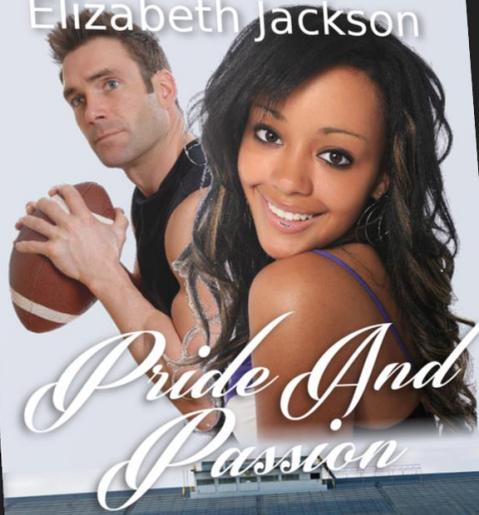


Elizabeth Jackson



*Pride And
Passion*

A BWWM Romance Story

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Pride And Passion

By Elizabeth Jackson

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Chapter One

Robin watched the second hand of the clock inch forward just slightly. The ticking sound got louder and louder as she tried to drown out the more unpleasant noises in the background.

“Where’s my daughter? I want my daughter. She wouldn’t leave me here like this. Not like you.”

Tick.

“I miss her so.”

Tock.

“She used to love playing on the swing set at the park and climbing that tree. I forbid her from doing it, which was probably why she loved it so much.” The old woman chuckled. “She’s a good girl though and I miss her. I don’t know what I did to make her hate me so much. She never comes to visit me anymore.”

Tick.

Robin leaned back in her chair and ran her finger across the scar on her arm – a distant reminder of what happens when you don’t listen to your mother and you fall out of an apple tree. “Do you remember what your daughter looks like?” she asked, her voice soft.

“She’s a young girl, like you. Beautiful. She got that from me, you know. Not her father. He wasn’t the loveliest man in Port Gamble but he sure was the sweetest and kindest man to live here. She got that from him too.”

Robin smiled and reached out for her mother’s hand. “That’s me, Momma. I’m your daughter. I’m Robin.”

Gloria Grace’s distant gaze came back and moved toward Robin. Her brows furrowed in confusion. “Well, of course you are,” she said finally, then turning away. Her eyes moved toward the window and she grew silent again.

Robin’s eyes were glued to the window as well. “Sandra’s supposed to be here by now,” she said. “I have to be at work.”

“Well, then why are you here?” her mother snapped. “I taught you better than to be late for work. Especially when work’s so hard to come by these days.”

“I can’t leave you al-” The words slipped out of her mouth faster than she had intended. Mostly because she hadn’t intended to say it in the first place. *Crap*, she thought. *I don’t have time for another argument.*

“What are you talking about?” her mother snapped again. “Go to work. I don’t need you here. I’m fine on my own.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, mom,” she said as she stood up on her long legs and stretched. She walked over to the other side of the seventies, floral couch and took her apron so that she could tie it around her waist. “Sometimes you need a little help, is all.”

“I don’t need help. I can do everything on my own. I’ve been doin’ that since your papa died ten years ago.”

More like twenty years ago, Robin thought – but she didn’t dare say out loud.

Behind her the front door creaked open. A sheepish woman in her thirties poked her head in. “Hello,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. “I’m sorry that I’m late.”

“I’m sorry too,” Robin said, grabbing her purse. “I gotta go.” She turned around to face her mother. She was watching TV in her wheelchair, smiling intently at the contestants on Family Feud. Robin’s brows softened at the sight and turned quietly to leave.

“You don’t leave mah home without sayin’ goodbye first, child,” her mother said. Robin’s grin widened as she ran over and quickly gave her mother a goodbye kiss.

“I’m late,” she said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She normally would have taken her beat up, old, silver Honda Accord or the bus but in the late night traffic, it would be faster to run downhill to the Red Apple diner. She slipped her arm and shoulder through her purse strap and sprinted down the hill. Since she’d been working at the diner for a couple of years already, she was already decked out in flats so that she would have to worry about blisters on her feet. It made this run bearable. Despite the fact that she hadn’t expected to be working here for so long, she had gotten good at what she does, which meant that she didn’t have to sprint to work like this very often.

Of course, the image of a tall, black woman sprinting down the streets in this time of the night wasn’t much to look at so people didn’t even bother stepping aside for her. She weaved in between and around the passer-byers and down a back alley. She knew that the back door would be propped open so that Linda could have her nightly smoke without having to worry about the noise from the door. The push-bar was old and made a loud, cranky sound – much like Robin’s mother – when it didn’t want to budge.

Unfortunately, Robin ran into another person that liked to make that same noise as soon as she tried to slip through the kitchen. The fry-cook gave her an empathetic look as the night manager came barreling down at her.

Todd Thomas was a blow hard. He quickly ran up the ranks at the diner because his father was the owner and he wasn't afraid to remind everyone of that fact. His fiery red hair matched the pink tint on his face as he continued to berate her in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to sound sincere. "It won't happen again. It's just that my mother-

"Yes, yes," he said. "I know about your mother. But I have a restaurant to run and I can't do that if my employees don't show up. This is your second strike, Robin. One more and I'm going to sack you." He continued to ramble on as she made her way through the kitchen and into the dining area. "I know that she's one of the reasons that you need this job but, you know, there plenty other people out there who'd love it," he said. Robin nodded as she set her purse under the counter and grabbed a carafe of coffee from the hot plate. She wanted to pour the whole thing in her mouth because tonight was going to be a long night.

