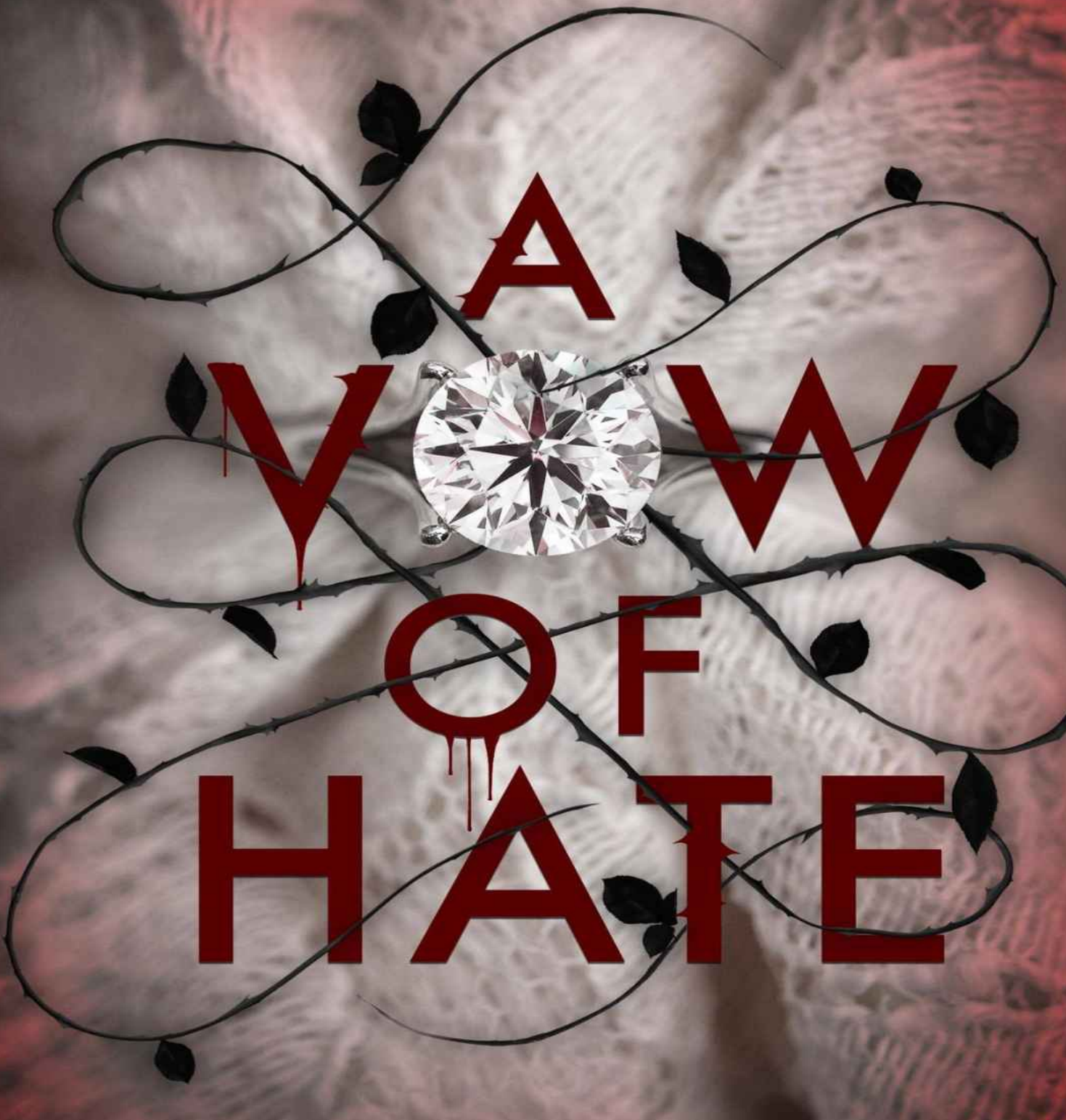


She was his— to hurt, to break and to hate.
Till death do them part.



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LYLAH JAMES

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A VOW OF HATE

A Standalone Arranged Marriage Romance

LYLAH JAMES



A VOW OF HATE

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*To my clowns – you know who you are...
You made this book possible.
Thank you for believing in me.*

PROLOGUE

Julianna



My father always told me that life is about choices; some that are impossible to make, while others we live to regret. But we're human after all, born to make mistakes. Humans are faulty, we are both good and evil – a perfect yin and yang.

What he forgot to tell me was that... some choices would haunt me forever.

A choice I made...

A moment of impulsiveness.

A destiny I couldn't rewrite.

After all, we can't stop time, right?

And all it took was a second.

I killed her that night.

My sister.

Gracelynn.

My story was tainted from the beginning, tainted by her blood. And her death was a sin for me to bear for the rest of my breathing days. I wasn't evil, but I was the villain anyway.

I pulled the black veil back over my face.

This is my atonement.

CHAPTER ONE

Julianna



The ugliness of life is that sometimes we can't undo what has been done. It doesn't matter how devastating the outcome is; we can't turn back time – can't change the past – can't fix the future.

"It is what it is," my father had said *that* night.

The night I woke up from my coma, bedridden with two broken legs, three fractured ribs, a messed-up spine and a fractured skull... and more scars than I could bear.

One night, four months ago, I made a mistake that ruined more than one life.

Since then, I have learned that grief is just a stage of coming to terms with the situation.

Just like denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. Except, I was still on the fourth stage. *Depression*, my therapist would say with a pitiful sigh.

Misery still choked me every morning as I swallowed down my breakfast and every minute of the day. While it wasn't as heavy as guilt, the imbedded grief still festered pus like an untreated wound.

But it was the guilt...

Guilt was what killed me everyday.

Pain became my companion; grief was my nightmare and guilt turned out to be my soulmate.

"Julianna, you haven't had your breakfast yet."

I could feel her presence behind me but I didn't turn away from the window. "I'm not hungry."

Selene, our elderly maid and my only friend, made a sound in the back of her throat. "Your father—"

"He doesn't need to know," I said, my nails digging into my palms.

“Your sister—”

My lungs caved in, my body growing cold. “Stop. Don’t even finish that sentence.”

“Julianna.”

“Please, stop. Stop trying. Just take the food and leave.”

My shaky voice was followed by silence and then the door clicked close. Her presence disappeared and I was finally able to wallow in self-pity again.

My window overlooked the stables from behind our mansion. My father’s estate expanded many thousand acres, but this spot used to be my favorite view.

Except now, it was nothing but a bitter reminder.

How could our lives change so quickly in merely four months?

If only we hadn’t sneaked out...

If only I hadn’t been so stubborn...

If only I hadn’t been driving that night...

My hand came up, trembling as I touched the black veil. The thin fabric started from below my eyes and hid the rest of my face. I kept my black hair down, with bangs that I never had before, keeping my forehead covered. Only my eyes were visible.

I hear she’s ugly now, that’s why she hides behind the veil, the whispers would say.

It’s good she keeps it covered. I don’t want her to give me nightmares.

Beasty, some sneered.

The poor girl, others pitied.

The whispers didn’t hurt. In fact, they had little effect on me. I had learned to shut the world out while I surrounded myself with my own misery. Jolie, my therapist, said it wasn’t the right coping mechanism. She said I was making it harder on myself.

She said a lot of things, but none of them mattered.

My sister – *Gracelynn* – was still dead. Because of me.

And I was still here, alive and breathing when it should had been *me* in her place.

I still remembered her wide-open, dead eyes. I could still smell the unpleasant odor of metallic copper; our blood and sweat. I still saw her mangled face so vividly in my memories and every time I closed my eyes.

I was in that car with her dead body for three hours.

Three hours that felt like three extremely long days.

I passed out many times, regaining consciousness only to see her bloodied face again and again, while I screamed at her to breathe, to stay alive.

Gracelynn wasn't wearing her seatbelt that night. The force of the impact, and when our car flipped, sent her flying through the windshield. Her screams still echoed in my ears. Her swollen, mangled face with glass shards lodged in her flesh was still seared in my brain.

Most days, I spent my time like this. Listlessly staring out the window, watching the sun rise and set, watching the day go by, turning into months.

It wasn't like I could run away from my misery. No, I couldn't even *walk*. That accident took more from me than anyone would ever see.



Hours later, the door opened again, bringing me out of my thoughts. I was still rooted in the same spot as Selene left me this morning.

"I'm not hungry," I said, already knowing who it was. Only two people were allowed in my room. Selene and my father.

My father rarely visited me.

And Selene was the only face I saw everyday. Her presence and the only human contact I had since I woke up from the coma and was brought back to my father's estate, kept what was left of my sanity intact.

"The room smells like death and despair. Quite frankly, I approve."

My eyes widened.

No.

My head swam and the collar of my sweater felt *too* tight.

What was *he* doing here?

Killian Spencer was the last person I expected to come into my room. The last time we saw each other...

Two months ago, when I visited my sister's resting place, for the first time. He had been there before me and when I had turned to leave, he didn't let me go without giving me a piece of his mind.

Cold voice.

Dark eyes.

Cruel words.

That was Killian Spencer. The *new* him.

"*Julianna*," he sneered my name. I imagined him curling his lips in

distaste.

“Before you say anything,” I started to warn him, but he spoke over me.

“Our fathers have arranged our marriage. It’s being finalized as we speak.”

I shut up and closed my eyes, holding back a desperate cry. He approached me from behind, his footsteps sounding closer. I could *feel* his body heat. I could *smell* his strong, spicy cologne. Unique and familiar.

My chest rattled when I exhaled a shaky breath. “You could have refused.”

From my peripheral vision, I saw his hands come up and he placed them over the handles of my wheelchair. For the first time, I realized how powerless I was against him. Weak and fragile.

He could easily hurt me.

And I would *let* him.

“You say this and yet you know how important this marriage is for both our families,” Killian mocked.

My fingers latched onto my silver, charm bracelet. With a frantic need, I used the sharp edge of the heart and dug it deep into my wrist. I winced and the pain made me *think*. Made me feel *alive*. “Is that the only reason why you agreed to this marriage?”

He bent forward, bringing his head closer to mine. I felt his breath against my ear. “You know very well what my reasons are.”

“You could just kill me,” I said. “Make it easy for both of us, don’t you think?”

“Why should you have an easy death?” The hatred in his voice was unmistakable. “She died a cruel death, Julianna. And you will suffer a worse fate.”

There it was. This was the reason why we were poison together.

I killed his love and he wanted vengeance.

“Do you know what date today is?”

How could I forget?

Killian was still too close. His presence was *suffocating*. “She was supposed to walk down the aisle today,” he said, deadly and heartless. But I didn’t miss the pain and the longing in his voice.

Gracelynn would have been the prettiest bride ever. I closed my eyes and choked on the sob threatening to spill from my throat.

My sniffing filled the room and there was Killian’s dreadful silence. His

silence was eerie and disturbing. Killian was deadlier than a viper, as he waited for the right moment to strike.

He moved around my wheelchair and stood in front of me. Dressed in all black, he was an imposing figure. I dragged my gaze up, from his polished leather shoes, up to his strong thighs, his wide chest and shoulders and then his face. Full lips, dark eyes and a glacial expression.

Our eyes met and he blinked, once, as if to shake the image of me from his brain. As if I was a ghost, haunting him.

Maybe I was.

Killian leaned against the window, his hands going to the sill as he crossed his ankles. He looked every bit the powerful and confident man he was. So devious, so in control, so cruel.

I fidgeted under his gaze, feeling so *out* of control while he was so *contained*.

“Two years.”

I blinked. “What?”

There was a tick in his left cheek, his muscles clenching, and his jaw hardened. Killian nodded at my legs – useless and frail. “Your father said it’ll take you a long time to walk again, if you ever will. With all the necessary therapy, he’s giving you two years.”

I swallowed. “Two years...?”

“Two years so you can walk down the aisle. Our wedding will be held on this day, two years from now.”

I knew this was coming. My father warned me beforehand – I’d have to take Gracelynn’s place at the altar – but I was still not prepared for this announcement.

“What if I can’t walk again?”

He grinned cruelly. “Then, I’ll drag you down the aisle, on your fucking knees, if I have to.”

I sucked in a shuddering breath. Killian stepped away from the window and bent forward, bringing his face closer to mine. I couldn’t even move. My wheelchair kept me in place. His breath feathered over my veil, right over my lips. “Listen to me very carefully. You will marry me; you will pay for your sins and you will die at my hands.”

He didn’t see that I was already paying for my mistakes.

Just like everyone else, Killian didn’t see *me*. They saw my veil. They saw my sin.

No one saw Julianna Romano anymore.

They didn't see my remorse— or that my sister's ghost haunted me.

My nails dug deeper into my palm, drawing blood. I lifted my chin up, matching his cold stare. "You've made yourself very clear, Killian Spencer."

He chuckled at my show of *I'm-not-scared-of-you-do-your-worst*. It was a weak attempt at bravery, but I didn't want him to think I was as powerless as he thought I was.

My life was already hell. But I still had some kind of control over what Killian could do to me, even though I deserved everything he said.

I should pay for my sin.

I should suffer.

I should die at his hands.

It was his right. After all, I killed his heart.

It would have been easy to say that Killian was the villain. But it was far from the truth. He was just another casualty of my mistakes and the end result of my sins.

I was the villain in this messy fairy tale.

His hand came up to my face and I flinched, expecting him to strike me, but he didn't. Killian curled a finger around a strand of black hair and then pulled. Hard enough to burn my scalp. "I *will* break you, Julianna Romano."

You can't break what's already broken.

I turned my face away, no longer able to look into his dark eyes. There was just *something* in them. Something that made me *ache*.

"You've said what you came here to say. You can leave now."

Killian pulled back and strode away. I clutched my chest, bearing the pain that seemed to dig itself deeper under my flesh. It wasn't just my heart that ached. It was my soul that was tormented.

"Oh right, I forgot to give you this." He fished something out of his pocket and then carelessly threw it my way. It skidded on the shiny floor, a few feet away from my wheelchair.

"Your ring," Killian said coldly, his voice dripping with venom. "Wear it. Happy engagement to us."

After he was long gone, Selene came back. Without a word, she lifted the ring from the floor and handed it to me. I took it from her, staring at the extravagant diamond ring. The rock was huge and nothing like my personal taste. But then again, this wedding wasn't about me and Killian could care less about my preferences.

It was heavy in my palm, but the weight was more than just the shiny diamond itself.

I loathed it.

And yet, I still wore it on my ring finger.

When my father came into my room much later, he smiled approvingly at the sight of my ring, patted me on the hand and then walked away without a word.

It was official.

Two years from now, I would be Killian's wife.

This marriage was his vengeance – the vows would not be of love, but of hatred.

His retaliation. My atonement. One imperfect marriage.

CHAPTER TWO

Julianna



Two years later

A wedding is supposed to be a joyous occasion, a day to be celebrated, where two souls come together. Joined in holy matrimony. Bonded by vows – to love and to cherish.

I always imagined something romantic. A grand wedding; the prettiest, most expensive gowns; gorgeous heels that many brides would envy; a lovely veil to put any other veils to shame, and my handsome Prince Charming – my own little fairy tale.

But it was just *that*. A fantasy. A lovely one to dream of, but a *fantasy* nonetheless.

Because my wedding was nothing short of a cruel reality. In the last two years, Killian and I only crossed paths twice.

Once – on our engagement day. The very same day he threw me the ring, so carelessly, so *heartlessly*.

And the second time was yesterday, when I arrived on Isle Rosa-Maria.

He had barely spared me a glance as he walked past me to greet my father. As if I wasn't even there. As if I wasn't his wife-to-be. As if we weren't about to get married in less than twenty-four hours.

Killian, without a single spoken word, had reminded me that Julianna Romano was *forgotten*. Even while I was still alive, my existence had been rendered to the life of a ghost.

Killian Spencer wasn't just cruel. He was *vindictive*.

"Julianna," Selene said, bringing my attention to her. "How about you switch your black veil—"

"No." I eyed the twelve-foot-long white veil she was holding in her hands; the end of the train was laced up with crystals that matched my wedding dress.

My fingers brushed against the little black veil covering just my face. “I’m not removing this veil or switching it with another one. I’ve had a wedding veil custom-made to match *this* one.”

“Yes. I know.” Selene sighed, as if she was speaking with a stubborn, bratty child. “But the one you custom-made is *black*. Please, at least for today, forgo the black veil and wear the white one your father had designed for you.”

“We’ve had this conversation way too many times over the last three weeks and my answer is still the same, Selene.”

I refused to wear a white veil, for my penance was not over yet. It would last an eternity but wedding or not, I wasn’t going to compromise with my atonement. Salvation came in many ways; absolution was different for every person. But to attain it, sacrifices needed to be made.

And I was sacrificing my white veil – my perfect wedding – just so I could taste the remnant of *mercy* on my tongue.

I gestured for the unopened box lying on the bed. “Bring me the veil I want.”

“Your father will be disappointed.” It was her last effort to help change my mind and she knew bringing up my father would do just that.

After the death of Gracelynn, I had done everything my father had asked me to do. I was the perfect daughter and my father’s casualty in his race for *more* power.

My gaze locked on Selene’s face without flinching. “I know.”

“People will talk,” she said.

“They already do,” I deadpanned.

“Well, they will talk *more*. There’s no way your father and the Spencers can quiet the gossips again.”

“Our lives have turned into a mockery, Selene. A few more gossips won’t hurt and I honestly could care less when I’m about to get married to the man who absolutely *loathes* my mere existence.”

“Oh, Julianna.” Her voice softened and there was the pity I had been waiting for. It was there all along.

Selene was my only friend, and her *pity* was the one thing I couldn’t bear. I just wanted someone to look at me as Julianna Romano.

Not to judge, pity or hate.

Not as the scarred girl, hiding behind her veil.

Not as Gracelynn’s killer.

And definitely not as the woman who had ruined Killian's life.

I wanted to be *Julianna* again.

The girl with a broken heart; the girl who was atoning for her sins; the girl who *survived*.

Not the accident. But the girl who survived the gossips, the cruel words, the sneers, the cold eyes, the heartless resentment and her *own* self-loathing.

I grasped her hand in mine, admiring the difference between us. Her hand was old, a bit wrinkled. The callouses on her fingertips were proof of a working hand, while mine was pale and smooth. Young and without any experiences.

I laced my fingers through hers, bringing her hand up and pressing my lips against the back of it. A simple gesture of respect and love. "You work for my father, Selene. But you're my only friend and companion," I whispered. "So, please, at least for today... can you just be my friend, instead of following my father's order? You're not his puppet, so for once, just take *my* side?"

"That's the thing, Julianna. I'm *always* on your side. You just don't see it because you choose to believe everyone is against you."

My chest tightened as she walked to the bed and opened the box, revealing the black tulle veil I had ordered, custom-made by my specification. The train ran twelve-feet-long with a lace design and black Swarovski crystals at the end of it.

