

Yes, there's an elevator in the building, but I'll only take it if I happen to be walking in with Professor O. I give him credit for all of the field work he does with one artificial hip and one plastic knee, and besides, I'm pretty sure that at sixty-one he's not as concerned about the shape of his butt as I am about my thirty-one-year-old model. The stairwell is almost always empty, which means I eliminate that uncomfortable elevator-silence with strangers, all of us watching our shoes as if we had discovered that suddenly they were on the wrong feet. I can handle the climb to the third floor these days without huffing too much.

I listened to the distinctive stairwell echo of my steps as I trudged upward, my work bag slung over a shoulder and the remaining quarter-cup of coffee held out in front of me. The way I figured it, I had about ten minutes here before jumping back in the car for the forty-minute drive to the dig. That should give the good professor time to get completely consumed by his work at the site, and allow me to slip in practically unnoticed. After a day or two of catch-up work I could ditch the invisible act.

Pushing into the outer office I came face to face with two-hundred pounds of fun. Dolores Jimenez served multiple roles in our little department, ranging from Oakmueller's office manager to personal assistant to liaison with the college administration. That was all fine and good, but I treasured Dolores for her spirit. She's one of those people that you meet and, within one minute, you just know that you'll form a lasting friendship with. I've sucked down more than a few cervezas with this woman, and found that her wisdom – particularly in the area of relationships – doesn't dim as the hour grows late and the alcohol content rises.

Dolores was also the only person who knew about my relationship with Davis because she's the only person I could trust with the information. Forbidden romance is tough, and a girl has to have at least *one* confidant, you know?

I see where you're going again, and no, he's not married. It's a long story. Wait till I get back in my car and I'll explain.

"Well, good morning, Sunshine!" Dolores boomed as I closed the door behind me. "I didn't think I would see you today. I think Boris needs you at the site."

Dolores refused to say 'Professor,' or 'Dr. Oakmueller,' or even my affectionate choice, 'Professor O.' He would always be Boris to her.

"Just a quick pit stop," I said, setting my bag on the floor and dropping into the chair beside her desk. "Couple of things to pick up."

She gave me that look that every child has seen from a suspicious parent, and said, "Uh huh. A little behind on our cataloguing, are we?"

Damn, she was good.

She lowered her voice, even though I'm pretty sure nobody was within earshot. "A little too much lovin' lately, hm? Got your mind on a bone that ain't a thousand years old?"

Damn, she was nasty. Kinda throws you off when it's coming from a fifty-year-old grandmother and not one of your sorority friends. I loved it.

"You are three for three," I said, setting my coffee on the desk. "But as of today I am focused."

"Uh huh," she said again. "Focused. You must have had a fight."

Damn, now she was just plain scary.

“Have you ever thought about working for Homeland Security?” I asked. “Maybe the CIA?”

“You think you’re hard to read?” she said. “Work always becomes number one with you as soon as you have man trouble.”

I smiled. “Okay, so we had a minor incident, but it’s already over and done with.”

Dolores picked up a file folder and leafed through the contents. “Of course it is,” she said. “Those first few months of a relationship, you don’t dare let a fight stretch out. It’s too soon to have a two-day silent treatment. You gotta make it through at least a year before you do that.”

I looked at the picture on her desk of a handsome man in his fifties, a slight paunch sticking out from a jean shirt that was partially hidden behind a giant belt buckle. “You and Joe fight much?”

“The kids are grown and gone, off having kids of their own,” she said. “We’re in our second honeymoon now. Plus, after thirty years together we’d rather put our energy into something else.” She turned to me, lowered her head and raised her eyes. “You know what I mean?”

“You give me hope, Dolores,” I said, picking up the coffee and finishing it off. “I was afraid I would lose interest in that by the time I was forty.”

She shrugged. “Eh, you might. Depends on the man, I think, whether he wants to make you happy or not.”

“So you got lucky.”

“Uh uh,” she said, shaking her head. “That ain’t luck. You know pretty quickly if he’s that kinda man. Just a matter of whether you pay attention to that, or if you overlook

it because you think it'll come later." She shook her head again. "Girl, I don't care how much money he's got or how nice his butt is, he ain't worried about taking care of you now, he ain't gonna be in ten years."

