

ICE STORM

© 2019 By Sue Erickson

Chapter 24 - In The Center Of It All

Rosie directed me into the back seat of Rick's car. Once we were on the way she twisted around to me. "This is celebrate Sandy night for Wyndham, and we couldn't think of a way to get your work comrades into this other than at Bernies. We gave them all salmon colored 3x5 cards so the waitresses won't charge them. One card for one beer, or even a wine."

"That's a lotta cards."

"Yep. That is a lot of cards."

Anxieties washed over my back like acid.

Good for him as Rick sensed my moods. "You are truly unique, Sandy. I didn't think you would last, and I did think Sam and the guys wouldn't like you. I thought they might sabotage you. Instead you won them over. A personnel consultant has watched you and them a few times at work out of sheer raw curiosity. As best as she can say, your young masculine voice from the tower works for them during the day. They all take a break each morning for watching up your skirt as you climb that crane which bonds them together. They take that liberty knowing in their heads you are a guy, but they are enthralled observers none the less. Your asking for their help, and your saying what you see from up there, all of that has them appreciating you. In some way no one has yet described accurately they bond together for protecting their girl up there in that tower. They went from being pissed at you to being proud as hell of themselves as protecting you. Heaven help the man who doesn't know what you really are under those clothes that touches you the wrong way at Bernies. It's not just Mongo."

The parking lot at Bernies had become jammed. A line snaked out the entrance and across the front.

I practiced girl style smiling as Rick found a parking place. We had a large area of parking lot to cross.

Rick and Rosie were with me as we started across that parking lot, but we were quickly surrounded by several guys from Sam's crew. Clearly they had been waiting for us.

Mongo hovered at the front door. His big and muscular physic made him the bouncer whether anyone said so or not. "Make space."

People did. The door way cleared.

My friends packed the area inside the front door. The cross dressers support group were first. They were well dressed as women instead of that goofy stuff they tried all the time. These were guys when they chose to be. They roared all as one. "Yeah Sandy." Each one welcomed me with a hug, and several gave me a little girl to girl style kiss on the cheek. Behind them were several Jaycees. The guys shook my hand. The gals picked up the queue from the cross dressers with hugs and cheek kisses. Behind them were church members.

My buddies from the work site broke out in a big applause. One of the waitresses handed me a frosty glass of water. Rick waived his hands and the Wyndham people made a space in the middle.

I kept bottling up a sharp comment of what the hell could this be all about.

The restaurant manager came through the crowd into that open space. He had a cordless microphone in his hand. "If the rest of you haven't figured out something special was happening tonight, Wyndham Construction is honoring one of their own. We're used to seeing the beautiful Sandy in her hard hat Friday evenings, but tonight enough of that. Tonight she is plain gorgeous, and you guys keep your hands to yourself. Mongo and Sam are big enough to wade through any fight like a momma bear protecting her cubs. They aren't the only Wyndham big fisted men here. She claims she is just a crane operator way up in that sky. There are people here with ten fingers, ten toes, two eyes, and one complete skull because she cared. From way up there she would call down with anything she could see that could be unsafe. I think their protecting love for their girl isn't an overstatement."

They interrupted him with whistles, cat calls, and a round of applause that swelled across the room.

Between the dim light and that air brushed make up, I don't think anybody saw me blushing. I had to do something. "Really guys, it was everyone. Mongo, Sam, Jodi, and the crew chiefs all come here. Rick too."

Rick turned away from me and yelled across the room. "Would the three bankers on the Wisteria Boulevard project come join us."

All three of those bankers were women in business skirt suits, and they must have been ill at ease in a beer bust place like Bernies. This wasn't the Jaycees. Each came into that open space and gave me a hug, but not a kiss.

Mongo arrived and stood behind me. Then Sam. The cross dressers were in a group around the periphery, and they had beers even though some were in Alcoholics Anonymous. A waitress arrived with four glass mugs of water for them as the beers disappeared into waiting hands nearby.

Two Bernies employees were bringing a table through the crowd.

Rick had that microphone. "The bankers didn't believe me when I brought the very young Sandy into work on that loan application. They didn't believe me when I identified her as our trouble shooter. Look at the crowd of the people who know. Believe me now? When she is sent into another work site they either answer her questions, or they catch hell from me. Sandy uses the sweetest words after her stock line of 'I have a low voice'. If they don't respect her position with Wyndham, then I swear like a trooper at them. So, this is Sandy Night. I want everyone to enjoy it."

That table came into the center. *What the hell?* I asked myself.

The short Rosie was doing something on the side. Behind her as she came through the crowd was Andrea in a really cute pants suit. She squealed with her hand to her mouth in her embarrassment. "Oh my Gawd. Sandy; you're a million bucks."

I snatched that microphone out of Rick's hand. "Thank you all. I had no idea."

A waitress grabbed that microphone. "Sandy we love you too, just as you are. You bring us cookies for the relationship, and some of those we give to the bartenders. Sandy is her own unique self, and God Bless her for that. Her work site loves what she does, and they love her to the bottom of their hearts."

I had moved aside for that waitress to have center stage.

That waitress towed me back to the center. "Just look at Mongo hovering. You remember Mongo from the movie *Blazing Saddles*?" She waved a hand. "Play that song."

They had a sound track from that movie. Laughter rippled across that room to the words "candy gram for Mongo; candy gram for Mongo." And "Mongo loves Bart".

Johnny Cash's famous song *A Boy Named Sue* played over the sound system. Rick raised a microphone. "Do it again, and this time we all sing it as *A Boy Named Sandy*."

Then they played *Big Bad John* by Jimmy Dean, except they sang it as *Big Bad Sandy*.

