

Back To Us

Teresa Roman

For my sister

Thank you for always having my back

Chapter 1

Nothing good ever happened to me without a little bad mixed in. Like the time I got hired to work at Radio City Music Hall over the Christmas season. I thought for sure I'd get to see at least a little bit of the Christmas show, but instead I got stuck outside working the doors and freezing my butt off.

My summer internship was apparently not going to be an exception to that rule. Between the ten-minute walk to the subway station and the three different trains I'd need to take to get to work, my mornings were not going to be fun. If it weren't for my absurd paranoia about being late I would've been freaking out as I waited for the A train that was apparently stuck somewhere in the tunnels under Manhattan. I still had over an hour before I needed to be at work, but there was no doubt in my mind that the ride from my crappy apartment in Brooklyn to my job on the Upper West Side was going to take a lot longer than I wanted it to. But still, it was a job. One that would look really good on my resume *and* help me pay my share of the rent. The extra money was coming at the perfect time, too, because frankly, I was getting tired of eating hotdogs and pecan sandies for dinner every night.

By the time I made it to the 87th Street Community Center, the back of my shirt was drenched with sweat and clung to my skin—thanks to another hot and muggy day. I took a deep breath and tried to ignore the nervous fluttering in my chest as I walked inside. The security guard looked bored and hot sitting behind a desk with only a small table fan to keep him cool. He looked up at me as I approached.

“I'm looking for Mrs. Connor,” I said. “I'm supposed to meet her here at nine o'clock.”

“Name?” the guard replied. He wore a navy blue uniform. The little gold nametag pinned to the left side of his chest read Donald.

“Jessica Maravic.”

“Mara *what?*”

No one could ever pronounce my last name the right way. “Ma-ra-vich.” I sounded it out slowly. Donald picked up the phone and pressed a few numbers.

“Girl named Jessica here to see you,” he grumbled into the phone and then turned to look at me again. “She’ll be right out; you can take a seat and wait for now.”

“Thanks,” I said before finding my way over to one of the chairs in the corner of the room. It had been about three weeks since I’d been to the community center for my interview, and I was so nervous then that I’d barely paid attention to my surroundings. There wasn’t much to the entrance area. Just an old beat-up metal desk that Donald sat behind and a few scratched-up royal blue plastic chairs with chrome legs.

“So, you’ll be working here?” Donald asked as he mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and adjusted his collar.

“Just for the summer.”

“My name’s Donald by the way. But you can call me Don.”

“Nice to meet you.” Something about the way he looked at me made me uncomfortable, but since I’d be seeing him almost every day for the next three months I managed to muster a friendly smile figuring I’d be better off if he didn’t think I had an attitude.

“You live around here?”

I shook my head. “Nope, I live in Brooklyn.”

Just then the door behind Donald opened and Mrs. Connor stepped out. She glanced down at her watch. “You’re early.”

“Sorry,” I said as I stood from my chair. “I wasn’t sure how long it would take to get here, and I wanted to make sure I wasn’t late.”

“That’s fine. It gives me some time to show you around before the kids get here.”

I followed Mrs. Connor down the hallway. She pointed to the restrooms and then poked her head through a door that had the word gymnasium stenciled on it. “Ah, you’re here.” I heard her say. “There’s someone I want you to meet.” She pushed the door open and walked inside with me right behind her. “This is Jessica,” she said to the man standing in front of her. He was holding a basketball in his hands and tucked it under one of his arms to shake my hand.

“I’m Justin. Nice to meet you.”

