

The line at Latte Da wasn't moving, and it wasn't because of a slow barista or a mechanical breakdown behind the counter, but rather because of a rookie at the head of the line who had settled comfortably into the exact center of the universe. She stood with her hideous backpack purse slung over one shoulder, staring up at the chalk board menu as if it displayed the answers to all of life's great mysteries encoded in riddle form, and she was bound and determined to solve at least one of them in the time it takes Paris Hilton to work out the Sunday crossword, even after spotting her every other Down.

I checked my watch for the third time in less than a minute, and weighed how much backing I would receive from my fellow spectators versus the inevitable looks of disgust from the overly skittish if I leaned my head back and yelled a warning that I would not be responsible for brutal acts of aggression if I didn't get my damned coffee within ninety seconds.

I usually don't think in such long sentences, but the holdup was giving me much too much time to construct a variety of violent scenarios and I was able to cut and paste them into the most eloquent – yet formidable – details that my caffeine-starved mind could manage.

Besides, my boyfriend pissed me off this morning.

I tapped my fingers against my arms and let out a sigh designed to reach the front of the line, which meant it had to penetrate three people in order to reach Backpack. In response, the man ahead of me turned enough to give me an 'I know, ain't it annoying?' look, but I was in no mood to commiserate with a stranger, especially one with a comb-

over. Instead I checked my watch again, to emphasize to any and all who saw it that I was *really* being inconvenienced.

Comb-over glanced at his own watch, but I think it was a calculated move to show off his very expensive timepiece. He opened his mouth to speak just as my phone warbled.

“Hello?” I said, as if I didn’t know who it could possibly be, even though the caller ID clearly stated OAKMUELLER, BORIS, and how many Boris Oakmuellers can anyone know?

“He probably doesn’t, but ask him anyway.”

Now, I know that’s not a natural conversational flow, but you have to know Professor Oakmueller, who will often call you while he’s in the middle of a conversation with someone else in the room, so that when you answer the phone you must listen to him wrap up that chat before he turns his attention to you. The first few times it happened I wasted many ‘huhs?’ and ‘whats?’ until I learned. Now I just wait.

“Call me when you find out,” Oakmueller concluded. Then, “Lexie?”

“Hi,” I said, looking past Comb-over to see Backpack reaching for money, which was progress.

“Where are you?”

“Getting coffee. Want anything?”

“No, but thank you. I’m going to the new site in about forty-five minutes. Will you be going straight there, or do you need to stop at the office?”

I considered my answer. Going straight to the dig would be the most practical move, while going to the office first would postpone having to explain why I hadn’t yet

catalogued last month's artifacts. Any delay would allow me to dream up a response much more professional-sounding than 'Because I'm too busy these days monkey-piling with my boyfriend.'

Which reminded me again that he had pissed me off this morning.

Which made me want my coffee even more, which caused me to once again contemplate the quickest and most painful way to kill Backpack.

"I have to stop at the office," I said. "Why, do you need something right away?"

"No, we're going to be doing plaster work this afternoon, and I want you to sketch a few items first."

Good. No question about last month's items.

"Have you finished cataloguing last month's items?" he said.

Shit.

"Almost," I lied, before quickly changing the subject. "Who's in charge of the wrap?"

"Elise," he said, with what sounded like phony disinterest. There were three or four good plaster people available in the area, but I knew that Oakmueller jumped at the chance for Elise Wisman to participate at any of his sites because Elise Wisman never wore a bra. Elise Wisman, wrapper par excellence, could stand a good wrap herself, but I had to admit that I did like her. Hell, even I liked looking at her breasts, so I certainly couldn't blame that old coot Oakmueller.

He was talking to somebody else who had walked up to him. "At least four. Five would be best, but get me at least four. Hey, Lexie, you still there?"

“I’m still here,” I said, finally shuffling forward a step. Backpack had moved off to the side, and was peering into the depths of that ugly purse with straps, completely oblivious to the miracle of life that occupied the space around her. “I’ll grab a few things and be there as quick as possible,” I told Oakmueller. “Last chance for coffee. Sure you don’t want something? Something to nibble on?”