She looked back at me. "How long you two been sneaking around now? A year?"

"Almost."

"Hmph. Then you know." She turned back to the contents of the folder. I sat there quietly, unsure of what to say next. Dolores waited a moment before filling in the silence. "You know, Boris probably won't care by now. Gonna tell him about Davis anytime soon?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Maybe. Probably. What do you think?"

She chuckled. "I think you should have told him after the first date. Or at least after you started sleeping together." She gave me the lowered head/raised eye look again. "Or is that redundant?"

I dropped my mouth open in mock offense. "Now you're calling me loose? I'll have you know I made him buy several expensive dinners before I gave anything up."

Dolores shook her head. "Expensive dinners? In Durango? What'd you do, get extra cheese and pepperoni?"

"Once was in Telluride."

"Uh-huh. Got separate rooms in Telluride, did ya?"

Listen, I like to think I'm quick, and can verbally spar with anyone. Dolores just wears me out, though. She's the champ.

"It was the meal in Telluride that sealed the deal," I said with a smile. "Besides, how'd we get on this subject anyway?"

“You’re said you’re gonna tell Boris that you’re dating Davis Bracken.”

“I said maybe.”

“You said probably.”

“I said maybe first.”

We both sat in silence, smiling, savoring our rapid descent into seventh grade.

Dolores kept working, and after a few moments I felt like I’d wasted enough time.

Tossing my empty coffee cup into the trash can beside her desk, I stood up and hefted the work bag onto my shoulder. It would be so much more fun to stay and prattle on about boys and sex, but at some point I would have to actually earn my rent money.

“Okay,” I said, “I’m off.”

Dolores gave a half-wave. “Bye, Sunshine.”

My desk isn’t in a private office nor a cubicle. The space we borrow from the college has been reconfigured so many times that now there’s an odd little L-shape at the end of one hall, like one of those funky paper remnants you’re left with after wrapping a gift. The previous tenants used it for storage, but I claimed it as my work space. It’s relatively quiet, and if I keep my head tucked around the corner I can actually carry on a semi-confidential phone conversation. I dropped my bag on top of the clutter on my desk and sat down in front of the keyboard.

After clearing out the daily assortment of spam email, including my personal favorites, the guaranteed penis enlargement pills, patches, and ointments, I scanned the list of relevant entries. Several were work-related, including three from Professor O, one from a museum director in Oregon, and two others from associates in the field, each asking for catalogue numbers to help them piece their historical jigsaw puzzles together. I

like that part of the job; it's behind-the-scenes, which means you'll never see me interviewed on the Discovery Channel standing in front of dinosaur bones or ancient tribal huts. I recognize that I'm what you'd call Support Staff, but where the hell would anyone of us be without support, right? These people would never get their face-time on television if it wasn't for my work. I get satisfaction from that.

There was an email from Elise Wisman, she of the bouncing bra-less behemoths, asking if I could please get the majority of my sketching and cataloguing finished by 1, so that she could swoop in and get started. I shot back a quick 'no problem,' and moved on to the next note.

It was from my mother, who had bravely waded into the digital age while my father skipped merrily along in his analog life. They were both sixty-years-old, but their notions of technology acceptance were separated by centuries. My father built and ran a profitable business with a pencil, bless his heart, before finally selling the business and sleeping in for the first time in his life. Mom embraced every new electronic gadget that came along, not out of any desire to stay young and be hip, but because every new leap gave her a faster, more efficient way to talk with someone, or, more often, multiple someones. She had an email and texting addiction that would rival any teenager. Very cute.

Of course, I don't know if you have older parents who are online, but in my experience they should be put on an email diet. Once they start, they can't seem to stop, and the stuff they send is, to be honest, garbage. My mother's messages are the computer equivalent of Pringles.

With a resigned sigh I opened Mom's latest message and found that I, along with every lucky soul in her address book, had been treated to a copy of an online news story about how forty percent of the items in our refrigerators have the potential to kill us. The headline screamed, "What's Lurking In Your Fridge? Maybe Leftover Death!"

Delete.