“I told Justin about you already. He usually helps me conduct most of my interviews, but he was out the day you came for yours. Justin’s in charge of our sports programs here and pretty much the second in command. If I’m not around and you need something, he can help you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said. Justin smiled and his amber eyes reminded me of twinkling Christmas lights. He had perfect teeth, straight and white like he’d worn braces when he was younger. He was handsome, there was no denying that. His hair was a deep brown, like mine, but what really stood out about him were the freckles that were scattered over the bridge of his nose and his cheeks like raindrops. I tried not to stare at him too closely, I didn’t want him to think I was flirting, which I wouldn’t do. Not on my first day at work, and not with a complete

stranger, but in my experience guys were weird like that. You looked at them a second too long and they convinced themselves that they were your dream come true, and that was the last thing I needed.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” Justin said as Mrs. Connor and I walked off. She showed me the break room and her and Justin’s offices next. Then we moved on to the computer lab and finally the classroom I’d be tutoring in for the rest of the summer. I was supposed to be helping high school students who’d gotten stuck taking summer classes with any subject they were having trouble with. I was also supposed to encourage the students to apply for college and teach them how to decide which school was the best fit for them. Mrs. Connor also had a handful of summer field trips planned, and I’d be coming along with her on those. I’d gotten the job through the work study program at the university I went to and was really excited about it; not just because of the paycheck, but because I was an education major, which made it a perfect fit.

“Why don’t you put your bag in here?” Mrs. Connor opened up one of the desk drawers and I deposited my belongings inside it. “Your first student should get here just after nine. She’ll let you know which subjects she needs help with.”

Mrs. Connor walked away, leaving me alone in the classroom. I was less nervous now that she was back in her office. It wasn’t as if this was my first job. I’d had plenty of them, but I was always shy in new situations, and worried about making a good first impression. After I got to know people, I was perfectly fine.

I took out a notebook and some pencils and waited. It was almost ten before my first student showed up, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she even wanted to be there at all.

“Come on in.” I smiled and stood as she walked through the doorway towards me. I was trying to exude confidence and authority. A nervous teacher wasn’t going to get very far. “I’m Jesse,” I told her as she placed her backpack on the floor and took a seat.

“My name’s Linnea.” She reached into her bag for a book. It was covered with a paper shopping bag to protect it, so I couldn’t tell what subject it was.

“So what do you need the most help with?”

“Everything,” she grumbled.

I thought for a moment about what to say next. “Are you planning on going to college?”

“I guess.”

“And what do you think you’re interested in studying?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nursing. My mom’s friend is a nurse, and she makes a ton of money.”

“You should pick what you like, not what you think you’ll make a lot of money doing. Do you even like the medical field?”

Linnea shrugged. “I don’t really like blood.”

“You should probably try for a different major then,” I said, trying my best to sound helpful and friendly, instead of judgmental.

“You go to college, don’t you?” Linnea asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“What do you want to be?”

“A teacher, eventually.”

“Yeah, that ain’t for me either.” Linnea shook her head. “Can’t deal with a bunch of wild kids. I do like computers though.”

“That’s good,” I said, encouragingly. “But you need to be really good at math, what kind of grades are you getting?”

“Math?” Linnea slumped in her chair. “Not good ones.”

“Well, then you’re in the right place, because I happen to be really good at math.”

Linnea finally cracked her first smile and a feeling of satisfaction came over me. Maybe I was getting off to a good start after all.

Chapter 2

Two more students showed up after Linnea. While I was finishing my third tutoring session of the morning Mrs. Connor poked her head into the room.

“Take a lunch break after you’re done.”

Without knowing if I’d have access to a refrigerator to keep my lunch cold, I hadn’t brought anything with me, so I left the community center in search of something to eat. I found a pizza place a few blocks away; a slice and a soda wouldn’t set me back that badly so I went for it because I was starving. It would be another two weeks before I got my first paycheck and I needed to be careful or I’d run out of money.

On my way back from lunch, Don, who wasn’t at his desk earlier when I’d left for lunch, looked up from the magazine he was reading and grinned as I walked back into the community center.

“What’s up, Brooklyn?” The flirtatious tone in his voice matched the look he had on his face.

“Hey Don,” I replied curtly, hoping he’d hear the lack of interest in my voice and get a clue. I rushed in through the door behind his desk before he could say anything else.

