

## ICE STORM

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### Chapter 15 - Cedar Falls

The next Sunday when Pastor Lisa usually arrived to provide Communion to the Cross Dressers group she arrived half way through the meeting. She usually arrived near the end.

Everyone describing their Fourth of July experiences had taken over the meeting. They were deepening their experiences of feeling accepted by society. Now I knew what Andrea had meant by rejecting others before they rejected you. Not having to reject everyone else became an enormous big deal.

I waited for the slightest pause in the conversation. “Hey. Pastor Lisa. Come sit with us and join in. Who knows, we might learn something. Come sit.”

They suffered a distinct hesitation before Lisa picked up her purse and her bag of communion supplies. The t-girl Peggy brought an additional chair to the two folding tables that served for our meeting.

Pastor Lisa sat with us, but didn't say a thing, until I said I had a new subject. I picked up my shoulder bag from the floor next to my chair, and removed my baby blue woman's wallet. That rumpled check from the Fourth of July parade came out. It sat on the table standing up with the fold it had developed in my wallet.

June sitting to my left could see what had been written on it. The he inside her exterior had a better handle on mimicking women's faces than most of us. Her eyebrows jumped, and her hand went to her mouth.

I picked up the check. “An old man came to the main concession stand at the parade and talked to me. He said we were living his ideals of ‘no lyin’, no cheatin’, and no stealin’, and that seemed more important to him than how we dressed. That we helped him with his views of life.”

When the Pastor saw what had been written on the check she emoted a little squeal of surprise. A hand of hers went on a hand of mine in a very girl to girl kind of way. “I knew when I first saw you, Sandy, that you had a presence. That had to be right even if I have no idea who you are.”

“Ma’am, why are you doing this for this little group of men as women and women as men who have so much trouble fitting in?”

“Call me Lisa, please. I’m just human trying like everyone else to figure out God’s will.”

“Don’t you have a special education, Lisa?”

“Oh, yes, a Masters of Divinity and I’m studying for a Ph.D. in religion and religious counseling.”

“And that isn’t enough? Sorry, but sometimes I have to push. Why are you here with us?”

The silence seemed total. Nobody stirred. No pins were dropped.

She took in a deep breath. The boy in me had my eyes glance at her bust. I had heard that lesbians did that too. Her eyes swept around and came to rest on my face. “My younger brother in Seattle is totally lost, dazed, and confused. He’s wearing diapers and dresses.”

I barely avoided blushing at the ears.

“Lisa. Why don’t you come sit in with us? No guarantees. I saw on something around here that Cedar Falls is ‘open and affirming’. Just because we use your space, for free, don’t we have to honor that too. Don’t we have to let regular people sit in? Maybe alcoholics, too, and any other addictions? What made you become a minister, anyway?”

“My name Lisa is from German where it means devoted to God. Just maybe I have to be a minister whether I like it or not. Here’s something all of you can use. Reach back in your memories of what happened to you around age 8 or so. The professionals I have met, and said anything, are almost universally do what they do because of something at the dinner table when they were eight. Can you think about that?”

I could see every face went into thinking mode.

“Sandy, let’s you and me do communion. OK?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A scowl crossed her face, but it didn’t hang around. And I couldn’t be so cool with calling a representative of God with anything less than respect.

By now I knew the group members’ names so I could say “the bread of life,” and

their name. With a few I switched to “the bread of “love”.

Benjamin lost himself with that love word, and did a little curtsy as if he could be the girl under his clothes.

Lisa asked me if we could talk after we had packed up.

“How can I say no to God’s representative?”

“Oh, Sandy, would you stop that. I’m just human too.”

“I call my boss ‘sir’ all the time too. Maybe someday I can grow out of that term of respect. What did you want to talk about?”

“It became obvious today, but I don’t think you realize it so much. You are the leader of the group.”

“Oh, Lisa, I found them jobs, most of them anyway. A few founded a company on my suggestion. I rack my brain some days on how to help all of them equally well.”

Both of our eyes briefly scrunched up. “You can sing a little, right? Could you lead the two of us with singing *We Shall Overcome*?”

She did. Except I broke down three times crying.

“What do you want us to overcome?”

“You’re not religious are you?”

“No ma’am. My family never attended.”

“My request of you is to come to church, here, on Sunday mornings. The Head Ushers aren’t doing so well. I need you to stand at the door, hand out the bulletins, and welcome them. Simple words will do. Just as simple as ‘good morning’, or ‘welcome’, or ‘glad to see you’. Could you do that for me? For the good of the cause?”

My eyes became wet all over again. “Yes.”

