

About Time

by Callista Day

I jumped. Something had crashed in my bedroom, startling me over the edge of my couch and onto the floor. “Ow,” I moaned as I rubbed my hip and the back of my neck. Freaking James and his freaking masculinity, stealing my freaking bed, right before I was going to break up with the freaking moron. He walked out of my bedroom with his hand shielding his eyes from the sunlight shooting in between the slits in the blinds.

“Freaking idiot,” I said.

He muttered something about whiskey and picture frames or fruit bowls or something while I just glared at him. My thoughts were running wild between which Italian phrase to start off with, which stiletto to jab into his tiny, mutant skull first, and which one of his many treasured cars to go all psycho on tonight. I pushed the button that started the coffee brewing and stared him down some more. His face twisted up the way it always did right before he offered some lame apology, but I knew that he only cared about two things in life: whiskey and his Mercedes.

The glow of the creamer appeared displaced in the fiery red cup that contained it. I cautiously poured the coffee and took a careful sip. I glanced up at James on the way to the bathroom. His head balanced precariously on his knee. He moaned.

My hairdryer blew the fuse again and the red reset button chose that moment to stop working. I managed to work my compromised hair into a weak French braid. I thought it wise to start in on my second cup of coffee before attempting my mascara, yet I still almost lost an eye when James knocked on the door and startled me into stabbing myself with my eye liner brush. At least he knocked, though, right? I tried to justify it in my mind as I did damage control on my face.

He knocked again, “Ebony, You okay? You’ve had two cups of coffee and all I’ve gotten out of you is ‘freaking idiot.’ Are you alright? Are we okay?”

I rested both of my palms on the counter and took a deep, steadying breath. Not now. Not now. Not now. I can’t take this today. I can’t take this right now. I swung the door open. “I need to get to work.”

James moved aside, his expression distant and unsure. Probably he watched as I grabbed my coat and purse and hurried out to the cab. Probably he watched the cab pull away from my apartment window. Probably he would be gone when I came back.

My lunch break couldn’t have come sooner. Without a thought in my mind I had the cab driver take me directly to Expectations.

“Ebony, honey! How’s my girl?” Marge hurried to wipe the counter of the bar down as quickly as possible. “Billy! Fries! Blue cheese! Something with something remotely healthy in it! Stat!”

“Blue Cheese? Fries? Hey Eb!!” Billy called back, her cherished, “lucky”, chef’s hat bouncing up and down in the open inlet for finished plates. Billy was Marge’s baby sister, and my adoptive one. On her “lucky” hat she had sewn a USMC patch as well as had embroidered some of her favorite band names. The Strokes were in red thread, Save Ferris in purple, Flogging Molly in green, and The Ramones in black. She never burned herself while wearing this headdress, but she had burnt herself frequently without it.

“Hey guys,” I sat down at my favorite place, resigned and at peace.

A steamy cup of coffee slid to a halt in front of me, the liquid almost plunging over the edge of the green-handled blue mug.

“Spill,” Marge said, pulling up a barstool on her side of the counter.

I briefly stole a glance behind my shoulder to survey the scene. Women, mostly pregnant and alone or with one of their girlfriends, occupied some of the seats. I looked again at Marge. Marge was a strong woman. She owned the restaurant. The idea to open up a restaurant that caters to the needs of expecting women was hers. The only men who ever came into the place were those who had either been dragged there by their hormonal wives, or who were daring enough to put themselves into a lion’s den. All in all, Expectations became a generally man-free haven for any victimized woman. Marge was brilliant, talented, a saint, and the best friend a girl could have. And she’d been my best friend for as long as I could remember.

“Okay, but there’s not too much to tell. The usual, really. I was determined to break it off with James. He came home drunk and almost shattered my fruit bowl—”

“The one with the cherries on it or the one you keep the actual fruit in?”

“Cherries. Anyway, he passed out in my bed, I fell asleep on the couch, woke up with a splitting headache, planned a million ways to murder him while I was in the shower--”

“Which way was the best?”

“Handcuff him to the inside of his blue Mercedes, fill it with water and flesh-eating fish, and watch him start to drown as the fish devour him, save him from that, take him to the hospital and shock him to death with those charged electric paddle things.”

“Slow and painful. Very nice. Continue.”

