

ICE STORM

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Chapter 5 - New Trouble

As Jodi gave me a lift to Andrea's one evening, he asked me how I came to work the crane. As I told him we kicked back and forth what those earlier arrests of the crane operators might have been all about. He told me I could take a big knife with me up those ladders to that crane cab in case that syndicate returned. He said there were enough inspectors and others with a reason to climb up there as an excuse. Or they might corner me on the ground. Either way they could threaten me, or worse.

I had rarely been in fights at school, and never excelled at gym class. I called someone I knew who talked about guns. I asked him what gun I might buy.

He asked what for, and sold me an old revolver with a partial box of ammo. It fit quite handily in my shoulder bag under a pair of fresh diapers.

Sam continued being fair with me. He coached me when called for, or when I asked. He called for me to lock everything in place and to come down whenever a thunderstorm visibly headed our way. The crane could act like a weathervane, so always park the long arm away from the expected direction of the wind.

Another work site had a crane damaged by a thunderstorm when the whole rig came loose on its swivel and swung around violently. It didn't fall, but went out of action for a few days for repairs which pissed off everybody.

I learned to rest in the chair up there when the crane had nothing to do, and could stay alert for many hours. Sam told the office to raise my hourly pay rate from my novice level before somebody hired me away. I gave Andrea part of my pay which pleased her as a tangible proof I had gone out in the world.

I learned starting all calls at work with the recipient's name. The system had a slight delay in its circuits switching the call to the recipient so all we typically heard would be the caller's name. "Sandy from Frank" would be received in my ear as a crackle followed by "Frank". I asked and they told me how everybody experienced the work site style of quick messages. "Crackle Frank crane available?" meant 'to Sandy from Frank, is the crane available' as a typical call for me.

A little after my first full month my ear piece sounded off loudly. "Crackle emergency emergency. Concrete truck Welsh Street."

I stood up to see the Welsh Street side of the construction project. The extra rear axle of a ready mix concrete truck had gone over the edge of a temporary retaining wall of the big hole in the ground for the construction project. The whole truck had tilted backwards in a strange way. The ground must have given way under its back tires. That

rear axle had been installed on a hinged frame extension for pouring out the wet concrete. "Sandy to site; crane coming; tell me what to do." I swung the crane long arm around towards Welsh Street, ran the pulley out to the far end, and lowered the hook.

Sam's voice came through. "Crackle Sandy bring it down, but stay off the truck. If it goes over the side it's weight could topple the crane killing you. Wait."

"Sandy to Sam. Waiting for instructions."

Men flocked to that truck. I watched them rig two cables from heavy trucks with tires against the curb to the front of the mixer. But that could only be a stop gap. If that mixer went over it could take them too. A snapped cable whipping around could kill a man. Over my ear piece I heard how dangerous it could be for the men down there to get to that axle over the wall. It certainly looked that way from way up in the crane's cab.

"Sam from Sandy. Could they drop one end of a cable over the side and the crane bring the free end back up? That way they could get a cable under that axle." That's what we did with lots of radio-phone chatter back and forth. When the cable had been rigged under that extension behind the tires its free ends were connected to two more trucks. As those trucks moved out they drew that cable tight bringing the axle up. With all five trucks applying power, the fully loaded mixer moved away from the dangerous wall. The crane never did any heavy lifting and had never been tied to that mixer. The crane did assist bringing extra concrete chutes for moving the wet concrete from the mixer truck over the retaining wall for the original need.

I worked thirteen hours that day which meant five hours of overtime. Those five hours with overtime pay exceeded my eight hours of regular pay.

Being tired, I took my time for my own safety coming down those two hundred feet of steps from the crane cab to the ground.

Sam waited for me as were several of his crew chiefs and other guys. "Sandy, this is Rick."

He shook my hand. "Hello, Sandy."

"Uh, pardon me sir, but I'm terrible on faces and names."

"That's OK."

Miguel whispered. "He owns the company."

Rick held a sheet of paper in his hand. "This is a letter of appreciation from the insurance company. Sam called in with what a good idea you had today and how you handled that crane in a dangerous place." He held that paper where he read more of it. "This includes a one thousand dollar scholarship fund for you anytime you want to take courses."

Everybody applauded. These were the guys on the ground who had been working with me. My eyes watered. I wanted a hug, but they didn't do that. I barely squeaked out a "thank you".

He handed me the letter and turned to everyone else. "We have a new problem. The State EEOC sent us a demand to document our equal opportunity employment."

Over half of the crews were Hispanic. “And they want numbers on hiring people with disabilities.”

The crew chiefs grumbled and cursed almost as a rough masculine chorus.

I spoke too fast without thinking. “Uh, sir, I have a disability.”

Everyone’s eyes snapped around to me including Rick whose attention went up and down my body. “What?” Which expressed his strong doubts.

My diaper became soaked. “Could we talk privately?”

He waved his hand for me to follow him. We went to one of the trailers kept at the site. He sat behind a work table piled with construction plans. “Have a seat.”

My diaper seemed too soaked for risking sitting down. “Sir, the reason I wanted this job is I wear diapers. That works for being up there all day.” My ears warmed with embarrassment.

“You do?” His tone said that he clearly doubted any adult would do such a thing.

“Yes sir, I do. And there is something else I’ve been hiding from everyone. Away from here I wear women’s skirts full time to hide the diaper bulge. That’s what I would like to do here, sir. May I?”