As I scanned the rest of the inbox, another penis pill ad popped in, followed by promises of lower mortgage rates and the total elimination of every wrinkle on my body.

Delete. Delete.

My eyes fell upon an email from Archie Middleton, and I smiled. Not because Archie means anything to me personally, but because (a) I've never known, nor will probably ever know, another guy named Archie, and (b) I can't see his name without recalling the family details he divulged over beers one evening.

Archie is about my age, and he's the transportation specialist for our little archaeological group, which means he's in charge of carting around the precious cargo that Professor O and his worker bees pull out of the ground. All it took was two beers at happy hour for Archie to let our group know that yes, he realizes no guy his age should be named Archie, and yes, his father was a huge fan of the comic books. Apparently his mother didn't mind them too much, either, because Archie admitted that he has a sister named Betty and a sister named Veronica.

So how can I not smile when I see his name pop up? I can only imagine how terrified he must have been as a child, praying that his mother wouldn't get pregnant again with a boy, otherwise he'd spend the rest of his life introducing his kid brother, Jughead.

If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times: parents should have to submit children's names for approval to some sort of committee, a panel whose only job is to look past the cutesy short-term narcissism of the parents and see how much torture that name will inflict upon the kid the rest of his days. That would immediately protect against anyone having to go through life saying, "Yes, my name really is Jack Daniels, and no, I don't drink it. Please stop grinning at me."

Anyway, back to poor Archie. He wanted to know if I was finished with the stockpile of artifacts in the on-site storage bins, so he could ship them off to their next destination. Seemed that everyone was anxious for me to get back to work.

I leaned back in my chair. Another cup of coffee sounded good, but you don't want to spend a day on site having to pee every thirty minutes. Plus, office coffee never, ever, tastes as good as coffee shop coffee. It's a law or something.

So instead I clicked on the desktop folder that held the latest materials pulled out of the ground at the site we've nicknamed Mouton. That won't last, because...well, because sites generally receive formal names based on either their location, the objects discovered there, or the discoverer. In this case, our temporary pet name was based on a joke. One of our exchange students from France, Henri Porcher, was working last summer at the new site and grew very excited when he uncovered an animal bone amidst some human fragments. He immediately proclaimed that it was a sheep, an important discovery that would tie the ancient peoples with herding, possibly for food or clothing.

Except the bone turned out to be a fossilized tree limb. Yes, upon first glance it was shaped exactly like the leg bone of a sheep, but that didn't stop the entire team from

torturing Henri with fake coughs that sounded like “baa, baa” until the poor guy’s tour was over and he slunk back across the Atlantic.

Mouton is French for sheep. See, we can’t officially file the site under that name, but it works for now, and it brings us joy.

With my unfortunate loss of focus in the past few weeks I was behind, but now I wanted to know exactly how far. The folder, updated at the end of each day by the site foreman, gave a rough listing of the objects unearthed in the past twenty-four hours, and it was then my job to sketch and catalogue each item. The stockpile actually wasn’t as bad as I had imagined. I synced my PDA to download the folder, closed out of the system, and looked around the desk to make sure I wasn’t leaving behind something I would need. Once on site there would be no jogging back to the office.

Finding anything on my desk would seem impossible to an outsider, but I pride myself on the ability to spot anything I need in a heartbeat. I’m like the people who can find the hidden three-dimensional objects in the paintings, like those cheesy horses-in-the-trees pictures, only I believe my skills are more valuable. You go ahead and point out the hidden Indians, I’d much rather eye the important paperwork peeking out of the piles.

I gathered up my things and walked back into the lobby.

“Boris called for messages,” Dolores said. “Before he hung up he asked if you had left yet, so I told him yes.”

I smiled down at her. “You’re very good to me.” Shifting my weight and readjusting the bag over my shoulder, I said, “Wanna do some margs tomorrow, about 6ish?”

“Who’s going?” she asked without looking up.

“What do you mean, ‘who’s going?’” I said. “So you want to hear the guest list before you commit? *I’m* going, isn’t that enough?”