Out on the diner floor, Robin found the place unusually empty. Other than one other waitress, there was only five people out there. She pushed the door to the dining area shut and felt a thud against it as Todd tried to follow her out there. He gave her knowing glance as if to say, "Watch it. Don't get sassy with me." She knew better than to get sassy with him on the floor. It wasn't professional. Of course, throwing one of their award winning banana cream pies in his face wasn't professional either but it was something that she really wanted to do.

Linda, the other waitress, hobbled over to her. She was an older woman who looked as if she had been around the world and back. Her pear shaped body motioned for Robin to follow her back behind the counter. "I got them," she said, talking about the patrons at the diner. She put an empty coffee carafe on a coffee maker and pushed one of the buttons. It sputtered and the soon the smell of fresh brewed coffee filled the air.

"What's with the limp?" Robin asked.

"Ah, I just twisted my ankle out there. I was trying to carry one to many plates back to the kitchen, I guess," she said with a laugh. Her voice was raspy and throaty from years of smoking cigarettes. Lucky Strikes, if Robin remembered correctly.

"Let me wrap it for you," Robin said. "Come on." She helped Linda into the back room and pulled a first aid kit off of a shelf.

"Oh that's right," Linda said. "You do this kinda stuff all the time with your mom, right?"

"Yeah," Robin replied. "My momma's always trying to do everything herself but she can't anymore. I've caught her lying down on the ground more often than I would prefer." She took Linda's shoe and sock off and began to wrap her ankle. "Can you believe that she was trying to hobble around and mop her floors after her last hip replacement?"

“She’s almost as stubborn as you are,” Linda said, smirking.

Robin let out a guffaw, “I come by it honestly, what can I say.”

The door to the backroom burst open with a flashy Todd waving his arms around. “You won’t believe what I just found out!” He continued without giving them a chance to guess. “There’s a chance that I can get Christopher Marler to come to our restaurant.”

“Restaurant,” Linda said. “Boy, we are a diner. People come in here and only order drip coffee.”

He continued, not paying attention to her response. “It would be such great publicity for us! You’ll have to go wait on him, Robin.”

“Me?” she sputtered. “Why me?”

“Because Linda spits in people’s faces.”

“I only spit in your face, Todd. You are just special that way,” Linda retorted.

He continued to ignore her. “Work that charm of yours on him. Maybe we can get him to dine here a few times. Maybe he can tell everyone just how great it is to eat here. We have the best pie,” he said.

“Stop,” Robin said. “Just stop it. I’m not going to see him just because he’s famous.”

“We make sacrifices for the team,” Todd said, his tone changing from ecstatic to serious in a heartbeat. “Come on, we’re your family and you know what happens when you turn your back on family, don’t you? You get disowned.” He took a breath. “I think you know what I mean.”

Robin rolled her eyes. “So I just have to serve him dinner or something, right?”

“Well, yeah, and stop by his place. I’m donating some money to his charity so I need you to stop by and give him the check.”

“Why can’t you do that yourself?” Linda sputtered.

“Because I don’t look nearly as good as Robin does in high heels and I need someone to give him his check and convince him to have dinner here - on the house. He just has to come in and tell people that he had some great food here.” He paused again. “Wear something pretty,” he said turning around. “Something that will catch his eye.”

The door closed behind him, leaving Linda and Robin to stare at each other in bewilderment. Robin was the first to break the silence. “What just happened?”

“I think Todd just pimped you out for the diner,” Linda said as she put her shoe back on, sans sock.

“You can’t be serious,” Robin held her face in her hands. “How embarrassing is this going to be?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re going to want to kill yourself after you’re done.” She patted Robin on the shoulder. “You’re a sweet girl. I’m going to miss you when you’re gone.”

Chapter Two

Robin didn't like football much. Well, it wasn't that she didn't like it, she just didn't care. She had to check the directions on her GPS a few times to make sure that she was driving in the right direction; she didn't even know where the football stadium was until she saw it looming in the distance. The gigantic event center and stadium might as well have been a foreign country. She pulled into a parking spot and grabbed her purse before heading to the gates. She could feel it in her bones that this would be an interesting day.

Todd had called the stadium in advance and told them that Robin would be dropping off his donation so all she had to do was flash her driver's license at them to be let in. "Mr. Marler should be practicing," he said. "If you could get him to sign this photograph of him, I'd really appreciate it. Oh and-" was all that she heard before she turned around and left the diner.

Dressed in her best pants suit which was tailored for her voluptuous figure and highlighted her long legs. She had rolled the cuffs of her sleeves up to her elbows and wore a gray vest that matched her pants. As she walked through the corridor toward the actual field, her clunky heels clacked against the concrete floor. The corridor itself was dark and the daylight at the end of the tunnel led to the field of the stadium. She suddenly worried about walking on the grass in her heels. "I'm not prepared," she muttered. When they finally stepped onto the field, a gust of wind blew her hair back behind her shoulders, revealing her white shirt collar and strong jawline (something that she got from her father).

In the distance, she could see an athlete decked out in a football uniform tossing a football to a group of kids. She stood back with her escort and watched as they all ran sprints, laughing the whole way. "I thought he was supposed to be practicing," she said.

Her escort looked at her with a cocked eye. "He likes to invite the kids from the local children's hospital down for some fresh air," he said. "I thought that's why you came here."

"I have a donation to give to him," she said, wondering what Todd told them over the phone.

The escort nodded. "Yeah, your editor mentioned that," he said.

Editor? She shook her head, trying to wrap her head around the lie that Todd must have vomited through the phone. "Ugh," she said.

The escort wasn't paying attention to her though, he was trying to wave Mr. Marler down to meet them. He frantically waved his hands around. Christopher's head popped up from the group of kids and he waved back. "Mr. Marler will be with you shortly," the escort said, before heading back in the direction that they came from.