Sam had come in behind me without my knowing it. “You fooled me. You’ve been good at running that crane.”

Rick scowled. “Mmmm. Let’s see, what could we claim as a reasonable accommodation? You’re already out of sight up there, so that’s not good enough. The operators don’t come down during the day, so that’s not good enough either. OK. You’re on. But warn the crew chiefs when you’re going to go up or down that ladder as you skirt will distract every guy around. The distraction would cause inattention which could be a safety hazard.”

“Yes, sir, I can do that.”

The next day I wore my red shirtdress with a pleated skirt. I called the site before I went up, and I called the site before I came down. If they watched up my skirt from as far away as they were I hoped they enjoyed the view. Sam told me I had saved the boss with that one disability statistic.

I went to Target and bought three denim shirtdresses as more appropriate clothes for a construction work site. After a few days everyone at the construction site greeted me, or didn’t, as they always had before.

A week later my earpiece crackled. “Sandy. An inspector is coming up.”

“Sandy to site. Yes, sir.” I made sure my skirt went down between my knees. With that disposable diaper filled out with padding, and in plastic pants between my thighs, I couldn’t bring my knees together like a woman. I happened to be in a blouse and pleated skirt instead of a denim shirtdress.

A man with a scarred, rough, and mean face had climbed all the way up and

opened the door from the catwalk into the cab. "This crane fourteen?"

"I have no idea. If they told me I forgot. This is the only crane I operate, so why should I know? Site from Sandy. Crane is on pause with an inspector here."

"Don't tell them things like that, kid. You hear."

"Why not? I can't watch below and answer questions at the same time. Not safely that is." I remained seated. "We've been so busy today I never had the time to set up my computer."

His eyebrows furrowed as he raised a clipboard with a form on it. He checked little boxes on it as his eyes darted around. His abruptness and nervousness affected me. *Why did he wear thin cotton gloves?*

He slipped a sheet of paper out from the stack on the clipboard and handed it to me. "Those are your instructions for watching the cops." His eyes went to the bottom of my skirt.

My stomach clenched so badly I almost threw up. This had to be the crime syndicate.

His hand went into a pocket and brought something out. With a flick it became a switch blade with a scary five inch doubled edged blade. "You follow."

"How?"

"We'll provide a handheld phone. Plug it into an outlet." His eyes darted around seeing there were a few regular household style electrical outlets. "It will play softly whatever music you want. We'll call you on it, and you call us. Understand?" We waved that switchblade menacingly.

I wanted him to leave. I'd figure something out later. "Yes, sir."

He waved that damned thing closer. "You a girl?"

"No sir. I wear dresses for my own reasons."

He swore a long string of really bad swear words ending with a phrase. "Damned cross dresser."

"Yes, sir. When do we start?"

"When we say so fucking squaw. You keep your mouth shut and do as you're told."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He folded that knife blade against his heavy belt back into its handle and slid the damned thing into the right front pocket of his jeans. He watched out the windows for a moment and opened the door. As he turned I saw an edge of what might have been a bullet proof vest under his shirt.

As he watched below out the door I reached deep into my shoulder bag at the

side of the operator's chair for my revolver. "No, I'm not doing it." I leveled the revolver.

"What?" He screeched as his hand had that switchblade out and flicked it open before he had fully turned in my direction.

I didn't have time to aim. I pointed at one of his legs and fired at a distance of only three or four feet.

He stumbled out the door as his wounded leg collapsed under him. Out there he dropped down the ladder.

"Sandy to site. Emergency; emergency. Man fell down the crane ladder."

Several voices came through my ear piece all at once with a stop work order. Sam's voice of authority dominated. "Sandy; what happened?"

"He threatened me to make me report on the police. He had a big switchblade. I said no and hit him in self defense. He stumbled down the ladder."

Some voice I didn't recognize reported what happened next. "He hit the first landing in an awkward way, and rolled over the side all the way to the ground. He must be dead." I knew that second fall could be over one hundred and seventy feet to hard concrete. I heard later a typical impact speed had to be 125 miles an hour.

"Sam to Sandy. Lock the crane and come down. Come down now before you are too nervous to climb down safely."

"Yes, sir." Before I came down I centered the crane arm in an easterly direction for the wind. I wound the winch bringing the hook all the way up, and brought the winch trolley into the base of the crane arm. I packed my stuff into my backpack and came down. I got the jitters part way down and stopped at one of the landings. I held tight onto a railing until my arm and leg muscles stopped having spasms.

The police had arrived before I reached the ground. They had his broken switchblade and clipboard. I handed them that sheet of instructions.

Sam and the other crew chiefs' faces were a mixture of things. The one impression that predominated became they were proud of me for what I had done. I barely held in my tears from their praise.

The police had that dead man's cell phone which had been smashed in the fall. They had the memory chip out, installed it in another phone, and were reporting the names and phone numbers on it to headquarters.

I felt chilled at their words. "You're under arrest. No, we're not charging you. We're taking you into protective custody before they come in the middle of the night to kill you. We have to call your family."

"That's Andrea. She's at work in the psychiatric wing of the central hospital."

The police jolted at the humor of that's where they were taking me for the secure entrance. That man's legs were such a bloody mess they didn't see the gunshot wound, and they didn't search my shoulder bag.