

ICE STORM

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Chapter 23 - Recognition

A few weeks later I returned to Wyndham's central office with a stack of folders of rumpled dirt stained papers from inspections at various construction sites. The day had started with a difficult meeting with a bank on the proposed huge Wisteria Project of a series of high rise mixed use buildings. From there my standard upscale attire of a pleated skirt-suit and a ruffled blouse increasingly needed a trip to the cleaners. Even my hard hat had been losing its glossy shine.

I exchanged company news with Sharlene at the front desk for a few minutes and had a hug with her. She had found out I gave hugs at church and made them acceptable at the office for her. I went straight to the copy room, sorted things by job sites and offices, and made four copies of everything. Two copies in paper were sorted by the offices to receive them, and the two electronic copies went to storage on the internet cloud. As authorized by Rick, one of those copies on the internet would be captured by my computer at home. And from there to memory sticks I rotated through a safe deposit box.

I dropped the rumpled dirty originals on the assistant's desk for the VP of Operations, and went searching for Mr. Rick.

He was on the phone in his office, and his tone of voice told me he was becoming very annoyed. The call sounded like he was talking with the bank where I had been this morning. He waved his hand for me to come closer and pointed at a chair near the table he kept in there. I sat down as directed.

"Sandy just walked in from site inspections. I'll have to talk with her. Yes, she is very young and sometimes naive. But she is honest to a fault. If she said it, whatever she said, is most likely true. And true even if I don't like it. I told her to stand up to me too, and bless her heart she does. And even more true if you don't like it."

There was a lengthy pause. "Look, I have to go, and I have to talk with her first and whoever else. Let's pick up with this on Monday morning. I have to talk with all those people. Say 11 am?" He slammed the phone down with real venom.

"Uh, Mr. Rick, sir, that was awfully high praise."

"Damn right, Sandy." He reached way over from his chair to a side table and picked up a Wall Street Journal newspaper. He flipped aside the first two sections and opened up the third to the first inside page. "Here, Sandy, read this over the weekend." His finger tapped a picture on the third page with lots of blue color. "The article is by Bill Gates of Microsoft, but don't be bamboozled by that lofty source." He flipped pages. "I

also want you to read this," he tapped on a page "on collecting phonograph records, and when America spoke French in Philadelphia." He turned a page. "Especially read this on how the Bible got itself written, and the incredible cruelty of London at the time of Charles Dickens." He turned a page. "And this on France during the Nazi occupation."

He turned back to the third page. Bill Gates mentions two books I hope you read." He scanned the page. "*Business Adventures* and the *Intelligent Investor*. No, there won't be a quiz."

He handed me that section of the paper. "There is a real practical reason, Sandy, to push you a little. You didn't like school, and were smart enough to recognize they were not teaching anything you wanted to know." He paused, and I knew he did that when he wanted the listener's mind to catch up. "You stick with the absolute truth as you know it. No change there. But, and here is the big but, those bankers young and old live in a different world. They have mortgages and shaky adulterous marriages and elderly parents and kids in trouble. They are incredibly dependent on getting along with the other people in those banks. All of those people are vulnerable to the whim and fancy at the top. Or worse a takeover from another bank laying off half the staff. They never know in a deep profound way what is safe and what is not. Reality on the job site doesn't trump their separate reality of getting along with those committees in there."

I struggled catching his drift here.

"That banker called here wanting to know what the hell is the corporate committee you referred to this morning. I thought of several. You have a committee of myself and the VP of operations. Different committees in accounting, in supply, with Sam and his crew, and even one with Sharlene at the front desk. I know what you just did even if you flung that one from the hip. What you did to them was your discovery of how they were more powerful at negotiating by negotiating from the position of least strength. So you did the same by creating your own fictitious committee to match their loan committee."

"I did?"

"He says you did, and he was flummoxed by it, and by you. So, Sandy, take this to heart. When they go on and on and on, just let them. When they do that its not a merit discussion on the project. You don't have to fling every little factual correction at them. We'll play catch up in the documents. It is their talking themselves into what they are going to tell their committees. Those people can't tell the difference between the honestly naive Sandy we know and love, and that Damned Crook down the street. That's the guy with the big contractor from out of town who live in a world of misconduct. That's why we sued the Union under RICO. That's our strategic ploy to chase most of these competitors straight out of the bidding for their past bad behavior. Those vulnerable bankers are your lead sales reps into those committees, so let them. Your job includes always being graciously willing to chase down one more stupid fact or golden nugget of information."

