



*Rugged*  
**MATCH**

THE  MATCHMAKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANA LOVE

RUGGED MATCH  
A BBW & MOUNTAIN  
MAN VALENTINE'S  
ROMANCE



**LANA LOVE**

[LOVE HEART BOOKS](#)

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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[About Lana Love](#)

# CHAPTER 1



JESSICA

*T*ell me your secrets!”

I laugh as my best friend Ruby rushes through my front door and heads straight to the kitchen.

“And hello to you, too.” My laugh loud as I close the front door and push the door snake against the bottom before too much cold air gets in. It hasn’t been a snowy winter so far, but the wind has been something else. It makes me regret that my front door opens directly outside instead of having a protected hallway like where Ruby lives.

“I know, I know! I’m late. But,” Ruby’s voice is bright and playful as she rummages in my cupboard, “I brought cupcakes!”

She returns to the living room and we settle on the couch as the opening music starts for our favorite addiction. We know it’s ridiculous, but we love that reality TV show about wedding dresses. It’s become our Thursday night thing. We drool and obsess over the dresses, discussing which ones we’d love for ourselves and which we wouldn’t even try on. Of course, we’d both need serious boyfriends before we could even think about shopping for our own wedding dresses.

“Okay,” I say with a faux-serious voice. “I suppose I could forgive you if you have a red velvet cupcake in here...”

“Knew it!” Ruby hands me a plate with two cupcakes – one red velvet – and cuts her eyes to the television, where a woman scowls at a meringue dress fit for a princess. We both laugh because we’ve seen this bride go through twenty dresses

already. It'll take a miracle for her to find a dress she likes.  
"What's new with you?"

"Well," I tease, smiling at her as she looks at me. My eyes drop to my mail on the table and the envelope I've been scared to open.

"What's that?" Ruby's eyes follow mine. "Oooh, what's with the fancy envelope? Are you invited to *another* wedding?"

I roll my eyes and laugh. "No. Not that."

"Don't be a tease!" She pouts. "Tell me what it is!"

"Okay, but you have to promise not to laugh," I say, a hint of embarrassment in my voice. I don't know whether I've done something smart or incredibly desperate. If I don't put words to what I've done, maybe it won't be real.

"Pinkie promise!" Ruby says, extending her pinkie toward me.

I loop my pinkie through hers and look her straight in the eye.  
"Now remember, you promised..."

"Babe. You know me. Have I ever shared one of your secrets?"

I raise an eyebrow at her but continue. "You know Mack and Aimee's wedding is coming up, right?"

"Yes," Ruby says.

"So here's the deal. I need a date, and everything feels weird. Our friends are getting married, and I can't even cross the two-month mark with a guy." I glance at the TV and pick up the remote, pressing the pause button as the show comes back from a commercial break. I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. "So I did a thing. Have you heard about that matchmaking contest?"

Ruby perks up. "Oh, you mean the one where they give you a vacation if you don't fall in love on the first date? I thought that was a scam..."

"It's not. And it was free to apply."

"You didn't!"

“I most certainly did! I came to the realization that I’m lousy at choosing men, so it seemed like a fair idea to let someone else have a crack at it. If it doesn’t work, I’ll win twenty grand and a vacation for my trouble. Plus,” I sigh, “everyone’s getting married, and the highlight of my week is seeing you and watching...” I gesture toward the TV, which is paused on a woman holding up a wedding dress that looks like a lace sheath. It’s pretty, but with my curves, I’d look like a lace-wrapped sausage link.

Ruby laughs. “And that’s a problem why?”

I sigh again and smile. “I love you, Ruby. You know that. But I also want a husband and a family. I’ll have to get a cat if I keep striking out with men.”

“Hold on. Are you saying you’re going to become a crazy cat lady?” Ruby teases.

I toss a pillow at her. “If I can’t find a man who wants me for more than two months, I’m afraid the answer is yes.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone, Jess. You’re an amazing catch – and you know it.”

I smile half-heartedly and twist my throw blanket in my fingers. “Thanks.”

“You know you are,” Ruby says, more seriously this time. “Don’t be hard on yourself. How are you supposed to know if someone is a match if you don’t take a chance? I still don’t understand why it didn’t work out with you and Luke. I’ve never seen you happier than you were with him.”

I sigh at the mention of Luke. He’s my brother’s best friend and the last man who truly broke my heart. It’s been two years and I’m not sure I’m over him yet. “Don’t remind me. I thought so, too. But he was going through something and never opened up to me. It was like he couldn’t trust me. We didn’t even hit the two-month mark.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Ruby pauses, then looks back at the fancy envelope. “If those are the deets for your mystery date, why haven’t you opened the envelope?” Ruby’s eyes light up.

I grin at her. “It’s,” I inhale deeply. “It seems like such a crazy thing to do. I mean, I’m kind of excited, but I’m also worried I’ll be matched with some guy who lives in his mom’s basement.”

Ruby laughs and nods. “Would a guy like that enter a matchmaking contest? And surely the company vets the people who apply. Come on,” she says, picking up the fancy envelope and passing it to me. “Open it. What if he’s a total dreamboat?”

There’s no hiding the flutter in my stomach at the thought of meeting someone new. “Either way, it’s out of my hands now. Lord knows I’m not doing too well picking them myself.”

“Jess, you’re an amazing woman,” Ruby insists, carefully peeling the wrapper off a cupcake.

“Thanks,” I sigh, but inside, doubt coils tight. I remember Luke—his intense dark eyes, how he made me feel like we had a future...and then the crushing heartbreak. I’ve tried to forget him, but he’s my brother’s best friend, and I can’t avoid seeing him occasionally.

“Hey,” she nudges me gently, her red curls bouncing as she leans in close enough for me to catch the scent of her floral perfume. “This could be the best thing that ever happened to you. Who knows? They might just find your perfect match.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, the word barely louder than a breath. My heart yearns for it to be true—to find someone who sees me, really sees me, and doesn’t turn away.

I take the stiff, cream-colored envelope with my name and address written in a fancy script on the front. It really does look like a wedding invitation. “Okay. Hold on,” I say, getting up to grab a knife from the kitchen to open the envelope.

“This is going to be so good!” Ruby says, rubbing her hands together.

“Here we go,” I say, pulling a piece of thick writing paper from the envelope.

*Dearest Jessica,*



*I am thrilled to announce that you have been selected for our matchmaking event, and we have found a man we think is your perfect match. Remember, the agreement is that you go on a single date, and if you aren't one hundred percent sure that the match we've selected for you is your perfect match, you will be awarded the cash prize and vacation of your choice.*

*There will be two parts to the date. For the first part of the date, you and your match will participate in a private cooking lesson at Ciao, Bella! on February 14<sup>th</sup>. Prepare to work together to create a delicious meal you will both enjoy. Your match has the details for the second part of the date. Formal attire is not required. Wear clothing you are comfortable moving around in. We are confident we have found activities that match both of your interests and strengths. Be prepared to work together!*

*Instead of wishing you luck (which we don't think you'll need!), we wish you the first of many dates with the man we believe is a perfect match for you! We will contact you after your date so you can provide us with an update.*

*Warmest regards,*

*The Matchmaker*

“Oh my God! Your date is on Valentine's Day! No pressure, or anything!” Ruby laughs, taking the letter from me and re-reading it. “It sounds like a really cool date.”

I groan and don't say anything for a moment. “Who in the world thought sending a curvy woman to a cooking class for a first date was a good idea? And on Valentine's Day!”

Ruby looks at me for a long moment. “What was it you said about trusting someone else to help with your dating life? Obviously, they researched you and the guy so they could choose activities that matched both of you – and you love cooking.”

“Touché. I did have to fill out a pretty extensive questionnaire.” I take the card back from her and look at it again. “But... Valentine's Day? That's such a loaded night for a date – especially a first date!”

“This matchmaker sure is confident in her abilities,” Ruby says with a shrug. “You said you were ready to let someone else intervene...and boy is this woman setting you up for a date to remember.”

I grab another cupcake and try to process all my thoughts as we get back to watching our show, commenting on every dress and the bridezilla level of each woman. *When will it be my turn to shop for a wedding dress?*

After our show ends and Ruby leaves, I take our dishes to the kitchen, pouring a glass of water and leaning against the counter as I sip. My mind drifts to the string of failed relationships from the last few years. There was Jordan, who looked at his phone more than at me; Mark, whose idea of depth was comparing beer brands; and, of course, Luke, whose memory still aches like an old bruise.

“Ugh, not Luke,” I chastise myself, pushing away from the counter with more force than necessary. “This is about moving forward, not looking back.”

I tilt my head, finishing the water in one long gulp. I’ve wanted someone to share my life with for as long as I can remember—a man who loves my curves as much as I do and wants to face the world beside me.

“Maybe it will work this time,” I tell myself, placing my glass in the dishwasher. Trying the matchmaking service is a leap of faith, and what is the pursuit of love, if not the ultimate leap of faith?

## CHAPTER 2



LUKE

“Come again?” I ask, my voice a sharp bark of disbelief.

I must be drunk if Daryl said what I think he said. That’s the most asinine fucking thing I’ve ever heard.

“Mack and Aimee’s wedding is coming up. You need a date.”

A growl escapes my mouth as I glare at Daryl. He’s not wrong, but...this isn’t right. The only thing worse than weddings is going without a date. Without a woman on my arm, every single woman will make a pass at me, and I’ll wish I wasn’t there. Women think a wedding means open season on every single man there.

“The fuck I do,” I mutter, draining the rest of my beer and motioning to the bartender, Marian, for a refill. I shouldn’t have another before Waylon and the others get here, but right now, I need to be not-sober.