All that singing distracted me from movement behind me. It took three employees to carry in the tallest cake I have ever seen. They set it on that table. It had a tall plastic toy construction crane on top. The white icing had been spread over everything concealing the layers. The top two layers had the words 'Big Sandy', and below that had 'crane operator'. Then Wyndham Construction, followed by Jaycees, Support Group, and below that Cedar Falls Church. Quite clearly printed below all of that in big letters read 'approved by Sam'.

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

We had to move a few feet for the staff cutting cake for everyone. The cross dressers formed a receiving line bringing people past me.

Rick came into the center again as he raised that cordless microphone to his mouth. "Lisa, please."

Pastor Lisa short height had prevented my seeing her through the crowd. She had a mostly empty mug of beer in her hand. I still had trouble wrapping my mind around her human side while she served as a messenger from God.

"Most of you probably do not know that Sandy has almost no religious background. What you may not have realized is she doesn't think much of organizations. So I have a gift for her." She raised a book as high overhead as she could as she pivoted herself and it around for all to see. "The title is *Saving Jesus From The Church*. I think she will find immense value in the basics of His message without all

the folderol and trappings. Let me tell you just one passage from in here. Please.”

She faced me. “The Bishops of the church who were to serve the people quickly became the men belching their way through large banquets. The front door of their church is gilded, but the kitchen door out the back of the basement is rusty. Outside of it is an unending line of tattered, filthy, hungry, homeless, people. In the kitchen of cracked tiles and dinged equipment sits Jesus on a table. His hands are gnarled, his knees are knobby, and his beard matted as he sits in the steam and misery of it all. But the crowd outside speaking many languages gets His message. ‘Everyone counts; no exceptions’.”

She handed me that book. “Does that sound like the Sandy you know? The Sandy who experienced pain by the death of the Mexican immigrant. The Sandy who became the leader of her cross dressers support group. The Sandy who can raise money for the church organ. The Sandy who formed a company so desperate people can have a job and an honorable place in society.”

She made me cry. She even made Sam cry, and I didn’t think he ever did that. The cross dressers struggled with their squinting up. “You ever have doubts, visit Cedar Falls Church and hear one of her offering prayers from collection. Sandy is something else.”

“No fair, Lisa. You told me how to do that.”

“But you do it. Few people can say ‘the bread of love my friend’ at Communion. You say that all the time when others can’t even say that when I told them what to say. Something you do not know is my academic advisor just approved my changing my Ph.D. thesis. It is now ‘Counseling On The Fly’, and is mostly about what I’ve seen you do in the support group. Rick tells me to expand that to what he sees you do around the company.”

She marched across the space between us and gave me a hug. “You and your blond hair.” She gently tugged on my hair drawing it back in place over my right shoulder.

She raised her hands high and applauded. “For Sandy.” Applause rippled across the room.

Rick and Rosie moved into the center with Rick taking the microphone. “Mongo, Sam, Jodi, Eric, and more all approved kicking you upstairs to corporate. You love that name tag ‘crane operator’, and are proud of what you can do on crane duty. The time has come.” Rosie ordered Sarita into action who moved in on me and put an expensive engraved name tag on a lapel of my jacket. Her hand went inside my jacket with a magnet for the name tag without having a safety pin punch holes in my expensive woman’s clothes. While her hand was in there her forearm pushed on my prosthetic breast reminding me I had been thinking of enlarging my breasts. It read ‘Sandy’ as before, but below my name it said ‘VP Wisteria’.

Rick interrupted. “Folks. Wyndham is bidding on the biggest project we have ever attempted. Sandy is our inside person on pulling that loan application and bid together. Those papers say she will be the on site inspector. We know you Sandy. We know you never have a thought for deciding what you want to do. So we are filing in the gaps so you can understand bankers and sub-contractors. Here is the bank’s pre-approval for your mortgage.”

Those three bankers gave a demure nod.

“Here is the purchase contract for one particular condo in the first Wisteria high rise. It is high up with the best view. There is one more thing.”

Lisa’s cross dressing brother moving across the back of the crowd diverted my attention. The he inside the girl clothes moved a few things I couldn’t see. She climbed up a succession of those such as a chair, a table, and I could see her stand on the bar. She set up a camera on a tripod up there. The lights grew brighter at her signal of raising her hand palm up.

Rick, Rosie, and Lisa came together and moved out of the line from the camera to me.

As they cleared things from around the bottom of that cake a new line of writing became visible. Up through the center was a PVC plastic pipe with that toy crane still perched on top. Each layer of cake had been supported by its own plastic disk. The lines of writing across the bottom layer read ‘To Big Sandy, From Denny, With All My Love’.

So Denny had been the secret driver behind this evening. I hadn’t seen her, and where could she be? What would I ask her if I saw her? For a date? Where would I take her?

She surprised me coming up unseen from behind me and putting her arm around my waist. I didn’t know what to do with that so I put my arm around her waist. She stood half a head shorter than I, and that included when I wore flats and she wore pumps with heels. “Big Sandy has proven she can hold her own. Now I can claim her as my partner, and she’ll need someone to help her decorate that condo making it into a home.”

Andrea, Rick, Rosie, and Lisa grinned like Cheshire Cats.

Denny and I had our first kiss right there in public before everyone.

Applause erupted. A decently dressed woman held Mongo’s hand.

That night Denny came right in Andrea’s house with me. Inside she held me tightly by the wrist. “Tonight you are mine. Completely mine. I’m taking you upstairs, changing you, and I have a footed sleeper for you.”

That wasn’t all. As we kissed she also had me suckling her. We went all the way more than once that night, and more all day on Saturday. She put my wrists into handcuffs, and took me downstairs in a toddler attire of diapers, plastic pants, and a t-shirt.

Andrea approved of the whole thing.