

AUBURN

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Chapter 15 - Gas Station

I dozed in the shade of the Sunrise Service building one afternoon with nothing to do. I had a lawn chair, a cooler doubled as a table, and a book from the library. Ginger had laid down flat on the cool ground for relief from the heat. On a visit from Joe, the library had granted me privileges, and I would get books on loan from the state's main library. The book at the moment on the Luminescent Movement continued an interest I had acquired in art while in Santa Fe.

Without any customer work the mechanics had all gone home taking the VW camper and its 'repair' sign with them. The sign on the roof had been repainted in our new Sunrise Service name in bright Arizona and Navaho colors. We needed a better sign out front, but the County couldn't harass us about a sign at the roadside painted on that camper.

I wondered if I should be mimicking the gringo's prejudicial image of Mexican laziness by wearing a sombrero instead of my fedora hat. But the Mexicans weren't any lazier than the gringos, and I never bought the sombrero.

My diaper had become heavier than just damp, but not that wet. I had a James Michener's historical novel in my shoulder bag trying to learn more about the Southwest, but had become bored with it. From what I read there every human race had been mean to every other human race at one time or another. And the word 'mean' had to be an understatement. I held a cold soda in my hand, and a chilled water bottle resided in the cooler.

A spiffy new car exited the Interstate and stopped in front of our building.

I came up out of my lazy stupor feeling unfriendly towards this interruption. Ginger raised her head, but decided this wasn't worth the effort in the heat.

A man in his thirties or forties in a blazing clean white shirt and tie above khaki pants got out. He left his blue sport coat hanging inside the left rear window of the car. "Hi. I'm Grant Denmark. His big face had been scarred enough to tell me he could make his way through a beer brawl. "The Snap-On Tool rep for this route said I should visit. He said to talk with a man named Nati." His grin didn't seem fun for me.

Ginger sat up with her tongue out just in case this needed spirited action.

I said. "Yes, I'm Nati. Why do you ask?" I should have said 'how can I help you', but I had an aversion to him already.

"Any business?"

“Some. The mechanics went home since it is hot, and there is none this afternoon.” I didn’t like him asking questions.

He said. “What does your bank think of that?”

I said. “Bank? Why would they think anything of us so far away from them?”

He said. “Terms and conditions of your SBA bank loan?”

“See that sign?” I turned and pointed my eyes at the placard in the window with the lettering ‘no cash transactions’ in two lines. I said. “No bank loan.”

Surprise dashed across his face. “How do you get by?”

I said. “You mean money?”

Anger flashed across his face but disappeared.

My hands lifted my skirt hem a little on each side. “I backpacked across the country so I could wear what I want to wear. The Indians didn’t run me off. Along the way I met too many nasty bosses while I worked odd jobs. There were only a few people I would ever want to meet again. Whatever about their businesses made them that way is something I do not want to become. Whatever that is. If bank loans are part of what makes them so mean spirited, then I don’t want one.”

The silence filled the nearby desert.

I had to do something. “Why do you ask?”

He said. “I’m with a brand distributor. I had been going to ask the owner about selling our gasoline and diesel fuel.”

A spiffy modern glossy gas station the same as a Love or a Sheetz flashed across my vision with a brightly lit cover over the self-service pumps.

I said. “I have a lease on the Arizona part, but the tribe owns the other part, and nobody knows where the boundary is. It runs through here somewhere. What do you want me to ask them?”

His smile returned. He began to grow on me as he told me.

I took him to Uncle Joe to find out who to talk with. Instead, we talked with Uncle Joe.

The talk dragged on and on for weeks with the tribal Chapter leadership. I wrote to the elderly woman who had given me that lease, but some other woman wrote back that the owner’s health had deteriorated. The talks dragged on, and that rep became stubborn.

At Uncle Joe’s one evening I told him I had an idea about that proposed gas station.

His eyes drooped for being so late at night. He liked what I said. With his liking it the tribal leadership saw it differently.

The leadership and I reached a point where I would to ask the owner and the county for their requirements. This time when I wrote that owner a lawyer wrote back. Her affairs were being run by her daughter who asked the lawyer to write me.

The Sorceress' Acolytes heard about all this and talked about making me a new dress for my trip to town. I liked the desert rock burgundy-ish color they showed me in an image of a soft cloth. I protested I needed it for talking with the county. They weren't buying my laments, and insisted on a matching cloth belt that went with it. The morning I had planned to go to town they arrived just after dawn and insisted on making me look more presentable.

I frowned at that. Ginger retreated outside. Smart dog.