Dolores cocked her head and gave me the look. “Sunshine, it ain’t about who’s on the guest list, it’s about the number of people. Once there’s more than four I don’t go. Too much yappin’ about nothin’.” She turned back to her desk. “You know me, I prefer things intimate.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, God, sounds like we’re going to talk about your sex life again. Well, so far there’s five of us, so I guess you’re out.” I started toward the door. “I’ll let you know if any of the yappin’ turns into somethin’.”

I pushed out into the hallway then into the stairwell, banging the door against the cinder block wall. Halfway down my phone rang, and once again OAKMUELLER, BORIS popped onto the screen. Damn, he was relentless today. But there was no way I could camouflage the echo of the stairs to sound like I was on the road, so I let him go to voicemail.

September in the southwest corner of Colorado is heaven. I grew up on the other side of the state, in one of the suburbs of Denver, so the view out of my bedroom window was the Rocky Mountains, which ain’t bad. But even that background didn’t prepare me for the sheer splendor that radiates from the San Juan Mountains. I know I visited when I was a kid, but c’mon, I had more important things to do in the backseat, like memorize the words to the New Kids on the Block and wish that Joey was sitting next to me rather than my sister, Micaela. Or did I like Jordan?

The point is, you never appreciate natural beauty until you grow out of your I'm The Center Of The Universe stage of life. Besides, as a kid you have no real taste anyway, as evidenced by my fascination with New Kids on the Block. Quit smirking, you had the damned posters, too.

Now, however, I sometimes find myself pulling over at one of those scenic overlooks, and...well, overlooking. I know that's usually reserved for flatlanders, or, as we like to call them, Gapers. But the ruggedness of the San Juans can make even a few of us natives realize how good we've got it.

Durango sits at the foot of the range and just outside a national forest, so you get mountains and trees, plus some running water, and decent weather. Listen, not everyone in Colorado is a ski bum, and while I'll go once or twice a year, I'm not gaga over being cold. Today was perfect. It was September 18<sup>th</sup>, the trees were starting to turn, the elk were tuning up their pitiful mating cries – the ones that rivaled closing time at Hootin' Annies – and the sun was working on a seventy-five-degree day. Yum.

Most guys love to drive, I think. Women, well, we tolerate it. It gets us from here to there, but it's always a lot better if there's a gal pal in the passenger seat. Radio's not much to speak of out here in a small town, so I had my little digital companionship turned up to overcome for the wind rushing in the windows. It would take me about nine songs to get to the Mouton Dig.

The third song in was by Alanis Morissette, and my thoughts immediately raced back to Davis. Alanis is a point of conflict for us, because he thinks she's a man-hater and I think she's perfect. Let me recreate the classic debate, which I recall took place while we were playing Putt-Putt:

Him: Listen to the words, it's no secret she hates all men.

Me: She doesn't hate all men. She vented in a couple of songs. *Jagged Little Pill* is her diary, Davis.

Him: It's venom.

Me: The guy was an ass.

Him: So any man who breaks up with a woman, regardless of his reasons, even if it's her fault, is an ass?

Me: Pretty much.

Him: But you're free to break up with us.

Me: Pretty much.

Him: Keep your head down.

Me: What?

Him: When you putt, keep your head down, don't look up.

Me: You're changing the subject.

Him: I'm helping your game.

Me: It's Putt-Putt, for Chrissakes. Be a man and finish the argument.

Him: Okay. Alanis Morissette influenced an entire generation of women to lash out at men even when they didn't deserve it. She made it cool to bash men.

Me: No, she gave women the strength to call bullshit. Like right now.

Him: So, if you were a Celine Dion fan we wouldn't be having this argument.

Me: If I was a Celine Dion fan I would hope you would hit me between the eyes with this putter.

Him: See, when you listen to Celine Dion the violence is aimed at yourself. With Alanis, it's aimed at men.

Me: God, you better hope I never write a song about you.

Him: Keep your head down.

For the record, the game of Putt-Putt was being played in Ouray, which is pronounced Your-Ray, and which is about an hour north of Durango. It's a cool little town, too, and offered us some protection from being spotted together socially.

Oh, yeah. I promised you an explanation about that, didn't I?