I arrived twenty minutes early. She had a basket with the bulletins. She also clipped a name tag to the right lapel of my business dress suit jacket. Across the top in small letters it read ‘Cedar Falls Church’. In the middle in huge letters read ‘Sandy’. The word below that of ‘Welcome’ made my cry.

Maybe a dozen people arrived when I switched my welcome to “how are you”. And when a few asked me I said “terrific.” A man stood nearby who turned out to be the Head Usher, but he didn’t interfere with what I did. He did ask me to help with

collection.

I protested. "But this is my first time here."

"You'll be teamed with someone who has done it before. Just mimic what they do."

I said "Yes, sir," and went back to welcoming people.

I liked the hymns they sang that morning. The sermon talked about living your week. Not in the name of God, but in the name of your own calling whatever that could be.

After we passed the collection plates back and forth and came forward that Head Usher gave a short prayer.

Nobody told me what to do so after we all walked to the back of the Sanctuary the Head Usher disappeared with the money. I stood right there. Pastor Lisa came to the back and shook everyone's hand as they filed past on their way out. I took to saying "thank you for coming".

A woman with the name tag of Gina stood next to me. She invited me down to hospitality. They had coffee, which I declined as I didn't like coffee, but that didn't stop them. They handed me a plastic cup of punch which tasted delicious to me.

A few people came to me and welcomed me. When they asked why I had come that day I noted the technique. I told them because Lisa had asked me to. They said they liked my welcoming words better than what anyone else had done.

I scrunched up at that.

Within a month most of the support group were coming on my reporting what had happened. I asked Lisa how we could attend without disrupting everyone else's comfort. She said to dress well, and not say too much too fast. Let the parents not feel frightened for their children.

I had given the Offering Prayer a few times before I discovered a simple method. After a short opening and closing, I simply borrowed words from the hymns and the sermon of that day.

I asked people to help with Sunday School. Nobody had said that, but after Lisa had said that churches grew with the more parents attending for their small children. They came looking for a good Sunday School.

Nobody asked me about my faith.

The support group grew. The church grew. More desperate cross dressers arrived. The earlier members of the group asked me how to find jobs for the newer members. But I didn't know that.

I asked around church how to help the choir. Not only had I always been a terrible singer, I cried during nearly every hymn. Besides, I seemed to be on duty at the other end of the Sanctuary. The Choir cornered me at Hospitality one Sunday. They wanted an Organ, and they wanted me to Chair a Capital Campaign.

"Me? Moi? I don't know a damned thing about those."

A Jaycees buddy knew of a church buying a better electronic organ, and for not much we could buy the old one. I asked Lisa could I make an announcement.

Her answer flowed out of a great big smile, and the very next Bulletin included an announcement for a Capital Campaign. But it didn't say what for. I snuck down the side of the sanctuary when they were all singing and sat in the front. As if my blond hair over my right shoulder didn't stand out like a beacon.

"Good morning, I'm Sandy Williams as most of you know. You know I have a low voice. But before I ask you for a favor, I can't stand misleading any one. I trust in your forgiveness when I tell you that I am a dedicated cross dresser. My voice is my natural man's voice. You all say 'open and affirming'. I held up a bulletin. It says 'no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here'. Hope that's true."

The place became very silent.

"Good. Thank you. The announcement is the Choir wants an Organ, and I have found one, and the financing for it." I didn't tell them the financing came from me. "We even have a volunteer for wiring it in." Lisa's cross dressing brother would do that. "Speakers are fairly inexpensive. We'll have to adjust speaker locations as we learn it. But no Organ without pledges to repay the loan."

One of the older women shot a hand up. "How much does it cost?"

"Not all that much. Ten Thousand ought to do it; soup to nuts; wiring and speakers."

Lisa interrupted. "That's a hundred dollars per pledge unit. We need this."

I brought my attention from her in her pastoral robes around to the audience. "A hundred dollars is what per week? Two dollars for a year. This is your church. Pick up an offering envelope and write your name and what you are willing to give extra each week for this. Go ahead."

My knees were weak and my back had become damp with sweat. I lost control

and wet my diaper. I kept my eyes on them as they slowly bent forward and took an offering envelope from the pew in front of them.

The collection plates nearly overflowed with offering envelopes that day.

A few months later Lisa asked me to go with her to a Saturday special at a larger church on church growth and money.

They had two speakers of a woman Pastor from Atlanta and Pastor Mike from Dallas. He seemed really good to me. He showed a video which someone told us we could see anytime on YouTube as *Why People Don't Go To Church*.

In the car on the return trip I asked Lisa. "We have people at Cedar Falls like those people in that video, don't we?"

She smiled. "Yep."