“What,” Robin started. She looked around and suddenly realized how big the field was. She shuffled her feet. Her shoulders dropped and her eyes turned back to the football star as he led everyone in a song. A smaller man in a suit took over for him as he started trotting out to Robin. A lump appeared in her throat. “What’s the matter with me?” she said to herself. “I don’t even know who he is. Why am I so nervous?”

Chapter Three

As he got closer, his face got clearer and clearer since he wasn't wearing a helmet. His five o'clock shadow covered an angular chin. His brown hair was tussled after playing with the kids. It was a thick, lush head of hair that she suddenly started to imagine running her fingers through. She shook free of her daze as his trot slowed to a walk.

"Hello!" he called.

Robin started walking toward him. "Hi," she said. Her voice crackled. *What is wrong with me?*

He smiled and held out his hand. "Miss Robin Grace, is that right?" His southern accent wasn't overt but she could hear hints of Georgia behind his All American annunciation.

"Yes," she said. She shook his hand. "I have," she started, her hands went straight for her purse so that she could find the check quickly and get out of there as soon as she could.

"Woah, woah, there's no hurry. Let me get out of these sweaty clothes and dressed first. Will you talk and walk with me?" he asked.

She nodded her head. Why did he need to get dressed to take a donation from her? Maybe he Todd had already mentioned that she was going to take him to the diner for dinner and she didn't have to convince him to go. *Well, that's a relief*, she thought.

He led her back into the dark tunnel. "Steven shouldn't have brought you out here, not in those heels. I wouldn't want you to fall out there. Our shoes tear up the field and dig small ruts into the grass. The maintenance team here is amazing to put up with all of it," he said. He chuckled and looked over at her. He must have read the lost look on her face. "You okay?"

"Um, yeah," she said. Her face lit up, as she tried to act cool. Her mother always told her that she wasn't really smooth under pressure. She couldn't disagree with her at the moment. "I've just never been at a football stadium before. It's a lot bigger than I thought."

"Oh!" He looked surprised. "Yeah, it's like a whole new planet in here, isn't it?" he said, holding the door open for her. She looked up into his bright green eyes. She could feel her cheeks flush.

"Yeah," she said, her voice breathy. "It's huge."

"I thought so too when I went to my first game." He led her in between two sets of lockers. "Let me tell you, the first time that I stepped foot onto the field, it looked too big to cross. Of course, depending on the play and the team that we're playing against, it

looks like an even bigger field to cross.” He laughed and turned to her. “Are you going to write that down? I’m not sure if the coach would want me to say that. He probably wants me to exude confidence or something.” He pulled his jersey over his head.

Robin nearly dropped her purse and took a step back, finally tearing her eyes away from his beautiful face. The realization of where she was hit her like a linebacker. “Oh!” she said with a squeak. “Let me wait outside. I’m sorry,” she said, averting her eyes.

He let out a loud laugh. “Reporters are in here all the time getting interviews. Don’t worry about it,” he said working on his shoulder pads.

“Um, but...” She looked around to see if there was anyone else around. “I’m not a reporter. I’m just here to give you the check that my boss is donating to your charity. To tell you the truth, the check isn’t even really that big. I don’t know what he told your people on the phone,” she sputtered. “I’m not here for an interview or any of this. I’m just supposed to give you the check and try to convince you to come with me so that you can eat at our diner. He says that the meal is free.” She took a deep breath.

“Calm down,” he said. The pause in dialogue made her eyes move from her feet up to his face. He was already half undressed. His tight pants, socks, and cleats were the only things left to strip off. She could tell that he was a little annoyed by the lies. “I’m just going off of what my manager said to me. He told me that a reporter was going to interview me and give me a check from some anonymous donor.” He motioned for her to sit down on the bench behind them. She took a seat but he didn’t. His perfect form stood in front of her. She stared at his abs – I mean eyes. “I’ve had a lot of people take advantage of me in the past. I don’t appreciate the lies.”

“It’s all my boss, believe me,” she said. “He just told me to drop off the check but I’m sure that he told your manager something else so that he could get me over here.” She reached into her purse and pulled out the check. After a moment, he took it from her hands and looked at the scribble written on it. “It’s small,” she said. “I know that it isn’t as big of a donation as some of the other ones you get, I’m sure.”

He shook his head. “It’s for the kids,” he replied. “So any donation is a good one. They just need to know that people are there for them.” He motioned toward the direction of the field. “A lot of them don’t have a lot of time left in their lives but they have so much positive energy to give out. I feel guilty being able to feed off of that energy when I know that they have such a hard time on a consistent basis. Medications, surgeries, and all that. I’ve had my fair share of hospitalizations in the past but these kids are just a fraction of my age and any one of them has been in the hospital more than I have.” He finally plopped down next to her on the bench. “They’re strong and their parents are strong too. I couldn’t imagine trying to take care of someone who is deteriorating before your eyes.”

Robin's thoughts floated back to her mother. Her mother was a mere shell of the woman that she knew as a little girl. She grew up with someone different than the woman that she was living with right now.

"By the look on your face, you've been through it," he said.

She could feel his eyes on her. "Yeah," she said. "Kind of." The two grew silent but she could feel that he was grieving with her. She wanted to ask him if he had been through it too but was stopped before she could even open her mouth.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. He shook free of his daze. "I get caught up in it sometimes. Anyway, thank your boss for me. Let him know that I appreciate the donation and that I'll stop by for dinner soon." They both stood up and Christopher held out his hand. "It was a pleasure, Robin."

"The pleasure was all mine," she replied.