I glanced at the mirror as Selene came to stand behind me. Without a word, she carefully pinned the veil at the back of my bun. My long black hair has been perfectly coiffed into curls that fell on either side of my face and a messy bun that looked elegant. An intricate ivory tiara, that had been passed down the Spencer family for over a century, sat atop my head. Once the black veil was in place, Selene pulled the front of it over my face.

It was the perfect contrast to my wedding dress.

My white dress was a heavy Ralph Lauren custom-made ball gown. The tulles and lace fabric were covered with over 200,000 Swarovski white crystals. The gown was so heavy, I wondered how I was going to walk down the aisle with it weighing down my body.

Only the best for a Romano and Spencer wedding, my future father-in-law had said.

It was gorgeous, fancy *and* expensive – nothing like my personal preference. I would have chosen something simpler and elegant – definitely

less heavy and shiny – if I had had a choice.

But it was all about the people, the paparazzi, and *our* image. This wedding had to be out of the ordinary, special and nothing like anyone had ever seen before.

Bishop Romano was one of the richest men in the United States, except only those closest to him really knew *what* his business was about.

He mingled with the richest politicians and businessmen. His support system went wide and far, from polices to doctors and lawyers. What they did behind the scenes and under the tables – well, it was exactly as they portrayed in the movies. My father and the people he surrounded himself were as corrupt as they came.

William Spencer, Killian's father – served as the President of the United States twelve years ago, for two consecutive terms. He was the one public figure everyone talked about – both the good and the ugly – but that meant his private life was not so private any longer.

Killian was expected to run for President – one day, soon enough. It was the only possible outcome as the son of William Spencer. I knew he was working toward it. He had been placing himself into the inner circles of politicians and where it mattered, since he turned twenty years old.

This marriage was a contract – the perfect alliance between a Romano and a Spencer. The only way the two families could benefit from each other.

And me? Well, I was collateral damage.

Selene came to stand in front of me, blocking my reflection and bringing me out of my thoughts. “There you go,” she murmured, her voice coming out choked. She had tears in her eyes. “You look beautiful, Jules.”

The pain in my chest was back at full force. The taste of misery was bitter on my tongue and shame – its *poison* – crawled under my flesh.

I could hear my sister's voice echoing in my ears. *Jules*, she'd say. *Jules*, she'd cry. *Jules*, she'd laugh.

“Do you...think she'd ever forgive me?” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“She already did,” Selene said. “Gracelynn doesn't hold grudges and especially not against you. *You* are the one who hasn't forgiven yourself yet.”

“And my future husband,” I added.

Selene huffed. “His opinions don't count.”

My lips twitched, even through the tears. “You really do hate him?”

“He made you cry, my precious girl. Of course I hate him and please, for the love of God, don't start crying. You'll mess up your mascara!”

I let out a teary laugh and then I was pulling Selene down for a hug. “Thank you,” I breathed. “You came into my life when I was five years old. You took care of me and Gracelynn, even though you didn’t have to. Treated us as if we were your own kids.”

Selene kissed my cheeks. “It was my pleasure, Jules.”

At ten years old, my life changed in an irrevocable way. I had needed a mother the most and Selene was there, every step of the way, supporting me, encouraging the little girl with a broken heart.

I swallowed my tears, sniffing. “Can you pass me my pills, please?”

Selene handed me the small bottle and I popped a pill into my mouth. It had been three months since my last seizure...

There was no way I could skip my medication. Not when it was the only thing keeping me from enduring another relapse.

“Help me up?” I asked, grabbing for Selene’s hand.

With her help, I stood on my two feet, but I wobbled a bit. Sure, I could walk again, but I had a limp and was still unstable. My physiotherapist told me that while I could walk, my legs would always be weak and I’d always walk with a slight limp.

Running again was not even a possibility. Sometimes, if I were on my feet for too long or walked too fast, my limp was more pronounced.

Selene fixed my veil, looking as emotional as I felt. The corner of her eyes wrinkled when she blinked, the tip of her nose was red and she sniffled. “As your foster mother, can I give you one last bit of advice?”

I nodded, feeling the way my throat closed and burned with unshed tears.

“You’re about to become Julianna Spencer, a wife. While you should always have your own best interest at heart, you’re now also responsible for your new family. Their reputation, their image and their well-being.” Selene paused and she nudged my chin up with her index finger, so my head was held high. “Killian is an asshole, true. But you need to be at your very best, so he’ll never be able to point a finger at you or accuse you of lacking something as a wife or a partner. Because we know damn well, he will dig under your skin, find all your flaws and shred you to pieces until your heart is bleeding at his feet. Don’t allow him to do it. No one should ever use your weaknesses against you.”

I licked my lips, tasting my shame and swallowing my secrets. Selene didn’t know even half of my story...

Nobody did, because the only person who knew all my secrets was

Gracelynn. And now they were buried with her, staining her grave with my tainted past and the bitterness that came with it.

No one should ever use your weakness against you.

Little did she know...

Killian was my only weakness.

“And remember, the vows you take are sacred, my precious girl,” she finished.

Sacred vows, a broken past and a tarnished future.

Killian and I were bound to break, eventually. No matter the vows we took or the relationship we shared.



Two hours later, with the help of Selene, I found myself walking down the wide stairs of the castle.

When William Spencer said this wedding would be nothing short of royalty, I didn't think he meant a castle. But that was exactly where my wedding was taking place.

Isle Rosa-Maria came into the Spencer's possession in 1865. Back then it was named Isle Wingintam. But in 1875, when Marquees Wingintam decided to make the Isle his permanent home, he renamed it Isle Rosa-Maria, just before him and his bride settled here.

The Spencers were a direct descendent from Marquees Wingintam. So basically, Killian was somewhat royalty. And this Isle and the castle that came with it? They belonged to my future husband.

When I arrived here yesterday, I barely even had a chance to take a look around what would be my home for the next two weeks. There was no honeymoon, but William specifically told Killian that we were supposed to spend some time alone, as husband and wife.

Hence, the two weeks on Isle Rosa-Maria.

Where there was no paparazzi, no gossips and we would have all the privacy we needed.

Dread filled me at the thought. I could only imagine the cruelty I'd go through at the hands of Killian and there would be no one to help me.

Not when we were basically locked away from the rest of the world and trapped in, what people called, a haunted castle.

“Have all the guests arrived?” I asked Selene, gripping her hand tighter.

“They are all here and waiting for your entrance,” she responded softly. “But as promised, they kept the guest list small. The reception they’d hold two weeks from now, though, will be much grander.”

Of course.

At least my father had allowed me this mercy on my wedding day.

I had specifically asked them to keep the guest list as small as they could. Only because I knew this wedding was going to end in a disaster.

Killian was barely hanging on to the thin thread of his sanity. God knows what he’d do when he finally reached his tipping point and we didn’t need an audience for that.

“Nervous?” Selene joked, as we came down to the last step where my father was waiting for me.

“*Terrified*,” I breathed, before my father grasped my hand in his.

He eyed the black veil with disdain. I expected him to scold me, but instead, he gave me a soft smile, shoving his anger to the side. “You look absolutely gorgeous, my daughter. If only your mother would have seen you on this day. God bless her soul.”

The lump in my throat grew larger. “Thank you, father.”

“Call me *dad* today.” The emotions in his voice were unmistakable. He leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss on my forehead, over the veil. “I’m going to miss you, terribly. After Gracelynn, you were the only one keeping me together, keeping me going. And now...”

I wrapped an arm around his waist, my head on his chest and I closed my eyes, feeling my father’s heartbeat. It soothed me. “Just because I’m going to be a married woman in twenty minutes doesn’t mean I’ll stop being your daughter.”

“Ready to walk down the aisle?” he asked.

In response, I wrapped my hand around the crook of his elbow. He patted the back of my hand while Selene handed me my bouquet of white and pink roses. Then, we walked through the double wooden doors and into the castle’s chapel.

The sight of it would have taken my breath away – the flowers, the decorations, the beautiful sunlight casting through the wide panels of the chapel – but none of it compared to who was waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

Killian had his back to me and he didn’t even bother to turn around to

watch me walk down the aisle to him. My heart accelerated and my palms grew sweaty the closer I got.

His feet were slightly apart, his arms down to his sides, his fists clenched and his back stiff. He looked more like he belonged in a military formation than his own wedding.

The moment I stood beside him, his jaw tightened and I swore, the muscle in his left cheek almost popped with how hard he was gritting his teeth.

My father clasped Killian by the shoulder. “She’s yours now.”

And that was it.

Killian didn’t respond. In fact, he barely even acknowledged my father’s words.

“Start,” he barked at the priest.

My muscles twitched at the harshness in his voice and I *almost* flinched. My nails dug into my palm and the pain soothed me.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony,” the priest began and I barely paid attention to what he was saying.

Blood rushed through my veins and I swayed, as the numbness slowly took over. I could hear the pounding of my heart echoing in my ears.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

It was so loud, I wondered if Killian could hear it. My legs trembled, feeling weaker than ever. I worried they’d give up under me and I’d end up taking my vows on my knees.

When it was time for us to speak our vows, the priest gestured for us to hold hands. Killian grasped mine in his, shocking me – he was willingly *touching* me. I knew it was for the audience and the cameras flashing behind us but my skin tingled, even though his touch was barely a graze.

“Killian Spencer, do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in matrimony, to love her–”

“I would like to repeat my vows in her ears, solely for my *wife*,” Killian interrupted.

The priest smiled. “Of course. Vows are meant to be intimate and there’s nothing more special than whispering your love in your beloved ears.”

My body went cold, my heart jumping to my throat until I almost gagged. If I knew Killian as much as I did...

My lungs clenched.

Killian shifted closer; his head lowered so that his lips were closer to my

ear.

The pressure on my chest grew unbearable. His breath feathered across my veil and the hair on my bare arms stood at attention.

The priest started the vows again, but his words were drowned out as my heart echoed while Killian's voice rasped in my ear. His own cruel version of our marriage vows.

"Killian Spencer, do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in matrimony—"

"I vow to spend the rest of my life making you regret what you did to Gracelynn."

"... To love her, to honor her, to comfort her, to cherish her..."

"To hurt you, to break you... and to hate you for the rest of our days. I will never be your protector, never your defender; I vow to be the villain in your story."

"... And to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?"

"In health and in sickness, through sorrow and pain, for all the days in my life, I will be your worst nightmare."

With my beating heart bleeding at our feet, Killian pulled back then straightened to his full height. He towered over me, while his dark eyes grew darker and the corner of his lips pulled up in a vicious smile.

"I do," he said, his voice strong, but lacking any warmth.

The priest turned to me. "Julianna Romano, do you take this man to be your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him, to honor him, to comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?"

I met his gaze without flinching. I had no need to change our vows because while Killian was marrying me for vengeance, I was marrying him for a whole different reason.

This was my way of seeking... *salvation.*

"I do," I repeated Killian's earlier words.

"... Till death do us part."

My eyes closed. *"Till death do us part."*

It barely even registered to me that we were already exchanging our rings; my thoughts were scattered as the cold reality of this situation finally sank into my veins.

"...I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

His jaw tightened and I swore, the look in his eyes was *deadly*. I watched in horror as Killian took a step back.

The silence that followed laid on my skin like poison, sinking under my flesh and paralyzing me as Killian walked away.

Leaving me at the altar.

I watched until he was completely gone, until even his shadow disappeared.

There were no whispers. No cameras flashing.

Nothing but silence.

The priest made a strangling sound in the back of his throat. My father looked absolutely *murderous* while William gave me a bitter smile.

He came forward and grasped my hand, bringing it up so he could kiss the back of it. “Welcome to the family, Julianna. I’ve always wanted a daughter,” he said smoothly, as if his son didn’t just leave me – his new bride – at the altar.

He turned us toward where everyone was seated. The small audience – only around twenty guests – cleared their throats and gave me tentative smiles.

“I present to you, my daughter-in-law, Julianna Spencer.”

They clapped, as if this was some joyous moment to celebrate, but it was all so *fake* and I was *sick* to my stomach.

Julianna Spencer.

My new name.

My new beginning.

Yet it was nothing but *bitter*.

CHAPTER THREE

Killian



I twirled her around and she threw her head back, laughing. There was just something about her laugh; the way she was so soft and carefree. And I knew that laugh was only reserved for me.

I remembered the first time I met her. She had been watching me as I prepped Coal for a ride. The horse had been enthusiastic and it had felt her presence before I did.

Gracelynn.

My Grace.

“How do you want our wedding to be like?” I asked, pulling her closer to me. She fell into my arms and her smile turned... wary. It always did whenever I brought up the topic of our upcoming marriage.

Her lack of enthusiasm or the look of caution on her face was making **me** nervous. Was it possible she was having cold feet?

Or maybe she wasn't ready to get married yet...

“Something simple,” Grace said, looking thoughtful. “But beautiful.”

I grasped her jaw in my hand and smokey grey eyes met mine and fuck, she intoxicated me with the madness in her gaze. There was just something in it.

So many secrets.

So much pain.

Loneliness and fear...

There was just something in them that screamed, **don't abandon me; keep me together.**

“Do you want this marriage, Grace?” I asked and then the urge to kick myself was strong. Why torment myself with such a question, to give her an easy way out?

But as much as I wanted Grace as my wife, I **needed** her to want this as

much as I did. My bride would come to our room at her own will and not because it was her duty to warm my bed.

Her eyes widened at the question and she grasped my hand in hers, squeezing with her all her might. Her chest rattled with a shaky breath. “Of course, I do! I always dreamed of my wedding and **you** – before I even met you.”

Thank fuck. “Why do I feel like there’s a but in there?”

Grace swallowed. “We still have so much to learn about each other.”

“I’ve been courting you for six months and we still have four months until our wedding.” I ran my fingers down the length of her white-blonde hair. The color was so light, her hair was almost a platinum white and silver shade that illuminated her round face. It made her grey eyes pop. “Plenty of time for us to still get to know each other.”

Grace was transparent, which meant she was a bad liar. Her eyes were the mirror to her heart and soul. They never lied, and today, they held such heartbreak in them – I could have drowned in them, like some mindless lover.

She came up on her toes and her lips brushed along my jaw, before they finally landed on my own waiting lips. A whispered kiss.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Grace?” I rasped into her mouth.

Her arms wrapped around my neck and she pulled away from the kiss, before burying her face into my throat.

“A secret,” she whispered. “Don’t hate me...”

“I could never–”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” another voice cut me off. “I didn’t know you were here, Killian. I was just coming to get my sister. We have plans.”

I looked back over my shoulder, where Julianna was standing. She fidgeted on the spot, looking a little guilty to have interrupted us. Goddamn it. Why did she always have to get in the middle? If I didn’t know better, I’d say she did it on purpose.

True, Julianna was supposed to chaperone because Bishop Romano had strictly forbidden me to meet with his daughter alone – even though she was my fiancée and we were about to get married in a little over four months.

Apparently, it had to do with the traditions that had been passed down in his family. Probably something about making sure I didn’t defile his daughter before our wedding.

Fuck that – I just wanted some time alone with my wife-to-be.

Grace pulled away and I reluctantly let her go. “You were going to tell me

something?”

“Tomorrow? My sister can be a little impatient.”

I gestured toward the stables and the horses. This was our secret hideaway, our meeting place. I waited for her here every night, without fault, and she always came to me. “I’ll be here.”

“If my father finds out we’ve been seeing each other alone—”

I brought her hand to my mouth, kissing the back of it. “We’ll just say Julianna has been chaperoning for us.”

My lips lingered over the back of her hand for longer than it should and Grace gave me a tender smile when I finally let her go.

I watched her walk away.

Not knowing it was the last time I’d see her.

She walked away...

Not even leaving her shadow behind.

Because the next time I saw her, her cold body was in a casket.

Buried with the secret she wanted to tell me.



Julianna

My wedding ended just like it began. Without any joy, but with much heartbreak. After Killian left me at the altar, my father and William Spencer did everything to please the guests. They knew there would be gossips, but they’d also do their best to bury them – as they always did.

My father-in-law introduced me to the guests, one by one. I talked; nodded when I had to; smiled when I was asked to; laughed when I was expected to.

The guests stared and openly judged.

Why the black veil?

Killian married her only because he had to. This will be a loveless marriage.

He didn’t even bother to lift her veil or kiss her.

I wonder if the rumors about her scars are true. Is that why she hides behind a veil?

Killian left her at the altar.

They whispered behind my back and gave me the fakest smiles when I

locked eyes with them. I kept my head high, gaze unflinching because these people were nothing but vultures.

Filthy rich but heartless. They were looking for a weakness and I wasn't going to let them step over me.

Not today and not in this lifetime.

By the end of the evening, I was more mentally exhausted than ever and it was taking a toll on my body. My legs had grown considerably weaker, trembling under my own weight and the heavy dress. My limp was more pronounced and I flexed my toes in my ivory, pearl flats. They were custom-made to match my dress.

My face had started to itch, my skin feeling stretched tight over my bones. The urge to scratch my flesh was strong and I fidgeted with my hands, burying them into the thick tulle of my gown so I wouldn't end up doing something embarrassing like lift my veil and claw my face until it bled.

When I woke up from my coma, pain came in a series of waves, similar to grief. And for the longest time, I wanted reprieve from it. Popping the sleeping pills like my life depended on them, I chased the numbness – the world between reality and unconsciousness.

Until I started to *obsess* over it.

We were all addicted to something that took pain away.

But me?

Well, I *needed* it.

Pain buried its fangs into my flesh, tearing into me, sinking its poison into my veins and I *craved* it more than I wanted solace or needed salvation.

Pain was a dwelling of madness, but it was exactly what kept me sane.

After dinner, I excused myself – not that I was needed, anyway – and Selene helped me back to my room. This part of the castle was eerily quiet and dark. The castle was built in mid-1800s and nothing had changed. The walls were still the same. The windows, the doors, the wooden planks – everything was still antique and practically ancient.

I was very much interested in anything historical, but I never imagined that I'd get married in a real castle and definitely not as beautifully deserted and grand as this one.

I itched to explore every corridor, every room and crevice of this place, to let the history of this castle bleed on my fingers. I heard these walls held a tragic love story and it called to me. The echoes of the whispered heartbreak

lured me into its depth the moment I stepped foot into this castle.

The wedding was over and done with. I had two weeks to explore this Isle and all the secrets that came with it. Just not tonight.

All the fight had left my body and I swayed on my feet as we climbed up the stairs that led to the East wing, where my room was located. I barely even noticed the frames on the walls or the chandeliers decorating the corridor.

The moment I stepped into my room, my legs gave out from under me and I sagged onto the floor, my gown practically enveloping me.

“Do you think Killian will come to you tonight?” Selene asked, while slowly unlacing my wedding dress. “It’s your first night as a married couple, after all.”

“He didn’t even kiss me at the altar. I don’t think he’s coming to my room tonight.” I hoped not.