“Come on, Foster. You’ve been moping around like some tragic hero in one of the romance novels my mom used to read. It’s time you got back in the game,” Daryl teases and slaps my back, nearly making me spill my fresh beer. He doesn’t try to hide how much he’s enjoying pissing me off.

“Listen here, Mathis,” I growl and set my beer carefully on the bar, my annoyance flaring hot. “I don’t need you—or anyone else—meddling in my love life. Or lack thereof.”

“Relax, Luke. You need a woman in your life. When’s the last time you took a woman out?” Daryl presses, not letting this go. “Don’t you think it’s time you put yourself back out there?”

Who knows? Maybe you'll meet someone who can handle your broody ass."

"Maybe I do, but this isn't the way to do it, Daryl." Inwardly, I admit he's probably right. It's not that I don't want a woman in my life. I'm still dealing with the burden of what I saw when I was in the Army. It's already ruined one relationship with an amazing woman – my best friend's sister, no less – and I'm scared that I'll shut down again instead of letting a woman in. Though the truth is, I haven't had eyes for any other woman since Jessica.

Daryl laughs and drains his beer, motioning to Marian for a refill. "You say that, but you have to admit you want more than this solitary life you've been leading."

"What about you, you fucking lunatic?" I counter. I'm not sure Daryl's ever had a woman in his life for longer than a weekend. "How is the man who claims he'll never settle down with a woman suddenly an expert on *my* dating life?"

"We're not talking about me. I'm happy as I am. You, on the other hand," Daryl says, tilting his beer toward me, "are not happy on your own. You're just too in your head to do something about it."

Daryl's comment pushes me into silence. He's...not exactly wrong. Still. "Tell me why I shouldn't haul you out of this bar and whoop your sorry ass into oblivion?" I threaten, but I'm laughing now. Even if Daryl is technically right, I'm still giving him shit for having done this without my permission.

"Because even if the date doesn't work out – and it's only one date – you win twenty-thousand bucks. You said you wanted to build out your cabin, and this could finance that, because I know you're not aching to jet off to the Bahamas or London."

A sharp laugh bursts out of me. "Damn straight. King Mountain has everything I need – especially the quiet."

"So you're not going to bail?" Daryl holds up an envelope that looks a lot like the wedding invitation I received for Mack and Aimee's wedding. "Because I have details for your date right here."

I glare at him and snatch the fancy invitation from him. “Give it to me.”

I read through it. It has instructions to meet my date at Ciao, Bella!, which is fine. I don’t eat out often, but I know they have good food. There’s a second envelope inside, which I’m supposed to open after the first part of the date. “Huh.”

“Huh, what?” Daryl asks, trying to read the card over my shoulder.

“It says there are two parts to the date. If this date is torture, I’m going to hunt you down and make you pay.”

Daryl snorts and pays for the new round of beers. “In your dreams, Foster.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter under my breath. “This matchmaker isn’t pulling any shots.”

Daryl laughs and turns to me. “What now, hotshot?”

I glare at Daryl, the fire of frustration rising again. “The date is on Valentine’s Day. Christ almighty.”

“You two are here early,” Waylon’s deep voice says from behind us, and it’s a good thing because I’m closer than ever to taking Daryl outside to settle what he’s done.

Daryl and I grab our beers and stand.

“Finished the inspections early,” Daryl says.

“Good. Good. The others will be here in a few. Grab those tables in the back,” Waylon says, nodding to the corner by the empty pool tables. “I’ll get a beer and be right over.”

Nathan and Reggie burst into the bar, laughing about something, and join Waylon. As usual, Reggie leans against the bar and moons at Marian, and Marian pretends she doesn’t notice.

“They need to fuck and get whatever that is,” Daryl tilts his head toward Reggie and Marian, “out of their systems.”

I watch as Reggie looks at Marian the way I looked at Jess. Reggie won’t admit it, but he has it bad for the curvy brunette

behind the bar and has for as long as I've been living on King Mountain.

"Alright," Waylon says loudly after everyone has grabbed a seat. "There shouldn't be too much to go over this week. Mathis, Foster, how are the rental cabins? They good to go for the upcoming season?"

Daryl glances at me, and I nod for him to give the report. He pulls his notebook from his back pocket and flips through the pages.

"Here we are. Cabin One, the deck boards we put in a few years back are holding up well. Wasn't sure how they'd be after the storms this winter, but they're fine. Cabins Two and Three could do with a fresh coat of paint. Remember those college kids from last year?"

Waylon strokes his beard and nods. We all remember those kids. Aside from damn near burning down this side of the mountain when they decided to get drunk and start a bonfire, somehow all the walls got marked up. It's a mystery we never figured out, and with the walls structurally fine, we figured maybe we didn't want to know what happened.

"Yeah. Anything else?"

"Nope," Daryl says, snapping his notebook shut and wedging it in his back pocket.

"Good. I'll order some paint, and we'll get those walls painted. We're already booked up for most of the season."

We all groan. Having tourists running around our side of the mountain is an annoyance, but it funds Waylon's work, so we all deal with it. There are other cabins, but Waylon usually takes care of those personally.

"Alright, that's a wrap, gentlemen," Waylon says, standing at the head of the table, his voice deep. "Good work this week."

The rest of us stand and start lining up quarters on the pool table.

Daryl sidles up next to me, a mischievous glint in his eye that I know all too well. "You know, Luke," he starts, and I brace

myself for whatever ribbing is coming my way, “I might’ve done you a solid by entering you in that contest.”

“Solid or not, I’ll bury you on the other side of the mountain if my match turns out to be a crazy woman,” I retort.

The guys erupt into laughter as Daryl shares the story of the matchmaking service, and they all raise their beers to me.

“Can’t wait to hear these stories.” Nathan chuckles, nudging with his elbow. “Luke Foster’s Wild Adventures in Love.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help chuckling. “Let’s keep the word ‘wild’ out of it, huh?” Maybe it won’t be as bad as I expect. Who am I kidding? It probably will be as bad as I fear.

“Hey, it’ll be the highlight of our next meeting.” Daryl grins, slapping my back.

“We’ll see,” I say drily, but humor softens my words. *It’s just one night*, I tell myself. Getting back in the saddle with women doesn’t sound like the worst thing, but aside from my ex, I’ve been fine minding my own business and not getting emotionally tangled up with a woman.

We settle around the pool table, the felt surface worn from years of use. Daryl racks the balls as I grab fresh beers from Marian.

“Your break, Luke,” Daryl calls.

I stride over, cue in hand, and line up my shot. Leaning forward, the world narrows to the white cue ball and the colorful triangle before me. The crack of impact sends the balls scattering, and the five ball sinks into the corner pocket.

“Nice shot,” Daryl compliments.

We fall into the easy rhythm of the game, the comfortable silence between us filled with the soft *snick* of pool balls and the scent of beer.

“Think this matchmaker found a woman who will be able to handle your grumpy ass?” Reggie teases as he watches Daryl and me play.

“We’ll see,” I reply. My gaze is on the table, but my mind wanders to the what-ifs of this matchmaking nonsense.

“Ah, I bet this matchmaker has an amazing woman ready for a chance with King Mountain’s most eligible bachelor,” he says.

“Most eligible disaster, more like,” I mutter. It’s been too long since I allowed myself to consider the prospect of someone else getting close, but maybe it *is* time. I haven’t been in a while, but maybe I should schedule an appointment with my therapist at Warrior Cares and see what he thinks.

“Ever the optimist.” Daryl shakes his head and takes another swig of his beer. “Just give it a chance, man. You might be surprised.”

“Surprised, terrified... it’s a fine line,” I retort, focusing on the eight-ball now lined up easily near a side pocket.

We play round after round, and eventually, the guys move on from teasing me about my upcoming blind date. The other men join in, and soon, a tournament is underway. Pitchers of beer circulate, along with the warmth of camaraderie we share. It’s a night like any other at King Tap, yet I feel like something new may be in my future. If you asked me if I was ready to consider a date with a new woman, I’m not sure I’d say yes. But now that one is arranged for me, I’m curious about the whole thing. Not that I’d tell Daryl.

“Next month, you’ll either thank me or curse me,” Daryl says with a sly grin as he sinks the first ball of the final game.

“Probably both,” I admit, unable to suppress a chuckle. “But, hey, maybe it’ll be a funny story to tell.”

“Here’s to funny stories.” Reggie raises his glass, and the rest follow suit, a chorus of drunken “cheers” filling the air. “Watching you squirm will be the highlight of the year,” he jests, his words laced with the kind of friendly malice only a true friend can muster.

“Keep it up, and I’ll make sure your love life becomes the bar’s next betting pool,” I shoot back, lining up my shot. The eight-ball kisses the cushion, rolls across the felt, and drops



with a satisfying *thunk*. A cheer erupts from the guys, and hands slap my back.

“Very funny, smartass. I ain’t never settling down with a woman, and you know it,” Reggie says defensively.

“Maybe we should submit you, too,” I tease, finally relaxing as the beer works through my veins. “Or are you going to finally ask Marian out on a date? You moon over Marian like a lovesick puppy.”

“Hey, now. Don’t go getting any ideas,” he warns. “And for the record: I’m single and I like it that way.”

“Sure you do,” Nathan says, and we all laugh.

As the night wears on, I wonder if Daryl might’ve done me a favor.

But what woman would be strong enough to take on my sorry ass?

## CHAPTER 3



JESSICA

I rub my hands on my arms, cursing myself for thinking I could get away with wearing a cotton dress with just a denim jacket. *It's February. What did you expect?* I wanted to look cute and sexy, especially since it's Valentine's Day, and cute and sexy is hard to do in a big puffer jacket.

When I glance down the sidewalk to my right, the butterflies in my stomach go into overdrive, and desire-fueled heat fills my body. This can't be real...can it? Is this some kind of cosmic coincidence? What the hell is *he* doing here?