Chapter Four

Robin woke up with a start. She jolted up in her bed and looked around her bedroom. Everything was as it had been the night before. Piles of clothes. Stacks of books. Mound of shoes. “I should really clean this up,” she said to herself. *What woke me up?* she thought. After a moment of silence, she laid her head back down on the pillow. It had been a few days since she had dropped off the check and she hadn’t heard or seen Christopher since. Todd wasn’t too thrilled with her, especially when she told him about what happened. But that wasn’t what had been filling her thoughts as of late.

The image of Chris with his jersey off floated back into her mind. “I should watch more football,” she said. After a minute, she rolled out of bed. Her mind was protesting but her bladder was pretty insistent. As soon as she opened her bedroom door, her heart sank. Her mother was lying on the floor in front of her wheelchair. She rushed to her side.

“Momma!” Her hands ran to her wrists to feel for a pulse. Her mother was still alive. “Momma? Momma.”

“Get me up, child,” she said. “For goodness sakes, help me up.”

Robin tried to help her up onto her feet so that she could lean her back into the chair but Gloria screamed out in pain. “No, no, no. Never mind. Lay me back down.”

Robin eased her down and then ran to the phone to call 911. Despite her frazzled explanation and frantic worries, the dispatcher gave her some instructions and told her that the paramedics were on their way.

“You’re not going to welcome the EMTs dressed like that, are you?” Gloria asked, trying to lighten the mood. Robin looked down at her tank top and short shorts. “Though it might get us a free ride to the hospital.”

“Momma, don’t,” she said. “Don’t do that. I don’t want to laugh. I just want to know what I can do to help you.”

“Leave me be, child. Let the paramedics do it. And put some pants on before they notice that you haven’t shaved your damn legs.”

“I’m not just going to let you lie here.”

“Don’t be stubborn.”

“I have a feeling that, that’s what got you in this mess in the first place.”

Robin hated hospitals. They were like waiting rooms for the dead. Between the smell of disinfectant and the smell of stainless steel, Robin’s skin was starting to crawl. She paced back and forth in the waiting room for hours before the doctor finally came

out to tell her that her mother had broken her leg as she tried to get out of her wheelchair in order to do some housecleaning. Robin was devastated. They quickly set the bone and placed her in a cast. It was apparent to Robin that taking care of her mother was going to be that much more difficult now. She felt like she could just burst into tears. As it was, Sandra wasn't getting paid for her time and was asking for more and more time to herself. She was a sweet neighbor but Robin knew that they couldn't live off of her generosity for forever.

Gloria was asleep in her hospital bed when Robin's phone rang in a text message. It was Todd responding to her request. He had an extra shift for her but she had to come in within the next hour. She kissed her mom's forehead and quietly left the room.

As soon as she got back home, Robin phoned their neighbor and asked her about working for them. "I'll pay you to sit with her and make sure that she doesn't get into trouble," Robin whispered over the phone. "I can't pay you much but I can give you something for your time." Her mind continued to reel as she thought about the medical bills that would soon find their way to the mailbox.

"Sure. She can't get into much trouble while she's at the hospital and if they've got her hopped up on morphine, that means that I can study while she sleeps. I'll be over as soon as I pack up my backpack," Sandra said through the headset. They hung up.

Robin hopped into the shower. "I can't work a double to raise more money if that means that I have to leave mom alone," she cried to herself. "I need to be able to stay here so that I can watch over her." She ran her fingers through her hair as the water poured over her already tear soaked face.

While she was getting dressed, she could hear Sandra come in through the front door. She quickly grabbed her purse and walked out into the living room. The TV was blaring – she turned it down a little. "I'm leaving early tonight, Momma," she said. Her mother stared at her, blankly. "I'm working a double tonight so I won't be home until morning." Quiet.

"We'll have fun," Sandra said, trying to break the awkward silence.

A familiar voice brought Robin's attention back to the television screen. Chris was on the news. Robin turned it up.

"- million dollars for playing a single season here. You just signed the contracts this morning. That's an extra five million dollars more than you earned last year," the news anchor said. She flipped her blond hair back and batted her long eyelashes at Chris. "How do you feel about that?"

"It's nice to know that they want me to play another year," he said, nonchalantly. "And the new car helps too."

Robin turned it back down. She could feel her cheeks flush again but this time it wasn't in embarrassment. "I can't believe him," she sputtered. "He gets paid that much to play a stupid game?"

"Football is dangerous," Sandra said but quickly tried to take it back when Robin looked at her. "But there are important people who work dangerous jobs that don't get paid as much as them. Like police officers."

"I can't believe the nerve," Robin said, almost in tears for having been so naïve. "I have to get to work." She walked over and kissed her mom on the forehead before leaving.

Robin had spent the last few days fantasizing about how normal and good natured Chris was only to find out that he was as materialistic as the rest of those stupid sports celebrities. She felt cheated and betrayed.

She set her bag down under the counter and work and reached for the coffee carafe, only to find Todd standing in front of her instead. "It worked," he said. He pointed behind him. "Mr. Marler is here. Whatever you did worked!" He could hardly contain his excitement. He quickly walked behind the counter and tried to fix her hair. "Now go out there and turn on that charm like you did a few days ago." He returned her blank stare. "And don't forget to smile, Sourpuss. You're the one that asked for this extra shift. I'm going to take it away from you if you wait on customers like that."

Robin shot him a fake smile and tried to regain her composure. Seeing Linda from the corner of her eye, she tried to motion for her to come over but instead, she felt Todd's hand on her shoulder. He rubbed her shoulder. "Come on. He hasn't had any coffee yet. Go pour him a cup and get his order."

"I think Linda should do it," she responded. "I'm not really in a cheerful mood so I can just serve the cranky customers."

