

AUBURN

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Chapter 16 - Permits

I felt like I slunk out of there with my tail between my legs.

I asked someone in the hall. That office had moved to the other side of the building and up one floor. So much for my noticing the temporary directions in my nervousness as I came in.

Still feeling unhappy, I went up stairs. There was a woman in a police type of uniform standing in the hall with a hand full of papers. But she didn't scowl.

"Where do I go for a gas station license?"

She smiled a little for her success of knowing an answer. "Down that hall." She pointed. "Door on the right."

Someone in there directed me to the Arizona State Department of Environmental Quality. That name implied a big organization with lots of intimidating requirements.

But this was my idea and I had promised Uncle Joe, the mechanics, and the Acolytes. I couldn't bear the thought of explaining I had been a coward to those young women Acolytes.

I became so anxious that foolish me hadn't seen another sign. At the door next to that big sign Environmental Quality I turned the door knob, fought the sick feeling in my stomach, and went in.

There was a long counter in that room without anyone insight.

When my vision passed over it I managed to not see a button for a buzzer until as I became annoyed with the waiting. I pushed.

A satisfying buzzing sound came from the back somewhere.

A young man in a shirt and tie and maybe in his young thirties came out. "Need help?" He didn't frown, but maybe he couldn't see my skirt below the counter.

"I'm the owner of a auto and truck repair business on the Interstate. We're on a mix of private and tribal lands. I've been asked about having a gas station, so I'm here to ask what are the requirements for having one of those."

"Oh, that's Ruth. I'll get her."

He returned with an older woman whose facial skin had dried out. Her face was neither friendly nor unfriendly when it had become just doubtful. "Where?"

I asked. "Have a map?"

That they had. It was at least twice as big as the width of that counter. When they had it unfolded and then folded down to half they laid it on the counter.

I followed the road with a finger, but very little of the details elsewhere were shown for the reservation. I put my finger on a place. "About here."

They both looked. He furrowed his eyes. "Why way the hell out there?"

I said. "We opened a repair shop in an abandoned gas station. I'm not an Indian, but the backside of the ground, maybe part of the building, and the mechanics are all Navajo. I hold the business license. It's all squirrely just which government does what between the Navajo Nation, the Feds, the state, or the county. I'm just here to ask. The land owner is highly prejudiced against the Native Americans. A fuel distributor stopped by, and the Tribe's Chapter Council wants to know more. So, what's needed for a gas station?"

Her face lost a little of its rigidity. "You said an abandoned gas station? Did anyone dig up the old gas tanks and check the ground for contamination?"

I said. "No idea. Let's write a list. Got a sheet of paper?"

They did. We passed that page back and forth as we both wrote on it. It was quite a list. But it was just a list with the names of many different government agencies.

Gas tanks leak especially the ones from a long time ago. Gasolene is dangerously flammable and even explosive which means all the electrical power for the pumps requires expensive equipment and severe inspections.

I kept writing. I swivelled the page around. "Is this it? If I solve all these then we can have a gas station? Right?"

They sent me around to so many offices in that building that I lost track. One office was blocks away in another location. When I returned to their office they had called the state capital for me.

By now they had seen my skirt, but whatever I had done impressed them enough they kept helping with that list.

I had become tired and hungry when I returned to Joe's, and asked him to call the owner of that car. Ginger was glad to see me.

The next day Joe brought the Chapter Chief, and we all went to the brand name motel several miles away on the Interstate. It had a restaurant with big tables. The staff frowned at my skirt, but they did seat us.

Joe listened. He looked at that list, and glanced at that Chief. "Why don't you tell the Distributor that we'll ask the tribe if that big company will dig up those old tanks if they are there. They can put in the approved new ones?"

An image flashed in my mind from a Chance card in a Monopoly game. It read 'Pay Gasolene Utility every time you go past Go, and for the rest of your life'. Nah; bad idea. "Could we ask that bank that let us set up an account for credit card payments? Maybe they have someone who knows about gas stations."

Joe's face light up with a big smile. The next day we drove two hours to Flagstaff where we went in that bank branch.

But they had their own methods of having everyone wait in chairs while they went to find the right person.

The right person was the Business Relations Representative who set up that credit card account. He had that sales rep smile and ready hand shake. I still cringed inside at hand shakes with some people including him. "We do SBA loans for gas stations."

Joe had me dig up those notes from my shoulder bag. "The short version please. What's in here that could be too hard?"

He glanced all the way through it. "Nothing. Just takes time." Then he rattled off his own list of a corporation, an environmental survey, construction company, agreements ..."

I interrupted. "Whoa, Tonto." He did look a little like a Native American Indian except he was a mixture of Malaysian and Antiguan with an Italian last name. "How much of this applies on Tribal land?"

"Oh." To his credit he put his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and leaned way back in his chair in thought. When he came forward he had a self-satisfied smile to die for. "The Federal rules apply; the Arizona felony laws apply; the County and misdemeanor laws not so much. The Navajo rules apply. The Federal rules will task Arizona on the environmental issues. How long ago did they abandon that as a gas station?"

Joe's eyes drifted to some far away object as he thought. "Long time."

"Decades?"

"At least one; no, more."

"You could luck out that everything leached away if the soil under those tanks is very porous. You won't know until somebody digs up those tanks. What prior brand of gasolene abandoned it without a clean up just because they thought they could beat the Indians?"

At least he was honest about the long history of abusing the Indians. I liked him for that. As dry as that place was I had doubts there was enough rainfall to leach away anything.

Joe was thinking. "Philips 66. They went out of business, didn't they?"

"They merged into ConocoPhillips which recently split."

Joe closed his eyes. "No, not them. Some weird sign. How can we find out?"

“The County offices.”

“We did. They couldn’t identify the former brand.”

He smiled. He came up with his hand held phone and called somebody he knew. Three calls later he was talking to the County. His pen had been doodling on a scratch pad with occasional notes of phone numbers and names. “Tax map 14-22-003. Thanks.” He wrote that down. He called another number. He tore off that page, flipped it over, and held it down with his computer monitor. He wrote more notes. “Thanks. Terrific. I have two people in front of me wanting to reopen that. Send them to you?” He listened. “Thanks a ton. See ya’ at the mixer.”

What were they mixing? Cocktail drinks, or one of those huge three axle trailers of concrete?

“They just moved. Go to room 3-14 at the County Annex for their Economic Development Office. They can help pull all of these permits and applications together for you. You’ll need friends in the business community. I recommend you come to the mixer of the County Chamber of Commerce Thursday of next week. Go to the print shop two blocks down the main road and get good looking business cards. Nothing wrong with that sign as a logo for a card. Come as your Indian selves. There is a feeling at the Chamber they should be reaching out to Indian businesses. You’ve got a business idea. They like hearing and talking about new business ideas. Don’t worry about somebody springing a competitor on you as you have a tribal lock on that land. Can you come? The Chamber will want to know if I am bringing guests.”

The printing company thought that home made sign was a grand idea for a card. All of us doodled out an image as we stood at their counter. Then they wanted to know our names, addresses, and phone numbers.

By the time we left we only ordered one business card for both of us. Instead of one name it said ‘Joe & Nati’. The address was ‘Nelson’s Store, Navajo Nation’. The phone number was the store’s not Wheelchair Bob’s.