I inhale sharply as Luke saunters toward me, a look of surprise on his face. My brother's best friend and the man I never got over, even though it's been a good two years since we dated. We had a hot fling when he came home from serving in the Middle East. He was a bad boy with, I discovered, a tender heart of gold. But knowing he had a tender heart didn't help when he up and disappeared into the wilds of King Mountain. I thought we had a shot at a future together, but fate laughed at that idea.

He looks as handsome and hot as ever in pressed jeans and a crisp button-down shirt, his dark hair slicked back. Hell, he even trimmed his beard.

"What are you doing here?" I exclaim as Luke stops in front of me, his eyes lingering as he takes in my dress. *Please don't let my date arrive now.* How awkward would it be, mooning over my ex while the man who might be my future shows up? I know it's ridiculous to still feel things for the man who

ghosted me, but seeing Luke reminds me of how much I wanted a future with him.

“Uh,” Luke stammers, faint color rising from his cheeks to his hairline. He shifts his weight from foot to foot, his discomfort as plain as day. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

I grin at seeing Luke unsure of himself. He’s always so broody and grouchy that I can’t help but push him when he’s like this. “Try me. It can’t be stranger than why I’m here.”

Luke fixes me with an intense stare, and I squirm a little. “I’m here for a blind date. One of the knuckleheads I work with submitted me to a matchmaking service because he thinks I need a woman in my life. So...here I am.”

He stops talking when he sees the look on my face. I bite my lip so I don’t burst out laughing. How would any of the guys up on King Mountain have heard about the matchmaking contest? My brother and Luke make it sound like they’re all resolute bachelors.

He must think the look in my eyes is pain rather than my attempt to subdue my laughter because concern fills his eyes. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” He steps toward me, resting a hand lightly on my shoulder.

His touch makes my body burn like a furnace. My mind races as I wrap my head around what I suspect is happening. “I... I’m fine. I think I’m your date. Hold on,” I say, unzipping my purse and pulling out my invitation from the matchmaker. “Does this look familiar?”

“What?” Luke’s voice raises an octave.

I smile. I like this glimpse of Luke’s vulnerability.

He takes a long look at the envelope and pulls a matching one from the back pocket of his pressed jeans. “Yeah, I got one of those, too.”

“I entered the same contest...” I hesitate. “I mean, we can’t possibly be meeting other people for the same thing, right?”

Luke opens and closes his mouth a few times, and it seems he’s doubting the whole idea.

“Though we can bail if you want. We don’t have to do this,” I say quickly, offering him a way out, though I mentally cross my fingers because I don’t want to bail. I know it won’t amount to anything, but I’ve genuinely missed Luke, and spending an evening with him would definitely not suck. My brother would have things to say about this, but he’s not here, and I don’t care.

Luke gives me a long look, rubbing his hand through his dark hair and messing it up in a way that he probably doesn’t even realize is sexy. He shakes his head. “We’re here, so we may as well go through with it. If you’re okay with that,” he adds as if unsure.

I smile and try to play it cool as he opens the door for me, but inwardly, my heart beats like an over-caffeinated pogo stick.

“Hello, and welcome to Ciao, Bella! You must be Jessica and Luke. Is that right?”

We both nod at the petite blonde woman in front of us. She has enough enthusiasm to light up a power grid.

I shiver as Luke lightly places a hand on my lower back and steps closer. I could get used to this. His hand is achingly close to my butt, and desire burns through me, wishing his hand would slide a little lower. I know Luke is a bad man to fantasize about, but what’s one night? Right?

“Great. I’m Greta, and I’ll be your instructor for tonight. I hope you brought your appetites with you!”

Greta tells us the restaurant is closed for the evening, so it’s just us here tonight. A strange, intense excitement courses through me. Before Luke abruptly ended things with me, he made me feel so special and seen. The Matchmaker booking the entire restaurant for us reminds me of that specialness. With it only being us and the instructor, we have to be present and together, with no one else to distract us.

Once Greta has led us to the kitchen and we’re in aprons, she explains the plan for this part of the evening. “Alright, you two! Let’s get started with our main dish, a classic pasta

carbonara,” the instructor announces, her voice echoing in the kitchen.

I reach for the olive oil, my hand brushing against Luke’s as he does the same. “Oops, sorry,” I mumble, looking away when warmth floods my cheeks.

“No problem,” Luke replies, his voice almost a whisper.

His fingers linger a fraction longer than necessary, sending an unexpected shiver down my spine. A wave of confusion crashes over me. Has he forgotten how he ended things two years ago? It almost feels like we’re picking up where we left off, but I know that’s a crazy thought. You don’t go back to that kind of familiar intimacy after two years apart, do you? We both said yes to going through with tonight, but what if that was the wrong decision? I’m questioning my sanity about now.

We stand shoulder to shoulder at the stainless steel countertop. I’m hyper-aware of Luke’s proximity. Does he keep bumping into me on purpose? I glance at him, trying to read his expression, but he’s focused on the instructor. Intentional or not, I ache to be in his arms again. Did the matchmaker know about our past? Is this genuinely a random match?

“Next, you’ll want to whisk your eggs thoroughly before adding them to the pan,” Greta says, demonstrating with a flourish.

“Guess it’s all in the wrist action,” Luke teases, glancing at me with a hint of mischief dancing in his intense eyes.

“Is that so?” I retort, attempting to keep my tone light. It’s like my mind and mouth can’t stop flirting with him, regardless of my doubts about all this. “I’ll have you know my wrist action is top-notch.”

Luke fixes me with another intense look, and I can barely maintain eye contact because my heart is pounding so hard. “I see,” he says, a smile playing on his lips.

A lightning strike of lust pierces my core, and I squeeze my thighs together, hoping Luke doesn’t notice how much he’s affecting me. How can he still make me feel so much? Have I

forgotten how he broke my heart? Everything about this matchmaking date is not what I imagined it would be!

“Jessica,” he says, his breath warm against my ear, “if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re enjoying this as much as I am.”

I look up into his brown eyes, speechless. I can’t trust myself not to utter words that will lead to something I’ll almost certainly regret.

“I’ll take your silence as agreement,” Luke says, the corners of his mouth quirking into a smile.

We continue following Greta’s instructions, and before long, we’re plating our meal. Will the butterflies in my stomach calm down enough for me to eat any of this? Who knows?

“Need a hand with that?” Luke’s breath fans over my neck as he reaches around me to drizzle a balsamic reduction over our Caprese salad.

“Please,” I breathe, leaning toward him. His body heat seeps into me, and I want to stay like this forever.

“Looks perfect,” he murmurs, his gaze locked on mine.

As if I didn’t already know, one glance into Luke’s dark eyes confirms that he isn’t simply talking about the food.

“Looks like we survived,” Luke says, his voice low and threaded with amusement.

Our eyes lock, and there’s no mistaking the heat in his gaze. Luke’s eyes flicker over my face, and I know my expression doesn’t hide my white-hot desire for him. We may not have dated for long, but he could always read the emotions better than anyone else.

“Let’s eat, then.” Luke smiles, rubbing his fingertips across the bare skin of my forearm. “We still have more to do tonight.”

## CHAPTER 4



LUKE

*B*eer?” I ask, relief flooding me when she smiles and nods.

At the bar, I order a couple of beers and a roll of quarters. Even after getting past the bumpy start at the cooking class, I still feel like I’m on the wrong foot. I need something to help steady my nerves. Thankfully, Flashback Games is exactly my kind of place, so at least I feel more comfortable than I did in a kitchen.

I’m a goddamned fool for going through with this “date,” but I can’t back out now, even if I wanted to, which I don’t. Seeing Jessica again is...a balm to my soul. Ending things with her was stupid, and her brother, Jake, nearly killed me. It doesn’t even bother me that it’s Valentine’s Day, which just escalates expectations.

“Not so bad spending an evening with me, is it?” Jessica asks as we walk toward the wall of vintage pinball machines.

I hang back a step, watching the curve of her ass and trying to suppress the hard-on that’s been building since I saw her outside Ciao, Bella! Nothing about spending time with her is bad. Nothing. She’s fucking beautiful in the red dress she’s wearing. It has buttons down the front and I’m already fantasizing about slowly unbuttoning her dress and making her twist with anticipation as I take my time – or try to – getting her hot and ready.

“I’ve had worse,” I mumble, immediately cursing myself for not saying something better.

She looks at me with her clear blue eyes, but I can't read them. Everything went well – mostly – during the cooking class, but the vibe has changed. I'm like a knock-kneed kid trying to get up the nerve to look at a pretty girl. It's like all good sense and knowledge of how to handle myself flew out the goddamn window.

“Thanks?” she replies, laughing as she stops in front of Alien Space. “How about this one?”

I look at the machine and nod. “Good choice. I played a lot of this when I was a kid. Do you know how to play?” I set my beer into one of the holders on a table next to the machine and reach into my pocket to grab the roll of quarters.

“Is that a roll of quarters in your pocket, or are you happy to see me?” Jessica teases.

Fuuuck. She has no idea how sexy she is, especially when she looks down at my jeans. I want to show her how much I miss her, but she also needs to know I miss more than simply having her in my bed.

I have to cough and look away. While my jeans aren't tight, if the boner that's been teasing me all night goes whole hog, it'll be obvious to Jessica and everyone how fucking turned on I am just from spending time with her again. She's sexier than ever and I want to lose myself in her womanly curves.

“A little, I guess. I've played for fun a couple of times, but I certainly don't play well.”

“After you,” I say, stepping aside.

Jessica walks past me, her thick hips swaying in a rhythm that fills me with a desire I've tried to tell myself I didn't need in my life. The memory of Jake warning me off his sister fills my head, but I push it away. I'm here, and I'm going to enjoy this night with Jessica.