I tutored three more students that afternoon. They all seemed wary of me at first, but after we started talking I could tell they began to feel more comfortable. It seemed crazy to me that not that long ago I was the one sitting in their seat. Now I was about to enter my junior year in college, and if you’d asked me four years earlier if I thought I’d be tutoring high school kids, I’d have called you crazy. The leap from someone suggesting that I should go to college, to

applying, then getting accepted, and actually going was gigantic for me. Maybe that's why Mrs. Conner decided to hire me. During our interview I was honest with her and told her how hard things had been for me and that I wanted to make a difference in someone's life the way other people had made a difference in mine. As cheesy as it sounded, it was all true. And now, sitting in the community center talking to kids who were still so scared to admit they wanted more from life, I felt like I was doing it, making the difference I'd wanted to since I picked education as my major.

I left work that afternoon happy. My first day turned out better than I expected. It was so good in fact that I didn't mind the ride back home jammed into the train like a sardine in a can. When the train was that crowded it was unpleasantly hot despite the air conditioning, but the heat coming off so many bodies wasn't nearly as bad as some of the body odor that wafted through the air.

A much more pleasing scent greeted me when I opened the door to my apartment. My brother had left the remnants of his favorite Chinese takeout – spare ribs – in the Styrofoam container they came in. How he could eat that fluorescent pink meat I had no idea. There was also a half-eaten tray of General Tso's chicken, which was my personal favorite, but the baby roach crawling over it was enough for me to walk away from it despite the gnaw of hunger I felt.

I walked inside my bedroom and flopped down on my bed. My brother and I shared a two bedroom railroad apartment. It was small, consisting of my bedroom and his, a small entryway with nothing but an old futon couch for seating, a kitchen and bathroom. It was pretty rundown looking, the floors were linoleum and actually curled up in the corners of the rooms, but with New York rents being as expensive as they were, it was the best we could afford. I didn't invite

people over very often because I was embarrassed by just how bad my apartment looked. The fact that my neighborhood was definitely on the sketchier side didn't help things either.

The door to my brother Mike's bedroom was closed, but I could tell he was home by the stench of marijuana wafting into my room from his. He seemed to think pot chilled him out, but in my opinion it made him paranoid and sometimes kinda mean, so I avoided him when I knew he was smoking. Besides, he was probably still pissed at me for adopting a cat from my friend Susan. Buddy needed a home, and I needed to get rid of the mice that were creeping me out. Roaches were bad enough, but mice were just plain nasty. I was getting tired of hearing my brother call me high maintenance every time one ran by and I screamed and climbed onto the nearest piece of furniture. Getting Buddy had been the best decision I'd made. I came home from class the day after he moved in and found three dead mice in the kitchen and I never saw another one in the apartment after that. To me, Buddy was a hero and worth the price of my brother being pissed at me, but Mike was right to be annoyed. I should have asked if he'd be okay with it first.

I turned on my TV and flipped through a few channels, but didn't find anything of interest to watch so I got up and headed to the kitchen to make something to eat. A few minutes later my brother strolled into the kitchen, too.

“Hey, J. How was work?”

He actually remembered, I was impressed. “Good. I really like it. It's just a bitch getting there.”

“Where are you working again?”

“Upper West Side.”

“Oh yeah, that kinda sucks.” My brother started clearing his mess from the kitchen table.
“I left you some Chinese if you’re hungry.”

“Nah, I’m good. I had Chinese at lunch so I’m kind of in the mood for something else.”

Telling my brother the truth, that I wasn’t into eating food that had a roach crawling on it, wasn’t worth the bother. He’d probably just give me his “so what” look, because if I was high maintenance, my brother was the polar opposite. Lying was easier.

“I’m heading out for drinks with Mel later, you wanna come?”

Melanie was my brother’s girlfriend. They’d been dating for over a year, and Mel was really cool, like a best friend and a sister wrapped up in one. Normally I would have said yes, but I was low on cash and drinks were expensive. “I would, but I gotta get up early for work tomorrow, so I probably shouldn’t stay out late.”