One of them stamped her foot and another said swear words in English. "Nati! Stop it. You're going into town for everyone's benefit. We can't have you looking like something a coyote munched on and left out on the desert. We are helping you the best way we can. Now stop that and sit still."

I did, although I became miffed they had used that coyote phrase.

They gave me breakfast, and washed and brushed my hair. They used a little makeup on me concealing a blazing red acne bump which they almost made that disappear. As before they matched the color of my sun tanned face. I have no idea how they did that, but they did.

My feelings were all over the map with that. My voice had a certain negative tone. "Where did you get the makeup?"

"Oh, Nati. Don't be so suspicious. We know you way too well. We went searching on the Internet. OK?"

I felt miserable at my ungratefulness. So many feelings flashed through me I couldn't keep track.

"Ready?" One of them held my hand as I got up. "You're our Princess."

I scowled at that. "Princess?"

Julia took charge, of course, with a whack on my padded butt. "Oh, Nati, just let us have a little fun. You have some fun too. Nothing mean. Do your best. Perfection is not required. Miracles are appreciated."

I drove a borrowed car. Ginger wanted to go, but no, she had to stay behind.

I went to the lawyer's office. Grave doubts were written all over his face as his eyes went up and down my burgundy dress.

I thought I had better launch an integrity attack. "Sorry, Mr. Sheldon, but I wear a dress for my own private reasons. I'm not a Fag if that's what you're thinking. This new dress came as a gift from a few Native American friends. As they said, they didn't want me looking like something left out on the desert after a coyote had a snack. This is a free country the last I heard, or did someone ring a bell and change that?"

My luck that had been the right thing to say to him. He enjoyed a quick silent

chuckle with a matching smile. “Refreshingly candid.”

He had been busy enough he didn’t waste time. He quickly said I could do just about anything as long as I didn’t damage the property. “Do you want to buy it?”

My voice gave away my surprise. “Buy it?”

He put his hands together flat with his index fingers up to his nose as if he enjoyed his own aroma as he watched my face. “Mrs. Shawhannsey can’t live on her own alone anymore. She needs money, but even more she needs to move that property off of her balance sheet.”

He paused letting me catch up, but I didn’t before he continued. “You’re there and only paying a hundred a month. That’s pretty low. What condition is the property in?”

I hesitated. “Peeling paint over old masonry. Unlocked door bangs in the breeze sometimes. Rest rooms went to hell long ago. No water; no electricity. All the equipment found a better home.” I stalled out not knowing what to say next.

He said. “You mean it’s a wreck?”

I said. “Sorta. Still standing. Guess the roof might leak if it ever rains.”

He said. “Got any business?”

I said. “A little. I sit there reading a book when there isn’t anything for the mechanics to do. They go home.”

He said. “Makin’ somethin’ out of nothin’?”

“Guess so.” I thought. “Yes sir, Mr. Sheldon.” I became afraid he would throw me off the property, but I recovered a little. “That’s what I’m doing. I never thought of it that way. Nice phrase. I may have to use that sometime.”

He opened a file folder and took out that lease. “This form lease must date back thirty or forty years. It’s so out of date we’ll have to do a new one. Could you pay \$300 a month plus a share of the net if the excess is applied to the purchase price?”

I did some fast math. \$3,600 a year would take a bite of my cash reserve. That much just might wreck my ability to walk on down the road if anybody got mad at me, or threw me out. I was running out of things to say. Now what?

He asked. “How do you get business?”

I said. “Mostly from the Navajos themselves, and their mechanics come down doing the work.”

He said. “Why don’t they, why didn’t they, rent that place?”

I said. “Did you ever talk with that woman? She seemed so glad I’m an Anglo with strong words to match of her dislike of the Native Americans. What’s that old building and plot of land worth?”

He said. "Nobody has an accurate survey. You knew that, didn't you?"

I said. "County licencing said something like that. What's it worth?"

He said. "Might not even sell. The buyer has to have the use of the reservation land behind to it. Or should I call the Navajo Nation to buy it?"

He frightened me I could be thrown off. A light bulb went off. Literally I envisioned a big yellow incandescent light bulb in a window behind him. "Could you give me a few days to see if anybody would go in with me on this?"

He looked serious when he nodded yes I could.

Outside I discovered how damp with sweat I was. My hands shook as I opened the car door.

I remained nervous when I arrived at that Courthouse where the business license office had been moved. They didn't have signs up yet. I had to ask. The paper sign pasted on the wall at that door had fallen off.

Someone I had never seen before in there used a sharp tone with me as she scowled at me. I guess she didn't like my Indian length hair and my dress, but I didn't ask. She told me gas stations had to have an environmental permit.

I asked. "What's that? Which office does those?"

She refused to say another word.