

AUBURN

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Chapter 17 - Meetings

Within days the Acolytes had figured out I felt oppressed by all this. “Oh, Nati, stop it.” They had that sentence almost memorized as a chant. The Sorceress found a reason to go outside. One of the four spoke next. “Come here.”

I shook my head for ‘no’ don’t boss me around.

Instead, they drew up four chairs in a tight circle in front of where I sat at the table. The one closest to me on each side of me took my hand. Julia took charge which she usually did with ease. She said. “Nati; what in the world is bugging you? What’s that big word?”

Terri said. “Inconsolable.”

Ruth said. “Yes, that. We’ve been taking classes at the community college and studying on a computer at the library.”

I asked. “You have? Why?”

Julai said. “We’re the Sorceress’ leading students. The world is moving on. We have to know more. If we want to be the future Native American Church spiritual healers, we have to know about modern psychology, for instance. Something is really really wrong for you, Nati. That’s why you are here. Did you drop out of high school?”

I said. “No, I graduated.” I told them about all those mean spirited bosses I had met, and repeated what I had said before about not wanting to be like them. “If they had bank loans, I didn’t want one.”

Julia said. “Is that all? So?”

Terri put her hand on two of the others. She said. “Got it, Nati. You’re all unhappy about that meeting at the Chamber of Commerce. Right? If that’s what you’re so down about we are going with you. Nothing cheers a boy up like having a girl. You’re so big, brave, and wonderful to us it’s going to take four girl friends just to be as big as you.”

That statement occupied the room. My eyes scrunched up as I felt even more miserable for a few minutes. Something clicked as a silent part of me brought me up. Just a little at first, but I could feel it, and I knew I could do this. With that I could let them help me.

Late that day the mechanics had left for the day when the Acolytes arrived in a borrowed SUV. They drove me to the high school where I used the gym for a shave and

a shower. I put on a fresh diaper, the white shirt, and blue skirt they had brought for me. They even gave me a bolo tie for a masculine look with that shirt. They brushed my hair with conditioner, and used a little lipstick in a discrete natural color.

My feelings came up with all their attention.

In the SUV they all rode in the back putting me in the front passenger seat. Joe turned the air conditioner up for the girls in back making me almost cold.

They held the Chamber mixer at a big new club house. I immediately felt intimidated just looking at it. In the parking lot two of the Acolytes slipped their arms in mine, as Joe led the way and the other two followed. They would not let me feel too far down.

Inside, a table had two young women welcoming everyone. They had name tags. Someone had talked to somebody as they even had name tags for all of us with the business name Sunrise Service with a background in bright Arizona colors.

The banker saw me and Joe, came trotting over, and made a bee line for the gasoline distributor rep who whispered at me. "If wearing a dress gets you four girl friends, where can I buy one?"

His humor helped me until the Acolytes heard what he had said and giggled.

Those two of the banker and the oil company representative sometimes took us to someone, but mostly they had various men all come past us. By late that evening I had more than three dozen business cards. The Acolytes had a good time with the women there. They had so much finger food we didn't need dinner.

They wanted all of us back at the bank at opening time the next day.

I rented three motel rooms of one for Joe, one for me, and a big one for the Acolytes. Even though he knew of my little secret, I remained uncomfortable with the idea of Joe seeing my diaper.

In the morning I became grateful I had that spare diaper in my shoulder bag. At the motel restaurant over breakfast one of the Acolytes borrowed a pen and several sheets of paper place mats. They quizzed Joe, and me, about what we had learned about gas stations, and made a tally sheet of costs.

Everyone had a different breakfast. I had a Western Omelet, and the menu had grits, of which I had in fond memory of that elderly African-American man.

From there we drove to the bank where Grant the Distributor representative waited. We were led into a small conference room including that rep. We made that room almost large enough by one of the Acolytes standing at a dry erase board. Those very young women took charge with many questions with the answers going up on the dry erase board. "What you men don't know is we've decided this gas station idea isn't big enough. Nati worked at a Love's truck stop on his journey across the country, and had delivery jobs at many restaurants."

Grant interrupted. "Love's! You worked there?" Now he really wanted us so he could tell his boss he had beat out that competition. He called regional and found ways to help us if we would commit to selling their brand.

“Yes, sir.” We did.

He asked. “How much land do you have?”

Joe interrupted. “The tribe owns an immense desert. Space isn’t the problem. How much water is needed?”

The banker held up a finger. Out came his cell phone and he called someone. He quoted the answer as a definite maybe. The hydrologist would come look early next week.

The tribe had a big old water trailer for an eighteen-wheel truck. It needed tires. They added that trailer to the equity for the loan. I think they fudged the value of the trailer and everything else.

Grant had been watching all this. “I gather, Nati, that you don’t actually own much. A knife, an old backpack, and a few clothes?” He told the banker to close his ears. He explained the Arizona exemptions to bankruptcy. “Go ahead. If this thing melts down or blows up they can’t get at you. Everything you have is exempt except maybe that truck, and you already gave that away.”

The Acolyte women were blatant with their hands on the representative’s hand and the banker’s hand. “How can we do this? We have brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and families of friends who need those jobs. Two Chapters away from us the unemployment rate is 75%. Joe; can you help us get the tribe to approve this? Get the construction people down out of the hills and donate labor?”

The bankers eyebrows popped up. “Got an e-mail address?”

Joe interrupted. “At the store.”

The banker said. “You have to promise.” There was a pause. “If I send you an existing SBA loan package for you to rewrite you have to keep that existing one secret. Can you do that?”

Joe and the Acolytes all spoke at once. “Yes.”

The banker said. “Now, here’s how you do it. The tribe has to sign on for the free labor. The first round of money goes for the environmental clean up and the new underground tanks. You have to pass inspections. The land is the tribe’s and can’t be conveyed, so the only lien we can have is to the equipment and maybe the buildings. With me?”

I didn’t keep up, and I wondered about the Acolytes.

Grant re-explained all that a different way.

The bank’s requirement for Community Redevelopment Act lending made this a go. They needed an Indian project. The SBA needed an Indian project. All the contractors and even the Distributor and the name brand oil company would have to sign papers.

Joe suggested that the tribe form different corporations for various reasons, and those would all sign on.

The banker smiled. “Yes. That would be better. Does the tribe have a lawyer?”

Coached by what we had heard, the Chapter drove Grant nuts holding off on approving the fancy new gas station.

The Acolytes coined the phrase that “wouldn’t smell right to them over old gasoline fumes if everyone will pardon the pun”.

The Chapter remained stubborn, and Grant used a pejorative phrase about “those God Damned stubborn Injuns.” He really could talk like a bull necked working man, which he had been. Bless his redneck ways, he talked the fuel company into digging up those tanks and any contaminated ground around them. They could add that to the payoff in the agreement.

Best of all, it made the bank loan more useful as more funds would be available for other costs which grew rapidly.

Everyone liked the idea of the top being the bright Arizona and Navajo colors, white below, and a blue band around the bottom. We added three flag poles out front with an American, Arizona, and Navajo flags fluttering in the breeze.