She chuckles, tossing her silky black hair over one shoulder. “You are so going down, Luke.”

“Promises, promises,” I retort as I slide a couple of quarters into the machine and move to give her space to play the game. I'd love nothing more than to get my head under that pretty



dress and lose myself in the sweetness between her thick thighs.

“Watch and learn,” she teases, leaning over the machine and enthusiastically trying to keep the silver ball in play. But as enthusiastic as she is, she doesn’t get very far.

“You take my turn and I’ll show you how it’s done. Stay there,” I instruct, stepping behind her. My hands find her hips, thumbs rubbing the fabric of her dress as I lean down slightly. “Okay, so you wanna use these flippers here to keep the ball in play.” I cover her hands with mine and guide her to tap lightly on the buttons at the sides of the machine, aware of how close my lips are to the shell of her ear.

“Like this?” Jessica asks, breathlessly.

Having her body against mine sends bolts of lust straight to my groin. My dick’s going to be pointing the way home, that’s for damn sure.

“Yeah, like that.” My voice is heavier than I intended, but I can’t help how she turned on she makes me. I swallow hard, trying to focus on the game, on anything but the joy of her sweet curves molded against my body.

I admire her enthusiasm as she plays and instinctively bounces her hips against the machine. “You’ve got great instincts, but if you keep up that hip action, you’ll tilt the game.”

“Noted. Tone down the hip action,” she teases, tipping her head to look up at me with a smile that sends my heart racing.

Fuck me sideways. “Be careful,” I warn. I want to see her win, not lose, because of her enthusiasm. God, I’ve missed her sunshine-y nature. She doesn’t know, but her sunny disposition saved me from the edge when I was going through the darkest days of readjusting to civilian life.

“Is that fear I hear in your voice, Luke Foster?” Her playful tone is laced with something that suggests she’s as turned on as I am.

“The only fear I have is not being able to let go once I get started,” I confess, the statement more truth than jest. I put my hands back on her hips, my fingers caressing the soft fabric of

her dress. “Keep your eyes on the silver ball, Jessica,” I say, my voice a low rumble in her ear as she leans into me. I’m acutely aware we’re playing a different game now, and if she keeps on like this, I won’t be able to stop until she’s moaning my name all night long.

“Like this?” Her voice is playful, but it has a breathiness I remember all too well.

“Exactly like that.” Her back nestles perfectly against my chest, and the subtle shift of her hips sends a jolt straight through me. My cock hardens as her luscious ass presses against my body. This is dangerous. There’s no way she doesn’t know how hard I am right now.

The pinball machine lights flash, and I can tell she’s focused on the game, but I’m focused on the soft sighs escaping her lips each time I trace my fingers across her hips, a little more pressure each time.

“Who knew pinball could get so... intense?” Her tone teases as she racks up points. And God, if the friction of her against me isn’t the sweetest torture.

“Guess it’s all about who you play with.” My hands find their way to the front of her hips and I could swear I feel the heat rolling off from between her luscious thighs. Fuck. I want to get on my knees for her and worship her.

“Your turn,” she says, stepping aside, but not before brushing against me in a way that threatens to push me over the edge.

“Watch and learn.” I step up to the machine, feeling her gaze on me just as keenly as I felt her body moments ago. The flippers snap under my control, metal on metal ringing out like a challenge. But the real challenge is standing beside me. When I take my eyes off the game for a second because I need to look at Jessica again, the silver ball slams into the gutter. “Dammit.”

“Looks like you’re losing your edge, Foster.” Jessica’s laugh rings through the din of the arcade, and it’s the only sound I care about.

“Game’s not over yet.” I grin.

“True. But when it is, I think you’ll owe me a victory drink.” Her hip bumps mine as she takes her position to play again, ready to take over.

“Only if you win.” The challenge is back, laced with the promise of what could come after.

“Isn’t that the point?” she quips, her blue eyes flickering with invitation.

I swallow hard, glancing up at our scores. My focus is shot to hell. I’m supposed to be teaching her how to play, but all I can think about is the curve of her hips under my hands and the softness of her ass pressing against my throbbing cock.

“Ah, but look there—” Jessica points at the flashing lights signaling a bonus round, and it’s all the opening she needs to spin around, facing me. She arches her body so that she’s pressed against me completely, and I can’t help the groan that escapes from my mouth. This woman...

“Got any tips for the next round?” Her question is loaded, her body language screaming volumes.

“Keep your eyes on the prize,” I respond, my voice steady despite the passion raging inside me.

“Show me how to win, Luke,” she whispers, and the double entendre isn’t lost on either of us. Her eyes are full of heat, a lusty promise that sends a surge of longing straight to my cock.

“Winning isn’t everything,” I say, but my hands betray me, gravitating toward the softness of her hips. I steady her gently, my touch light, but I’m not planning to let her go.

“Maybe not,” she concedes, her lips curving into a knowing smile. “But I’d rather win than lose.”

I fight the urge to taste her lips and find out if her kiss is as sweet and sultry as I remember. Every part of me screams to claim her, not to lose her like I did before. I still can’t wrap my head around tonight – it’s like our past didn’t happen, but we both know it did.

“Careful, Jessica,” I warn, my throat tight, “You might just get what you’re asking for.”

“Maybe that’s what I want.” Her words hang between us, a lusty invitation if I’ve ever heard one.

But as much as I want her, as much as this moment is everything I’ve fantasized about, a whisper of doubt keeps me anchored. Is this the thrill of the game, or is there something real behind those irresistible blue eyes?

“Jess,” I murmur, and there’s no more room for hesitation.

My fingers brush through the silk of her dark hair, and I lean in, drawn by some magnetic force I can’t control. Our lips crash together in a passionate kiss that feels like the first real breath after being underwater for too long.

“Finally,” she breathes against my mouth, the word barely a whisper. Her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me closer, sealing every inch of space between us. “I thought you’d never kiss me.”

The world narrows to the sensation of her curvy body pressed against mine and her warmth seeping into my bones. The intensity of our connection sets off fireworks behind my closed eyelids, each burst brighter than the last.

“God, Luke,” she moans softly.

I taste the desire in her name for me, sweet and intoxicating. “Jess,” I groan, my voice rough with need. With every beat of my heart, I want her more—need her more.

“Is this okay?” I manage to ask between kisses because even now, I need to know she’s with me, that this isn’t just a spark but a flame that could burn for a lifetime.

“More than okay. It’s perfect,” she assures me, her smile bright enough to chase all my shadows away.

I lower my mouth back to hers, and our kiss turns ravenous. Her tongue duels with mine, stoking a fire I’ve ignored for far too long. I’m all action and instinct, my hands re-charting the delicious curves of her body.

“Jessica,” I growl against her lips, my voice rumbling with pure primal need. I dig my fingers into her hips, pulling her tighter against me. I press against her, wanting her to feel how hard she makes me.

“I need you, Luke,” she pants, her breath hot on my face.

My hips grind against hers, almost punishing in their desperation. I’m lost in the sensation of her lush body yielding to my touch, the taste of her mouth driving me wild. The sounds of the arcade fade into irrelevance; it’s just us, the flame of desire and this electric moment.

Desire roars through me, drowning out caution, and I know one thing for certain—I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

Then, as if the universe conspires against us, my phone vibrates in my pocket—one sharp, insistent buzz after another.

We freeze, the spell momentarily broken, and I swear under my breath.

There’s only one person it could be.

## CHAPTER 5



JESSICA

“Hello?” I groan, not even looking at my phone when I answer it. All I want is to go back to the sex dream where Luke had my arms pinned above my head and was kissing me so slowly that I was squirming for more.

“Jessica! I’m downstairs. Where are you?”

I sit up in bed, realizing I won’t be going back to my dreams anytime soon. “Ugh. Sorry. Overslept. Come up, and I’ll get ready. I’ll unlock the door.”

I run my fingers over my lips, remembering the tickle of Luke’s stubble and how his firm lips pressed against mine last night. My gaze moves to my night table, wishing I had time for my battery-operated boyfriend, but I know Ruby won’t be put off. Her jaw will hit the floor when she finds out I was matched with Luke.

Damn. I snuggle in bed for one last second, remembering Luke’s hands on my hips as I played pinball. And that kiss... I’ll forever curse whoever called him and cut our night short. Even if we didn’t have a future together, I was all in for having one more night together. It stung that he left after the phone call he got, but I reminded myself I don’t have a claim on him.

I barely manage to wash my face and put on leggings and an oversized sweater before Ruby knocks on my door.

Please let her have coffee...

Ruby’s green eyes are bright when I open my door, and she waggles her eyebrows at me. “I’ll trade coffee for all the

deets!” She laughs, holding up coffee and a paper bag from the café on the corner.

“I’ll do anything for coffee right now,” I say, gratefully taking the cup she offers me. My stomach growls when I smell breakfast sandwiches. “Come in.”

Ruby walks straight to my living room and settles on the couch. She rips open the bag and sets out napkins before taking out the breakfast sandwiches.

“You are an angel,” I say, grabbing one and taking a big bite.

“Soooo. Spill!. How was the date?” she asks, anticipation written over her face.

I pause because I know what will happen when I tell her. “It was... wow. You won’t believe who it was!”

“It was someone you know?” Ruby’s voice is surprised.

“Now, don’t get all excited, but...it was Luke.”

Ruby freezes and looks at me, her eyes wide as saucers. “Luke Foster? How in the world...”

“I know, right? Apparently, one of his friends up on King Mountain signed him up. I can’t believe he even showed up for a blind date.”

“So, how was it? Was it weird? Amazing? Did you get laid?”

I laugh and raise my hands. “Slow down. It was kind of weird at the beginning, but then...it wasn’t. It’s probably cliché to say it, but it felt different.”

