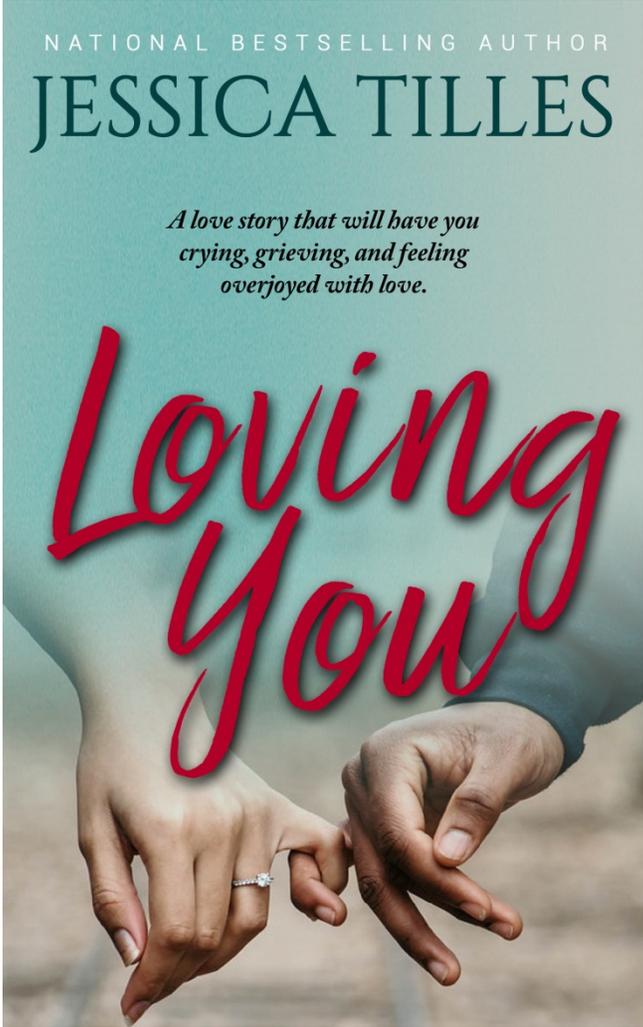


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JESSICA TILLES

*A love story that will have you
crying, grieving, and feeling
overjoyed with love.*

Loving You



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Chapter 1

The loud, beeping alarm clock jarred Julian Winters out of a peaceful slumber, as he smacked the off button. Waking up was no longer a pleasure. Rolling over onto his back, he blinked, closed his eyes, and blinked again. Streaks of sunlight penetrated the window, blinding him. He rose up, dragged his feet off the bed, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his knuckles. He stretched his arms above his head, arched his back, and yawned. He looked over his shoulder, closed his eyes, and inhaled. He could still smell Moonlight Path, her favorite Bath & Body Works fragrance. He missed her so, as he rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his head in his hands. His throat tightened, nostrils burned, and eyes welled, a feeling to which he had become accustomed. Squeezing his head, he raised it as his fingertips dragged down his face, caressing his chin. He rolled his eyes upward.

I don't understand why any of this is happening, Julian thought, massaging the tension from the back of his neck. He remembered the words his mother spoke to him as a young boy whenever he was overwhelmed by impatience. "Not everything is meant for you to understand, son. When God is ready to tell you, He will. You must have patience."

"I guess He's not ready and I'm running out of patience," he mumbled.

Julian stood and arched his back. With his hands on his hips, he stretched from side to side, a ritual he performed every morning. He padded his bare feet across the room, into the master bathroom, and into the water closet. He didn't close the door before aiming for the commode, but she was not there to gripe. He missed that, too. He turned on the shower. As he pulled his T-shirt over his head, the landline rang. In a swift motion, he dropped the shirt to the floor and rushed into the bedroom, rounding the bed to the nightstand to answer the phone.

"Yeah, hello," he answered, winded, with his hand propped on his hip, his head bowed.

"Hi, honey!"

Smiling, Julian sat on the edge of the bed. Even though it wasn't the voice he wanted to hear, it warmed his heart all the same.

"Hey, Mom. How are you?"

"I'm good, honey."

"And, Dad, how's he doing?"

“Your father is doing fine. He sends his love.”

Constant deep sighs from his mother assured him he needed to get comfortable. Julian crossed his legs at the ankles, relaxed his posture, and settled in for what would come next.

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Your father and I worry about you.”

“I’m good, Mom.”

“Are you sure? I’m your mother. I’m going to worry about you. Are you eating?”

“Yes, I’m eating.” He lay back on the bed, stretching his free arm above his head.

“Well…” She sighed. “Well…”

Focusing on the cobwebs in the corner of the ceiling, he realized he needed to call a cleaning company. Housecleaning was not his thing.

As he listened to his mother hem and haw, struggling to find the right words, he simply said, “She’s fine.”

“Well,” she said, sounding relieved. “You know, your father and I were planning to visit, but you know he has that big conference going on this week.”

“It’s okay, Mom. She’ll understand.”

“Okay, well, honey, I won’t hold you. I love you, son.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

“We love her so much.”

“She knows.”

Soft whimpers left her lips to his ears. “Oh, Julian!”