“No, no,” he said. “Just hurry out here, because I want to get in a lot of work before the rain.”

I assured him I would fly, hung up, and within twenty seconds had moved up another couple of feet. Regulars know the steps and can dance through the line at a good clip. Thankfully Comb-over was on his own phone now, and I was free to alternate my thoughts between the caffeine anticipation and the irritation I felt toward my boyfriend.

Okay, let’s step back a moment, because I think we’ve started out on the wrong foot. You might think I’m a bitch, but... Well, I’ve been a little bitchy this morning, but an inventory of my last two hours might buy me a pass.

Waking up late was my fault, I’ll admit, but it’s a fine line between pushing the snooze and actually turning off the alarm, and I smudged the line this morning. I’ll take responsibility for that. Staying up ‘til 1:30, okay, my responsibility, too.

Not really building a good case so far, am I?

But hear me out. Make-up on my shirt, having to change three times, already running late, gas light popped on and I *know* that means maybe ten more miles before the car sputters to a stop, so I had to pull over and put in ten dollars worth. Now I smell like gas, it’s a godawful hair day, and there’s a moron at the front of the line at Latte Da.

Then there's Davis. He hasn't pissed me off very much in our ten months together, but that's irrelevant because this morning's row was worth three fights put together. You can poke fun at my car, you can give me shit about my messy condo, and you can even snicker about my addiction to red licorice, but don't ever – *ever* – ridicule my work. Work, my friend, is what has paid the bills and taken my mind off the crap that I've lived through in the last few years. Does it pay a lot? No. Is it glamorous? Well, maybe a little bit, I guess, but that's only because most people don't even really know what an archaeologist does, so there's a wisp of mystery to it.

When you get right down to it, I sketch and catalogue old artifacts, like pottery and tools and jewelry. It happens to be my specialty in the field, so I'm not exactly Indiana Jones, get it? In fact, don't even mention *him* around Professor Oakmueller, or you'll get one of his classic lectures on how Hollywood set archaeology back twenty years by painting some romantic image that universities capitalized on without explaining the truth to their eager young charges. Once the students arrived in the field and found that they weren't chasing the ark of the covenant or the holy grail – when they found that they were most often sifting through ancient garbage dumps and fossilized dung – their enthusiasm rapidly waned, often leaving the good professor hanging out to dry.

But I love what I do, and my work has been my sanctuary for the last few years. Anyone who has found themselves mired in a lousy marriage like I did will know what I'm talking about; work is an escape. Once I got out of the marriage I plunged even further into my career, so let's just say I have an emotional connection to my job.

That's why Davis's comments pissed me off. At first he didn't even realize he'd done it, and was content to get off the phone with a breezy 'I love you,' probably

anticipating a roll in the hay later this evening. The dead silence he encountered after the ‘I love you’ was his first clue. The barrage he got in return for his ‘what’s wrong?’ was punctuated by some of my best cursing ever, and that pretty much clued him in to the fact that there would be no appointment in the hay tonight.

Or tomorrow, probably.

Davis is a hotshot real estate developer, worth a couple million, good looking in a slightly ‘I don’t need to prove anything’ kinda way, self-confident, a good dresser, a good lover...

Jeez, what am I doing? I’m supposed to be mad at him right now.

His self-confidence can sometimes morph into a touch of arrogance. Not much, but I almost wonder if it’s inevitable in some regards. Or, more than likely, it’s not so much that he gets arrogant, but that the rest of us realize that we aren’t quite at his level, and so we twist our own insecurities into some sort of character flaw in *him*...

Whatever. When I mentioned on the phone this morning – remember, it was already a bad start to the day – that I was behind on some work, and that I might have to lay low and get caught up for a day or two, the last thing I needed was for him to say, ‘Or you could just blow it off, we’ll go to Vegas this weekend, and you can look for a better job next week.’