"We stick Linda on him and he'll never come back. Besides, she turned customers into cranky customers just by being there. Now go pour the man a cup of coffee." He pushed her through the saloon doors. She walked onto the floor and slowly made her way over to Chris.

He was sitting by himself in a booth, looking through the menu.

"It's not Chez Pierre," she said as she walked up to the table. "But we know how to make a decent pie." She flipped over one of the coffee cups sitting on the table and poured him a cup. "Do you know what you want?"

"Everything looks so good," he said. "I haven't had real diner food in forever. Do you recommend anything other than pie?" He looked down at his cup. "And coffee."

"Our cook makes a pretty good mushroom burger and the shoestring fries might be marinated in crack because it's so good."

He let out a loud laugh. "I'm sold. That sounds great. And if you've got some apple pie, I'd love a slice of that after the burger."

"Glass of water too?" she asked.

He nodded his head. "And maybe some company."

"I can't. I've got customers to serve."

"Well, if you've got a break coming up, I'd love it if you could spend it with me." The confused look on her face must have read pretty clear because he added, "You're a beautiful and sweet woman. I liked that you came clean with me the other day. You intrigue me, Miss Robin. I'd like to get to know you better."

Flustered, she just nodded a quick goodbye and told him that she'd get his order in so that he could get his food quickly. Once behind the counter Linda pulled her aside.

"Woman," she said. "What the hell was that? He was practically throwing himself at you and you just shoved him off."

"I've got other customers to take care of. I can't spend all my time with him."

"You can to. You know that I'd cover all-" Linda looked at the crowd. "-four people that are in your section."

"I can't. We're from two different worlds. I don't need that kind of drama right now."

Chapter Five

While the diner may have been fairly quiet that night, a double shift is still a double shift. When Robin got back to her mom's hospital room, the doctor is there waiting for her.

"Your mom can't go home," he said as they walked the halls.

The pain in Robin's heels suddenly went away. "What do you mean she can't come home?"

"Between the dementia and the healing that she has to do, she's going to need 24 hour care. It's going to cost a pretty penny but we've got some financial aid to help if you need it."

"Financial aid..." she said. Those words struck her like a bolt of lightning. She had never needed financial aid before. It felt insulting. "I need to think."

"Of course," the doctor said. "We're going to need for you to make some kind of decision soon."

"I just. I need some fresh air."

It was nearly noon. Robin had been up for nearly 48 hours but that was the least of her worries. Instead of getting in her car, she just kept walking as she headed out the front doors of the hospital. After what seemed like hours, she finally sat down on a bench. It took her all of her will power to keep herself from breaking down right there. Tears streamed down her face and she wiped them away. She had been in predicaments before but this was a new kind of trouble.

The next day, she pulled Todd into his office. Linda had urged her against it but Robin needed the money so she needed to ask Todd for some extra hours. Apparently he had been cranky all afternoon.

"You've got to be kidding me," Todd said. "After how you treated everyone yesterday? The way that you were rude to the guests and to me. You want extra hours? You should be glad that I'm not firing you right now because I was seriously thinking about it last night," he said pointing to some paperwork on his desk. He had taken the extra step of filling out her name on the termination papers.

She leaned her head back and rolled her neck. "I'm sorry. I've just been going through a lot lately. I need the extra money."

"You should have thought about that before you completely ignored Christopher Marler last night. He didn't say a word to me or anyone else last night. He didn't even

finish his burger. He just paid his bill and left. If you can convince him to come back and give us some kind good word, than yeah. I'll give you your hours then."

Robin left his office disappointed. She didn't want to see Chris again. She didn't want to see his privileged face ever-

"Chris," she sputtered as took a step onto the dining room floor. "What are you doing here?"

"I wasn't going to come back," he said. "But you looked so agitated and depressed yesterday. I wanted to come check on you and make sure that you're okay." He tried looking her in the eye but his gaze fell quickly on the floor again. "I feel bad. I made an ass out of myself last night, just walking out like that. I wanted to ask you if you were okay but you looked like you needed some space."

Robin thought about Todd and his proposition. "It's okay. I wasn't really being a good waitress. Um... How about I make it up to you tonight? Maybe I can buy you a drink after my shift tonight."

"I would love that," he said with a smile.

Robin looked past him at Todd, who was walking the dining room floor. Their eyes met for a split second before Todd nodded. *Todd is pimping me out for this damn diner*, Robin thought.

After her shift, she met Chris outside the diner and let him to at a bar next door. Robin was reluctant at first but after a couple drinks, she didn't care anymore.

"I went through the same thing with my grandfather," Chris said. "He had dementia so I know how hard it can be." The bar was dark but Robin could see the pain in his eyes. "When he passed away, I felt bad that I couldn't help more than I did. I was out trying to make my career instead of spending more time with him. If I could take it all back, I would. I would trade all of this just to spend a couple more years with him." Their eyes met and for a split second, it was as if they were the same person. "Here," he said. He pulled out his wallet and quickly filled out a check. "Take this money and use it to pay your mother's medical bills."

"What?" She almost spit out the beer that she was drinking. "You don't need to do that. That's not why I asked you here. That's very nice but I can't do that. I couldn't possibly accept-"

"I know that this isn't why you asked me here. You're a good person. You just need a break." He held his finger up to her mouth so that she wouldn't interrupt him. "I like you, Robin. Not only do I like you, I know what you're going through." He tore out the check and set it in front of her.

She looked down at it and gasped. "That's a lot of money. I couldn't possibly-"

“You can use it or you can leave it. I just want to be able to help you and this is the only way that I know how.”

