

Colorado

by David McKenna

"OK, I'll stop," he said. "Is it a deal?"

"No deal," the woman said. "You'll never stop."

"I knew you weren't serious."

"Of course you knew," the woman said. "You know everything."

The café was empty except for a waitress and the couple, who sat at a window table in sunlight. They were middle-aged and fit-looking, a handsome couple. The dinner menus were out but they had both insisted on breakfast. Now it was time for the tiny blue cups of espresso. The woman raised her cup and sipped. She had brown, perfectly cut hair and a strong, even-featured face that rarely betrayed emotion. The man watched her replace her dainty cup on its dainty saucer.

"Colorado," he said. "You're joking, right?"

"Alright, I'm joking. If you say so, love." She had a clipped British accent and perfect posture and was not easily rattled. He wanted to rattle her.

"You could have found a simpler way to push me away. A Persian cat, maybe."

"This isn't about pushing you away, it's about something I had to do. Why must everything be about you?"

"It was about us together, something we were working out. Or so I thought."

"You would never have stopped."

He chuckled. "We were talking on the phone the other day, but you were two thousand miles away."

"I couldn't bring myself to tell you." She put her hand on his arm. She was an outdoorsy woman who always smelled of Chanel.

"You were in Colorado, buying a baby. Jesus."

"I was tired of your anger. You would never have stopped."

"On a reservation, no less," he said. "A regular baby wouldn't do."

"You would never have agreed."

"It had to be an exotic baby, a papoose."

"You nasty man. Must you be cruel?"

"A half-black, half-Cherokee papoose that cost you 35 grand. Please tell me this is a joke."

She sipped her espresso and sat back, eyes set. "None of the agencies in Pennsylvania would let me adopt. They said I was too old."

He had rattled her. It didn't show — it never did — but he could hear it. When she was rattled, she sounded plaintive and put-upon.

"Oh, but you fixed them," he said. "No one tells you what to do."

"I would have told you if —"

"You would never have told me."

"You were dodgy," she said. "You weren't with me."

He drummed his fingers on the table and looked away. She put her hand on his hand and pressed his fingers to the table. Her hand was strong and brown, her nails carefully groomed and opaque. She squeezed his fingers.

"You're very special to me," she said.

"If I were, you wouldn't have gone to Colorado."

"But I always felt you were laughing at me."

He slid his hand on top of hers and squeezed until she winced. When he let go, she pulled away her hand. Their cups and saucers clattered.

"I could stop, you know," he said.

"No you can't, not at your age."

The waitress was at the other end of the café, next to the kitchen window. She was tall and pale. The man and woman were like her parents, or somebody else's parents. She'd seen many such couples, polite and shellacked, spitting their words at one another in subdued tones. She wasn't thinking of them but of her new pieces at Kung Fu Necktie. In a few hours she would walk there and see if any of them had sold.

"You might at least be happy for me, just this once," the woman said.

"I'm happy, alright, happy as a clam."

Two young customers, one with a hat and the other with a beard, entered the café and sat at a table near the waitress.

"Sup, Ronnie," the beard greeted the waitress.

"Will you be angry with me forever?" the woman said.

The man looked at her tailored silk jacket and her green cashmere Burberry scarf and frowned. He thought of her cold home in Narberth, her eight rental properties that she'd spent too much on, her ongoing trans-Atlantic feud with her forever dying mother, her reliance on him to tamp down her maudlin fears, sometimes until three in the morning.

"I'm not angry," he said. "Don't flatter yourself."

"I had to make a choice, don't you see?"

"I see you in a tepee next to a river, handing over a wad of cash."

"It wasn't like that," she said. "They have bureaucrats in Colorado, too."

"I see dirty diapers and sleepless nights."

"You won't have to worry about those, will you?"

"I see you — "

"You've had your children. God forbid anyone else should have one."

She'd never met his children. Just once he'd spoken to her of his grown son, proudly. She'd glowered at him.

"Yo Ronnie," the hat said. "I like your new pieces."

"Yeah, well, I didn't have much time to work on them."

"They're awesome," the beard said.

"They're held together with duct tape and Elmer's," Ronnie said.

"I need a triple mocha bull shot or whatever," the hat said.

"Something will open my eyes."

"I don't know if we have anything strong enough for that," Ronnie said.

The hat and the beard laughed and looked toward the front of the café at the grim-faced couple speaking in low tones. They did not look long.

"Where's the baby now?" the man asked.

"She's with Alegra. I told her I'd be back by half past six."

Alegra was from Ecuador and will be her *au pair*, the woman explained. He chuckled and shook his head.

"Go on and laugh," the woman said. "That's what I expected."

"I could stop, really. You could send the baby back to Colorado."

"I'll never do that. She's three months old and already a full head of hair and adorable eyes that never blink. She looks so wise but then she reaches out and wraps her little brown hand around my thumb. She needs me."

She was trying to say she felt something, to convince him of this. She was proud that she felt something. "I love her so much," she said.

He remembered that Colorado meant reddish in Spanish. The state was named for the red mud in the Colorado River. In his mind, the baby was that color. He saw red muddy water rushing over flat white stone. He could feel the water and something new.

"You should go home, your baby needs you," he said, surprised by his tone. He sounded like someone else.

"Do you really understand, or are you being ironic?"

"I'm being ironic, but I understand."

"You're not making fun?"

"You'll be late if you keep asking."

"You're not angry anymore?"

"I'm fine," he said. "You're fine, too."

She was strong and handsome and on a mission. She needed something, but not him. He'd got her attention, but what had he wanted with it?

"I knew you'd understand," the woman said.

"I knew you knew. I know everything."

She stood and walked quickly to the door and closed it behind her. He walked over to the waitress and handed her the check with some money. He heard running water in the kitchen and felt cool as stone.

"Was everything OK?" the waitress asked.

"At first I thought I might need duct tape," he said, "but I'm fine, Ronnie."

Ronnie smiled at the smiling man. "I've got plenty of tape if you need it."

"I feel great," the man said. "Like I could walk all the way to Colorado if I wanted."

"That's a long walk," Ronnie said. The hat and the beard looked at the man and adjusted their chairs, as if to make way if he started walking.

The man turned to look out the window. The woman's blue Lexus was gone. An old huckster was unloading produce from a truck.

"But I don't want to," he said. "I don't have that kind of time."

* * *