He closed his eyes and allowed her to have her moment as she wept.

“Honey?”

“Yeah.”

“Please give Gracie our love.” Her voice cracked. “I want her to know how much—”

“I will, Mom. I’ll call you later.”

Behind a soft snuffle, she ended with, “Bye, honey.”

After showering and dressing in blue Nike training shorts and matching hoodie, Julian headed for the kitchen. It was her favorite room in the house. It was empty, devoid of sound, only the smell of fresh coffee that brewed in the automatic coffee maker an hour before he rose.

He looked at the coffee pot and smiled. “Black, no sugar, no cream, just like my man,” she would always say in a singsong fashion each time he fixed her a cup of coffee.

Julian moved toward the refrigerator, opened the freezer, and glared at the many frozen meals she had prepared before her long hospital stay. *Did she know*, he wondered, *that she wouldn't be returning?* An emotion lodged in his throat yet again He swallowed hard and closed the freezer door. He wasn't hungry anyway. His hearty appetite left when she left.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of the hoodie and stared at the sunflower wallpaper. Julian hated it when she chose it, but pretended to love it when she purchased it. *It is still ugly*, he thought, remembering the day she talked him into hanging it.

“The kitchen should be bright and full of life.” That was her reason for choosing ugly wallpaper.

“True, but sunflowers? I feel like I'm in a field.”

“Julian, don't be silly. The wallpaper is beautiful, just like you.”

Julian blushed at his recollection. She always hurled the sweetest words from her arsenal of loving compliments. He never recalled a negative word ever slipping from her lips, even in the midst of anger. Fact is, they didn't argue. It wasn't in her makeup, and he adored her too much to speak harsh words to her.

Grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl sitting on top of the kitchen island, Julian headed toward the garage door. As he wrapped his lips around it to take a bite, an eerie feeling enveloped him. Chills caressed his spine. With his feet planted to the floor, he was unable to move. He stood still for a few moments before he took a step backward and faced the golden-rod colored telephone hanging on the wall. Circa 1970, the telephone belonged to Grace's grandmother. It was something she had to have several years ago when her grandmother died. He shivered. There it was again, that feeling of emptiness, of loss, knotting his stomach.

Julian rushed toward the phone and picked up the receiver. With his index finger, he punched each keypad with intensity. He did not need to pull out his cell phone to retrieve the phone number. He had memorized it the day he left her at the hospital.

“Thank you for calling Holy Cross. How may I direct your call?”

“Room 303H, please.” His request was loud and urgent.

“Sure. Have a great day.” Her perky demeanor irritated him, causing the escape of a long sigh.

Julian's heart pounded with each ring. "Please pick up, baby." With closed eyes, *Oh, God, not now*, he prayed, and on the third ring, he slammed his palm against the wall, thinking the worst. "Damn—"

"Hello." Her tiny, weak voice slowed his racing heart.

He relaxed his posture and leaned against the wall. "Babe?"

With as much strength as she could muster, Grace sat up in the bed and moved the phone's receiver to her other ear.

"Hi, honey. Are you okay?" She knew something was wrong. She could hear it in his voice. "What's wrong, Julian?"

"Nothing." He hung his head low and mouthed, *Thank you, God*. He was listening after all.

"Then why aren't you smiling?"

"Huh?"

"You sound like you're frowning."

He chuckled and forced a smile just for her. It always amazed him that she knew him so well. "Is this better?"

She smiled, too. "Much. Now, what's going on?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice. How did you sleep?"

Grace grunted. "It's hard to sleep in this place. Folks coming in every hour on the hour, checking this, that, and the other."

"It is for your own good."

She grunted, again. "So they tell me." Grace looked around the room, wishing she were home, anywhere except in a cold, sterilized hospital room. "Are you coming today?"

Julian rested his head against the sunflower wallpaper. "I come every day, Gracie."

She chuckled. "No, you don't."

"What?"

"You don't come *in me* every day." She fell out with soft, weak laughter, followed by a subtle cough.

He smirked. "You don't know how much I want to, babe."

Grace reclined her head against the pillow. "Don't I wish; the last time you were inside me... Wait, I can't even remember!"

"We've been through this—"

“Yes, I know, you don’t want to hurt me. Got it. When are you coming?”

“After my run.”

“Okay, honey. I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Do you need anything?”

“Just you and your hot rod.” She smiled and hung up the phone before he could reply.

He chuckled. Hearing her voice was exactly what he needed. Feeling relieved, Julian picked up his keys off the island and exited through the door leading into the garage. He came upon the red Fiat® 124 Spider Classica convertible. It was hers. He had given it to her...just because.

After giving a soft tap to the opener on the wall, the garage door engaged. It was an autumn day. Far enough from summer to have lost the scorching heat and not close enough to winter for the blistering cold. The leaves had begun to fall and rain was in the forecast. The air was as crisp and sweet as the apple that lodged in his mouth as he zipped up his hoodie and prepared for his daily run.

When he hit the sidewalk after a few stretches, Julian started to jog. He never ran. His slow gait was almost soundless as his running shoes slapped the concrete and the exercise would clear his head.