Chapter Six

The rehabilitation wing of the clinic smelled like cabbage and medicine. She thought that the stench of disinfectant and sick people from hospitals made her sick. Robin didn't know that there was something even worse. The clinic was across the street from the hospital itself. Her mother's doctor had released her to the rehab clinic so that she could relearn how to walk on her leg again. The place was state of the art and the bills that she got in the mail reflected that. Without insurance to cover them, she wasn't sure what she was going to do to pay them.

She had scheduled a meeting with the director of the facility to talk about her financial options but to her surprise, there were a couple extra people waiting for her in the office.

"My name is Doctor Wheeler," one of them said. "I'm one of the neurological specialists here. I wanted to talk about your mother's condition." He stood up and moved one of the chairs. "Won't you have a seat?"

"My mother's condition?" Robin said taking the chair. "You mean her dementia?"

"Yeah, I saw her medical records from before her admittance here. Before you go and actually see your mother, I wanted to warn you that her dementia has been exacerbated by the hospital visit. It wasn't the fault of the nurses or doctor's there. The whole situation has taken quite a toll on your mother's psyche."

"Is she okay?" Even Robin could hear the panic in her own voice.

"She's doing as well as can be expected in her case. Unfortunately, she has seemed to have taken quite a step back in her treatments. We're setting up some therapy for her. Physical therapy and occupational therapy to help her with her motor skills. There's also some counseling sessions to help her with her memory."

"Oh that's great," Robin said. "That should really help."

"I wanted to run something else by you as well. There is some medication that can help her but they're not cheap. At this stage in her dementia, it's really the only thing that might be able to bring her back a bit. She's lost a lot but with this medication, she'll be able to have more lucid moments, if you know what I mean."

Robin took a deep breath. "I'd really like to see mom right now."

The director picked a file folder up from his desk and reached across the table top to give it to her. "Here," he said. "I've compiled the different programs that can help your financial situation in terms of care, billeting, and medication. I figured that you would want to see how your mother is doing so let's reschedule this meeting for a later date. Perhaps tomorrow would be a good day?"

Robin nodded. "That's fine."

Her mother was in a joint room. As she walked in, Robin noticed that there was someone on the other side of the partition in the room. Her mother was in the half which was closest to the door and was fast asleep in her bed. She quietly shut the door behind her and sat down in one of the chair so that she could look through the paperwork.

She tried to prepare herself but seeing the numbers in front of her put her in a state of panic. She found it hard to breathe all of a sudden. She leaned back in her chair and let her head fall backwards so that she could stare at the ceiling, hoping that it would help her clear her mind. Her thoughts wandered back to the check that was sitting in her wallet.

Robin reflected back over to her meeting with Christopher and what he said to her that night, "It's one thing to refuse the money because of pride, but sometimes pride takes second place when it comes to taking care of others."

This was one of those situations. She was going to have to swallow her pride so that her mother could get the care that she needed. For once, Robin was going to have to give in and let someone help her. She was just frustrated that it had to be someone that she didn't know very well. The more she thought about it the more angry she got. Did he think he could just buy her? Why would someone give a virtual stranger that much money? Tears streamed down her face.

Chapter Seven

“Thanks for meeting me,” Robin said, looking down at her hands. The bar wasn’t as busy as it was the night that Chris had given her the check but it had its fair share of patrons. There were a few people who had looked like they had been there since the night before while others were there with their children, ordering breakfast since the bar was an all age’s diner before 5PM.

The lights were brighter in the morning so that Robin could see the details of the countertops and the leather booths. It was classier during the day, when drunks weren’t stumbling around looking for someone to take home. The booths were made of high quality wood and dark leather upholstery that was lined with big brass rivets. Those would look great at the diner, if they had the money to be able to afford that luxury.

“I didn’t know that this place was open at 9AM,” Chris said as he sat down in the chair across the table from her. A waitress walked over to them to take their order. Chris ordered a Bloody Mary and soft scrambled eggs.

Robin just waved her off with a “Just water. Thank you.” She turned her attention toward Chris when the waitress walked off. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Is it the check?” he asked. “I hope you weren’t insulted by it. I really just want to help.” He began to ramble. “I know that I’m not doing a good job at endearing myself to you and I’m known for making a pretty horrible first impression. That’s why my manager thinks that he has to coach me for all of my interviews. He says that I don’t come off like a confident football player or something. I keep telling him that there’s something noble about a football player who can stay humble but he keeps telling me to talk about cars and useless crap-” He stopped as soon as he saw the look on her face.

Robin choked back some tears. “Listen,” she said. “I just wanted to thank you for the check and I wanted to tell you that I have every intention of paying you back.”

He shook his head. “Think of it as a gift I couldn’t give to my grandfather. See it as that, rather than one to you. I want to do this and you won’t have to pay me back.” He took her hand in his and smiled at her.

“You can’t buy me, you know,” she said, out of nowhere.

“What are you talking about?”

“I just don’t know why someone would want to give away this much money. I’m almost offended by it. I mean, are you trying to show off or something?”

Chris dropped her hand. “No,” he said, simply. “No, I’m not. I just saw someone that I have feelings for, in need and I wanted to take care of her.”

“Well, I don’t need someone to take care of me.”

He shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way. I know that you're fully capable of taking care of yourself. But you don't have to go at it alone. Knowing when to accept help from others is about being smart and growing up. If you could just stop being so damn stubborn and prideful, you'd see that."

They got quiet, suddenly realizing that the entire bar was as quiet as they were.

"Never mind," Robin said, getting up from the table. "Forget it. I can't accept this money." She left the check on the table. "Thank you for the offer but I can't accept it as a gift. Everything has to be paid back one way or another," she said. "But thank you." The chair squealed in protest as she pushed it back and walked out of the bar.