She tilts her head, giving me a knowing look. “Different good or different ‘I’m projecting what I wished happened the first time and am trying to convince myself Luke Foster could actually commit to me’ good?”

“Different good,” I say quickly. “But maybe both? I don’t know,” I say honestly. I put down the breakfast sandwich and take a long drink of coffee, relishing the caffeine as it hits my bloodstream. “It was unexpected.”

Ruby watches me closely, and her red hair bounces as she shakes her head. “Girl, you’ve got it bad. I thought you were

over him?”

I sigh. “I thought so, too, Ruby. I did. But then he walked up to me on the street, and it was a bunch of ‘what are you doing here?’ and ‘you wouldn’t believe me if I told you,’ and then we did the date. I thought it was a ‘let’s do this thing since we’re here,’ but it turned into a capital D date.”

“Hmm,” Ruby says. I can tell she wants to say more but is holding off. “So what’s next? Are you two gonna see each other again?”

“I hope so.” I fidget with the hem of my sweater as I imagine Luke’s calloused hands lightly gripping my hips. “He said he’d call. And the way he kissed me...” I trail off, biting my lip as the memory sends shivers down my spine.

“Kissed you?” she presses, eyes alight. “Do tell.”

“We were flirting half the night, and then we ended up at Flashback Games, and things escalated. It was like it was before. I know nothing can come of it, but it was like being in a bubble with someone perfect.” I sigh, unsure of whether to feel happy or frustrated.

“Jessica Pierce, you’re blushing!” Ruby teases, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “But, hey, I get it. I know how much you cared about him. Did he say what happened? Apologize for hurting you?”

“No. It was...surreal, I guess. But it all felt real. Like, *really* real. I don’t think he could have faked all that.”

“What’s there to fake? You’re a hot babe. You both have history. Maybe he finally realized that he lost an incredible woman.”

I half-snort. “Maybe. Doesn’t change what happened, and it’s not like it could go back to the way it was. Besides,” I sigh, “my brother would probably kill Luke and me if he knew what happened.”

“Maybe your brother should allow you to make your own decisions about who you give your heart to,” Ruby says, a hard tone in her voice.



Ruby doesn't have a brother, so she doesn't understand that it's not that Jake wants to control me but that he's the standard over-protective brother. After we lost Dad, he became very protective of me.

"Oh, he's just protective of me. It's not like he tries to control me. He wants what's best for me. I know he was furious with Luke about how he ended things."

"I suppose," Ruby concedes, though I can see she's doubtful. "But what about you? Do you even want to try again with Luke? Or do you just one last roll in the hay with him?"

I can't help blushing, and that sets Ruby laughing. "Maybe?" I admit. "But I'm trying not to get ahead of myself. It's just..." I pause, swallowing the sudden lump in my throat. "What if this is real? I don't know if I'm projecting, but it was amazing to see him and be with him last night."

"Then you grab it with both hands and don't let go." Ruby's voice softens, her playful demeanor giving way to sincerity. "You deserve this, Jessica. You deserve someone who makes your heart race and your knees weak. But you damn well make sure he treats you properly this time. You deserve to be worshipped, not discarded without an explanation."

I sigh, my smile fading as my heart fills with conflicting emotions. "Ruby, he's ghosted me before. After everything seemed perfect. How do I know he won't just disappear again?"

"Jessica, look at me." She grips my shoulders, her touch steady and sure. "Luke would be a fool to let you slip away a second time."

"Maybe." I chew on my lower lip, the uncertainty gnawing at my insides. "But—"

"No buts." She wags a finger. "If you want him, and it's plain as day that you do, open your heart and give it a second chance. Otherwise, you'll always wonder what if."

Maybe this time *could* be different.

"Okay, so it's your turn to spill. You've seen me through every disastrous date—what's your secret to staying optimistic?" I

ask Ruby as I walk to the kitchen to make more coffee. One cup was absolutely not enough.

“Optimistic? I’m just realistic. There’s a difference. I’m determined to find that mind-blowing connection—you know, the kind that knocks you right off your feet.”

“Passionate, huh?” I tease, watching as she playfully twirls a curl of red hair around her finger. “I can see that. But what about commitment? Do you ever think you use your humor as a shield? That maybe you’re scared to get too close to someone?”

“Scared? No,” she replies. “I think I understand what you’re trying to ask. Commitment isn’t a trap, Jessica,” she replies, her tone softening as she reads the concern etched on my face. “You put yourself out there, and sometimes you get hurt. But when it’s right, it’s worth it.”

“Maybe,” I concede, chewing on my lip. “But with Luke... it feels like playing with fire.”

“Then turn up the heat,” Ruby declares, her laughter filling the room. “Make him realize you’re the flame he can’t live without. Seriously though,” she continues, “I’m a firm believer in love at first sight. Or at least lust by the first fuck.”

I nearly choke on my fresh coffee, coughing as I set my mug on a stack of old magazines. “Ruby!” My voice lifts an octave, incredulous yet amused. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m absolutely serious! Come on, Jessica. Tell me you’ve never felt that zing—the kind that makes you want to rip someone’s clothes off with your teeth?”

Luke. Only with Luke. Laughter bubbles out of me, and the tension eases from my shoulders like steam. “A ‘zing’?” I mimic, raising an eyebrow. “Is that the technical term?”

“Absolutely,” she fires back, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “And don’t pretend you haven’t felt it with Luke. That man has ‘zing’ written all over him.”

Ruby grins, leaning forward to tap her mug against mine in a mock toast. “To finding love—or at least a good ‘zing’—in the most unexpected places.”

“To love and zing,” I echo, clinking my mug with hers, my heart filled with uncertainty. “But this is different. This is Luke. It feels like the stakes are higher.”

“That’s because they *are*, babe,” Ruby says, her gaze softening. “Look, I know you’re scared, but isn’t it worth the risk?” Her voice has a gentle challenge, pushing me to be honest with myself.

I pause, closing my eyes as I imagine Luke’s strong hands on my hips and the way he looked at me like I was a goddess. Being with him was intoxicating in the best way.

“Maybe it is.”

## CHAPTER 6



LUKE

I stride into Ghost Security, my heart hammering like I'm headed into battle. The steel and glass of the office don't do a damn thing to cool my nerves. Jake's desk is a fortress of monitors and tech. He stands by the window, looking out over Jefferson with that intense focus he gets when solving a problem.

"Jake," I start without preamble, "we need to talk."

He turns, his eyes watching me closely. "What's up, Foster?"

"Can we—somewhere private?" My voice is gruff and even I can hear the strain in it.

I'm not looking forward to this conversation, but I know it's better to have it now than later. One thing therapy taught me is to work on getting in front of issues, not hiding and waiting until they explode like an IED. Besides, Jessica is worth it.

Without a word, Jake leads me to a small conference room with floor-to-ceiling windows. It's a room meant to impress and intimidate. The sounds of the office disappear as Jake closes the door.

Jake turns to me and crosses his arms over his chest. "Spit it out, Foster."

"It's about your sister," I start, the words sticking in my throat.

"Is she okay?" Jake's demeanor changes to concern with a coiled intensity. He's deeply protective of her.

"What? No, no, she's fine." She's fantastic, actually. "It's...we went on a date."

Jake lowers his head for a long moment, and I see the muscles in his arms clenching.

“What have I told you? You need to stay the fuck away from my sister. You hurt her again, and you’ll regret it. You’ll end up on that mountain in a ditch where no one will find you for a hundred years.”

I wince. He may be a computer guy, but I know full well he did combat training in the Army. I’m no stranger to combat, but I don’t want to fight my closest friend. It strikes me that my challenge now isn’t only to win over Jessica—I need to convince her brother, too, so *he* doesn’t try to kill me.

The air between us crackles with tension. Jake’s jaw clenches, and he doesn’t hide his feelings about me wanting to see his sister again.

“Listen, I know how protective you are about her, and I respect that, but—”

“Respect?” Jake cuts me off, his voice low and dangerous. “If you respected it, you wouldn’t be here telling me this.”

“I’m here *because* I respect you. Her happiness is important to me,” I counter, staring my best friend down.

“Is it? Or is this just another conquest, Luke?” The accusation stings because part of me fears he may be right.

“Conquest?” I shake my head, heat rising in my cheeks. “No, it’s not like that. I don’t sleep around, and you know it. With Jessica, it’s different.”

“Didn’t seem that way when she told me you ghosted her the summer you came back. She’s not a woman you can string along. If you hurt her—”

“I’m not intending to hurt her,” I interrupt, my hands fisted at my sides. “Hell, I didn’t want to hurt her before, but you know the shit I was dealing with. If I had stayed with her, she would have ended up hurt worse. I’m not making the mistake of letting her go again.”

“Jessica doesn’t need a project, Luke. She needs stability, someone who will love and honor her.”

“If she gives me a second chance, that’s exactly what I’m going to do,” I argue, and I mean it with every fiber of my being. “I’ve been working on getting my shit together. I even got a therapist through Warrior Cares.”

Jake stares at me for a long minute, then nods slowly. “The most important question is this: what does Jessica think?”

I rub my hand along my jaw and exhale slowly. “I’m not sure yet. The spark is still there.” I explain about the whole matchmaking affair, which makes Jake roar with laughter.

“Sweet mercy. She didn’t tell me she was doing that.”

I chuckle, grateful the conflict between us is easing. “Well, she probably didn’t want her older brother laughing in her face about it.”

“Man, that’s part of the charter of being an older brother!” he rubs a hand over his face. “Back to the matter at hand. If she wants you and goes into everything with open eyes, I won’t stand in your way. But if you hurt her again... I’ve got a shovel in my trunk.”