“That’s about it actually,” I said as I shoved a couple more blue cheese-loaded fries into my mouth. I took a bite of the tuna salad Billy had made me. Billy was a goddess.

Marge’s eyes became nothing but thin pencil lines as she studied me, “That’s it?”

“Yep,” I said over another mouthful of fries.

“All right.” She got up and tended to a couple of customers. She came back and stole one of my fries. “Why don’t you just break up with him already?”

I closed my eyes. I knew this was coming. I wanted it to come. I wouldn’t have come to my best friend’s restaurant if I really didn’t want to talk about it. And yet, I really didn’t want to talk about it.

“Marge, I...” I sighed. I didn’t have a clue why. That jerk came to my apartment drunk all the time. He broke a picture of us on our first date last week in one of his drunken parades. The neighbors complain to my super all the time about him singing various songs late at night at a volume that would make a deaf man cringe. He smelled of whiskey constantly. Yet he always apologized profusely in the morning. He’s never hurt me or physically abused me, and when he is completely sober he is one of the sweetest guys I’ve ever met. He was foreign. British. And he had an accent. Probably it was the accent that made me keep him around.

Besides, if I broke it off with James that would open my way up for Toni to start something with me. Tony was amazing. Tony had an accent too. But Tony scared the crap out of me.

Marge kept her eyes focused on mine. We were so close; sometimes I swear she could read my mind. I was hoping intensely that she was abusing her skill at that moment. I couldn’t talk about it, but I sure as heck couldn’t stop thinking about it either. She stared at her black chucks for a while, and finally said, “You have to do it Eb. You know it’s the right thing. You have to do it for you.”

“I know.”

“Besides, Ebony, have you seen the way Tony’s looked at you lately? My god, the man is on fire!” she fanned herself with a menu she had just collected.

I examined the cheese crumbs left on the plate in front of me. It slowly slid away and a snickers bar was put into its place. “Thanks. Put it on my tab, okay?” I gathered my purse, buttoned up my coat and smiled as I opened the candy bar. Marge was the best. The rain was beating down hard on the pavement, but this time I didn’t call a cab.

I walked in the steady, rhythmic rain for a couple of miles. Growing up in New York had conditioned my feet to walking such long distances in my stilettos. I was sure-footed now as I approached the park at the center of town. The heavy, elaborate twists and turns of the iron-work at the entrance took my breath away and caused me to quicken my pace. The rain beat down consistently. I sat down on my bench and watched the rain for a while.

Time stood still, I guess; I’m not even sure what that means. But I could see his frame through the muddy foliage on my left, and it kind of looked like a painting. The constant, steady, pouring rain drenched him as it did me. He would be able to see my bench clearly as soon as he turned the corner of the distorted concrete pathway in the park. He turned the corner. He saw me, but not the way I thought he would. His green eyes studied me like an old friend he couldn’t quite remember. Something was off. My stare caught him off guard, and for once in my long history of knowing him, that face of his—that face that I was so used to seeing—was shattered.

Rain bounced lightly off of his worn bomber jacket. His dark brown hair was soaked and gently curled around his face. He stood there in front of me, both of us frozen in that moment for a few seconds more. He slid his hands into the front pockets of his perfectly cut, well worn

jeans. He grinned, his dimples making my palms sweat. Sounds corny, but I swear that's what happened. "Buongiorno Principessa. Che tempo fa?"

My play-dough smile exposed my vulnerability in his presence, "Che bello!"

The temperature rose a few degrees when Tony took a seat beside me, "What are you doing here in that suit and those heels? I hope you remember that it is dry clean only. And with no jacket on either. Shame on you mi tesora."

My face was still contorted in that pathetic smile. Darn his freaking dimples. "You caught me," I shrugged, "I knew it was going to get ruined. What I don't know is why I don't really care."

"Perhaps it is because you can get a new suit?"

Ha. As if I could afford a new suit. With great effort I pounded out my smile, "Give me a reason why."

"Why you should get a new suit?"

"Why I shouldn't be with James."

He slouched back on the bench and looked at the sky. Rain drenched his face and dissolved his smile. "Ebony."

His thick Roman accent as he said my name gave me the chills despite my bubbling stomach. Continue. Please. Don't stop. Tell me why. I urged him on in my thoughts even though I knew the conversation had ended there. His face was once again a mere reflection.

"Babe. You know why."

My eyes began to rain. I did know why. It was over. James was over.