Chapter Eight

“Oh Robin,” Gloria said, holding her daughter’s hand. It had been a week since Gloria had been moved to her own room in the rehabilitation clinic and this was the first lucid moments that Robin had seen. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too, Mom,” she said, sitting down at the chair next to her bed.

“Have you been visiting me?”

Robin nodded her head. “Usually when I come in, you’re asleep. But lately, since I’ve been visiting in the mornings now, I can catch you in the therapy room with your PT. She’s pretty awesome. She says that I’ve got a knack for physical therapy.”

“I always told you that you’d make a good doctor,” Gloria said. “How come you never graduated from that school with your nursing degree?”

Robin’s smile disappeared from her face. “I just couldn’t cut it,” she lied. She had quit because she had to stay at home and take care of her mother, while working nights at the diner. Her life hadn’t been the same since but she wouldn’t give it up. She thought back to Chris and what he said about his grandfather.

“You know a nice man came to visit me yesterday.”

“Oh?” Robin said. “Was he a doctor here?”

“No, he was an angel,” Gloria replied. “He came to see me and make sure that I’m okay. He told me that I shouldn’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

“Oh?” Robin fixed her mother’s blankets and straightened her pillows. “What was his name? I’d like to thank him.”

“Oh, I don’t remember,” Gloria said. “But let me tell you, he didn’t look like all of these other nurses. If all the nurses looked like that, this hospital would be filled with sick, single women.”

Robin laughed.

“Oh! There he is now!” Gloria said. She pointed toward the door.

Robin turned around but the door was closed. There was no one in the room except for her and her mother.

“Who?” Robin said turning back to her mother. That’s when she noticed that she wasn’t pointing to the door. She was pointing to the television screen.

“-here at the Red Apple Diner with star quarterback Christopher Marler.”

“Wait,” Robin said. “That’s the man that came to visit you?”

“Yes and he said that I wouldn’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

Robin’s eyes lit up with fire. “The audacity of that man,” she said. Tears streamed down her face. “I have to go do something, mom.”

The news blip that Christopher did with that reporter must have worked because the diner was filled with people. Robin pushed her way through the crowd and walked up to the counter. “Todd,” she said. “Todd, is Chris still here?”

Todd nodded and pointed toward a corner booth. Chris was surrounded by women, footballs, and pictures of himself that were being shoved in his face.

“Chris,” Robin said after elbowing some fans. “I have to talk to you.”

Robin led him to Todd’s office and shut the door.

“Did you see?” Chris said. “The crowd out there is crazy. I told them all to get the mushroom burger and an apple pie. You were right, you know. It’s the best burger that I’ve had in a long time.”

“Stop it,” Robin interrupted. “What you did-” Robin tried to catch her breath. “You saw my mom?”

Chris’ smile disappeared. “Yeah, I just wanted to meet the awesome woman that raised such an extraordinary-”

“You paid my mother’s bills?” Robin sputtered.

Chris didn’t respond. “I didn’t do it for you,” he finally said. “I did it for your mom.”

“You had no right to do that! She is my mother. She’s not your grandfather. You can’t atone for your sins by forcing yourself into my life.” The words flew out of her mouth like a bullet before she could hold back.

Chris gritted his teeth. His eyes welled with tears. “Well,” he said. “I didn’t realize that was what I was doing.”

“I need you to leave me alone. I told you that I didn’t want your help. Why do you insist on doing this?”

“Because the more you push me away, the more I want to know you. Everyone that I know wants to take advantage of me. Even people that I don’t know – like your boss. But you. I’ve never met someone like you before. I just don’t understand why the only person I want to help is the only one that doesn’t want me to help.” The room got quiet for a moment. Their heavy breathing and sobs were the only sounds in the room. “I thought I saw it in your eyes.”

She looked up at him with questioning eyes.

“I thought I saw it in your eyes when I first met you. You’re the one that I’m meant to be with. You drive me crazy and it makes me want you more. You’re independent and beautiful and... I thought you liked me too.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I liked you. *Liked*. I’m not in love with you. I don’t even like you anymore. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

“If that’s what you want,” Chris said.

Gloria’s room was silent except for the sound of an old black and white TV drama.

“What did I do to make you so mad at me?” Gloria asked.

“Mom,” Robin said. “Nothing. What are you talking about?”

“Did I say something wrong? You’ve been all pouty since you got here.”

“No, no, mom. You didn’t.” She leaned in and gave her a big hug. “No, you’re perfect.” She sat back down in her chair and gazed into her mother’s eyes. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, baby. You can ask me anything.”

“What do you do when you feel like everything around you is crumbling? Like the whole world has something against you?”

“You go get ice cream.” Her mom patted her hand.

“What?” she said, spluttering. A smile crept across her face. She couldn’t help it.

“Baby, I lived through segregation and so much anger, that you’d be able to melt all of the polar ice caps all that fire. The one thing that I’ve learned is that you can’t live with that much anger in you. We’re stubborn women. Your father told me that plenty of times. But it’s one thing to be stubborn and it’s another to be spiteful. I didn’t raise you to be angry and spiteful. Don’t live with that anger. It’s not worth it. Cool it off with some ice cream. You can’t be angry if you’re having a cone with your one true love.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to find a true love then,” Robin said.

“First you’re going to have to shave those damn legs of yours,” Gloria said with a smirk.

Chapter Nine

The football field looked amazing at five in the morning. The sun was just starting to rise and since the stadium was an open air stadium, it cast glorious and ominous looking shadows over the field. The kids had arrived early because that was the only time that Chris could squeeze them into his busy schedule. Since football season was in full swing, his free time was more and more scarce.