“I think your father expects—”

“... bloody sheets in the morning?” I cut her off, my heart hammering in my chest.

“Julianna!” Selene hissed, outraged. “I was *not* going to say that.”

I shrugged and lifted my black veil off my face. Selene was the only person who has seen me without the veil.

She had seen *all* of me.

Every single flaw.

All the little imperfections that marred my skin.

Selene took a deep breath, once again composed, before she pulled apart the last lace and I could finally *breathe*. The corset had been pushing into my chest and against my rib cage for hours. “I was going to say that your father expects you and Killian to get along.”

I took out the pins holding my hair up and in place. “Because they need an heir and my womb is on lease?”

Selene threw her hands up, letting out an aggravated sigh. “Why are you so cynical, Jules?”

“Not cynical. My fantasy had long turned bitter and now, I choose to live in reality,” I said, my voice detached from any human emotions. “I know why my father and William have arranged this marriage. I know what Killian needs and I’m fully aware of what my job description is as Killian’s wife. They need an heir and I’m just a breeding machine.”

Selene stepped in front of me and helped me to my feet. My legs wobbled

but we successfully rid me of my heavy gown until I was standing in a white chemise and panties.

“Holy shit. I feel so light,” I groaned, massaging the stiff muscles of my neck and shoulders.

She stared at my uncovered face for less than a second before her gaze shifted, but the unmistakable pity in her eyes had my stomach hollowing with sorrow. My eyes landed on the mirror behind her head and I stared at my reflection.

The first thing I used to notice whenever I looked in the mirror were my eyes. But now, all I saw were the jagged lines across the left side of my face. The scar tissue had healed, but not before leaving the lasting effect of the burns and the glass shards that had cut through my face so cruelly. The skin felt stretched tight along the messed-up tissue – my mangled flesh, lumpy and taut, pink and daunting – *ugly*.

I touched my cheek, feeling the bumpy scars under my fingertips. The map of scars on the left side of my face told a story, a haunting one. My fingers brushed against the faded silvery ribbons on my forehead, my slit eyebrow and through the uneven dents and lines etched in my cheek, where once it was soft skin.

It looked like someone had taken a sharp knife to my face, cutting through my tender flesh, as if it was slicing apples.

Beautiful, they’d say.

Beasty, they now whispered.

Gracelynn would say that we got our beauty from our mother, for her looks had been praised by many. But now, the word *beauty* was just an *ugly* reminder of my tarnished past and my broken future.

The idea of Killian lifting my veil at the altar had almost paralyzed me, but I *knew* he wouldn’t. Killian Spencer was more than just cruel. For he was still loyal to his old love.

And even if he had tried to lift my veil – I wouldn’t have allowed him. Consequences be damned.

“I think I’ll take a warm ba–”

The door crashed open, causing both of us to flinch, and I scrambled for my smaller veil, the one I always wore.

“Oh, Killian,” Selene gasped.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach. I let out a frantic yelp while trying to pin my veil in place. My skin crawled and the sick feeling was back

again. Like I had been catapulted into the air multiple times and I had the need to throw up now.

“Get out,” Killian said, his voice low and *threatening*.

“Well, I—” Selene looked between Killian and me, and when I took a shuddering breath and nodded, she gave me a tentative smile before walking away.

The door closed behind my back, leaving me alone alone in the room with Killian.

“Why are you here?” I clipped, my whole body shaking.

“Our fathers expect us to consummate this marriage,” Killian spat, his words violent and harsh to my ears. I heard him shift around in the room, *felt* him move closer to me. I kept my back to him when realization finally dawned on me that I was only in a thin white chemise and panties.

“Consummate this marriage?” I let out a humorless laugh. “You couldn’t even bear to kiss me at the altar.”

He was considerably closer now, his warmth spreading across my back. He was so close I felt his breath fanning at the back of my neck and the fabric of his pants brushing against my bare legs. My skin peppered with goose flesh and I trembled at the nearness of him. He crowded into me, pushing me against the vanity.

Killian made me feel small and *vulnerable*. But he was no merciful man.

“Turn around,” Killian ordered.

“I don’t take orders from you,” I breathed.

My heart stammered when his fingers grazed my elbow. “Maybe you should just shut up and do as you’re told, *wife*.”

I spun around, locking eyes with Killian. My hands landed on his chest and I pushed, putting some distance between us. “Two years haven’t changed the fact that you’re still as much of an asshole as the last time I saw you.”

Killian grasped my elbow and tugged me closer. My legs were unstable, so I wobbled on my feet before crashing into his arms. He lowered his head so we were eye level. “Two years haven’t changed the fact that *you* killed your sister,” he hissed into my face.

My scars itched. When I flinched, the corner of his lips curled with derision. His handsome face darkened and he looked like a fallen angel, with the insistent need for sick vengeance.

“Are you going to throw that in my face for the rest our lives?” I tried to sound strong but my words only came out choked. “I know what I did that

night. I have the scars to prove it!”

That was my first mistake – showing him my weakness. Because Killian only did what he was best at. He fed on my rage and my vulnerability.

I had a habit of hiding behind my veil, not just my face but my emotions. Except, Killian could still see *me*.

A thin piece of fabric was not enough to hide me from his hatred.

Or to protect me from his anger.

And his endless humiliation and torture.

The veil did nothing but remind me that I was damaged goods...and I was at Killian’s mercy.

At the altar, there had been no vows to love and to cherish me. There was no honor in our union, no love in our story... and no redemption for our mistakes.

Killian Spencer vowed to make me suffer for the rest of my days.

That wasn’t a wedding. It had been a one-way ticket to eternal damnation.

He jerked me closer, his lips hovering over mine. I could feel his breath on my skin through the black lace veil. He smelled of his cologne and aftershave, mixed with a strong scent of alcohol. His fingers tightened around my wrist and I winced, feeling his nails dig deeper into my skin. His eyes darkened; they were almost pitch-black.

“Why... why do your eyes look so much like hers? It fucking haunts me,” Killian whispered, the roughness in his voice growing deeper. “You. Are. Every. Reminder. Of. What. I. Lost.”

His bitter words dripped venom, but I didn’t blame him. We were poisonous together. Toxic. And there was really no cure.

“If I remind you so much of *her*, what makes you think you can consummate this marriage?” I hissed, while also breaking into cold sweats. “Tell me, Killian. Can you really sleep with me? Fuck the woman who reminds you of your broken heart?”

He let me go, like I had burned him, and pushed away from me. The hand that had touched me; I watched as his fingers flexed before he curled them into a fist. Rage and disgust swirled in his bottomless, dark eyes.

Killian took a step back. “You have no fucking idea what you are playing with. You will regret taunting me.”

“What else can I lose? I’ve lost my sister and my freedom. And now I’m stuck with a man who loathes the mere sight of me. You can’t *hurt* me because I’ve already reached my threshold of pain and misery. But keep

trying, dear husband.”

He cocked his head to the side, his stance changing from furious to... almost aloof. He was silently sizing me up, taking my challenge as a threat. After a second of dreadful silence, filled with unmistakable tension, he finally shifted on his feet and walked away.

When he reached the door, he paused – only to spin around and face me once again. His piercing gaze seemed to knock away my defenses, digging under my flesh, sinking into my bones and burrowing underneath the cage around my heart.

Killian burned me on the spot with a single cutting glance.

And my ashes laid at his feet.

“I will break you, *Beasty*.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Julianna



One week later

The flowers have started to bloom and the garden smelled like spring and fresh blossoms. Yesterday, I planted new ranunculus seeds but had to wait almost three months before they started to flower.

I had always preferred gardenias and ranunculus over roses. They were not as popular or as well-known as roses, but just as beautiful and meaningful. I rubbed my fingers over the petal of the pink rose, feeling its softness under my fingertips.

The beautiful scent of the roses expanded across the garden as I walked down the path, toward my favorite place. I tucked my thick book under my arm and bypassed the green labyrinth on my way to the Victorian styled gazebo. It sat right next to a little lake and I found myself there more times than I could count. This spot was eerily quiet and lonely, but *peaceful*.

The domed wrought iron and carved marble made the gazebo. I settled on the bench, opening my book to where I left off this morning. I had read *Wuthering Heights* more times than I could count and had probably memorized every single line, but it was still one of my favorite classics of English literature. Followed by any work of Jane Austen and Edgar Allan Poe.

Like my love for ancient castles and tragic love stories, I adored anything historical and classic. Sometimes, I wondered if maybe I was born in the wrong era.

I was so lost in Heathcliff and Catherine, I didn't hear someone approaching me.

"Mrs. Spencer." The voice was gentle, but I still jumped and slammed my book closed. My hand went to my black veil, to make sure it was in place,

before I turned toward the voice.

The butler, Stephen, gave me a slight bow in acknowledgement. Stephen had to be in his early sixties and his family, for over six generations, had been this castle's butler. "Emily has asked me to find you, with a message. She says the cake is ready."

I scrambled to my feet. "What? It's been an hour already?"

"Apparently so." Stephen smiled. "She's excited to have someone with the same passion for baking."

I walked down the stairs of the gazebo and stood next to Stephen, who presented me with his elbow. I gave him a questioning look.

"Humor me, Mrs. Spencer," he said. "The path here is rough. Allow me to help you."

If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was taking a dig at my weak legs and my limp, but it was the complete opposite. He was only trying to be considerate.

"You're a sweetheart, Stephen." I curled my fingers around the crook of his elbow and allowed him to guide me through the garden. "Didn't I tell you and Emily to call me Julianna?"

"It's not appropriate."

"Well, I'm not comfortable with being called *Mrs. Spencer*." Though I was now Killian's wife, I just didn't want any reminder of him or our already doomed marriage.

Killian left the Isle the night of our wedding. That was the last time I had seen him or heard from him. All the guests, as well as my father and William Spencer had left the next morning.

He just... *left* me here. On my own. In this unknown place, without any thought that I probably wanted to return home too?

Nope. He simply didn't care.

Killian just walked away without a second glance.

Now, I was stuck. Well, not exactly *trapped*... I could easily call for a boat to come and get me...

So, maybe I was still here due to mild curiosity. This place just had so much history, so many stories to tell. I had been overwhelmed with the need to learn *everything*. My curiosity had been unmatched for the last seven days. I had explored most of the castle and the terrain.

And I had even walked through the garden's labyrinth... only to end up getting lost in there for hours.

“We don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable,” Stephen said, bringing my attention back to him.

“Then, *please*, call me Julianna.”

Stephen slowed down, looking a lot thoughtful and a bit uneasy. “It goes against all my traditions...”

“I’m not a traditional Spencer bride,” I cut in.

He laughed, the corner of eyes wrinkling. “Now, that’s quite true. You broke all the traditions, and honestly, I think that’s exactly what we needed.”

“So, Julianna?” I asked, almost hopeful.

He nodded. “Julianna.”

“Yes!” I did a little hop, which only made Stephen laugh louder.

By the time we got to the kitchen, my legs were shaking, but I was in a considerably more pleasant mood.

“Emily,” I said, looking at the older woman who was bent over the table, transferring the baked cake over to the decorating rack. “Stephen has agreed to call me Julianna. Therefore, you *have* to call me by my first name as well.”

“Oh, has he now?” she mumbled, taking a quick peek at her husband, who shrugged and backpedaled slowly.

“I’ll leave you two ladies alone. Have fun.”

And then he was gone.

Emily was a much older and plump version of Selene, who had to leave with my father – the day after my wedding. The loss of her companionship hurt, but Emily and Stephen helped fill the void.

“There you go. All yours to decorate, Julianna.” She gestured toward the two-layered chocolate cake. I smiled when Emily called me by my first name.

I wanted to be more than Mrs. Spencer, Killian’s bride. I wanted to be *Julianna*, a person not a vessel for Killian, or a walking womb on lease.

For the next thirty minutes, Emily and I went back and forth, decorating the cake together. The last time I had baked anything was before... the accident.

But when Emily had found out we shared a passion for baking, she urged me to join her. I couldn’t exactly say no to the older woman; she was so damn convincing.

Once the cake was done, we popped it in the fridge. That would be our dessert for tonight. “Why don’t you rest up until dinner is ready?” Emily suggested.

I nodded and left the kitchen and her to do what she was best at.

This was the perfect time for me to continue to explore the castle.



Three hours after dinner, I found myself in the small library on the East wing, which was now *my* side of the castle.

I had longed finished *Wuthering Heights* and was now of my second collection of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry. Two days ago, I had found the leather-bound edition on one of the shelves.

A shift to my left had me sitting upright on the chair; my attention snapped to the intruder. My heart had practically catapulted to my throat, only for me to find a young girl sitting cross-legged on top of the table next to me.

Was this who I thought it was?

Emily told me she had a granddaughter who lived here, but apparently, she didn't like meeting new people, so I never saw the girl.

She wore ripped jeans and a flashy pink sweater, her black hair piled into a messy bun atop her head. She had a septum piercing and looked completely nonchalant and at ease for someone who had just sneaked up on me.

"How did you get in here?" I questioned, eyeing the girl suspiciously.

She pursed her lips. "I have my ways."

"How long have you been watching me?"

"A week."

My eyebrows pulled up in surprise. "Then why have you never made your presence known?"

She shoved a hand into the pocket of her sweater and pulled out a packet of gum. The girl popped a slice in her mouth before offering me a piece, but I shook my head.

"Well, I'm not a people person," she started. "I was making sure you were safe before I approached you."

"And what made you finally approach me?"

"The book." She nodded at my hand, where I was still holding the Edgar Allan Poe's collection. "Can I borrow it?"

"You like poetry?" I asked, smiling.

"I do, but I haven't read this collection yet. I didn't know we had it in this library."

I rubbed my fingers over the smooth surface of the book. "How old are

you?” I asked, finding myself wanting to talk to her.

“Fourteen.”

So young, so full of life. I wondered what that would feel like.

“I could give you the book, but you haven’t even introduced yourself to me yet. What’s your name?”

She rolled her eyes, like a typical sassy fourteen-year-old. “Mirai. It means the future in Japanese.”

“That’s a pretty name. I’m Julianna,” I introduced myself.

She waved a hand, as if to disregard my introduction. “Oh, I know. Killian Spencer’s wife. The girl who hides behind her veil. The new mistress of this haunted castle. Oh yes, I know who you are.”

“You’re smart,” I deadpanned.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you,” she said, popping her gum in such an obnoxious way that it should have annoyed me but I was definitely intrigued by this girl.

Or maybe I had just been lonely for so long... that I just craved companionship, or simply just someone to talk to.

I closed the book and placed it on the coffee table in front of me, tapping my fingers on top of the cover. “How long have you been living in this castle?”

“Almost a decade. My mother is a drug addict and could care less about me. My grandma, Emily, is my guardian.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to apologize or maybe give her my condolences, but I saw the look on her face and I realized that this girl didn’t want any *pity*. No one could understand that better than me.

Pity was ugly to people like us, a poison without its remedy. We only wanted people to *understand* us.

I looked at Mirai and only saw a younger version of myself. “So, you must know a few stories about this place?”

Mirai quirked up an eyebrow. “I know a *lot* of stories.”

I grinned, although it was hidden behind my black veil. “First question, is this place really haunted?”

“Yup,” she popped the *p* and nodded at the same time. “Definitely. Arabella’s ghost roams these halls.”

Curious, I leaned forward. “Arabella?” I asked.

“Marchioness of Wingintam. The wife of the first Marquess of this castle,” Mirai explained patiently. “They were the first couple to settle here.”

“They are the tragic love story I’ve heard about?” I had been dying to know about this couple since I heard of Isle Rosa-Maria, but both Emily and Stephen had been disinterested in my questions and barely gave me any good answers.

“Yup. And there are three others. Before you, only four couples have lived in this castle and each story ended tragically.” Mirai paused, looking thoughtful before she nodded to herself and continued. “The last couple lived here in 1914, just before world war one. The man died in battle and the wife soon succumbed to a heart sickness, and she ended up passing away two weeks after her husband’s death. She was pregnant at the time.”

I gaped at her, my jaw slack. “You’re saying, this castle has been deserted for over a hundred years?”

Her lips curved into an infectious smile. “Well, not exactly! Housekeepers and butlers have been keeping this place polished and liveable. My grandma, and her mom and her mom’s mom... they were all the housekeepers of this place. They practically kept this place alive.”

“That’s interesting,” I mumbled. “Back to Marchioness Arabella. Wasn’t it called Isle Wingintam? Why did the Marquees change the name to Rosa-Maria?”

Mirai clucked her tongue at me, smirking. “Now you’re asking the good questions.”

I let out a small laugh at the wicked look on her face. She was a little gossiper, this one, and I was eating up every little detail of this story.

We both leaned forward, as if we were sharing a secret. “No one knows *why* the Marquees changed the name to Rosa-Maria. No one knows the meaning behind the name, what it was or *who* it was. But there are... rumors.”

I quirked an eyebrow, waiting.

“Before Arabella, the Marquees was in love with another lady. He had a short affair, but sadly, he was betrothed to Arabella and once they married, the lady left the Marquees and that’s when he decided to settle on the Isle. Far away from his lover’s memories. So, rumors say that Rosa-Maria was his lover.”

She sat back, rubbing her chin with her fingers. “But it’s all rumors. No one knows the truth.”

My stomach fluttered but there was pang of pain in my chest. An ache that wasn’t there before, but it was just an echo of my own heartbreak. “If what

you say is true... it must have been painful for Arabella. Living in the shadows of her husband's lover."

I knew exactly what *that* felt like.

"They say that she was madly in love with him, but poor Arabella only ended up with rejection and misery. She passed away without her husband's love or devotion. But it's more tragic than that. A tale of unrequited love, heartbreak, jealousy and death."

I settled back into my chair, smiling and delightfully *intrigued*. "We have all night."

CHAPTER FIVE

Julianna



“Gracelynn, no!” She tried to grab my arm, pulling at it. I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Let me go!”

“Julianna, slow down. You’re going to kill us!” she cried. “Please, I don’t want to die.”

“I’m going slow.” I grinned, keeping my foot on the accelerator.

She clutched her chest, her face red. “Julianna, stop! Please. You’re going too fast.”

I laughed, glancing at her before looking back at the road.

“You’re drunk,” she accused, tears spilling down her cheeks.

I was? I didn’t know...

*There was a dull throb at the back of my head, like a low hum. Confused, I blinked hard once and then... **pitch-black darkness.***

The scene faded away and we were now driving down a lonely, dark road. My heart hammered in my chest.

The car was unstable under my hands; I could feel myself losing my grip, but for some reason, I didn’t lift my foot off the accelerator. My foot was glued to it.

*My lips parted and I let out a silent scream. **Stop**, I told myself. **Slow down.***

My lungs squeezed and I seemed to gasp for breath, my hands clammy and shaking.

“I’m scared,” Gracelynn whispered.

“Me too,” I said.

I heard her screams first.