"Yes, sir. May I crack a humor line, sir?" I didn't wait very long. "Yaz'za boss, whatever you say."

He chuckled. "Exactly. Keep laughing at the human foibles even when they drive you nuts, or make you mad."

He paused for a few seconds. "I've heard you started a company, and then another. I've heard you did that for desperate people. That's the only way to learn working with actual people warts and all. I understand you ran the soda pop concession for the Fourth of July parade. And that you came out of there with a major donation for a church. Did anyone tell you 'well done, Sandy' for that?"

I had to think.

"No, I thought not. That after that you are attending regularly on Sundays, and have become their Greeter at the Gate. The rest of us have to bend and twist the arms of our junior executives to go work on charitable boards to get that experience. Yes?"

I vaguely nodded just to keep from feeling too stupid.

"I've heard you stood up in front of the Sanctuary of people your parents and grandparents ages and raised money. Why do they think they asked you to do that? Stand up there?"

"They told me, sir, because I'm upbeat and gave hugs."

"And one more thing, Sandy."

"Yes sir."

"Someone thought that you had a strong sense of yourself, called a dramatic presence, and that you would radiate that up there in front. The details don't count. That you did counts."

"Uh, sir, why are you telling me all this?"

"Sharlene has put together a one page description of you for somewhere in the back of the loan package of project leadership. Let's see, what would most people say about you? Dropout. Social misfit wearing dresses. Twice committed to the psychiatric ward. Police record for a gang rumble. Possibly packs a gun illegally. Need I go on?"

He didn't pause for long. "Now turn that around. Took a job with known dangers high up in the sky. Won over the site boss and crew chiefs with long hours, always willing to learn, asked good questions, AND called down with warnings of dangerous conditions. Stopped racketeering with no help from anybody. Became the crane troubleshooter, and project site troubleshooter. Quickly solved troubles in Purchasing. Civic leader and church fund raiser."

He grinned. "So when another Executive at the Chamber or a personnel consultant gives me a hard time for my weird employee, what should I should say? Besides go to hell, that is."

"Uh, no idea, sir."

His grin grew. "I should tell them go find their own weird employee, damn it. That paper on you in that loan package will be all over town within a month. The head hunters will be after you in droves. Legal will come up with an employment agreement for you. Have you ever heard of golden handcuffs?"

"No sir."

“That means economic sanctions if you switch companies. Go hire a lawyer, maybe from the Jaycees, for this you have to fight back for your own protection. Got that?”

“Yes, sir. You actually want me to fight you?”

“Damn straight I want you to learn to fight. You’ll have to do that often enough, so might just as well start here with us where it is safe.”

I thought of that lawyer in the cross dressers who was having a very hard time. Nobody would hire him or her, and he or she had no customer base. Maybe this would help.

He sounded like Denny. Had she been in here? “Hey there, Rosalie. Come meet Sandy. Sandy, this is my wife, Rosalie.”

He stood up and they kissed when they met in the middle of the room.

She was noticeably shorter than Rick. “So this is **the** Sandy I’ve heard so much about.”

I held out my hand while I tried to think of something to say.

She reached for a hug instead, which felt awkward to me. When she let go she grabbed my hard hat off the table. “Enough of that kiddo. You’ve become such a big hit at Bernies. But you knew that, didn’t you?”

“I am? Uh, sorry, Mrs. Blanchard, but I have no idea I am a big hit, or what to say to the boss’ wife. May I say I’m scared of blowing it.”

“I’ve been told you’re honest to a fault. Well, don’t worry about it. We’ve got work to do.”

“Uh.” I remained spooked by everything Rick had said, and now her. “What?”