Robin was leaning down into a huddle with the kids. “You know what to do?” she asked. They all nodded their heads.

“Chris is going to kill me for letting this happen,” said Steven. He was in his usher’s uniform already and didn’t look very enthused.

She stood up and the huddle dispersed into little groups of kids. Robin smiled at Steven and patted him on the shoulder before turning to walk away. He stopped her before she could scamper any further. “You know he’s been all mopey for like a week now. You sure did a number on him.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him. I-” she stopped. “I guess I just couldn’t see how amazing he was until he wasn’t there anymore.”

Steven smiled. “Well go ahead before he catches you here.”

Robin watched from behind a set of football sleds as Chris ran onto the field. He was carrying his helmet under one arm and a football in the other hand.

“Mister Marler!” the kids screamed. They all rushed him and smothered him with hugs.

“Hey guys! I haven’t seen you in a while. Sorry I’ve been MIA. We had a game in New York.”

“Yeah I watched it on TV,” said one of the boys. “You were awesome!”

“Thanks!”

“But that one guy didn’t do so well.”

Chris shrugged. “We had a couple fumbles but everyone makes mistakes.”

“You should fire him!” said another boy.

“Yeah!” they all joined in.

“No, no, no. That’s not the teamwork that I’ve taught you. You guys know better than that.”

“So what are you supposed to do when someone makes a mistake?” asked another boy.

“Well, let’s see,” Chris said. He motioned for everyone to gather around and had them all sit on the ground. He plopped down too. “If one of my teammates makes a mistake, we all talk about what we could have done differently as a team. Sometimes, it’s not his fault that he made a mistake. It could be a bunch of things that went wrong. Then we practice and give him another chance to do better next time.”

“A second chance?” one of the boys said.

“Yep.”

“Second chances are important!” said another kid.

Chris smiled. “Yes they are.”

“Especially if it’s someone that you really care about,” said another.

Chris looked around at all of the bright eyed kids. Robin stepped out from behind the sled and walked toward them.

“Come on,” said Steven. “Let’s all go get some water at the bench and then we can go bug Chris’ manager for an autograph.”

“Yay!” the kids exclaimed in unison.

Chris got up from the dewy grass. “Hey.”

“I’m sorry about all of the things that I said,” Robin burst out. “I couldn’t have been more wrong if I tried. I know that you’re a good person. I just- I just-”

Chris put his finger up to her mouth to hush her and then pulled her close. As they kissed, they could hear the jeers and cheers from the kids as they squealed from a few yards away.

“Now he’s gonna have cooties!” one of them screamed. “I hope he can still play football!”

“Did you hear that?” Robin said when they pulled away. “You just got cooties.”

“Oh no,” Chris said. He wrapped his arms around her. “What am I going to do now?”

“I think I can think of an antidote.”

Chris shook his head. “In cases like these, it’s best to handle it the same way that you handle a hangover.”

“With an ice pack and some really tacky sunglasses?” Robin asked.

“Hair of the dog,” he said. “You cure a hangover from alcohol with more alcohol.”
He kissed her again.

“That is really cheesy, Mr. Marler,” Robin said, kissing him again.

Chapter Ten

“You know that I believe in you, right?” he asked. His hand gripped hers tightly as they walked toward the diner.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m applying for financial aid so that I can take online CNA courses. The local community college has a pretty great nursing program. If I can get this help, I’ll be able to take some night courses and labs at the college.”

He stopped, causing her to spin around and face him. “Are you serious?” he said. A smile crept across his face. “That’s the best thing that I’ve heard all day.”

“You helped me realize just what I’m capable of.

“I’m sorry, you did what?” Robin sputtered.

“I sold the diner!” Todd said. He emptied a drawer into a cardboard box. “I’ve always hated this place. You know that. Besides, with me gone, maybe you can finally get that promotion you’ve been dying for.” He winked at her. “I’ve got a feeling that you’re a shoe in for that job anyway.” He motioned towards the door.

Robin turned around and found Chris and Linda standing in the doorway. A set of keys went flying over her head and landed in Chris’ open hand. He took a step toward her. The smile on his face was as bright as the sun. “I bought the diner from him.” He pulled a clip out of his pocket and placed it in her hand. “And I’m making you the manager. You know this place backward and forward. I know nothing about how to take care of a diner. I know that you can help this place thrive.”

Linda stepped into the office. “With Marler’s name on the diner, this place will get more patronage than it’s ever seen. It’s great! We get more customers. More customers means more money. More money means that you can pay your mom’s assisted living bills,” Linda squealed.

“Since you only have to work one shift now, maybe you can spend more time with me,” Chris said, taking her in his arms.

Todd walked around them, clutching the box against his chest. “Get a room,” he said as he walked past. He winked at Linda. “These two. Am I right?” He turned to them. “You better invite me to the wedding. You know that the only reason you two are together was because of me.”

Linda tugged on his arm. “Stop it. Leave these two alone. Come on, I’ll pour you one last cup of coffee before you go.”

“What do you mean, one last cup?” he said. “I’m going to be stopping by every day so that you can serve me some of that award winning pie.”

“No way. I’m not serving you squat. We’ll ban you from the premises,” she joked. They walked out of the office.

“You think those two?” Robin asked.

“No. And if they did, they wouldn’t last long. Todd wouldn’t be able to handle that much woman.”

“I heard that!” screamed Todd from the other room.

Chris reached for Robin’s hand. “Maybe you can take those CNA courses that you’ve been dreaming about without the need for financial aid. You’re good at taking care of people, Robin. I want you to be able to put that love and talent to good use.”

Robin smiled. “Come on,” she said. “Let me buy you some ice cream.”