I remembered my body flying airborne when the car flipped – then silence. I crashed into a void before landing back in the present. With the stench of blood strong in my nostrils and searing pain coursing through my body.

So much agony.

I couldn't feel my legs. There was an insistent pain in the back of my head and my ears were ringing. There was an echo, but I didn't know where it came from. Blood rushed between my ears and my head was heavy, as my body dangled upside down.

My skin burned.

Agony licked through my veins. Every cell in my body felt like they had been crushed under a ghost weight.

I can't breathe.

I don't want to die.

I can't breathe...

It hurts.

I... can't... breathe...

My eyes blinked open and the first thing I saw was her face.

Her bloodied, mangled face – her empty eyes wide open.

My body startled awake and I sat up straight, my ears ringing with screams. Loud and anguished. I shook, whimpering until I realized they were my screams. My jaw snapped close and my lips trembled with the effort to hold back my cries. My bedsheets were twisted around my ankles, sweat soaking through my nightgown.

The terror of my nightmare paralyzed me with fear and confusion. My face and neck felt like they had been scratched raw and my skin was aflame, burning and sensitive. I knew it was only the ghostly echo of my own past pain. I remembered it so vividly and I could still *feel* it on my flesh and in my bones.

My chest tightened.

My heart *hurt* but it was almost like a physical discomfort. Something tangible squeezing the fragile organ.

My body had long grown accustomed to pain. I had lived with it long enough that it was now familiar; we were best friends, after all. Pain and me – we came together, bonded by my tormenting past and the sins I bore on my flesh.

I wiped away the sweat on my forehead, settling back against my pillows, but my body was still shaking. My recurrent nightmare had left a bitter taste on my tongue and bile rose in my throat before I swallowed it down, with great difficulty.

This interpretation of the accident made no sense to me.

I only remembered what happened *before* the accident, but anything after that? My mind drew blanks.

I remembered making the plans to sneak out, to go to the party. I knew I was the one driving the car, but I didn't remember why or how the accident happened. My memories were all jumbled up. Every time I dreamed of the accident, it was always somewhat of a different version until it left me senselessly *confused*.

What was exactly real... and what was just my imagination?

My father said I hit a deer and that I must have panicked. Apparently, I had been driving too fast, way over the speed limit... and when I hit the deer, I didn't brake and ended up swerving, which made the car flip over.

I rubbed a hand over my face. There was a giant blank space in my memories and I was so lost. I wanted to remember exactly what happened that night, but after two years of nothingness, I had eventually given up.

Because at the end of the day, the accident was still my fault.

I decided to sneak out and convinced my sister to come with me.

And *I* was driving, while being intoxicated.

There was no justification. It didn't matter what version of the accident I tried to fill the void with, I killed my sister.

This was the only reality that mattered.



One week later

“Boo.”

I yelped and almost dropped the book I was reading. Rolling my eyes, I peeked over my shoulder to see Mirai sneaking up on me, yet *again*. She was grinning while obnoxiously chewing on another piece of gum. Today, she had twin braids pulled up into double buns atop her head. She wore a neon sweater and black jeans shorts.

“You have to stop doing that. I might just end up hurting you one day in my fright,” I warned.

She scoffed. “Please, I’m not worried. You can’t even hurt a bug.”

My heartbeat pounded in my ears, harsh and loud, like beating drums.

Sorry to fool you, Mirai. But I did more than hurt just a bug. I had killed.

My own sister's blood was on my hands and no matter how much I tried to wash the blood away, tried desperately to hide my sins – my skin was still soaked with the stench of her death.

I squinted up at her. "Is it really fun to scare someone?"

"You're just so jumpy. Sorry, but yeah, it is fun." Mirai smiled.

Such a brat, but I found her presence somewhat delightful. Over the last few days, her companionship had entertained me. Mirai was young and bright, full of mischief and life.

"So, do you have it?" Her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree and she practically bounced on her toes.

I felt myself smiling at her eagerness and I crossed my legs, closing my book to give her my undivided attention. Reaching for the pocket in my dress, I fished out what Mirai was so excited about and dangled the keys between my fingers for her to see.

"Holy shit," she gasped.

Two days ago, Mirai told me a little secret. Something I hadn't been able to stop thinking about, and so I took matters into my own hand.

My curiosity got the best of me, after all.

"I forgot to tell you," Mirai started, looking excited to gossip. "Did you know that, apparently, there are old letters from Arabella that have been kept safe and locked away in one of the rooms in this castle?" She quirked up an eyebrow, waiting for my response.

"Letters from Arabella?" I paused. This was literally a treasure, I thought, while gaping at Mirai. If what Mirai said was true, the letters would be a direct look into Arabella's past and story. "Do you know which room?"

"North wing. That's where her room used to be. It's locked and I don't have access to it. But you should be able to get the keys from my grandpa. This is your castle now."

"Good point. I'll ask Stephen for the keys."

Mirai gaped at me. "You actually got it?"

"Well, yeah. Like you said, this is my castle now. I should have access everywhere, even forbidden and haunted rooms."

She giggled. "Oh, girl. We're going to have so much fun!"

"Do you want to go exploring now?" I asked, even though I already knew her answer. Mirai was every bit of a historical fanatic as me. She was obsessed with the secrets that this castle's walls bore. Maybe this was the reason why Mirai and I got along.

“Duh! Those letters better be real and not just rumors,” she said, echoing my thoughts.

I got up and gestured for her to follow me. “Let’s go.”

Nerves burst in my chest as Mirai and I walked down the corridor of the north wing. I thought my side of the castle was eerie, but the north wing was just... plain gloomy and *disturbing*. Maybe because it lacked *life*.

The hair on my arms stood up and I felt a prickle at the back of my neck. My body grew cold and I didn’t know if it was just a *feeling* or if it was because the temperature of the wide corridor had somewhat decreased.

The chandelier lights were dimmed and as Mirai and I walked past, our shadows danced on the walls. The knights stood still, for they were frozen in time. The statues that decorated the corridor stood tall and imposing. The sculptured faces were not ones of joy, but their expressions were contorted in what seemed like despair and anguish – as if tormented souls were trapped in them.

“There,” Mirai pointed at the end of the corridor, “this was Arabella’s room.”

We stopped in front of the double doors, with golden and carved designs on the wooden surface. I inserted the key into the lock, holding my breath at the same time. There was a loud click that echoed through the deserted walls of the north wing as Mirai pushed the doors open.

We crossed over the doorway, but my feet faltered at the entrance. I gaped at the inside of the room. I didn’t know why I imagined an unkept room with dust and spiderwebs... something old and well, looking quite... *haunting*. But it was the complete opposite.

The room was spotless. It appeared that the housekeepers had been keeping it clean and organized. The room was quite similar to mine. A huge four-poster bed in the middle, neatly made, with silk curtains and more pillows than I could count. Two nightstands on either side of the bed, a dresser to my left and a large window that overlooked the labyrinth. There was another full-length mirror on the other side of the window, the frame made out of thick wood and the carved flower design was... well, fancy and immaculate. There were two crystal chandeliers and there were hints of gold in the crown molding. The wallpaper was a golden flower design, giving it the final feminine touch.

The bedroom was every bit antique, just like my own – and just like the

rest of the castle.

I stayed by the door while Mirai rummaged through the drawers, almost impatiently. She pressed against the walls, as if expecting them to open up and to show her a secret passage. When she didn't find anything on one side of the room, she walked to the next drawers, opening and closing. *Searching.*

I walked over to the dresser, trying to find anything that would look out of the ordinary. For a brief moment, I felt a sense of... guilt. Like I was doing something wrong.

Well, snooping around *was* wrong.

But then again, Arabella died more than a century ago. Her stories had been told over and over again, each version different from the previous one. And this castle belonged to Killian and me, after all.

Every secret that came with it was mine to discover.

Maybe Mirai and I should leave the dead souls to rest, and let the secrets be buried with them. But damn it, my fingers *itched* to know *everything*.

I didn't know why I was so curious about their story. But I felt it, deep inside my bones.

I wanted to know.

I needed to know.

I had been obsessing over it for a week.

A small squared jewelry box caught my attention. I reached for it, but the bottom of it was stuck to the surface.

Curious, I wrapped my fingers around it, struggling with the pretty box as if it had been glued to the dresser. With a flick of my wrist, it turned to the side and there was a clicking sound that made me pause and then... a drawer in the dresser opened, revealing stacks and stacks of books and... letters?

Not just any random letters. They were handwritten; some were sealed in envelopes while others were piled and tied together with several thin ropes.

"Holy shit, you found the letters!" Mirai practically squealed, coming to stand by my side. I guessed I did...

My heart slammed into my rib cage, like a thundering storm, and my legs grew weak.

Arabella's secrets... and her love story were all right here. Written in these pages.

I took out the stack from the drawer and the musky scent of old books and papers prickled my nose. The letters were so old, some of them were wrinkled and torn apart. The black ink had run out, slightly fading on the

brown paper, but I could still make out the words.

The papers had many creased lines, from so many times of being folded and unfolded.

There were some stains on the letter... *tearstained?*

“This is literally Arabella’s life in your hands,” Mirai said in awe.

My fingers brushed against the first letter, the one on top of the stack. I admired the penmanship of Marchioness Wingintam, my eyes caressing over every cursive word, the careful strokes of the pen made so many years ago.

Dear Husband,

My thoughts are filled with you.

Your hatred for me, for I have taken the one thing you did want the most.

Your handsome visage,

Your sturdy hands,

Your wicked smile,

And your soft eyes.

I want to believe you were made for me and our souls are one.

But how can I bethink so...

When you still envisage her while you bed me.

- A

And so, I got lost in a love story that wasn’t my own, yet it called me.

Lured me with the promise of tragedy.

Dragged me into the depths of despair.

And tempted me with its beautiful sorrow.

CHAPTER SIX

Julianna



Six months later

*We are lost,
in the madness of love.
Like the morrow frost,
during the winter days.
Thy love is cold,
if only,
Our story could have been foretold.
The pain would not have been threefold.*
- A

I folded the half-torn letter and placed it next to my hip, on the window seat. I spent a week reading through every single letter and poem written by Arabella, and with every faded word I read, they dragged me deeper into her life and her heartbreak.

I sifted through the brown papers, choosing the poems that I loved the most. Some days, because I was so gluttonous for pain, I'd reread her poems. Like today.

Marchioness of Wingintam lived a life of misery. She fell in love with the man who couldn't bear her touch. She loved a man who mourned for another woman.

Arabella's life was a lonely one and with every child she lost, she grew desperate for her husband's affection, only to end up with his cold eyes and loveless hands. She offered him her body, day and night, because it was the only moment she felt close to her husband.

Yet, his passion was reserved for his lover and never for his wife.

Arabella died alone.

She took her last breath under the gazebo Elias had built for his lover.

How cruel fate could be, but I understood better than anyone else.

I looked out the window, where the stables were. Over the last four months, I had found myself in Arabella's private library more than my own. The view here was beautiful as I watched the stableman work with the horses.

One horse in particular caught my eye last week – the white one. It was a newly arrived horse on the Isle.

She was so beautiful, my fingers itched to touch her. The wind wisped her long, white mane into the air as the mare galloped in circles. She was a playful one and I guessed she had to be young. I watched as the stableman groomed her, brushing through her beautiful pelt of hair.

The older man looked up and caught my eye through the window. I waved at him, as I always did. He smiled and his attention went back to the mare.

If only I had the courage to go down there...

With my cheek against the window, I watched the mare and stableman together. Emptiness clawed at my chest and the back of my eyes prickled.

A day passed by and I found myself here again, looking out from the window.

The day after that, I couldn't keep my eyes off the white mare.

Another day went by.

A week...

Until...

I wanted a closer look at this gorgeous creature. I wanted it so badly that I felt it down to my bones, felt it in my veins, and so without any consideration, without thinking twice about it, my feet propelled me forward.

I left the letters on the window seat and walked out of Arabella's private library. I found myself walking down the corridor and down the stairs.

Blindly, I walked past Emily and followed the path to the stables.

To feel her soft skin under my fingertips.

To ride her.

To feel the wind against my face.

I wanted that.

I missed it...

I paused outside of the stable, watching the mare carefully. The stableman was currently running his fingers through her beautiful mane.

He must have noticed my presence because he looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said. “Come closer. She’s friendly.”

I chewed on my lip. “Waiting for me?”

“You’ve been watching her for two weeks now, looking so lost and scared.” He let out a small laugh. “It took you long enough to come here.”

“What’s her name?”

“She doesn’t have one yet. I’ve been waiting for you.”

I blinked in surprise. “I don’t understand...”

“This is a late wedding gift from your father-in-law. She’s yours.”

I was taken aback by his response but now it all made sense. William Spencer called me a month ago to try and convince me, once again, to come back to Spencer Manor. I simply refused and then wished him well. Before hanging up, he told me that he was preparing a wedding gift for me. But I hadn’t thought much of it.

Since his illness had been made public, my father-in-law has tried multiple times to convince me to leave the Isle behind and to come back to the mainland.

But I *couldn’t*.

It wasn’t because I was safe here, away from the gossips, the curious stares, and the *pity*.

I had made the decision for Killian. He had to focus on his father, not on his hatred for me. Because if I were there, I would be the constant reminder of what he lost, the thorn stuck under his flesh and the knife digging into his heart.

It was better if I stayed out of their way.

Even though we were married on paper, husband and wife by law – I hoped that if we didn’t cross paths, maybe Killian would finally find peace.

Maybe with someone else, a woman who suited him more than me.

I cleared my throat, looking between the stableman and *my* mare. “What’s your name?”

“Gideon,” he introduced himself. “At your service, milady.”

“I’m–”

He smiled, charmingly. “Julianna, I know.”

“She’s beautiful,” I whispered, taking a step closer. She sensed my presence and eyed me. I was slow in my movement, careful not to cause her any fright.

“Indeed,” Gideon agreed. He finally looked at my veiled covered face, his eyes lingering over my eyes longer. I expected pity, but there was only mild curiosity. “Mr. Spencer said she’s the perfect match for Cerberus.”

“Cerberus?” I asked, confused.

He nodded toward the tall, black stallion to my left. I hadn’t noticed him before, since all my attention was on my mare. He was in a stall, looking curiously at my horse. “Cerberus there belongs to Killian. He’s a bit of a grumpy one and can get violent. No one rides him, except Killian,” the older man explained.

I let out a scoff. Of course, Killian would have a grumpy horse to match his own violent tendencies. And of course, he named his stallion after the three-headed hound of Hades. How original of him.

“Are you scared of horses? You seem a bit stiff. She won’t hurt you; she’s very gentle.”

“I—”

Frayed nerves coursed through my veins and my legs grew shaky. I swallowed past the heavy lump in my throat. “I had a little... incident when I was ten-years-old. I was learning to ride and fell off my horse.”

It wasn’t a small incident though.

I ended up in a coma for nine days from a brain injury...

I woke up with a seizure.

And till this day...

“So, do you know how to ride a horse?” he asked, head cocked to the side curiously.

I nodded stiffly. “A little. I learned a few years ago.”

Once I was close enough to reach out and touch her, I brought a shaky hand forward. My fingers brushed against her long mane, beautiful and soft.

Gideon grasped my hand in his and helped me to caress the mare’s chest. I let out a yelp when she stomped her hooves, getting a bit antsy. “She can sense your emotions. Stay calm. Don’t be nervous.” He let go of my hand and took a small step back, letting me and my mare bond.

I kept my hand on her side, slowly caressing her. She was so soft; I liked how she felt under my fingertips. I pet her for what seemed like a long time, lost in the moment with my beautiful, white mare.

“Hey there, big girl,” I whispered, bringing my head closer to her. Slowly, I pressed my cheek against her flank. “Do you think we can be friends?”

She sighed in response.

I stepped forward and she lowered her head, bumping her nuzzle against my shoulder. Her breath was warm against my cheek. I smiled under my black veil. “Is that a yes?”

I rubbed her nuzzle softly. “God, you’re so gorgeous.”

She let out a massive breath and I feigned a gasp. “Did you just agree with me? Of course, you did. You know you’re the most beautiful thing ever.”

I gave her a scratch over her velvet nose. “*Ragna*.”

She snorted in response and our eyes met. “*Ragna* is your name.”

A moment passed, there was something in her dark gaze that matched the emotions squeezing in my heart – something I couldn’t exactly describe.

Loneliness.

Hopelessness.

Desperation for someone to see me for who I really was.

Ragna saw me. She didn’t see the veil or my sins. She didn’t care about my past or my broken heart. She didn’t judge. She saw *me* – Julianna.

Ragna threw her head back, her mane flying, and for the first time in a very long time, I felt myself smile. Truly, with all my heart’s content.

“I’ve been waiting for you, *Ragna*. We’re going to be best friends.”



Killian

A week later

I remembered the first time I saw her. Hiding behind a stack of hay, watching me prep Coal, the black stallion I was training after Bishop Romano had asked me to.

Coal was a stubborn one.

He just wouldn’t let anyone near him, let alone ride him. He had already injured two other horse trainers that Bishop had hired and when he asked for help – I couldn’t exactly say no.

Not when we were supposed to keep our relationship amical. Not when my father had warned me beforehand that Bishop would be my future father-in-law and I had to do everything to please him, enough that he’d happily hand over his daughter to me.

And especially not when I knew that Coal needed me.

Some would say I had the power to speak with horses because of how good I was with them.

I still remembered the flash of platinum blonde hair when Grace had rushed to hide when my gaze had caught her behind the hay.

“I know you’re there,” I called out, rubbing a hand over Coal’s chest. He stomped his heel and turned his head to the side, almost grumpily. “Yeah, yeah. You hate me,” I muttered to the stubborn stallion.

“You better come out now,” I said, loud enough for the girl to hear me. “I don’t like people sneaking up on me and Coal is a bit unpredictable. You might end up hurt.”

That did the job. She let out a small squeak, and from my peripheral vision, I saw her coming out from behind the stack of hay.

“And who you are, Miss...?”

She wrung her hands. “Do I have to answer that?”

“Are you a thief?” I questioned, sternly. But I already knew she wasn’t.

First of all, she was neither dressed nor looked like a thief. She had a lavender dress on and it came down to her mid-thighs. Her hair was loose, with two tiny braids on either side of her temple, but they pulled back and got lost in her waves. Her ankle boots were black and leather, still quite new.

Second, she fidgeted too much to be a thief.

And third – Bishop’s security was tight and a little girl like her would definitely not be able to sneak inside. So, I had already come to one conclusion.

“Of course not,” she responded, clearly affronted by such judgment.

Coal’s attention was on her and I knew that look very well. He definitely didn’t like her and felt threatened by her presence. I kept a hand on him, trying to soothe the big beast. “Did you do something wrong and now you’re running away?”

Her lips thinned. “No.”

“Then why can’t you give me your name?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“Not an acceptable answer, princess,” I rasped.

Her lips parted and I watched her inhale sharply. “You already know who I am,” she accused.