“Never stopped me.”

“Yeah, but you can get by on like three hours of sleep. I can’t do that.”

I finished eating the hotdog I’d made and gulped down an iced tea while my brother got ready to head out. About ten minutes later there was a knock on the door.

“See you later, J,” my brother said as he went to answer the door.

“Tell Mel I said hi.”

The house was quiet after Mike left, so I turned on the TV again, not really caring about finding something to watch, I just wanted to hear something other than my thoughts. Buddy must have sensed I was feeling lonely because a few minutes later he jumped into my lap. By midnight I was still up, sort of waiting for my brother, even though I knew he probably wouldn’t

be back for the rest of the night. No longer able to keep my eyes open, I fell asleep. In the morning I checked my phone to see if Mike had called. He hadn't. I loved my brother and I knew he loved me back, but he was pretty bad at showing it sometimes. It wasn't out of malice, I knew that, he was just kind of clueless sometimes. Things didn't occur to him. Things like "my little sister might be worried about me so maybe I should call her or text her and let her know I decided to crash at my girlfriend's house instead of coming home." Or maybe it was just me that was clueless, and I expected too much of my brother. But it was just the two of us, so sometimes I worried about him.

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The morning air smelled like garbage, which wasn't that unusual on hot and humid days. It was like the air just sat still and the smells of the streets got trapped. By the time I made it to the train station sweat was dripping down my back and I was grateful that I didn't have to wait long for my train to show up because I was in desperate need of air conditioning. As luck would have it, I even managed to get a seat.

Just as I walked through the doors of the community center my phone started to chime. My brother had finally texted.

Sorry I forgot to text you last night, stayed at Mel's and probably will again tonight

The message made me feel better and I smiled.

"Message from your boyfriend?"

I looked up and realized Don was talking to me. "What?" I asked, even though I'd heard his question just fine.

“You look happy, just figured it was your boyfriend sending you a sweet message.”

I couldn't think of anything to say in response. It wasn't really his business whether or not I had a boyfriend, and if he didn't work at the community center I probably would have told him that; but with me as desperate for a job as I was, I couldn't afford to piss him off and take the chance he'd say something to Mrs. Connor that would cost me my job.

“No, just my brother,” I answered too quickly. It would have been better if I'd told him that, yes, it was my boyfriend, my very jealous boyfriend, texting me. At least that way he'd know I was off limits.

I rushed past Donald before he could ask any more prying questions. On my way to the classroom I bumped into Mrs. Conner. “I was just looking for you,” she said.

“What's up?”

“The boys' basketball team practices this morning, and when they're done a few of the players will be going to the computer lab. I want you to head over there, get things set up, and when the boys show up, help anyone who needs it.”

“Sure, of course, no problem.”

It was another half hour before anyone showed up. I felt kind of bad sitting around knowing I was getting paid to pretty much do nothing. To pass the time I took out my phone and started reading one of my e-books. If I'd known I would have so much downtime I would've brought an actual book to read with me, I hated reading on the small phone screen, but it beat just sitting there doing nothing.

When I heard voices and laughter coming from outside the door I tucked my phone away and went to open the door.

Five boys, still sweating from basketball practice, walked in followed by Justin. “Make your way over to those computers over there,” he said, pointing to the back of the room.

As the boys sat down in front of the computers, Justin turned to me. “Jessica, right?”

I nodded. “You can call me Jesse, though, that’s what most people do.”

“How’s everything going so far?”

“Good,” I replied, trying to think of something clever to add, but I was never good at making conversation.

Justin stood and looked around the room awkwardly for a few moments. For someone who coached basketball he wasn’t that tall, only a few inches taller than me and I was right at average height. But he had strong broad shoulders. I noticed that even with the loose-fitting shirt he wore. “Okay, well. I...better get back to my office now,” he finally said.