“Understood,” I nod. “I’m not going to fuck things up.”

“Good. Now prove it.”

\* \* \*

THE HAMMER FALLS from my hand, landing with a dull thud against the unfinished pine floor of the new safe house. Waylon’s laughter is a deep rumble that fills the space between us and carries an edge of knowing mischief.

“Boy, Jake’s gonna have your hide if he finds out you’re sniffing around his sister,” he teases, reaching over to pick up the fallen tool.

I can’t help but crack a grin, even as I shake my head at him. “Jake doesn’t own her, Waylon. Besides, Jessica’s a grown woman. And I already talked to him.”

Waylon raises an eyebrow and gives me a long look. “Fair enough,” he says, handing me back the hammer. “Doesn’t mean he won’t try to string you up by your toes just for kicks.”

“Let him try,” I retort, though I know well enough to take Jake’s threat as a promise. I take the hammer.

“You sure you’re ready for this?”

“More than ready.” The moment I say the words, I know they’re the absolute truth. It’s no secret that I’ve been messed up since coming home, but if I want something more than ghosts and demons for company when I’m alone, I need to do something about it. Seeing Jessica again reminded me of what was possible, of how good life could be.

Ain’t no way in hell I’m fucking things up again with her. I’m going to make Jessica mine for eternity.

“Good,” Waylon says, watching me closely. “You don’t talk about her much, but you obviously had something special.”

I nod. “I wasn’t in a good place then. You know that.”

“It sounds like you’ve got your head on straight about this.”

“I hope so,” I admit. I know it’s not going to be easy.

“Anyway,” Waylon says, grabbing another plank. “Thanks for helping the other night. I know you were on your date. Harley wasn’t scheduled to bring anyone to the safe house, but...”

“Yeah, I know. You can’t always predict when someone will need protection. If things get serious with Jessica—”

“When,” corrects Waylon.

“When.” I smile. “I know we’ll be able to trust her with all this.”

“Of course. She’s practically family already,” Waylon says. He’s worked closely with Jake and the others at Ghost Security, setting up digital surveillance around the safe houses and the rental properties. “Have you talked to her yet?”

I think about Jessica and how perfect the unexpected date was. The kiss we shared has been on constant replay in my mind, especially at night or when I’m in the shower. Our connection was still there, unable to be ignored. “I will. Soon.”

Not a moment goes by when Jessica doesn’t work her way into my thoughts. I know I’ll have to prove myself to her, and it’s

something I'm going the distance on.

I'll prove to Jessica I'm a better man than I was and that I'm the only man for her now.



## CHAPTER 7



JESSICA

Luke came to talk to me.” My brother’s voice is tight. I know where this is going and I sigh. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

This dinner should be about family time, not the confusing mess that is my non-relationship with Luke Foster. Mom is in the kitchen preparing dessert, and arguing with my brother is not what I want tonight.

“No, we talk about this now,” Jake insists. I close my eyes for a moment, hoping Mom comes back sooner than later.

“There’s something between us, Jake. It’s electric. I just don’t know if it’s worth the risk.”

“Jess, he’s my friend, but you’re my sister. If he hurts you—” His jaw clenches, the soldier in him ready to defend.

“Then I’ll deal with it,” I insist, my resolve stiffening. “I need to find out what this is. And I don’t need you beating him up on my behalf.”

Jake snorts and studies me, his gaze softening. “Just...be careful, okay? I won’t always be there to pick up the pieces.”

“Since when do I need you to pick up the pieces in my life?” I tease, trying to lighten the mood and ease the tension coiled within me. Luke said he’d call, and it’s been eating me that he hasn’t. Part of me says, “Well, what did you expect from Luke Foster?” and part of me keeps hoping we’ll work everything out and start a future together.

“Smartass.” He chuckles, reaching over to ruffle my hair. “All right, if you want to pursue this thing with Luke, you have my support. But I swear, if he breaks your heart, I’m—”

“Yes, yes. I know. And I’m not your property—I don’t need your permission,” I say, rolling my eyes dramatically. “You’ll take him up on the mountain and hide him where no one will find him.”

“Jacob Pierce,” our mother says sharply. She places the cake she’s brought out for dessert so heavily on the table that I’m surprised it doesn’t collapse. “You will do no such thing. That’s not funny to even joke about.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he says, looking down. But when Mom isn’t looking, he gives me a look that says he’ll do exactly that if Luke hurts me.

\* \* \*

“JESSICA,” Jake says as he waits for the light to change so he can turn his car onto my street. His voice is softer this time, but his protective concern is still evident. “I meant what I said earlier. If you want to give Luke a second chance, then do it. But keep your eyes open.”

A sigh escapes me, half frustration, half longing. “I know, Jake. Believe me, I know.”

“Look, he’s been through a lot, and so have you. You’re both strong and as stubborn as hell,” Jake continues, his hands tightening briefly on the steering wheel. “Sometimes the things we want most are the scariest to reach for,” he adds, surprising me.

“Scary doesn’t begin to cover it,” I confess, staring down at my hands in my lap.

“Whatever you decide,” Jake says, accelerating once the light changes, “I’ve got your back.”

“Thank you,” I breathe. I may not want his protection, but I appreciate that he has my back if needed.

My phone dings, but it’s only an email notification from the matchmaker.

“Do you need to take that, Jess?” Jake asks. I know from his tone he’s peeved that my ringer is on, but I can’t help it.

“No, it can wait,” I say, pressing the button to turn the ringer off.

“Is it Luke?” His voice is tight even though he said he’d support my decision.

“No. I got an email from the matchmaker. I’ve been putting off responding about how the date went,” I confess, my voice quiet.

“Jess.” Jake sighs as he pulls into a parking space in front of my apartment building. “Just be careful, okay? Guys like us... we come with baggage, and I don’t want to see you get hurt. But you wanna know a secret?”

“Sure,” I reply.

“One call, and I’ll be there with a shovel,” he reminds me. “I know how to hide a body.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help but smile a little.

## CHAPTER 8



LUKE

Mack's bachelor party is in full swing as I enter The Tap. A rowdy mix of familiar faces from Rebel Autos, a bunch of boxers from Raytown and Jefferson, and the knuckleheads who live up here on this mountain. It's easy to forget how many people Waylon knows because the quiet makes it easy to forget the rest of the world up here.

"Hey, Luke!" Mack bellows over the din, raising his beer in salute.

I nod and weave through the crowd, making my way to where Mack stands, surrounded by a group of rowdy men well on their way to being drunk.

"Look at you!" I shout, clapping Mack on the back. "The last free night of your life."

"Free?" Mack laughs, shaking his head, his short, dark hair catching the dim light. "Man, being with Aimee, that's the freedom I've been looking for."

"Come on, you can't tell me you're not gonna miss the wild nights," Roman chimes in, slinging an arm around Mack's shoulders.

"Wild nights don't hold a candle to waking up next to Aimee every morning." Mack's brown eyes glint with sincerity. "When you find that one woman, your life makes sense, and all you want is to be with her and support her. I never thought I'd want a family of my own. Then Aimee came in with her

vintage Mustang, and I was done for. I'm looking forward to the life we're building together."

I can't help but feel a pang of envy. I've tried telling myself I didn't want a woman in my life, but that kind of connection is something I'm desperate for—especially after seeing Jessica again.

"Cheers to that," I say, lifting my glass, the liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim.

"Damn straight," Roman agrees.

Quincy nods, and their expressions soften with unspoken understanding. They both got married not so long ago, and Quincy's wife Claire is already pregnant with their second child.

"Here's to Aimee, the woman who captured the heart of Mack Jennings," Roman declares, and a round of cheers erupts as we all toast to Mack.

I take a swig of my beer, feeling the buzz of the alcohol and the heat of the party, but my thoughts drift to Jessica. More than ever, I know I need to call her. I can't keep putting it off.

The door swings open with a flourish, slicing through the din of boisterous laughter and the music from the jukebox. A woman in a sequined bikini and impossibly high heels saunters into the room to a stream of catcalls and whistles. She's all curves and confidence. The boys are hollering now, even some of the married ones, each trying to outdo each other.

"Hey, Luke, you're missing the show!" Quincy nudges me, his grin as wide as the Grand Canyon. You'd think he didn't have a pregnant wife at home, but I know he wouldn't touch a stripper.

I force a smile that doesn't reach my eyes, watching her move with practiced ease around the poles set up for the occasion. The woman knows what she's doing, but watching her does nothing for me...except make me wish I was with Jessica.

"Isn't she something?" another of the guys shouts, his words slurred by the alcohol that's been free-flowing all night.

“Sure,” I manage to say, but my gaze drifts away, uninterested. *I don't want to be here.*

“Man, what’s gotten into you?” A guy I don’t know throws an arm around my shoulder, and I feel the weight of his confusion.

But my thoughts are miles away, tangled up with images of Jessica—her long, black hair cascading over her shoulders, those bright blue eyes that light up when she laughs. It’s her laugh I want to hear right now, not these guys hollering over a stripper.

“Man, I’ve never seen you so out of it,” Reggie says, his hand landing heavily on my other shoulder as if trying to anchor me to this moment.

“Sorry, guys. This isn’t my scene,” I shrug off their hands. “Hey Mack, I need to duck out,” I say, catching him mid-laugh.

He turns, the light catching the gold in his hair, eyes crinkling with mirth. “What’s up? Got an emergency up on the mountain?”

“No. More like I need to go talk to someone,” I admit, my words barely audible over the noise in the bar.

“Man, if it’s about the stripper, don’t let it ruin your night.” Mack’s voice is thick with concern, but I shake my head. “These yokels think I should be fantasizing about cheap sex with a woman whose name I wouldn’t remember, but the truth is, I only have eyes for Aimee. The stripper is for the single guys, not those of us with a woman we love.