My lips twitched. “I might already have an idea.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and inched closer to me. “Tell me,”

she challenged.

“You tell me,” I shot back. Coal threw his head back, stomping and letting out a small huff. He had been a good boy all day today and I didn’t want our intruder to mess this up, so I led the stallion back to his stall. He happily stomped inside and I closed the latch behind him, making sure he was securely locked inside.

He had already tried to run away twice.

I faced the girl once again and rubbed my sweaty palms over my pants. I still wore my office clothes since I wasn’t supposed to be here today to train Coal, but it was a last-minute decision. I might have missed his stubborn and grumpy ass.

She eyed me carefully, her gaze drifting from my polished leather shoes, up my legs and then my stomach. Her eyes lingered a second longer on my chest, where the top of my white shirt gaped open; the buttons were undone and my sleeves were pulled up to my elbows while I worked with Coal.

I leaned back against a beam and crossed my ankles. “Once you’re done checking me out, please don’t hesitate to introduce yourself.”

She gasped indignantly. “I wasn’t checking you out.”

I quirked an eyebrow, watching her flush and mumble under her breath.

*“What’s **your** name?”*

“Killian,” I finally introduced myself. “Killian Spencer.”

Her jaw went slack and she sputtered. “You—”

*She looked left and right and wrung her hands together. Her wide eyes would have been comical if she wasn’t so goddamn... **beautiful**, while looking so confused.*

Her round face. White-blond hair. Grey eyes. Pink lips and a curvaceous body. I usually went for brunettes, but I’d definitely make an exception for this one.

*“You are... **the** Killian Spencer. William Spencer’s son? What are you doing here, training my father’s horse?” she rambled, clearly in shock.*

Ah.

So that confirmed my suspicion. She was Bishop’s daughter.

And she must have thought I was some stable boy her father hired. How fucking hilarious.

I tucked my hands into the pockets of my black slacks, watching her. “I have to go,” she breathed, when I didn’t answer her quick enough. “Um, I shouldn’t be here.”

She was already walking backward and I watched her disappear around the corner of the stables. She left without giving me her name.

I saw her again the next day.

And the day after.

And the day after that.

She had a habit of running away and every time, I'd let her.

Until...

I slammed the whiskey glass on the countertop. The fury still festered, even after three long years. It dug holes inside me until I was less human and more monster. And it was all because of *her*.

I closed my eyes. The memories didn't make me sad anymore nor did they hurt because I was fucking enraged.

Julianna.

My wife.

She stole the one good thing I had in my life.

Her face, hidden by the black and lace veil, flashed behind my closed eyelids. Even though I had put more distance than possible between her and me, she was still *here*. In my head. Mocking me with every breath she took, taunting me every minute of the day.

How was it possible that I thought of the woman who destroyed my life with a simple flick of her wrist more than I thought of my Gracelynn?

The heartbreak had long been forgotten. I was no longer heartbroken; I was just so goddamn *angry*. At Julianna. At my father... at everyone and everything. It was easier to be angry than to feel hurt.

Heartbreak made me weak.

Rage gave me purpose.

It had been six months and two weeks since our wedding, since I left her on the Island. I thought she'd come back a few weeks into our marriage, demanding her wifely rights. I thought she'd expect us to stay together – to share a fucking bed and a life.

But Julianna shocked me by not only continuing to stay on the Island, but she made it her home. When Bishop had asked her to return back to the mainland, she simply refused.

When my father had tried to convince her to come back to Spencer Manor, she said that she had already settled on Isle Rosa-Maria and that she liked it there.

The gossip had spread far and wide – but both my father and Bishop had tried to shut it down. They succeeded when my father’s illness was made public.

The focus had switched from my failed marriage with Julianna to my father’s little time left on this earth.

A tumor in the brain, the doctor had explained. It was not operable. And worst, it was invasive and growing rapidly. One doctor said my father had less than a year to live. Another one gave him an estimate of eighteen months. They said he could try radiation therapy or chemotherapy, but I remembered the look on their faces – the pity and the *defeat*.

They said it all depended on my father’s luck and God’s will.

But fuck that. What was the reason for science and evolution when we still had to depend on “luck” and “God”?

My father was dying and I had approximately ten months to make his wishes come true and fulfill our contract with Bishop Romano.

An heir for the Romanos and Spencers.

A child to connect the two families by blood.

My fist clenched around my glass. “Fuck,” I hissed under my breath, reaching for the bottle of whiskey.

“Well, you’re in a good mood today.” My father joined me, coming to stand by my side. He grabbed the bottle before I could and poured the whiskey into my glass.

“Are you packed yet?” he asked, almost lazily, but I didn’t miss the threat in his tone.

“You’re literally kicking me out of my own home,” I snapped, before bringing the glass to my lips, taking a sip.

“Your home is with your wife, Killian. If she’s not coming here, you will go to her.” He was talking as if I was a five-year old and still needed my father’s guidance in life.

Yeah, no. I knew exactly what I had to do and it has nothing to do with Julianna Romano.

“You have a contract to fulfill,” my father reminded me. “And I don’t have long to live. I want to see my grandchild before it’s my time to go.”

Thanks, dad. I definitely needed that reminder.

My mother was traveling Europe with her lover and my father was dying. I married my dead girlfriend’s sister who also happened to be her killer and I detested my wife.

Breathe in the rage, breathe out any other emotions.

I dropped the glass on the marble countertop and walked away.

“Julianna is not the villain you’re making her out to be, Killian,” my father called out. “It was an accident.”

I paused. Fire licked through my veins and I felt the spark of rage, starting from the bottom of my spine, and my fists clenched at my sides. “She had a choice,” I gritted out. “She shouldn’t have been driving that night. Especially not when she was intoxicated. Accident or not, she killed Gracelynn.”

I heard him walking closer and my father stood in front of me. His jaw squared and his pale face stern. We were the same height and we used to be the same build. But my father had lost weight over the last three months. I could see the fatigue in his eyes as death dug itself inside his bones.

“I tried to give you time, Killian,” he said, his voice harsh and unyielding. “Two years to come to terms with the fact that Julianna was going to be your wife. Then, I gave you six months. You left her at the altar, you didn’t consummate the marriage, you left her on the island and came back to Spencer Manor alone. But I don’t care anymore. You married her and you need to take responsibility. She’s your wife and the mother of your future children. I expect you to figure this relationship out. *Now*, before it’s too late.”

My jaw clenched and I locked eyes with my father – a silent battle neither of us were ready to lose.

“I expect you to be back on Isle Rosa-Maria at dawn and this is *final*.”

My lips thinned.

“Is that understood, Killian?”

A big hole burrowed itself inside my chest and I gave my father a sharp nod, before stalking away.

“I vow to spend the rest of my life making you regret what you did to Gracelynn. To hurt you, to break you... and to hate you for the rest of our days. I will never be your protector, never your defender; I vow to be the villain in your story.”

“In health and in sickness, through sorrow and pain, for all the days in my life, I will be your worst nightmare.”

“Till death do us part...”

It was time to face Julianna and the vows I took. She was the darkness plaguing my half-dead heart; the reason why I was the man I was today.

The world saw me as Killian Spencer – the man of wealth and power at

his fingertips. I was the gentleman in a suit. I smiled at the camera, shook hands and I did everything they expected me to.

A lawyer with an insane drive for justice.

A politician with a perfect and clean record.

But no one really knew of the monster lurking underneath the skin of Killian Spencer.

I'm coming, Beast. And your life will never be the same.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Julianna



I gave Ragna a little nudge with my heel. It startled her and she took three quick steps forward, before relaxing into a steady walk.

“Good girl,” I praised, running my fingers through her mane while keeping one hand on the rein. Almost as if she understood me, Ragna snorted and sounded *pleased*.

“You’re doing good,” Gideon said, keeping up with my mare. He walked beside her, a steady hand on Ragna’s bridle to guide her, in case she went a little wild and I had trouble holding onto her.

This was my fifth time on Ragna. We were taking it slow, but every day I enjoyed this time with her. She was a gentle creature and we got along pretty well, while Gideon guided me with patience.

“You’re a natural.” Gideon smiled.

I flushed under his praise and fatherly smile, but I was far from a natural like he said. My horse did all the effort; I let her guide me into her personal space and did what *she* wanted. She let me on her back and didn’t buck me off. She accepted me as her rider and gave me a chance to sit atop a horse again.

Ragna was made for me.

I patted her long neck, rubbing my hand down the side of it. “Do you want to go for a gallop, my love?”

Gideon released the bridle and I steered Ragna toward the center of the big arena. She started slow, galloping. My thighs squeezed, my hips tightened for a moment, feeling an ache spread through my bones, but I ignored it. My hands clutched the rein and I nudged her with my heel again, encouraging her to go faster.

The wind blew on my face, my black veil fluttering, and the breeze caressed my bare skin. I breathed in, feeling my chest tighten before I

released a loud exhale. My body loosened and I sat in a rocking motion atop Ragna.

I clucked my tongue and she understood my command, going faster, until my heart was in my throat and my stomach fluttered with butterflies I didn't know I still had in me. I rode the wave, feeling her strength under my butt and against my thighs.

Ragna was a big girl, but God, she made me feel *safe*.

The wind streamed past her, whipping my black hair into my face, but I couldn't help it. I let out a small *laugh*. The ground rushed by us and the only sound I heard were the pounding hooves and my heart thudding in my ears.

When we came to a stop, Gideon was there, his face slightly paled but an affectionate smile on his lips. "Damn it, little one. You scared me there for a moment, but then I saw that you got her. And she got you. You rode her beautifully, Julianna."

I petted Ragna and she sighed into my hand. While Gideon held onto the bridle, I swung my right leg off and then released my left foot from the stirrup as I dismounted my mare. The moment my feet were on the ground, my legs gave out under me.

Both Gideon and I expected it and he was prepared, already reaching out to me. His arm wrapped around my waist, keeping me upright.

I let out a small shaky laugh. "Thank you, Gideon."

He kept me anchored to him. "At your service, milady."

"You're a perfect gentleman," I said, teasing.

He winked in response. Gideon was a handsome man and probably around the same age as my father, but he was vastly different. In his emotions, his words and the way he just was.

Bishop Romano wasn't exactly a bad father. But he was guarded and *too* busy.

He expected perfection.

And well, my flaws were too many to count and I was riddled with imperfections from my body to my heart straight down to my soul.

Gracelynn was always his favorite, even though he never said it out loud. After she died, I became his only child and no matter that my flaws were too many to count, I was still his blood and the only family he had left.

His expectations of me were high, but I did everything he demanded of me.

In the end, I only ever wanted his approval. And I got that by marrying

Killian, even though it *killed* me.

Once I felt that I could stand on my own again, I patted Gideon's arm and he released me. My feet were unstable on the ground and my legs were shaking, but I leaned against Ragna, letting her support me.

Three years...

It took me three years... to find what I had been searching for.

The freedom I found in Ragna.

The undeniable connection between my mare and me.

The story between us – the look in her eyes and the way my heart *squeezed*.

I pressed my forehead against her nuzzle. "I love you," I whispered to her. She let out a soft breath, speaking to me in her own language. I imagined she was reciprocating the same feelings.

"Julianna!" I flinched away from Ragna and looked over my shoulder to find Mirai running toward me, flailing her arms.

I took a step away from my mare and toward her. Gideon grabbed Ragna's bridle and guided her back to her stall and strutted away as Mirai came to a halt in front of me. She bent over, hands on her knees as she gulped in several loud breaths.

I patted her back, waiting for her to catch her breath. "Why are you running?" I asked when she straightened. Her lips parted as if to speak, but she only ended up gasping some more. "What happened."

"Killian," she panted.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach.

"Killian is here. On the island."



My black dress swished around my feet as I walked as fast as my legs would allow me to the dining room, where Mirai told me Killian was.

I found him sitting at the head of the long dining table that could easily fit thirty people. He lazily took a bite of the juicy steak Emily had made for lunch today.

Killian must have noticed me entering the dining room, but he didn't acknowledge my presence. I stayed by the pillars while he ate his food, enjoying his late lunch, and he never even glanced at me.

I watched him, quietly. His suit was unruffled, his dark hair was slicked back and he was clean shaven; his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing his strong forearms, and his spine was straight against the chair, his shoulders tensed.

Killian Spencer looked every bit the royalty that he was.

He dominated every room he was in, and this dining room was no difference. The air sizzled with tension and cracked under the cold pressure.

He took his sweet time, carefully cutting his steak into precise pieces and taking slow sips of his wine.

Once his plate was cleared, he dabbed the corner of his mouth with his napkin.

“I’m sure you are aware of what is expected from you, out of this contract marriage,” Killian drawled, finally acknowledging my presence but still not looking my way.

I took a step forward, my shoulder squaring. I knew exactly what he was talking about. “I know what is expected from *both* of us, yes.”

“You haven’t fulfilled your duty as a wife—”

“I can’t get pregnant on my own, Killian,” I snapped. “I think you are well aware of that and if you don’t know how it works, I can give you an anatomy lesson. Shall I prepare a PowerPoint? *How to impregnate your wife*, will be the title.”

His jaw clenched and he gripped the table, his knuckles growing white. “You’ve chosen the wrong moment to be bold, Julianna,” he threatened slowly.

I inhaled sharply, my knees shaking.

“I wasn’t talking about fucking you or getting you pregnant. I was talking about your duties as my wife. Other than carrying and birthing my child.”

My lungs clenched. I licked my lips and swallowed down the acidic bile before I could gag on it. Killian made me jittery... and when I was anxious, I made *mistakes*.

Mistakes that could cost me dearly.

“Oh, right. I had to look pretty in your arms, smile at the camera, mingle with the people at charity events and parties, showing them just how *happy* our marriage is. A perfect lie. A pretty façade.”

“Yes,” he hissed. “Exactly that.”

“Well, you haven’t done your duties as a husband either,” I gritted, before I could swallow down the words. “So we are both failing at this contract

marriage thing.”

His head finally snapped toward me, his dark eyes glaring. “It’s taking all my self-control not to wring your neck, Julianna Romano. But then again, I want your death to be slow and painful.”

“Spencer,” I shot back. “Mrs. Julianna Spencer.”

“You’re not my wife,” Killian spat.

“Too bad. We are legally husband and wife.”

He pushed his chair with a loud screech and stood up, rounding the dining table. He stalked toward me with long, powerful legs, his face dark with rage and his lips curled cruelly.

My back slammed against the pillar as he crowded into my personal space, pushing his chest against mine. I sucked in a harsh breath and my scars *itched*.

Kilian was too close.

I didn’t like it.

I couldn’t... *breathe*.

My heart hammered so hard I wondered if it bruised my rib cage.

His head lowered and his whiskey breath whispered over my lips, my black veil the only thing separating our mouths from touching.

He was too close...

His warmth surrounded me, his scent musky and unique... *familiar*. His eyes darkened, boring into mine.

Please. Don’t look at me so closely, for you’ll see my demons.

My sins.

My mistakes.

My lies.

My secrets.

“Our fathers expect us to consummate this marriage,” he said, his thick voice laced with an underlying *threat*.

“I know.” I buried my shaking hands in my dress.

“The mere thought of touching you brings me disgust, but I will enjoy breaking you.” His right hand came up. It brushed against my neck, almost tenderly, before he wrapped his fingers around my throat, squeezing in warning. “You will submit to me, *Beasty*.”

The venom in his tone pierced my heart, sinking its poison into my beating organ. The pain was... blinding and pure *agony*.

His thumb stroked over the healed scars along the left side of my neck.

They were not as bad as my face and had healed into pink, faded lines. “Poor little Beasty,” Kilian taunted in my ear.

My breath stuttered.

My soul wailed.

My heart wrenched from my chest, laying at his feet, and he cruelly stomped on it.

Atone for your sins.

I reminded myself.

Beg for absolution.

I closed my eyes. I deserved this.

Salvation is in the hands of the one who you have wronged.

I inhaled a shaky breath, swallowing my cries and my injured pride. My hands landed on his chest and I gave him a hard shove, enough for him to let me go, and I stepped away from him, putting a safe distance between us. When we were too close, I couldn't *think*. When he touched me...

Our eyes locked. “I don't consent,” I murmured.

“You don't have a choice,” he mused.

I gritted my teeth. “You'd take me against my will?”

Killian's eyes darkened and his cruel face broke into a mocking smile. “I'm your husband. Your body is my right, Julianna.” He took a step forward and I skidded back, out of his reach. He advanced toward me again, like the predator he was. He was the master of the hunt.

And I was apparently his prize. I may be his trophy wife but I was not a martyr. I had been through worse and handling Killian's hatred should be no trouble. Or I thought so.

When he was close enough, his arm snaked out and he grasped my elbow. Killian gave a hard tug and I stumbled into his chest. His head lowered and he pressed his cheek against mine, over my veil. His lips brushed against my right ear. “It's my duty, isn't it?” he rasped. “To consummate this marriage? To make you a wife, to make a mother out of you? My duty is to breed you and your job is to give me an heir, Julianna Spencer.” Killian spat out my full name like he was disgusted that his last name was attached to me.

“What century are you from?” I growled. “Definitely not this era. Rape is rape, whether you're my husband or not, you need my consent and I don't give it to you.”

He chuckled heartlessly. “You'll refuse me?” He grasped my left hand, his thumb stroking my wedding ring. He dragged the ring forward, over one

knuckle, to reveal the imprint that the ring left. “You’ll refuse me while wearing my ring? My name is etched on your skin, Beasty.”

Killian’s name was engraved inside my wedding band, similar to how my name was engraved inside his. But he never wore his ring. The wedding band had left an imprint of his name on my ring finger.

I snatched my hand away, my other palm slapping against his chest. An act of short rebellion, but I knew it wouldn’t last long. Killian knew too many of my weaknesses. “Yes,” I said.

“I want to see you try.”

Goddamn it. He was a bastard. A *heartless* bastard. “The man I knew would never force himself on a woman.”

“You don’t know me. You know nothing, Beasty.”

“I know enough,” I snapped. “The man my sister so passionately spoke of was respectful. A decent man who would always do the right thing. That was the man she fell in love with... yet the one standing in front of me is nothing but a monster. A beast. You’re without remorse, Killian Spencer.”

There was a flash of pain in his eyes before he quickly blinked it away. A shadow covered his face and his jaw twitched. “You’re right. I’m not the Killian your sister fell in love with. You killed him that night; the same night you killed your sister. Bravo, Julianna. You single-handedly ruined two lives in one night.

“Three,” I breathed, the crack in my chest growing larger.

That made him pause. “What?”

I swallowed, my eyes burning. This fight had taken all my energy and now... Killian had left me feeling *vulnerable*. “Three lives. I ruined myself that night,” I said, my voice breaking. “You seem to forget that every time. You. Are. Not. The. Only. One. Who. Is. Suffering. I miss her too. I loved her too. And yes, I hate myself too. More than you can *ever* hate me. So no, your anger and your hatred does nothing to me.”