I dropped my curling iron in the sink and exploded. ‘This is my job, Davis. It might seem disposable to you, but this is what pays the rent, this is what has gotten me...’

Well, you’ve already heard all that, and now so has he. Loudly. He could have recovered nicely with an apology, even one that wasn’t quite authentic, because at that

point I would have considered anything. But no, Davis has a bit of a sarcastic bent to him, which is sometimes charming and stimulating, at least when it's directed at somebody else. But when I'm the target, and when he drops a bullshit line like, 'Well good luck, let me know if you stumble across Fred Flintstone today,' it's not so charming.

I've hung up on my share of guys in my life, but I can tell you that it only brings you satisfaction with the old-fashioned slam-the-phone-into-its-cradle maneuver; fumbling for the END button on a cell phone lacks all drama whatsoever and leaves you feeling flat. Throwing the phone onto the unmade bed was lame, too.

Comb-over stepped aside and it was finally my turn at the counter. Josh was his usual perky self, greeting me with a smile and at least two too many piercings in his face. "Hey, Lexie, how's it goin'?" he asked while simultaneously writing my name on the cup as it filled with coffee. Yes, coffee, black. You might feel disappointed that my order is not a sexy order, chock full of double-shot this and easy-on that, but sorry. I used to be that person; in fact, I once took some perverse pride in having what I call the paragraph order, but after you've sunk through enough layers of shit in your life you find that you just don't have time for that anymore. Black coffee, thank you. One and a half packets of Splenda. Done.

"Crappy, Josh," I said, swiping my frequent-jack-myself-up card and moving to the side. A twelve-second counter experience; I looked around for Backpack to see if she was observing how it's done, but didn't spot her.

"This is what you need," my twenty-something savior said, handing over the large cup with my name misspelled. Josh was convinced that it was Lexxy, and I lost the heart

to educate him long ago. “Diggin’ up anything good today?” he asked, wiping his hands on his apron.

I know the drill: quick questions require quick answers when there’s a line at the coffee shop. “Digging up history, Josh. It’s all good.” We exchanged pleasant good-byes, and I turned for the door.

It was a lie. Not all history is good, but enough about me.

I cruised past the sugar and napkin stand long enough to grab the little yellow packets, past Comb-over who nodded while he sipped, out the door, into the bright Colorado sunshine, and there’s everyone’s favorite logjam, digging again through that repulsive bag, probably this time searching for keys. Her medium-sized whatever sat on the wobbly metal table beside her, the lid off, apparently discarded, another dead giveaway that she’s a rookie. Don’t *ever* throw away the lid. As I walked by, she set the purse on the table to continue the hunt, and promptly knocked over the cup.

I scrolled over to my favorite playlist and put it on shuffle, so that during the drive to the office I could wallow in my audio version of a security blanket. Some people have comfort food, I have comfort songs. New music is great, and I try to keep an open mind about it, but when I’m down I just need something that I can sing along with. Of course, even if it’s a song I’ve been listening to for twenty years I still don’t know the words, usually. I’m a music person, not a lyrics junkie, which means I have a tendency to embarrass myself in groups by blurting out something not only wrong but ridiculous. I

found out later that Sheryl Crow says the bartender looked up from his want ads, not the bartender looked up from his one eye.

You sing it your way, I'll sing it mine. Personally I think a one-eyed bartender adds a little style to the tune.

The Jetta is five years old and still runs great, gets me where I need to go, and doubles as a mobile storage locker. Right now there are at least three changes of clothes in various combinations, a somewhat disturbing collection of fast food wrappers, empty Slim-Fast cans, and Tupperware, along with an emergency overnight bag. Don't get any ideas, that's not what it's for; sometimes we get caught out on a dig and have to crash somewhere close.

There's also a lot of work piled up in the backseat, but I know exactly where everything is. No, really. Some of you throw that line around irresponsibly, but I can tell you right now, from the front seat, hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead, that the Mouton Dig folder is in the pile on the rear passenger seat, the sketch pad from this current project is on the floorboard directly behind me, and Professor O's barely-legible notes from last week are in the back pocket of my seat. See?