“We’ll see you Thursday, right coach?” One of the boys called out as Justin turned to leave.

“No practice Thursday, remember?”

“Awww, man,” a few of the boys replied in unison.

It turned out the boys didn’t really need my help. They spent most of the time joking around with each other and talking about girls and acted like I wasn’t even there.

“Mrs. Connor told me you guys were supposed to be looking for information on colleges,” I said after a while.

“Don’t need to,” one of them said. “I’m going to whatever school I get a basketball scholarship at.”

“Lucky you.” I wished I’d done that. Maybe not basketball, but some other sport that gave out scholarships. Even with financial aid I was going to be over fifteen thousand dollars in debt by the time I graduated. But at least I’d have a degree, and that was a huge step up from the future my father had predicted for me.

“You’re going to grow up and be a prostitute and die from AIDS,” he used to tell me, even before I really knew what it meant. By the time I was old enough to truly understand, I wasn’t living at home anymore. I’d been handed over to the state of New York because I was too wild and unruly, at least in my father’s eyes. I wondered what he would have thought of the eight other girls who lived in the group home I was eventually placed in. At fourteen, I was still pretty innocent compared to my new housemates. That changed quickly and I wondered if I’d ever not be bitter about it. Although no matter how rough it was in the group home, it was still better than being abused by my father.

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I ran into Justin again during my lunch break while trying to figure out how to get the dinosaur of a microwave they had in the break room to work. He was eating at the big round table in the middle of the room and must have noticed me having a hard time.

“That thing is a fossil,” he said as he walked over to help me. “I should buy another one and bring it in, but I keep forgetting.” Justin pointed to one of the buttons on the microwave.

“You gotta press this one first before you do anything else.”

“Thanks,” I said feeling embarrassed at my inability to operate a simple appliance.

“No problem.”

I turned to look at him. His dark hair was cut into a close-cropped fade, and I found myself wondering if he'd let it grow longer when summer was over.

“Did the boys behave themselves this morning?”

“Yeah. They were fine. But I kind of felt bad 'cause it didn't seem like they needed my help that much.”

“Well, they might have been a little shy. Sometimes we boys don't like to admit we need help, especially to a pretty girl.”

I didn't need to have a mirror in front of me to know that my face turned several shades of red. If those words had come from Don I would have been annoyed, instead I found myself feeling flattered, and shy.

“I'm pretty sure that wasn't it.” The microwave dinged letting me know my lunch was ready. Justin grabbed it out of the microwave for me and brought it over to the table. I sat beside him not knowing what to make of his chivalry.

Before I could thank Justin, Don walked in, spotted the two of us and strolled over to give Justin a fist bump. “Hey Jesse,” he said before pulling out a chair next to me.

“You two didn’t want to be alone, did you? Am I interrupting something?” Without pausing for a reply, Don leaned towards me and said, “You know, Justin here, he’s a real good man.”

“Not as good as good as you, Don,” Justin joked going along with Don’s banter.

“And modest, too.”

“Hey, c’mon, man. You’re embarrassing her,” Justin said. He apparently wasn’t as oblivious as Don was to my discomfort at their conversation.

“Am I?”

“No, not at all,” I replied, lying through my teeth. What I wanted to do was get up and finish lunch in my classroom, but walking away seemed awkward. I fell silent while Justin and Don started talking baseball. I didn’t really have anything to add to their conversation. It wasn’t that I didn’t like sports, I just never had enough free time to follow who was in the playoffs or who was being traded to what team. Most New Yorkers I knew were die-hard Yankees fans, and summers were often filled with long conversations about the team.

When I finished eating I got up from the table. “I better get back to the classroom,” I said, noticing that Justin and Don had stopped their conversation and were both looking at me. “I think I have a tutoring session in a few minutes.”

I walked away and when Don thought I was out of earshot I heard him whisper to Justin. “*Damn.* That girl is fine.”

I didn’t get a chance to hear Justin’s response.