“If you want pity—”

“I’m not asking for pity!”

My voice echoed through the walls and his eyes widened. “Watch your tone with me, Julianna.”

“Or what?” I challenged, blinking the tears away.

“You will regret it,” he warned.

I gave him a bitter smile. “You still don’t understand, do you? What else can you do to hurt me when I’m hurting myself every day, every time I

breathe.”

“I can do much worse.”

The pressure on my chest intensified. I let out a sigh, rubbing my temple. “We’re going in circles, Killian.”

He stuck a hand into the pocket of his slacks, his eyes piercing mine. “I came here to finish what we started.”

I nodded. “The heir our families desperately need.”

His lips pulled up, but there was no warmth in his smile. “How about we make this easy for ourselves? Just bend the fuck over and submit to me, Beasty. I’m sure you know what it’s like to be on your back and on your knees. You can’t be a virgin,” he paused. “Once the job is done, you’ll be paid bountifully every year. A payment for your services, as per the contract.”

My fists clenched into the fabric of my dress. “I’m not a common whore, Killian.”

He scoffed. “My apologies. I thought that was your job description. *Truly.*”

“That’s petty, even for you.”

He chuckled, his wide chest shaking.

“I’m not a vessel,” I said, my chin nudged high, and I channelled every ounce of pride I had inside my bones. I was my father’s daughter, after all. The Romanos didn’t let anyone step on them. True, I was paying for my sins. But I wasn’t *weak* and my husband had to see that.

“I’m not a vessel,” I repeated. “And my womb is not up for discussion, Killian. But I have a few conditions of my own before I give you my consent.”

His gaze fixated on me. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“No, it’s a simple compromise.”

“A compromise, you say,” he said slowly. “I don’t and won’t compromise with you.”

I watched as he spun around, walking away – leaving us mid-conversation. That was his way of saying that I had been dismissed.

But I wasn’t done.

Either Killian accepted my conditions or he’d never get the heir he needed. This time, the ball was in my court. I had all the power in my hands – or should I say my *womb*.

I took a step forward and called out to his retreating back. “It’s either that

or your father doesn't get the grandchild he desperately wants to see before—”

He came to a sudden halt, his head snapped toward me and his eyes turned to slits. “You're a fucking bitch.”

Yes, I knew it was a low blow, bringing up his dying father. But it was the only way to get him to listen to me.

“We've already established that you hate me and I'm a bitch. Let's move on, Killian.”

“What do you want?” he snapped, enraged.

“Dinner, every night for thirty nights,” I spilled out quickly before I lost the courage. “And I expect us to converse without throwing insults. Simple as that. After those thirty nights, we can then discuss *consummating* our marriage.”

I had to practically choke out the last sentence. Killian's brows pulled up in confusion. His jaw tightened. His lips parted, as if to speak, but I was already talking over him.

“Dinner will be served at seven. I hope to see you there.”

And this time, I spun around and walked away, leaving him behind.

I rushed up the stairs to my room and once inside, I slammed the door closed and my shaking legs finally gave out from under me. I slumped against the door, sliding down until I was sitting with my butt on the ground.

What have I done?

I tried to inhale, but I couldn't breathe through my panic.

What. Have. I. Done?

I clutched my chest as I tried to remember *how* to breathe. My room swayed and my vision blurred.

God, I was so dumb.

I should have kept my distance, should have let him do whatever he wanted. Once he impregnated me, maybe he'd leave me alone. Maybe he'd go away again until I gave birth.

That would have been the ideal situation.

So why... why did I ask him to spend more time with me?

Because I was stupid.

Stupid and lonely.

And now I had to pay for one more mistake.

Because those thirty nights would be absolutely cruel to my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julianna



*Falling in love is like the sunshine,
But our moments are lost in time.
Like a drowning lover,
Yet again, I fall for thou,
But thy heart yearns another.
- A*

When I came to Isle Rosa-Maria, a day before my wedding, I found that my wardrobe had already been filled with new clothes, a few of them were my personal taste, but it was all per Killian's choices and what William expected his daughter-in-law to dress, like a true Spencer.

After all, the attention would be on me

How I walked, how I dressed up, how I talked...

Every breath I took, every movement I made, every smile and every laugh.

The high society and the common people would judge me and if they found me lacking, it would be the Spencer's reputation at risk.

William didn't expect Killian to leave me at the altar though; he hadn't anticipated that his son would leave the island without a backward glance or that I would defy all expectations and decide to stay *here*.

One side of my wardrobe was stuffed with evening gowns and formal dresses. I also had simpler ones that I could wear at home, comfortably. On the other side, there were sweaters, blouses, jeans and skirts.

All were newly bought: posh and expensive.

I grew up in luxury and wealth, none of this was surprising and neither did it wow me. If the Spencers held blue diamonds in their hands, the Romanos possessed jadeites.

“Is this like a date?” Mirai questioned lazily, bringing my attention back to her.

“No,” I deadpanned. “It’s just dinner.”

“Then why are you taking so long to choose a dress?”

I glared at Mirai and she pressed her lips together, hiding a mischievous smile. “Get out.”

She clucked her tongue at me. “You want him to *like* you.”

“Mirai,” I warned, slamming my wardrobe close. She let out a small giggle before she bounced off my bed and rushed out of my bedroom, closing the door behind her.

What Mirai said couldn’t be further from the truth. I didn’t want Killian to like me. No, I wanted him to see me as *equal*, not a vessel or a walking womb for him to be used and then discarded.

I was more than that. I was Julianna Romano, my father’s daughter. I was Julianna Spencer, Killian’s wife.

I was *Julianna*.

I was Killian’s equal and I needed him to see that.

In the end, I chose a simple black evening dress, with a sweetheart neckline, spaghetti straps and side slit, up my right leg. The satin fabric was soft under my fingertips.

The diamond necklace sat heavy around the base of my throat. While my dress was simple and elegant, the jewelry adorning my neck was quite extravagant and *expensive* with more than fifty intricate, teardrop pieces put together to create one necklace.

I gave myself a once-over in the mirror. My black veil was pinned in place and my hair fell down the curve of my spine, shiny and curled in waves. I looked every bit the elegant and classy wife, the one high society expected me to be.

I left my room with frayed nerves coursing through my veins. My heart was beating as fast as a hummingbird’s wings, one locked in a cage, desperate to escape.

When I approached the dining hall, I saw that Killian was already there, seated at the head of the table. He had discarded his suit jacket. The collar and first two buttons of his black shirt were undone, exposing the top of his chest. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and he sat back on the chair, his legs stretched out under the table, one elbow on the armrest and cigarette between his fingers. His posture was the epitome of calm and collected, but I

didn't let his nonchalant act deceive me, for I knew of the flickering rage underneath his skin.

He watched me walk into the dining hall, his attention drifting down where the slit on my dress exposed my bare legs as I walked before his gaze came back to my face. Not before his eyes lingered a second longer on the deep v-cut of my black dress, where my breasts were pushed together by the tight bodice.

Killian brought the cigarette to his lips, taking a long inhale before blowing out a puff of smoke. "You're late," he said.

"Now that's not true. I'm right on time; you're just a tad early. Maybe it's good practice for you. It's gentlemanly to wait for your lady, with *patience*." I took a seat on the opposite side of him, at the other end of the dining table. There was more than twelve feet in length separating us. With a flower vase strategically placed in front of me. The three chandeliers hung low from the ceiling, right over the dining table and I liked how they illuminated Killian's face. Even from the distance, I could see the way his jaw was locked and the darkening of his gaze.

"You're not a lady, the same as I'm not a gentleman," he drawled, loud enough for me to hear him across the table.

"You're right," I agreed. "We are a perfect lie together, husband."

Dinner was served in silence and once the two housekeepers made themselves scarce, Killian finally spoke his mind. "What do you wish to accomplish with this dinner?"

While making sure the flower vase was directly in my face, hiding me – well, most of my face – from Killian's view, I slowly removed the pins that kept my black veil in place. I lowered the lace fabric and placed it on my lap.

"Nothing much," I said, keeping my voice from shaking. It was the first time I had removed my veil outside of my room. But it wasn't like I could eat while it still covered my face.

From the corner of my right eye, I saw Killian grinding his cigarette into the ashtray, before letting it fall from between his fingers. "Then, what's the point of it?"

"You married me, Killian," I said, grabbing for my cutlery. "Don't you think we should at least spend a few minutes in each other's presence without you feeling the need to go for my throat?"

He let out a humorless chuckle. "I don't think that's possible, *Beasty*."

I ignored the jab, and the way he seemed to keep calling me *Beasty*. After

my accident, strangers would whisper that name behind my back, giggling and sneering, until it became my label. Now, my dear husband was using it against me in the most vindictive way possible.

But that was Killian Spencer for you. Lethal words. Dangerously heartless. Cold eyes and even deadlier vengeance seeping through his veins. Every time he used that name, I was left with another crack in my heart.

He knew that and he used it to his advantage.

I gritted my teeth. “Well, that’s the point of these dinners. To *make* it possible.”

“You’re gluttonous for pain, wife.” His deep voice wrapped around me and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Goose flesh peppered my bare arms. “The walls that hold you prisoner is of your own doing and your destructive need to make yourself miserable. Self-loathing, Julianna. You stink of it; it bleeds through your actions and seeps through your words. The high society will eat you alive and spit out your crushed bones.”

“Is that a warning?” I breathed, my hands shaking as I gripped my knife and my fork tighter.

“No, it’s simply a threat, Beasty.”

I knew that the chains around my ankles and my enduring penitence was of my own doing – Killian was right, but I never expected him to so easily read me like an open book.

He saw through my thorned cage and tore down my walls with a single observation. Killian left me defenseless, before taking his dagger and driving it into my heart – leaving me bleeding with his careless words and heartless epiphany.

Selene had been right.

He will dig under your skin, find all your flaws and shred you to pieces until your heart is bleeding at his feet.

I licked my lips and took a deep breath. “Your father has arranged for the masquerade ball, exactly a month from now. It’s our wedding reception and this time, you can’t walk away from me. Not when we have to prove to the high society and our friend circles that we are the perfect married couple. It’s a pretty façade, of course, but whether it’s a lie or not, we have to convince them that we’re happily married.” I gestured between us with my fork. “This is *practice*, Killian.”

“We have to be civil with each other,” he mused, a wicked grin on his lips.

“Civil and in love,” I amended.

He cut through his chicken and brought his fork to his lips. “There’s no love where there is hate,” he said, before popping the small piece of chicken into his mouth.

“There’s a fine line between love and hate, Killian.”

“Not for us.”

“Not for us,” I agreed. For the vows I took were sacred while his were tarnished with vengeance. Our love story was doomed from the beginning.

The rest of the dinner was silent, with only the sound of our cutlery against our plates echoed within the walls.

Once our plates were cleared, Killian pushed his chair back and he stood up, throwing his napkin on the table. “Are we done here?”

My stomach hollowed and I nodded. He walked away without another word, quickly disappearing around the pillars. Once he was done, I grabbed for my black veil, my fingers shaky as I pinned it in place, once again.

I didn’t know what exactly I expected to come from these dinners, the short time we were to spend together. Maybe I wanted a glimpse of the real Killian behind that cold, hateful exterior.

Or maybe I wanted *him* to see the *real* Julianna.

I wanted Killian to move on – to fall in love again, with a woman who deserved him more than I did. But here I was, making stupid decisions that were only bringing us closer than putting distance between us.

Though, the closer we got...

The harder it became to protect my lies and my secrets.

It was a dangerous game I was playing and if I wasn’t careful, Killian might just end up hating me even more.

For the truth was worse than my secrets – and our reality.



Killian

A week later

I downed the whiskey, feeling it burn my throat, but fuck, that was exactly what I needed. I dragged the comforter over my lap and leaned against the headboard. I must have slept for only two hours.

It had been a week since I came back to the Island, a week since I was living in the same goddamn place as Julianna, a week since I was forced to sit and have dinner with her.

Her presence taunted me.

I knew Julianna was trapped within her own heartbreak. I saw the torment in her eyes; eyes that looked so much like Gracelynn's.

Her grey eyes, like the smoke after the fire, after the burn... like the fucking ashes we were laying in. They got darker and greyer when she was angry. Those unique green speckles, sometimes they hid behind the grey, sometimes they were so vivid in her eyes.

Her fucking eyes remind me of... what I lost.

It was torture, watching the woman who killed my heart, walk around the halls of this castle, alive and breathing. Julianna carried Grace's ghost with her, mocking me.

The rage festered, growing darker... deadlier.

Her soul was so well entangled with mine, I could feel her torment and I *breathed* it. Her pain fed the monster lurking beneath my skin.

My phone rang, snapping me out of my thought, and after checking the caller ID, I picked up the call. "Dad," I greeted.

"You really thought you could fool me, Killian," he said in greetings, his voice slow and breathy. *Sick*.

My brows pulled up in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I have eyes everywhere, son."

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I've done what you asked me to do. She compromised with me and I allowed her. I'm being a gentleman, like you asked."

Dad clucked his tongue at me, in a dismissive manner. "Do you take me for a fool, Killian?" he asked, repeating his earlier words.

"No."

I heard a rustle in the background and I imagined he was still in bed. It was still early in the morning, after all. "Maybe in your dictionary, being a gentleman means humiliating your wife every chance you get."

My eyes widened and my stomach heaved. *Double fuck*. How did he come to know about this?

"What? How—"

He cut me off. "Three weeks left until the masquerade ball. Don't you

dare mess this up, Killian. You have three weeks to stop acting like a grumpy child and more like the man I expect you to be. I raised you better than that.”

I rubbed my temple, where a headache was starting to form. “Yes, I understand.”

He hung up and I threw my phone on the bed, fighting back the urge to break *something*.

My father was having me watched. Every single moment of my day was being reported back to him.

Goddamn it!

So, it was either Emily or Stephen.

Or could it be Gideon?



Four hours later, I found Julianna walking in the garden, taking her sweet time to check on the flowers that have recently bloomed. Today, she was wearing an emerald blouse, tucked into her pillowy white, ankle-length skirt. And of course, her black lace veil covered her face.

While Gracelynn’s hair was a platinum blonde, almost white in the sunlight, Julianna’s was black and shining. Gracelynn used to walk with an elegance, a sway in her hips, but Julianna walked with a limp. Her sister was modest and never argumentative, but my wife *fought* back, giving me a piece of her mind with everything I threw at her.

But it was all a sham.

Her strength was as fake as her, because I got a glimpse of the woman Julianna was hiding behind her perfect ruse.

Too bad for her, she didn’t realize that she was stuck here, on this island, and this was my kingdom but she wasn’t the queen.

Julianna was a martyr.

And she was trapped in this golden cage I had built around her.

I had her soul in my bare hands and Beasty didn’t even know it.

“Roses are beautiful, but their thorns can make you bleed,” I called out, approaching her from behind. “But you’d know that better than anyone, right?”

She straightened, giving the flowers one last look before turning to me. “You won’t bleed if you don’t mess with them. That’s why you don’t pluck

roses. Leave them be and they'll stay beautiful, without causing any lasting harm."

I clapped my hands. "What a beautiful epiphany, wife."

"What are you doing here, Killian?" she sighed. "It's too early for this."

I agreed, but to *please* my father – a dying's man last wish was for him to see his son courting his wife – I had to play along.

I presented her with my elbow, begrudgingly. "Take a walk with me."

Julianna squinted at me in suspicion. "Why?"

"You don't trust me?"

"No," she shot back.

"That's a wise and smart decision, Beasty."

She rolled her eyes. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to get me alone so you could slit my throat and dump me somewhere on the island."

"Now, that would be too easy," I drawled.

"You're an asshole," she hissed, before wrapping her fingers around my elbow.

"We've established that."

We started walking, Julianna matching my long steps without any complaint. When I noticed that her limp was more pronounced, I slowed down. "What are you trying to do?" she asked, giving me a side-eye. Confusion masked her voice, but it was her curiosity that had her asking the question.

"Civil and in love, remember?"

She inhaled sharply. "There's no one here though."

Or so she thought, my naïve wife.

I paused in front of a bush of roses, also bringing Julianna to a stop. One specific bloomed rose caught my attention. It was lonely amongst the other budded ones that were still waiting to blossom. It was the reddest of the roses I had seen so far, its big petals fluttering against the breeze.

It was pretty, so I plucked it.

"Wait, don't–"

Beasty was too late. I held the plucked rose by its stem, gesturing for Julianna to take it. "For you."

This close, I could see the way her lips thinned in displeasure behind her thin, laced veil. When she didn't take it right away, I grasped her hand in mine, pushing the rose into hers, forcing Julianna to accept the *gift*.

Our eyes silently locked, speaking in languages we didn't understand. My

lips twitched, she blinked – and I put the slightest pressure on my hold, pressing her fingers into the thorns.

“Ouch,” she gasped, releasing the rose and *trying* to snatch her hand away.

Blood seeped through where the thorn had pricked her index finger.

“Oops, I made you bleed.” I caught her hand in mine and brought it to my mouth. “Some people are roses, Beasty. Some people are thorns. Here’s the thing, you can’t turn a thorn into a rose petal. A thorn is a thorn, beautiful but unpleasant and painful at the same time. They mingle with the roses, but never let the thorns get to you. For once you’re pricked, you *bleed*.”

“They coexist, together,” she breathed. “What’s a rose without thorns? A wilted rose.”

My lips wrapped around her bleeding finger, sucking on the blood. Her grey eyes flared and Julianna didn’t make a sound. Her chest rose up then down, with the shuddering breath she took. I tasted her blood on my tongue, a subtle metallic flavor. My tongue circled the tip of her finger, laving over the tiniest wound. My teeth grazed her fingertip and I bit down until she flinched and whimpered. “There you go. All good,” I said, letting her finger slip out of my mouth.

She went to snatch her hand away, but I held fast. “We have eyes on us, Julianna.”

Her brows furrowed, before her eyes widened in understanding. “Oh.”

“Oh,” I echoed.

She plastered a fake smile on her face. “Your father,” she said.

My eyes flickered over her shoulder to find our stalker watching us. I nodded. “Play along, Beasty. It’s a dying man’s wish.”

“Who is it?”

“Gideon,” I answered, without needing her to clarify her question.

I tucked the flower into her hair; Julianna let out a barely audible gasp before I gripped her hand in mine, tugging her forward. We resumed our walk along the path of the castle’s garden. The royal people in the Victorian era sure loved anything fancy and grand. Who the fuck needed a seven-hundred acre garden?

Once we reached the fountain, the one sitting in the middle of the path, Julianna released my arm and limped over to it. With my hands shoved in the pockets of my slacks, I watched as she sat herself down on the flat surface of the fountain, stretching her legs out in front of her.

Our eyes collided before they locked with each other, in a silent battle.

Julianna was quiet for a moment, before she opened her mouth and ruined our peace treaty.