I'll never understand people who are anal about the cleanliness of their car. Jeez, people, it's a car. I've got a lot of crap to haul around, I'm not entertaining European heads of state, and I don't plan on eating off the seats anytime soon. Davis is a clean-car type, and used to needle me as he kicked around Wendy's bags on the passenger floorboard. Eventually we just began to stick with his car each time, which was fine by me; for one thing, gas ain't cheap, and plus he drives a Jag convertible.

I made my way toward the office, a small collection of rooms that the good people at Fort Lewis College allowed us to use. I glanced out the windows as the town of Durango settled into its workday, missing the hustle and bustle of Denver while at the same time feeling grateful that I could be in the office eleven minutes after leaving my condo. Okay, fifteen with a coffee stop. The year I've lived here has flown by, and deep down I think I appreciate the change of pace, even if I do make the usual grumblings that all big-city people make when they relocate to the sticks.

Eight blocks from the parking lot my phone tootled again, and this time it was Davis. Exactly fifty-six minutes after I hung up on him. Okay, we're still learning about each other, and there's some good information to file away: after a big fight he waits an hour before calling back. I thought briefly about letting it go to voice mail so I could listen to his recorded apology more than once, but my curiosity got the better of me. Besides, if he hung up without leaving a message, it would eat at me for hours wondering what he *would* have said.

My cell phone goes to voice mail after four rings, so I answered after three.

"I'm almost to the office so I only have a minute."

His voice was the first thing that attracted me to him last year. We met on the phone, and I practically wanted to undress him before we said goodbye that first time. It was an unfair advantage right now.

"Did you already make the reservations for the wine festival, or do I need to do that?"

I almost choked. "What? *That's* why you called?"

"Well," he said, "there's more, but you said you were in a hurry."

“Yeah, well let me hear what else you’ve got so I can see how you prioritize.”

“I wanted to apologize for making you angry this morning. You’re very special to me, I care about you very much, and I would never intentionally do anything to damage what we have. I spoke without thinking, and said some things that I shouldn’t have said. I’m sorry.”

Holy shit, why didn’t I let this go to voice mail so I’d have a copy of it? I mean, I like to play tough every once in a while, but whose heart wouldn’t melt to this? I felt all of the anger dissolve, I suddenly heard every bird within a mile, Backpack was instantly forgotten, and my hair looked awesome.

But...

“You couldn’t tell me this first? You started with wine festival tickets?”

He chuckled. “One of your magazines had an article that said, after an argument, you should never immediately go back to the scene of the crime. It said you should lead off with something else, then gradually work your way back to the issue. Something like that.”

“There’s no way a woman wrote that,” I said.

“You’re right, it was some guy, some doctor of something or other.”

I smiled. “How sweet. You’re trying out relationship advice from one of my chick magazines. Did you tear out any recipes while you were at it?”

“No,” he said, “but I scribbled down five ways to guarantee you’ll scream for more.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “I remember that issue. I think I wrote those down somewhere, too, but then realized I only needed you for two of them.”

His perfect voice rumbled with a laugh. “What time are you finished today?
Wanna grab a margarita on your way home?”

“No, I’ve got work to do, remember?”

“Perfectly. Okay, just thought I’d ask. At the office yet?”

“Just sitting here in the parking lot.”

“Call me later.”

I took a deep breath. I knew it was my turn. “I probably snapped a little too easily
this morning. I’m glad you called, Davis. Really.”

Sometimes I feel extra cheesy when I say stuff like that, but I can’t help it. I might
occasionally get riled at the push of a button, but I don’t like to swim in that too long, you
know? I happen to be proud of the fact that I carry a full complement of emotions and can
shift on the fly.

“Sure,” he said, then, just before hanging up, added, “Give my best to Barney and
Betty Rubble.”

How can you stay mad at a guy like that?