“Yeah, it’s something like that,” I admit, rubbing my palms on the side of my jeans. “I think I’ve found someone who could be my forever.”

“Seriously?” His eyebrows shoot up, a grin spreading across his face. “Who is she?”

“Jessica Pierce,” I admit, and there’s a reverence in her name that makes my heart kick against my ribs.

“Jake’s sister?” He claps me on the shoulder, laughter bubbling from his lips. “Does he know about this?”

“Yeah, he does. We’ve talked. I think we’re good.” I clap him back, a smile finding its way onto my face despite the nerves gnawing at my insides. “I’ll see you soon.”

I burst into the crisp night, leaving behind the heat of the party for the cool clarity of solitude. My boots thump against the pavement in a steady rhythm, echoing the heartbeat pulsing in my ears.

My thumbs hover over the screen, uncertainty a bitter aftertaste against the earlier adrenaline. I type, erase, and retype a message to Jessica.

*Hey, it’s Luke. Can we meet? I’m headed to the coffee shop on Main.*

Send. I haven’t felt apprehension like this since I was strapped into a Humvee, racing into battle with a loaded weapon in my hands. Anxiety coils in my stomach like barbed wire, but it’s tempered with a spark of excitement that sends a charge through my veins.

I get to the café and scan the menu board absentmindedly, too hopped up to think about drinking caffeine. A barista with an eclectic collection of tattoos on her arms offers me a small nod as she wipes down the espresso machine.

“Decaf coffee, please,” I manage, my voice steady despite the explosion of need and emotions inside my heart.

A vibration in my pocket pulls me back, and I fumble for my phone, anxious to see if she’ll even talk to me. It’s Jessica.

*Sure, give me fifteen minutes.*

I take a seat, my back to the wall, watching the door like my life depends on it.

“Here you go,” the waitress sets down a steaming mug in front of me.

“Thanks,” I murmur, though my gaze never leaves the entrance.

When the door finally opens and Jessica steps in, time stops. She's silhouetted against the streetlamp outside, her long black hair a dark cascade gleaming under the coffee shop lights. Her eyes search the room, landing on me, and my pulse thrums with an intensity that makes me worry about the strength of my heart.

"Hey," she calls out as she shrugs off her coat.

"Hey." My reply is a croak, and I clear my throat as I stand. "Thanks for coming."

"What's up?"

"Jessica," I start, my words trailing off as I lose myself in her blue eyes. Everything I want is wrapped up in Jessica, and I'm terrified I'm going to fuck things up again, or she'll say no. After what I did, I couldn't blame her for rejecting me, but everything I could ever hope for depends on her saying yes.

"Is everything okay?" Her face softens with concern, and it nearly does me in. Despite what happened the night of our date, I don't know if it was all just fun and games or if I still had a chance.

"Everything is..." The admission comes out rawer than I intended.

Her hand reaches out, brushing mine. Electric desire courses through me.

"Explain what you mean?" She pauses for a second as the waitress comes and she orders chamomile tea.

I fumble with the paper napkin, tearing it into shreds as my heart hammers against my ribs. "Jessica," I begin again, voice unsteady, "I owe you an apology—for everything that went down between us." My gaze locks onto hers.

"Hey, Luke, we're both adults. It didn't work out before. We don't have to read too much into the matchmaking thing. We can call it a dud," she replies, a shadow falling across her eyes.

My heart can't believe she means that. "No, listen." I lean forward, my voice urgent. I need her to understand and not think I'm making easy excuses. "It was more than just bad



timing or crossed wires. I never wanted to end things with you, Jessica, believe me. But I was dealing with shit from war, and I knew I couldn't be the man you deserved. I didn't want to hurt you by not being able to live up to the love I saw in your eyes."

Her hand covers mine, and I let go of the half-shredded napkin. "Oh, Luke... Why didn't you just talk to me?"

"Jessica," I exhale her name. "I couldn't talk about it for more than a year. Waylon finally got me to talk to a guy at Warrior Cares. It's embarrassing to say I have a therapist, but I do. I don't go often anymore, but it helps." The rawness of my confession is like tearing open old scars, but it's necessary. "I need you to know because I want to be the man you deserve. I want to be a man you could love. Not someone who came back from war broken."

"Stop," she interrupts gently, her grip on my hand tightening. "You're not broken. You're one of the strongest people I know, Luke. And you're doing the work—that's what counts."

"Am I?" I ask. I don't always believe that I'm doing everything I can. "Sometimes it feels like I'm just scratching the surface."

"Then we'll keep digging until you find the peace you need," she declares, her voice fierce with conviction. "I'm here for you, Luke. All the way."

"Jessica..." Her name spills out, tangled with all the hope and desire I've bottled up inside me. The air between us crackles with intensity. This is more terrifying than any battle I fought in.

"Whatever it takes, Luke. We'll face it together." Her thumbs stroke soothing circles over my knuckles and help calm the chaos inside me.

"Being with you tonight—it feels right, Jessica. Like coming home."

"Good," she whispers, leaning in so close our foreheads almost touch. "Because that's exactly where you are, Luke. Home."

Heavy desire builds in me. I want nothing more than to close the space between us—to taste the promise on her lips. But I hold back – she has to know this is more than physical.

Jessica gives me a look filled with tenderness and affection, and my impulse takes over. I lean across the table, capturing her lips with mine in a kiss that tells her exactly how I feel.

The kiss breaks, and the moment hangs between us, charged with a new electricity. Jessica’s breath comes in soft pants that fan across my cheek, sending a shiver through me that has nothing to do with the night air outside the coffee shop.

“Jess,” I start, voice hoarse with an emotion I can barely name, “Mack’s wedding is coming up...” My words trail off as I search her blue eyes, looking for a sign of where we stand.

“Y-yes?” She tilts her head slightly, a lock of her black hair falling across her face.

I reach out and tuck it gently behind her ear, the need to touch her an overwhelming force inside me. “Would you... I know you’re probably going already, but...would you be my date?” The question feels monumental, like I’m asking for more than just her presence at a wedding—I’m asking for a shot at something real.

Her lips part in surprise, her eyes widening before they soften with warmth. “Luke, I’d love to.”

“Really?” A stupid grin stretches across my face, and I feel lighter than I have in years.

“Really.” Jessica laughs, a sound that lights up the entire room—even this late-night corner of the world seems brighter with her in it.

“Good, because...” I reach for her hand, and she meets me halfway, her fingers intertwining with mine. “Because having you there with me would mean the world.”

“Would it?” There’s that playful challenge again, but this time, it’s laced with something sweeter—a promise, maybe, or a hope.

“It would be better than perfect. You’ll see.” I stand, pulling her gently to her feet. We’re close now, closer than before, and the space between us is charged with anticipation.

I’m never letting her go.

## CHAPTER 9



### JESSICA

Jessica!” I pivot on my heel to see Ruby waving from across the room, her red dress a vibrant flame among the pastels. She beams, and when our gazes lock, she raises an eyebrow in question.

I blush and grin in response. “Look at you!” I call excitedly as I walk to her. “You look stunning!”

“Girl, I could say the same about you!” Ruby’s laughter rings out as she pulls me into a hug, making my heart burst with love for her. She leans back, eyes scanning over my shoulder. “He can’t take his eyes off you, Jessica.”

“Who?” I feign ignorance, though my pulse races, knowing exactly who she’s referring to.

“Come on, don’t play dumb.” Ruby nudges me with her elbow. “Luke. He’s smoldering, Jessica. I want a man who looks at me like that. Are you happy?”

Tears threaten to fill my eyes and ruin my makeup. “So happy, Ruby. Truly. We talked, and I think it’s going to work, that we have a real chance together. There are things to work through, but we’ll do it together.”

Ruby wraps her arms around me and hugs me again. “I’m thrilled for you! You deserve every happiness. It’ll be your wedding I’m dressing up for next!”

“Stop it,” I chide, heat flooding my cheeks while a thrill courses through me. I still can’t get over that things are working out with Luke. Being with him has reminded me why

it never worked with anyone else – I'd already met my perfect match, but our timing wasn't perfect.

My gaze dances across the room, hungry for a glimpse of Luke. Our eyes meet, and the world tilts slightly. I watch him as he stalks toward me, and I know in my heart that I'm making the right choice. No one has ever, or could ever, make me feel as right as Luke.

"Jessica," his deep voice rolls over me, making happiness and desire tingle over my skin. "Have I mentioned that you look breathtaking?"

"You have, but I don't mind hearing you say it again," I smile up at him, standing on my tip-toes to kiss him lightly. He's mine, and I want everyone to know it.

"Jessica," his voice is a whisper, a plea wrapped in a single syllable.

"Yes, Luke?" I whisper back, recognizing the crossroads we're standing at.

"May I have this dance?" Luke's voice is low, laced with that familiar rasp that sends a ripple of desire straight to my core.

I look up at him, his brown eyes holding a promise. "You may," I reply, my voice steadier than the tremor of excitement fluttering inside. The golden glow of twinkling fairy lights casts a soft glow in the reception hall.

My hand is warm in his as we weave through the crowd, my pulse quickening with each step toward the dance floor. The band shifts into a slow, sultry melody, and Luke pulls me close.

As Mack and Aimee twirl past us in a loving embrace, I smile at their infectious joy. They move together like they were made for this moment—two hearts joined together in a love that's almost blinding to witness.

"Look at them," I murmur with awe. "They look so perfect together."

"Right now," Luke says, pulling me closer, "I only want to look at you. You're the most beautiful woman here." The heat

from his body seeps into mine, feeding the fire in my core.

Luke's hand settles on the small of my back, a silent command that draws me even nearer. Our breaths mingle, and I lose myself to the rhythm of our dance, the press of his firm chest against mine.