“What was your favorite thing about my sister?” she whispered.

My muscles tensed at her words. “You have a penchant for self-destruction, Beasty.”

“Answer the question.”

My chest tightened and I growled, “Her hair. It was unique, different... *beautiful.*”

Julianna gave me a bittersweet smile. “Do you think she’d love the new you? This Killian standing in front of me, right now? So full of rage and hatred.” She shook her head sadly. “She’d hate you more than anything.”

It was almost as if Julianna *wanted* me to *hate* her. She didn’t *think* before she spoke, bringing up her dead sister when she knew the reason behind my hatred was herself.

I stalked over to her and she gasped when my arm snaked out, too fast for her to act. My fingers circled around her throat and I squeezed, pulling her up. She stumbled into me, our chests colliding together.

Julianna let out a small sound and she fumbled, her nails digging into the back of my hand that was currently wrapped around her pretty neck.

“What is this new, stupid act?” I hissed, my breath fanning over her veil. “You’re digging your grave deeper, Julianna.”

My hand tightened around her throat, not enough to choke – I knew she could still breathe easily – but it was a warning. I saw fear flash behind the grey in her eyes and she trembled under my hold.

“What can you do to me that has not already been done?” she muttered softly.

“I am your karma,” I growled in her face. “I could tear you apart if I wanted.”

She breathed, her eyes still locked on mine, stubbornly.

“I’m in your soul, Beasty. I see you for who you are. A villain, my enemy – the reason behind my half-dead heart. I’ve made you weak; I’ve brought out your vulnerability and I’ve used it against you. But you’re so fucking naïve, still standing in front of me, with your stupid act, as if you’re strong. But you’re not, Julianna. I’ve seen the real you. The bleeding you. The you behind this veil, behind that façade, and you know who she is? A feeble creature with bones stained with sin, blood under her fingernails, and soulless eyes. I’m standing in the ashes of who you used to be, Beasty.”

Tears filled her eyes and I smelled her *defeat*; it was so potent that I tasted her defeat on my tongue. Her body went slack under my hand, the fight finally leaving her body. “And you know what’s laughable?”

A single tear escaped her eye, sliding down her cheek, hidden behind the veil.

“I haven’t even started yet. Your life is mine. Call me a monster, but you’re the one with blood on her hands.”

Julianna made a choking sound in the back of the throat, holding back a sob.

I released her and she stumbled back, shaking her head. “You’re heartless,” she cried. “Downright cruel; it’s almost inhuman.”

I watched her gasp, tears spilling down her cheeks before she spun on her heels and ran away, stumbling and limping into the labyrinth.

Fire flared inside me, hot and raging. She shouldn’t have baited me, shouldn’t have brought up her sister when she knew damn well what it meant to me. I raked my fingers through my hair, pulling until my scalp burned. From the corner of my eye, I saw Gideon walking toward me from a distance. *Fuck.*

This was the last thing I needed right now. Gideon questioning me and then reporting back to my father. With a growl, I rushed after Julianna.

Once inside the labyrinth, I called out for her. “Julianna!”

She couldn’t have gone far, but this was a dangerous place. Once lost, it was near impossible for her to find her way out. We’d be stuck in here all day and well into the night.

“Julianna,” I yelled loudly. “Call out to me.”

She didn’t.

I moved around the labyrinth, left and right, only to come across three dead ends and no sign of her. “Goddamn it,” I swore under my breath.

Tugging at the collar of my shirt, I snapped the first two buttons open. It was too hot today and here I was, chasing after my fucking wife – in a goddamn labyrinth.

There was a wounded cry to my far left that made me pause. When the sound came again farther away, but it still sounded like Julianna, I ran toward it.

There she was.

On the ground, as if her legs had given out on her. A wretched sob came out of her throat. “Stay...away from... me, Killian.”

I shook my head, approaching her slowly. “Can’t do that, Beasty.”
She sniffled. “We are toxic together. *Poison.*”

“I agree.”

Julianna brought a hand up, as if to ward me off. “Don’t come any... closer.”

It didn’t stop me. I paused when the front of my polished, leather shoes bumped into her ankles. I crouched down, coming to her level. “You’re my wife.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “A farce of a marriage. I remember your vows clearly, Killian.”

“*To hurt you, to break you... In health and in sickness, through sorrow and pain, for all the days in my life, I will be your worst nightmare,*” I rasped, bringing our faces closer. “*Till death do us part.*”

She crumpled under my eyes and watching her break *should* have brought me satisfaction. My sternum ached and there was a tight vice clutching my chest and squeezing my heart.

I didn’t care for Julianna.

But goddamn it, why did her tears remind me so much of Gracelynn’s?

I grasped her elbow, pulling her up, and that was when she went absolutely *ballistic* on me. Screaming at the top of her lungs and swatting at my hands, struggling against me. “Let me go!”

A breath lodged in my throat and I gripped her arm harder. “Calm the fuck down, Julianna.”

My words had the opposite effect. Her tiny fists slammed into my chest. “You’re a brute. I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

Her wails pierced through the air and I knew Gideon could hear them. The whole island could. I had finally broken through her walls and Julianna had lost her senses, letting her emotions swallow her whole.

It would have been a sight to be seen, watching her *break*, if I hadn’t been so *bothered* by it. But I didn’t let myself question *why* because, at the end of the day, it didn’t matter. Julianna and I were poison together, as she said. There was no cure.

Grasping her by the shoulders, I slammed her into the grassy walls of the labyrinth. “Shut up. Gideon will hear us,” I hissed.

“Let me go,” she screamed, clawing at my face. “You’re *hurting* me, you monster. Let me go!”

“Shut the fuck up!” I roared, gripping her jaw before I slammed my mouth

over hers, silencing her screams and swallowing down her cries.

Right over the fucking veil.

Julianna gasped and went completely rigid in my arms.

Her lips parted under the veil and I could *feel* her soft fucking lips. Her breath was warm and her hollow eyes flared with... *shock*.

My body pinned her up against the wall of the labyrinth, and her balled fists came to my shoulders, as if to push me away, but she *didn't*.

Her fingers dug into my muscles and Julianna whimpered under my lips, through the thin veil.

I didn't move. She didn't either.

The kiss was barely even a kiss.

One ruined moment.

Two simple breaths.

Three shattering seconds.

I pulled away and Julianna's legs gave out under her. Before she could crumble to the ground, I swept her up in my arms. She roved her eyes over my face, and without a word, she wrapped an arm around my neck and buried her face into my shoulder.

How ironic. To surrender herself into the arms of the monster she so despised.

It took me a long time to find our way out of this place, but I eventually saw the exit. With Julianna still in my arms, I walked out of the labyrinth.

I found Gideon standing there, an expressionless look on his face. I walked past him without a word and carried Julianna back into the castle, up the stairs and into her room. She didn't move once; her muscles barely twitching; she didn't speak. If I didn't know better, I'd say I was carrying her cold, dead body in my arms.

Or maybe I am...

She barely made a sound when I placed her on the bed. I straightened and she curled into herself. Her eyes blinked open and our gaze collided together.

"There's a fine line between love and hate, Killian," Julianna muttered, her voice soft and broken.

"Not for us," I said.

"Not for us," she agreed.

CHAPTER NINE

Julianna



A week later

I walked into the stables to find Killian brushing Cerberus's black coat. He ran his fingers through the stallion's mane and he spoke softly to it. I slowly backed away when both Cerberus and Killian's gaze snapped up to mine.

Oh well, too late to make myself scarce now.

His eyes rove over my riding outfit, from my black shirt, tucked into the waistband of my tight, brown riding trousers, down to my legs and boots. I ignored the way my stomach fluttered and I stalked over to Ragna.

I still haven't forgotten what he said to me a week ago, or what he did in the labyrinth.

That... *kiss*.

That stupid kiss.

To this day, my lips still tingled and the kiss was still seared into my brain. Alright, it wasn't a real kiss. My veil had been in the way, but I still *felt* his lips on mine.

Over the week, we were courteous with each other. Sure, he still threw in a few insults here and there, because he was Killian Spencer, after all. He couldn't be a gentleman without also being an asshole.

But I knew the only reason he was being 'nice' to me was because Gideon was reporting, every second of our days, back to Killian's father. So, we had to play a little game. A pretty lie and a perfect ruse.

To show Gideon and William that we were finally getting along, slowly falling in love and finally acting like a real married couple.

Except, the truth couldn't be further from that.

We were still very much volatile together.

Killian's hatred for me still simmered underneath his skin, waiting for the right moment to burst through. His rage still flickered in his dark eyes. His smiles were as wicked and as cold as the winter days. There was a darkness in him that called out to me. But there was nothing romantic about it, for I was neither his light nor his peace.

In fact, I was the exact opposite. I was the reason there was darkness in him. His dead heart was my doing and I couldn't undo it, not when Killian was still so hellbent on tormenting and exacting his vengeance.

I led Ragna out of her stall by her bridle.

Cerberus let out a loud breath and he perked up at the sight of Ragna. My mare strutted closer to Cerberus and they eyed each other with keen interest.

Like the tease she was, Ragna brushed her body against Cerberus and the stallion let out a snort in response. But Ragna was already prancing away.

My lips pressed together, holding back a laugh when my mare paused a short distance from Cerberus and Killian. Her attention was still on the stallion, but she was playing hard to get.

"You're being difficult on purpose, my love," I whispered to her, running my hand over her white coat.

"If your mare doesn't stop teasing my stallion, I will have to do something about it," Killian warned thickly.

"It's not Ragna's fault that your horse won't take a hint," I said.

Killian scratched his horse behind his ear and his voice had deepened when he spoke again. "Cerberus doesn't play games."

"And Ragna just wants some loving," I shot back. "Maybe if your stallion wasn't as grumpy as you..."

"Cerberus is fine the way he is," Killian snapped.

I rolled my eyes. I guessed he was protective of his horse. Like I was with Ragna. At least we had *something* in common.

I took in the sight of Cerberus. He was almost twice as big as my mare. His black coat was shiny and he was imposingly tall. His mane was long and silky, as was his tail. "He's a beautiful horse," I praised and I meant it.

"He is," Killian agreed, still brushing Cerberus.

I did the same with Ragna. "How did he come into your possession?"

"I found him as an injured foal about ten years ago. His front leg was broken and he was left to die in the snow," he explained, giving the stallion a look that could easily be described as adoration. "I fixed him up and he grew attached to me. Didn't want to leave when I tried to send him away to

someone else. So, I kept him. He was brought to the island about four years ago. I don't have much time to ride horses, anyway."

Of course, he didn't.

Killian was the heir to all of Spencer's foundations and businesses, including all the wealth that came with it. His father was slowly starting to retire and now that William was practically on his deathbed, Killian was already taking over. He was a busy man, after all.

"Grace used to be scared of horses," Killian said, his voice surprisingly soft. "You're not."

I swallowed against the lump that seemed to lodge itself in my throat. The fluttering in my stomach ceased and my muscles tensed. Every time Gracelynn had been brought up... my somewhat peaceful moment with Killian would fall apart, disintegrate into ashes.

And this time, Gideon was right there, tending to the other horses. He was within hearing distance and he was watching both us with keen attention.

Ragna lowered her head to me, bumping into my shoulder. I rubbed the side of her neck, giving her a gentle smile. "If you keep comparing Gracelynn to me, you'll continue to find that we're two completely different people," I whispered.

"I see that." His hoarse baritone voice reverberated through my bones.

I pressed my forehead against Ragna's. She let out a small breath and I closed my eyes, my heart feeling heavier than ever. "We are both miserable in this marriage, Killian."

He made a sound in the back of his throat, almost dismissively. "Miserable or not, you're stuck in this marriage, Beasty."

I hadn't been talking about me though. Guilt charred inside of me, simmering like lava inside my belly. Killian deserved better than this fake marriage. He deserved a second chance at love... even though, that woman wasn't me.

A shuddering breath rattled through my chest and I finally had the courage inside of me to say the one thing I had been dying to say since the day of our engagement.

"You're not as unlovable as you make yourself out to be," I finally spoke, feeling the way my chin wobbled and my hands shook. I peeked at Killian to see his nostrils flaring and his jaw tightening.

"The man my sister loved is still there, hidden somewhere underneath your skin and that cold exterior of yours. True, me and you can't ever be

together. Not with our tarnished past. But I hope one day, you can find love again. The kind of love that makes you a soft person and the kind of love that makes you want to be a better man. You deserve a love that's not stained with sins or ugly lies and horrible secrets."

He let out a chuckle, without any warmth, and so cold it almost gave me frostbite. "That's a pretty speech you have there, Beasty," Killian mocked. "Very well-practiced, I have to say."

Why was I even surprised that this was his response? I didn't exactly hate Killian, but while I was trying my best to get along with him, he was just making it so damn hard. "Why do you have to turn everything I say into something ugly?"

"Give me the heir I need, and we can go our separate ways," Killian responded coolly, as if it was just that – a matter-of-fact and not a life-changing decision.

I took a step away from Ragna and approached him and his horse. "Would you really let me go?"

He tsked, cocking his head to the side. "We'll live our separate lives, but I won't give you a divorce," he amended.

"Why not?" I asked, genuinely curious why he could live his separate life but he still wanted to be attached to me, in some way, even in name only.

"No divorce," he deadpanned.

"So, you can continue tormenting me?"

His lips widened with a wicked grin, so malicious, so cold. "Exactly. See, you're a smart girl. Why do you like to act so stupid sometimes?"

"Why do you have to act like an asshole, all the time?" I shot back, tempted to snap at him but I reined in my anger. One of us had to stay cool, one of us had to hold back because the last time we both lost control...

It ended up with my walls torn down, me sobbing in his arms... and him kissing me to shut me up. Whatever the outcome was, Killian Spencer always ended with the upper hand and I was left *vulnerable*.

"It's part of my charm," he drawled.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't find it charming at all."

As I grew closer to Cerberus, he eyed me doubtfully. I was right to call him grumpy. He didn't get along with anyone except Killian. Even Gideon was only allowed to bathe him and brush his coat. If the older man had as much as tried to mount him, the stallion would have bucked him off and not so nicely either.

Killian's eyes briefly darted to me before he went back to petting Cerberus. "When will you realize, Beasty, that I could care less what you think of me?"

"Tormenting me has really become your favorite hobby, hasn't it?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. Bitterness dripped in my words and even I heard them clearly.

My lungs squeezed the breath out of me.

"It's boring here, on this island," Killian responded, his voice shockingly soft, but I didn't let it fool me. Killian was a dangerous creature. "So, I had to find a new hobby."

"I'm pretty sure that was your way of calling me interesting enough to be Killian Spencer's hobby."

"Only you would turn an insult into praise."

My lips twitched with a ghost of a smile. "It's just a unique ability I was born with."

Killian let out a sound that sounded something between a laugh and an insult. Cerberus made a defensive snort, always angrily, when I got too close to him. I slowly started to back away, hands up in the universal surrender sign. "Easy boy, I'm not going to hurt you."

Killian paused. His eyes flickered past my shoulder and they widened, horror washing over his face. I dropped my hands, my heart dipping into my stomach as coldness washed over me, freezing the blood in my veins. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and...

It all happened in slow motion.

Cerberus let out a loud neigh, as if he could feel his master's tension and *fear*. He threw his front legs up, before slamming them down.

Killian ran toward me.

I stumbled away from Ragna.

A gunshot roared through the air, loud and clear, *paralyzing* me.

My husband slammed into me, spinning us around, and I tipped over. My eyes squeezed shut and I let out a piercing scream, bracing myself for the fall.

The moment I was flung onto the ground, my breath left my lungs with a loud whoosh and Killian collapsed on top of me. My back felt like it had been scraped raw and every muscle in my body tightened in pain.

I laid there, for a second too long, unblinking, unmoving.

I stared at the sky as my head spun and the world swayed.

A short whimper escaped my throat.

What... just... happened?

There were more screams and Gideon rushed past me, as I tried to understand what was happening. The scene, from the moment Killian's eyes widened to the moment he flung us onto the ground, each second of it flashed in front of my eyes like a black and white Polaroid picture.

We were shot at?

No, someone tried to shoot *me* from behind.

And Killian... saved me.

I brought a hand up to my face, my hand slamming over my mouth as I shivered uncontrollably. The pins holding my veil had come undone, with the lace fabric no longer covering my face. I *panicked*, a shuddering breath leaving my lungs, as my arm shot out and I blindly searched for my veil.

It was then I realized that Killian was laying still on top of me, his body weight crushing me into the ground. "Killian?" I whispered, but I was met with silence.

With all my might, I rolled him off my body. He let out a pained groan, his eyes clenched tightly. I ran my gaze over his face, before my eyes swept over his body to examine him. From head to toe.

"Oh my God," I gasped, when I finally saw the reason why he was in pain. His pristine white shirt was stained with... *blood*. "Oh God! No!"

I practically ripped open his shirt, searching for the wound. The left side of his stomach was covered in blood. A bullet wound.

Realization slammed into me and my body went so cold, my teeth clattered and I was shaking uncontrollably.

Killian didn't just save me from getting shot, he took an actual bullet for me.

I was trembling from head to toe when Gideon came back, crouching down next to us. "Are you okay, Julianna?"

"I – I don't know... he... Killian got shot."

I could feel the panic rising, like a cluster of sparks going out, flickering in the pit of my stomach. Gideon grasped my shoulders, turning me to face him. "Help is on the way. Calm down, little one. You're shaking."

I wrenched myself from his arms and collapsed on top of Killian. I gathered his face into my palms. "Killian, wake up. Open your eyes, please!"

I begged, sobbing.

I pleaded, wailing.

The tears spilled down my cheeks.

My breathing came out more rapid, more shallow. I had to remind myself to calm down, but I *couldn't*. Oh God! I tried to slow down the swaying, the spinning world, to do something my brain and my body could cope with. But the numbness took over.

“Killian...”

“He’s going to be okay.” The voice seemed to call out from far away, yet Gideon was right next to me. I couldn’t focus on him.

“He’s hurt. I – he’s hurt because of me.” My stomach heaved and I felt sick. “No, no. *No!*”

Frantically, I pressed my hands against Killian’s bullet wound. “I have... to... put pressure, right? Right? He can’t bleed too much. If he bleeds too much... He can’t. Put... pressure. Need to...”

My sentences were fragmented; my voice sounded lost and crazy even to my own ears. “Please... don’t die. Please. Please. *Please*. You can’t leave me too. Please. Killian... Killian. *Killian.*”

I didn’t notice that more people had arrived at the scene until arms were grabbing me from behind, pulling me off Killian’s body. He out a small groan, his eyes *finally* blinking open, but they were glassy in pain. It was almost like he couldn’t see *me*, like he was lost somewhere else.

“Killian!” I screamed.

But the moment he turned his face toward me, Gideon spun me around. Later, I would realize why he didn’t let Killian see me.