Yes, I'm sneaking around with Davis Bracken. No, he's not married, I don't have another boyfriend, nothing slimy like any of that. When we got together we just didn't think it was wise, politically, that's all. And now, ten months later, I'm into one of those endless loops where I don't want to admit what's been going on for so long, you know? For a while I figured we would just eventually break up and I wouldn't ever need to explain, but now we're getting close to that magical one-year mark and still nobody knows about it, except Dolores.

I told you, Davis is a hot-shot real estate developer. What I didn't tell you was that Davis is the guy who's developing the property that we now call the Mouton Dig. Yes, he has the rights to carve it up, plow it under, and construct mammoth homes, the kind that we all gaze at through the security gates and then wonder what sort of sleazy, underhanded job generates the funds necessary to play in one of those. Davis is the guy who builds those fantasy camps.

He's supposed to be building a nest of them on sixty-something acres here in the four-corners region, but a bulldozer turned up twelve-hundred-year-old cookware, sorta like Caveman Tupperware. The next thing you know it hit the news, and then Professor O's team was called out, and suddenly the bulldozers were gathering dust.

That doesn't sit well with Davis. He's essentially losing money every day, while in the meantime our little archaeological team is crawling around like ants on my grandma's Formica countertops. And, in case you didn't know this, archaeological teams move at a pace that would make government workers seem like Dale Junior's pit crew. That means they're slow.

Davis squawked a lot. Davis tried ignoring the historical aspect and ordered his men to get busy. Then Davis fumed when the judge issued his ruling, stating that it was a protected site for the foreseeable future, at least until the artifacts could be removed and catalogued.

Davis and Professor O are not the best of friends. So, I guess now you can see why it wouldn't have been wise to tell my boss that I was suddenly dating his nemesis. I never could figure out how to break the news, and, as each month rolled past, it didn't get any easier.

I don't know if you've ever carried on a secret relationship, like maybe an affair, but, if you have, I gotta say that on one hand I'm ashamed of you, while on the other I marvel at your ability to pull it off. I guess I grudgingly acknowledge that there's a certain rush to it all, that touch of forbidden fruit that adds an exhilaration usually lacking. I've spent enough nights wondering if it's embellishing the relationship, you

know, making it seem more exciting than it really is. Like, if I wasn't hiding my fling with Davis, would I still even want to be dating him?

Those of you who have snuck around know exactly what I'm talking about. Those of you who are judging those of us who have snuck around, shut the hell up, because you've at least thought about it.

To complicate things a bit more, I've realized that at some point – I think it was during a long, pronounced staring session with my bathroom mirror – I have officially reached the stage in a relationship called Overthinking. You know the symptoms; you begin to analyze not the relationship itself, but every microscopic element that makes up said relationship. It's no longer enough to think 'I had a good time tonight;' no, at this stage you break it down into every possible component: 'He was twenty-minutes late...what was he doing?... I'm sure the car smells different...is that perfume?...he knows I don't like calamari and yet he ordered it anyway...yes, true, I did get the onion soup, which was good, maybe a little too much crouton, but that's not the point, he could have ordered something we *both* enjoy instead of suddenly now we're getting separate appetizers...what does that mean?...he used to not take his eyes off me during dinner but tonight he was like a bobblehead...I swear he has never driven home this quickly, like he's anxious to drop me off...now the radio is on, so I guess talking is out of the question...fine, I didn't want to know about his day, anyway...yes I do, and he damned well should want to know about my day...even though nothing special happened, that's not the point...watch, he'll probably pull the ol' "I've got a busy day tomorrow" and drop me off...which is fine with me, I'm not sure this is working anyway...no, that's a lie, it's working fine for *me*...and I even shaved my goddamned legs this afternoon...'

Smirk at me all you want, you've been there, honey.

In this particular case, I have fallen into a zone where I am questioning exactly what it is about Davis that tugged at me in the first place. It's not like I'm some sort of adrenaline freak who has to live on the edge and push the limit and all that happy crap; but since we're being honest here, I have to fess up and say that part of me doesn't want to tell anyone about us. There, I said it: I like the intrigue.

I just want to know, deep down inside, if it's the excitement, or if it's Davis.

So now you know my little secret. I'm a conflicted woman.

A conflicted woman who is suddenly six miles beyond the last remnant of civilization in southwest Colorado and has to pee like there's no tomorrow.