"Jessica," he whispers, our faces mere inches apart, "you have to know I never wanted to let you go."

"Then don't let go, ever again," I breathe, the words barely a whisper yet heavy with desire. I tilt my head back, catching the flicker of raw need in his gaze.

"Never," he promises. "Not even your brother can scare me away."

"I should hope not." I laugh, wrapping my arms tighter around Luke's muscular body.

"God, Jessica," Luke groans softly as our hips move in tandem, the friction sparking a hunger that threatens to consume us both. "Being with you like this—I'm happier than I ever thought I would be."

"Me too," I confess and lean my head on his shoulder as he leads me gently through the dance.

Mack and Aimee's song comes to an end, but Luke and I remain locked in our private world, unwilling to break the spell that's enveloped us. As the music fades, the noise of the reception filters back in, reminding us of the here and now.

"Damn, you're beautiful," Luke breathes out.

"Look who's talking. I never thought I'd see you in a suit, but," I bite my lip as I look at this man I never stopped loving. "Pardon my language, but you look fucking amazing."

"Let's get out of here," Luke murmurs against my lips, his voice rough with the same urgency that's thrumming through my body.

"Yes," I breathe without a second thought. My heart races with the need to make love with Luke because I know that's what's next.

We break away from each other long enough to offer our congratulations to the newlyweds and make our escape. Outside, the cool night air doesn't touch the heat burning within me. Luke's hand is firm in mine as we navigate the path to where his truck is parked.

"Your cabin?" I ask.

He nods, his gaze intense. "There's nowhere else I want to be, as long as I'm with you."

As Luke drives me up the mountain, my pulse beats faster and faster, my need for him blinding me to anything else. I need his lips on mine, his hands on my body. I need him to fill me up, make me forget everything except him, except us.

The door to Luke's cabin swings open, and Luke pulls me into a passionate embrace.

"Jessica," he says, his voice a low growl reverberating through my body. He steps forward, bridging the gap between us. "I've wanted this for so long."

"Me too, Luke," I confess, the words tumbling out.

Our lips collide in a frantic kiss. His hands roam over the curve of my hips and reach around to cup my ass, pulling me hard against him. The heat from his body seeps into mine, stoking the fire smoldering within me since I first saw him walking toward me on Valentine's Day.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmurs against my neck, his lips tracing a path of fire down to the neckline of my dress. His fingers deftly unbutton the back, and the fabric slides across my skin as it falls to the floor. He traces his fingers across my bare skin and the world stops as an exquisite anticipation burns through me.

"Your turn," I say with a playful smile, reaching for his tie and loosening it. "As much as I love you in that suit, I want to see that suit on the floor."

Luke grins as he shrugs out of his jacket and tosses it aside, his shirt quickly following. I run my hands over the expanse of his chest, tracing his muscles with my fingertips. He's solid, real, and all mine—for tonight and hopefully forever.

“Come with me.” Luke’s voice is thick with desire.

“Lead the way,” I reply, biting my lip in anticipation.

We stumble toward his bedroom, a tangle of limbs and lips, the heat between us escalating in intensity. We nearly fall because we’re focused on touching and kissing each other than watching where we’re going. Damn, I’ve missed this with Luke.

I gasp and laugh as we’re suddenly airborne, and then we land on his bed. Luke’s hands are everywhere, and I arch against him, craving the weight of his body on mine. He positions his body over me and heat rolls off his body like a furnace. He pauses for a moment, his thick cock vibrating against my leg, his eyes wild with passion and vulnerability.

“You’re mine, Jessica Pierce.” Luke’s voice is ragged with desire and it unlocks a deeper emotion in me. I always thought Luke and I had something special, and now I know it was true. I’m going to do everything, always, to fight for the two of us.

When he finally enters me, I cry out at how deep he pushes into me. Luke thrusts his thick cock into me over and over, slowing down and making me blind with desire.

“Jessica,” he groans, his movements becoming more urgent. “You feel incredible.”

“More, Luke,” I plead, wrapping my legs around him to pull him even deeper. “Faster.”

“Jessica,” he says, his voice low as he thrusts faster and deeper. “I love you.”

My orgasm explodes as he says the words I’ve been longing to hear. “I love you too, Luke.” I press my lips to his chest, feeling his heart beat wildly.

Luke groans and thrusts rapidly and deeply inside me, filling me up so completely I don’t know if I’ll be able to walk in the morning. All I know is I love this man.

“I’m never letting you go, Jessica Pierce. My beautiful Jess,” he murmurs, tilting my chin so our eyes meet. “Because I’ve never been more serious about anything.”



My heart swells, threatening to burst from my chest. In his eyes, I see my future, and I'm happier than I've ever been. "Let's do it right this time," I say, a promise forming between us. "No secrets, no holding back."

With a ragged voice filled with desire, Luke declares, "You're mine, Jessica Pierce." His words unlock a deeper emotion within me, confirming what I had always believed—that there was something special between us. And now, as he enters me and we move as one, I know it to be true.

My body trembles at the depth of his thrusts, his thick cock filling me completely. He moves slowly at first, savoring each moment before building into a frenzy of desire.

"Jessica," he groans, his movements becoming urgent. "You feel incredible. You're so fucking wet."

I wrap my legs around him, pulling him in deeper as I plead for more. "Faster, Luke. I need more."

He responds with an even faster and deeper rhythm, declaring his love for me with each thrust. As my orgasm crashes over me, Luke repeats the words that fill my heart.

"I fucking love you so much, Jess." Luke's eyes glisten over me and I can feel the emotion in his declaration. I love that we found each other again, to renew and deepen the connection we shared before.

"I love you too, Luke." Pressing my lips to his chest, I feel his heart beating wildly. Luke plunges faster and deeper inside of me and in a flash I'm coming so hard I'm seeing stars and screaming out his name and thrashing underneath him.

Luke grunts and thrusts rapidly, his groan echoing in his cabin. He collapses next to me, his arms wrapped tightly around me. I'm overwhelmed by the heat and strength of his body against mine. With Luke, I feel utterly loved and safe, and I know he loves me for exactly who I am.

"I'm never letting you go, Jessica Pierce," he whispers, holding my chin so our eyes meet. "My beautiful Jess...I've never been more serious about anything."

My heart swells in response to his words. In his eyes, I see a future filled with happiness and love. “Let’s do it right this time,” I say, making a promise between us. “No secrets, no holding back.”

“Nothing but honesty between us,” Luke agrees, sealing our pact with a slow, deep kiss.

“Speaking of honesty, we should call the matchmaker,” I tease, grinning at the irony. “Tell her the job’s done, and she can keep that prize money.”

“It’s too bad,” Luke chuckles, the vibrations rumbling against my cheek. “I had plans for that money. I was going to renovate this cabin. What were you going to do with it?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I was hoping for a love match, not the money. Maybe I’d have used it as a down payment on a house. And I suppose I’d have gone on a vacation. Maybe take my friend Ruby and go to a beach somewhere.”

“Would this beach involve you in a bikini?” Luke asks, his eyebrow arched.

He lowers his head to my breast and takes my nipple in his mouth, roughly licking it with his tongue. A fresh wave of passion builds in me, and I need him inside me again.

“I don’t usually wear bikinis,” I say, thinking how I’ve always hidden in one-piece swimsuits because of my curves and stomach rolls. “But if we go on a beach vacation, I’d wear a bikini for you.”

A feral growl comes from Luke’s mouth and he moves his body above mine again. Intensity and desire roll off him, and I welcome it. I’m here for our future, which I know is beginning right now.

Luke’s hands roam over my skin, every caress making me squirm with fiery need.

“Jessica,” he breathes, his voice rough like gravel, “I need you.”

“Then take me,” I say, my heart overflowing with joy.

Luke leans his face to mine and gives me a long, lingering kiss that makes my toes curl. I spread my legs as wide as I can and push my core up to meet his cock, my body arching in pleasure as he plunges deep inside me again. This is perfection.

His lips claim mine with a hunger both fierce and tender, and I moan with desire and need.

“God, you are fucking incredible,” he groans as he pushes deep inside me. I whimper at the intensity of my feelings and how much I want this, how much I want Luke in my life forever. I don’t even know if I can come again, but I’ll give everything to revel in our love.

“More,” I urge, my fingers digging into his shoulders. “Give me everything.”

His movements become more urgent and powerful. With every thrust, he drives deeper, not just into my core, but into my very soul. It feels like I’m being shattered into a million pieces, and that our love is rebuilding everything in me – stronger, more loved than ever before.

“Look at me,” Luke commands, and my eyes lock onto his. In those dark depths, I recognize that he’s finally mine. “I love you.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper, the power of his words amplifying everything I’m feeling.

“Always,” he vows, and I feel the truth of it in every pulse of his body against mine.

The building pressure reaches its peak, and we tumble over the edge into ecstasy. Luke’s name is a moan on my lips as waves of pleasure crash over us, binding us together.

As we lie there, spent and entwined, I realize this is just the beginning. With Luke, I’ve found not only a lover but a partner forever.

“Round three?” I tease, still breathless.

“Round three, four, and forever,” Luke promises with a wicked grin. “I’m nowhere near done with you, my beautiful Jess. My

love for you will never end. You're mine and I'm yours."

\* \* \*

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# ABOUT LANA LOVE

Lana Love is a USA Today Bestselling Author of steamy stories about relatable women, and the strong men who will move heaven and earth to capture the heart of the curvy woman they can't live without. Curvy since forever, Lana writes the heroines she never read about or saw in movies when she was growing up.

Lana lives in the Pacific Northwest and is passionate about dancing, travel, chocolate, and cocktails, and writing stories that make her heart race and bring her fantasies to life. She loves a man who loves curves and who knows what to do with them!

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