“You. We can’t let you be the Wyndham big image going in there tonight looking like something a coyote left out back on the reservation.” Rosalie’s face did have a little of that rounded shape of some Native Americans. “Now, enough of that hard hat. Sam, Mongo, and the big boys have been guarding you from any unwanted mischief. Do you know you have been a big influence on Mongo?”

“Uh, no ma’am. I have?”

“You’re the first girl who ever talked to him that anyone knows of. Don’t protest. We all know that’s only your clothing. You gave him comfort about girls. He recently asked a girl for a date who accepted. Now that’s a big influence. With me?”

“Uh, no ma’am. What are Rick and you doing here? I’m just a crane operator.”

Rick interrupted. “You know perfectly well, Sandy, that you’re no longer just a crane operator. You have become a go-to person. Troubled work sites, failing equipment, screwed up supply orders, inspectors with bad news, and bank officers making trouble. That hard hat and your name badge saying ‘crane operator’ fools ‘em so often. Now just hesh and let Rosie be Rosie.”

She put a hand on a chair. "Sit."

Which I did. I must have had doubts and concerns written all across my face.

"This is OK, Sandy. This won't hurt. But when you go in Thirsty Bernies tonight you are going to be the prettiest girl ever in there."

"Why?"

"Because. First no hard hat. You have beautiful hair. Let it show." She had a hair brush in one hand and a bottle of conditioner in the other. She used her fingers working the tangles out first. I'd have to try that method myself, and tell Denny. "You'll be a stick of dynamite without that hard hat and with your blond hair this long draped over your shoulder. Hold still." She brushed and brushed and soon had my hair over my right shoulder. In the mirror I got it. Rosie looked up at the door. "Hey, Sarita."

Another woman came in I had never met before. Up close she wore a Mary Kay name tag. "Oh my gosh, yes. Take those earrings off. Their good, but not for tonight."

I did.

She opened up some kind of a kit on the nearby table. "Nothing wrong with your lipstick if you freshen it, but nothing right either. We're going to do three layers." She kept a hand on the back of my head as she worked and talked. The three layers were a lip liner, a lipstick, and a gloss.

In the mirror what she did took my breath away. "Wow. That's nice and not too bright a color."

"Good. Now I'm going to take you to the stars." Out came an airbrush.

At least I knew what that was. "You don't need that. It's too much."

"Off with your blouse and don't blush." She wrapped a sheet around me as if for having a hair cut. "Close your eyes and hesh." I felt that air spray all over my exposed facial, neck, and upper chest skin. "OK, look."

"Holy cow. What are you doing?"

"We got it right. Thanks for those photos Rosie."

"Photos?"

"We've been working on this. Now, try these earrings."

At least I knew how to get the hooks into my pierced ears. In the mirror they flashed with the slightest movement of my head.

"Perfect. Now we're doing your nails."

Sarita drew one of my hands out to her and rested my forearm on the chair's arm. Even I had to admit the color they chose wasn't dull and wasn't too flashy. She did spook me shaping my nails, but by now I was buying into this. At least a little.

“C’mon guys. What’s this all about?”

Rick put his hand on Sarita’s arm. “Perfect. Honestly, Sandy it would take too long, and we’re short on time. Sandy; can you sing.”

“No sir.”

“Good. Talent scouts won’t take you away with these looks. Time is short.” He grabbed my hard hat taking it further beyond my reach. “Carry your coat. You won’t need it in the car. We’re going.”

“Oh no.” It was Rosie who went out and came in with clothes on a hanger. Those were my clothes from home. *What the hell is going on?*

Sarita packed up her kit. “Sandy, we don’t have time. We all know your secret. So Rick and Rosie scoot on out of here for a minute. Now, where’s your shoulder bag, Sandy? I’m going to change you so the fit is right. Blush away, but we’re going to even if I have to get the front desk and the supply department in here to hold you down. I was a nurse in an earlier life.”

I blushed heavily hidden by that air brushed makeup.

She was quick and good.

She put pantihose on me over my diaper and plastic pants. She helped me put on my best red pleated skirt, blazing white blouse, and suit jacket before calling Rick and Rosie back in. They all took photos with their cell phones. In a mirror I really did look like something else. I carried my backpack and my hard hat as he and Rosie led the way to Rick’s big long expensive car.