My body felt strange, *too* numb, *too* cold, shaking *too* much as the older man pinned my veil back in place. The pressure on my chest tightened, almost like it was squeezing the life out of me. That was exactly how it felt. Like the grim reaper himself dragging my soul out of my frail body.

I watched as two men helped Killian stand. He said something to them, but I didn’t hear their whispering. They walked away with my husband and my gaze darted to the blood on my hands.

Stained.

Bloody.

Tainted.

Messy.

I tumbled forward into Gideon’s arms, quivering and no longer in control of myself.

My mind was just... empty. *Numb.*

Darkness shrouded me.

And my body seized up.



Killian

“We found her,” Samuel said, walking into my room with a frown on his face and his jaw locked tight. “In the woods and she’s dead. Gunshot in the side of her head. It looks like suicide, there’s no other explanations. We didn’t find any other footprints in the dirt and there was no one else in the area.”

I remembered the scene so vividly. One second Julianna was bantering with me, and then I saw *her*. One of the maids – standing about ten feet away from the stables, gun in her hand, pointed at the back of my wife’s head.

Adrenaline still coursed through my body. Getting shot fucking *hurt*.

And Julianna could have seriously been injured.

Worst, she could have...died. That gunshot would have been fatal to her if I hadn’t gotten to her in time.

I didn’t know *why* that bothered me, when I could care less if she continued to breathe or not. But fuck, my body had acted against my will. The sudden and fierce need to *protect* her, I didn’t know where that came from. I blamed it on the adrenaline. I blamed it on the weakness of a moment.

Whether I loathed her or not, she was still my wife. Her name was attached to mine and people would question and whisper if she was found dead on the island while I was also here. *Killian Spencer couldn’t save Julianna*, they’d say behind my back.

Killian’s wife was assassinated in front of his own eyes, they’d whisper.

The common people would twist the story until the simple truths would become bitter lies. The high society would eat up the rumors and drag my name into the dirt.

The absolute look of lunacy on the maid’s face still flickered in my mind. I tried to sift through my memories, attempting to figure out if her face was familiar, if she was someone I knew – but I was drawing blanks.

The maid was *nobody*...

But why the fuck would she try to shoot Julianna?

And why suicide?

“I want every person on this island questioned,” I hissed, my wound burning like fucking acid had been poured onto my flesh. “And if words leave this island, if anyone else finds out about this, I will personally fire every single person in this place and I will make sure they never find a job anywhere else. Understood? Make it known. Warn everyone.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed. “Are you sure she didn’t try to shoot you? I mean, why Julianna? It’s possible she didn’t act on her own and was hired by someone else.”

“The gun was pointed at her; I saw it clearly. I wasn’t anywhere in range. I was behind Cerberus.”

Julianna had been the one in the open, vulnerable.

Goddamn it.

“Who the fuck tried to kill my wife and why?” I growled, fury burning through my veins. I was incensed.

“You seem awfully caring for someone who claims he hates his wife,” Samuel drawled, almost mockingly. He handed me a glass of water and I quickly gulped it down before handing the glass back to him.

“I hate her,” I said, reaffirming my feelings for Julianna.

Samuel raised an eyebrow in question. “Then why did you take a bullet for her?”

Samuel had been working for me for six years. He was my bodyguard – but not exactly. More like he just followed me everywhere. He was a *friend* and a foe sometimes, because while he didn’t usually question me, he also had a habit of speaking his mind without thinking of the consequences.

I was his boss, after all. But the bastard acted like he didn’t give a shit that I could easily fire him. Not that I wanted to. He was one the few people I actually trusted, but sometimes, he really got on my fucking nerves.

I held a hand over my injury, wincing only slightly as the wound burned. “Because she’s my wife.”

“I don’t get it. The more I try to understand your relationship with her, the more confused I become,” Samuel said, pulling his medical kit in front of him. “I’m gonna have to stitch you up without anesthesia.”

I unbuttoned my white shirt, that was now dirty and bloodied, to give Samuel access to my bullet wound. He was good at what he did, but this was going to hurt like a motherfucker without anesthesia.

Trying to distract myself while he got his stuff ready, I focused on his previous words. “Don’t try to understand mine and Julianna’s relationship.

What we have is nothing short of destruction. That's what we are together – pure chaos.”

My teeth ground together as Samuel removed the bullet and stitched the wound. I ignored the needle going through my flesh as the scene replayed in my head again.

“How's Julianna?” I practically gritted out as he finished with the last stitch.

“She's safe. Just shaken up a bit with some bruises and scrapes,” Samuel said with a sigh. “I already told you that; this is the third time you asked.”

“Her life is important to me.”

“Because your father–”

“Yes,” I barked. Samuel gave me a side-eye; he shrugged and closed his first-aid kit, after wrapping a bandage over the wound.

I balled my hands into fists and dragged the comforter over me. “Stop giving me that fucking look.”

He blinked innocently. “What did I do?”

My eyes started to droop and my vision blurred, my body growing weary. I could feel the sleep pulling me under, dragging me into unconsciousness.

My head snapped to Samuel and I cursed him and his stupid grin. “You fucking drugged me, asshole.”

“Sweet dreams,” he laughed.

CHAPTER TEN

Julianna



I woke up with a headache and my body was extremely sore, like I had been flung into a wall several times.

At first, I was confused.

Then, I was filled with dread as the memories came crashing into me.

Someone tried to shoot me; Killian saved me; he took a bullet for me; he was hurt.

Oh God. Who would someone try to kill me and *why*?

The island was supposed to be safe – it was, up until today.

A wretched sob escaped me and someone popped in front of my blurry vision, leaning over me. “Hey, little one. You’re awake. How are you feeling?” Gideon asked gently.

Panic threatened to seize me but I breathed, reminding myself to take small and deep breaths. I licked my lips and finally noticed that I was wearing my veil. I remembered now. Gideon had covered my face before Killian could see me and my scars.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice cracking.

“No need to thank me.” He waved a hand, dismissing my words. “How do you feel?”

“Sluggish,” I responded truthfully. “My head hurts and it feels like my whole body is sore. How’s Killian? Is he okay?”

He nodded in understanding. “He’s fine. Samuel was able to take the bullet out and Killian is sleeping right now. There’s nothing to worry about. But I’m worried about *you*.”

I swallowed and took in a shuddering breath. An invisible hand clutched my heart in its fist. “You *know*; you saw me,” I choked, my eyes growing teary. “I have no control over it.”

“You had a seizure, Julianna,” Gideon said softly. It felt like someone was

pounding a hammer into the back of my head and blood rushed between my ears.

Gideon grasped my hand in his and he gave me a gentle squeeze. “I won’t ask y—”

“The first time it happened was when I was ten years old,” I spilled out, practically choking on the words. “I had sustained a brain injury after falling off my horse.”

His brows furrowed. “You have regular seizures?”

“Not exactly.” I shook my head. “I used to, and they would be really bad. But I take medication regularly. I can better control it now, but epilepsy can’t be cured. It was wired into me and my brain. The last time I had a seizure was a month before Killian came back to the Island. It was a smaller one, not as bad as today’s. Emily and Mirai know. And now you.”

Stress and uncontrollable emotions were major triggers for my seizures. Sometimes I could better control them, but once I lose grasp of that tight control or if I ended up missing my daily medications... my seizures could get really bad.

Before I came to this island, only a handful of people knew of my condition, including my father, sister and Selene. I didn’t see epilepsy as a horrible thing; it was part of my life and I had learned to accept it at a very young age – but it was difficult for my father.

He saw it as a weakness – one that could embarrass him. So, I confined at home, in my room, within my four walls.

My father didn’t want anyone to know of my condition, and when I was younger, it was harder to control when or *where* I had my seizures.

Stress triggered them, and unfortunately for me, I stressed easily. And I was also an emotional person.

So, I became Julianna – the forgotten daughter.

“Does he know?” Gideon asked, breaking through my thoughts.

“No,” I said too quickly. “Please, Killian can’t know.”

“I won’t tell him,” he promised. “It’s not my business to get between husband and wife.”

I cracked a small smile under my veil. “And yet you report back to William Spencer...”

Gideon let out a low chuckle, not taking my words to heart, and I was glad he didn’t. “He’s my boss and I have to do what he tells me to.”

I finally propped myself up against the pillow, in a somewhat seated

position. “Are you sure Killian is okay?” I questioned, still feeling... guilty at the fact that he took that bullet for me. He didn’t have to; he hated me – then *why?*

He could have been seriously injured; it could have been fatal; he could have *died*.

The thought left a bitter aftertaste on my tongue and my stomach heaved almost brutally and I fought back the urge to throw up.

Maybe I was still in shock.

Gideon patted my hand. “He’s fine. Killian just needs to rest up for a few days.”

“Okay,” I murmured, closing my eyes because I didn’t have the strength to keep them open any longer.

My body was still weak and sluggish – but that was just a side effect of my seizure. I would also be sleepy for days, my brain mushy and slow. My body needed time to recuperate after such a stressful toll.

Unconsciousness dragged me deeper under, feeling sleepier than usual. Somewhere far away, I heard my door open and then close. Gideon must have left but I could barely move a limb. The last thought in my head before I passed out was...

Who would want me dead?



I limped down the corridor that led into Killian’s quarters. It was dark and eerily quiet, but I didn’t let that deter me from my mission. It was past midnight and I was hoping he was asleep; I just wanted to see him once.

Just to confirm he was okay.

I *needed* to see him.

He had been an asshole to me since the beginning, but I couldn’t exactly blame him when I was the villain in his story. And yet, Killian protected me when he didn’t have to.

I quietly opened his door, letting out a sigh of relief when I found it unlocked. Walking inside, I shut the door behind me and my eyes searched for Killian. The room was practically pitched black, with the exception of a dimly lit nightlamp.

I walked closer to the bed and found Killian sleeping in the middle of the

mattress. The comforter was lazily thrown over his hips and he was bare-chested, except for the white bandage.

Dusty hair peppered his chest and stomach, leading up to a single trail along his sternum – the rest was hidden under the comforter. Killian wasn't overly muscular; he was lean and built with wide shoulders and strong arms.

My gaze roved over his face. I took the time to admire his almost peaceful, sleeping face. Killian had defined cheekbones and three days' worth of dark stubble peppered his cheeks and sharp jaw. His Roman nose was slightly crooked and I knew he must have broken it at least once during his younger days. A few strands of his dark hair fell over his forehead and my fingers itched to brush them away.

Killian just looked so... *peaceful*, that I wanted to drink in the image of him and sear it into my brain, so I could carry it with me forever. There was no rage, no hatred simmering in his dark eyes and no insulting words spitting from his full lips.

His abs clenched as he sucked in a pained breath and his brows furrowed in his sleep.

I slowly lowered myself beside him on the bed, careful not to wake him up. My fingers brushed over the lines on his forehead and the deep frown between his eyebrows, smoothing them out. His lips parted and he released a soft sigh, still very much asleep.

"I came into your life, bringing tragedy with me," I whispered. "Love can kill while still keeping you alive to *feel* it. How deadly it is, how painful, how cruel."

My touch feathered over his cheek, running along his jaw. "If I could go back to change the past... I would have never willingly inserted myself into your life, if I knew our story would be filled with such venom. Our beginning was stained and our future is broken."

His lips twitched and he shifted in his sleep. I felt brave when I touched his lips, feeling their softness under my fingertips. I gasped when his arm snaked around and his fingers circled my wrist. My eyes collided with his sleepy ones, looking slightly confused and still very much lost in the world between awake and consciousness.

"Killian," I breathed, the pressure on my chest growing heavier.

He searched my eyes, before tugging me forward. It happened fast, even for someone half-asleep. Killian rolled over until I was under him, and he groaned in pain, his forehead dropping to mine.

My pins had come undone and my veil shifted, dipping below my neck and exposing my scarred face to Killian.

But it was dark enough he couldn't see the ugly, mangled flesh. That was the only reason why panic didn't seize me, why I didn't rush to cover my face.

Darkness shrouded us. Killian was barely conscious... this was *my* secret.

His gaze fell to my lips, and he lingered there for a second too long, his eyelids hooded. His harsh breath fanned over my mouth and gooseflesh peppered my skin. Sweat broke between his brows and I could see the shadow of pain on his handsome face.

"Killian." His name echoed from my lips.

He released a shuddering breath and then he did the one thing I didn't expect him to do. His nose brushed against my unmarred cheek and along the length of my jaw. Killian nuzzled me, his lips caressing my skin like the softest feather.

I *trembled*, warmth pooling in my belly. He lowered his body over mine and I didn't have any choice but to accept his weight on me. My legs fell open and he settled between the cradle of my thighs. We were chest to chest, hips to hips, all of his hardness against my softness.

Oh God.

I didn't come here for this...

But now, I *wanted* it.

The way his body pinned mine into the mattress, his breath on my skin, his lips whispering over my jaw with the gentleness of a lover's touch.

I want it.

No, that was a lie.

I need it.

When he leaned down to my mouth, my eyes fluttered closed. I needed this more than I needed salvation. More than I desired redemption.

Killian took my lips, stole my breath from my lungs and swallowed my whimper as I gave myself to him. He drove his tongue into my mouth, tasting me, licking me from the inside. My tongue met his in a tentative dance and I wanted to *sob*.

My fingers curled into his dark hair and I cried into the kiss. The man who hated me with such cruelty was kissing me so... tenderly. Almost affectionately. Like I was a fragile treasure in his arms and he wanted to savor me.

I cried because I knew...

Killian wasn't kissing *me*.

He was kissing the woman in his dreams, a ghost of his past.

I knew that, but I still kissed him back.

I stole his kisses because I was *greedy* and *selfish*.

So I took the kisses that didn't belong to me because I was intoxicated by Killian. Drunk on him. Ravenous for the way his lips moved against mine; the way his tongue felt on mine, plunging into my mouth, wet and *needy*.

I wanted to break under his touch.

To feel powerless against his kisses.

To surrender under his body.

To forget the lies and the secrets, for my truth had ruined us enough.

Killian let out a pained groan and our lips separated. I inhaled a deep breath when he slumped over my body, the strength leaving him, and he sunk into unconsciousness again. His face was buried in my throat and I felt his breath on my skin, warm and soft.

Such a sweet fantasy but also a cruel reality.

Killian and I were an unfinished story, with no happy ending in sight. For we were more than a tragedy. We were an impending calamity; we were nothing but ugly together, wreaking havoc on our own souls. With our bare hands.

"*I'm sorry.*" The walls and the ghosts of this castle heard my whisper, my pain seeping through those two simple words.

The secrets that were buried with my sister were catching up to me, quickly. The lies I had webbed around us were crumbling.

Because my truth was that...

I fell in love with Killian Spencer when I was seventeen years old.

But I only ended up killing his heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Killian



“Should you be out of bed?” Julianna asked, finally breaking through the tension. Our forks and knives against our plates had been the only sound echoing through the walls of the dining hall for the last five minutes.

I took a slow sip of the champagne, *Dom Perignon Rose Gold*. My tongue tasted the layers of sweetness, and then tartness with one single sip, tantalizing to my tastebuds like I expected any expensive champagne to be. “Dinner every night, for thirty nights. That was your compromise,” I said, placing my champagne flute back on the table.

This morning Julianna and I spoke about the damage that took place last night. She told me that she didn’t have any personal enemies and she truly didn’t know *why* someone would try to kill her. None of it made sense.

I thought maybe it could be an enemy of Bishop Romano or maybe an enemy of the Spencer’s, but to so foolishly try and attack Julianna in plain sight? None of our enemies would be so stupid to do so. They were more... *sophisticated* than that.

But with the only suspect now dead, we had no leads.

Still, I’d doubled the security around the island. While we were still in the dark, we didn’t know if the maid was just insane and acted on her own – or if there had been someone else behind the shooting. A mastermind.

Whoever it was though... they wouldn’t attack again. Not any time soon. And especially not when we were now vigilant after their first failed attempt.

My side, where the wound had been bandaged, still ached like a motherfucker. Every time I breathed, it felt like someone was poking the wound, digging their finger in there. And sitting up straight wasn’t helping either. Sweat broke across my brow and I gritted my teeth against the pain.

I missed last night’s dinner because Samuel fucking drugged me, but I heard that Julianna was practically passed out too and she missed dinner. So,

last night didn't count.

But I wasn't going to miss another dinner. A simple bullet wound wasn't going to stop me.

Not if Julianna would use it against me and come up with another shitty compromise, making me dance to her tunes.

Not that I thought she would...

And it was definitely not because I somewhat *enjoyed* dinner with her every night. Her banter and her in-depth discourse about politics and really, anything in between.

Yeah, maybe getting shot has fucked with my brain. Goddamn it!

Julianna wasn't a stupid rich heiress, like I had expected her to be.

In fact, she was quite smart about politics and business, so, over dinners, we had found a common ground. Other than throwing insults and going for each other's throats, we had chosen safe topics to talk about.

That was the deal, anyway. Wasn't it?

Dinner every evening, for thirty nights and we would try to get along. Well, granted that wasn't a success *all* the time... but we did get along, well enough that we survived each other's presence for the last two weeks without strangling each other.

Two weeks in her company and I was starting to see Julianna for someone other than Gracelynn's killer...

There was just so much heartbreak in her face, so much torment in her eyes – Julianna was already killing herself without me having to. She was self-destructing; her soul practically begging for more pain, more suffering, more despair.

A pretty fucking mess, under the black veil, expensive gowns and beautiful jewelleries.

"I wouldn't have held it against you if you skipped dinner tonight or tomorrow," she said. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

The three flower vases along the length of the table, sitting right in the middle, hid her face from me. I knew she removed her veil while we ate and I knew those vases were placed, in this specific way, for a reason.

I found myself frowning at her words, not exactly sure if she was calling me *weak*. Did she think that stupid bullet wound could bring me down? "I only got shot, Beasty. You're acting as if I'm dying."

"I'm acting like a *caring* wife," she informed me, with a slight quiver in her voice.

“Ah, yes.” I nodded. “Playing along. Civil and in love.”

Julianna released a tiny growl and I almost laughed at how *non-threatening* that sounded. “That’s not it. Why do you keep twisting my words, Killian?” she gritted.

I cut through my steak and shoved a piece in my mouth and waited until I had chewed and swallowed down my food before replying. Because respected gentleman didn’t speak with their mouth full. “Why? Do you want me to think that you actually care?”

She must have heard the taunt in my voice because Julianna dropped her fork with a clank against the porcelain plate. “I’m not heartless. You got shot because of me. Of course, I care!”

My brows pulled up at how affronted she sounded. “Would it matter?”

“What?” my wife hissed.

“Would it matter if I died?” I drawled, enjoying the indignation in her voice. “You’ll finally be rid of me, Beasty.”

That silenced her.

Even with the distance between us, I heard her sharp inhale. I imagined her tortured grey eyes, glassy with heartbreak. For once, I wanted to see her facial expression, instead of having to guess her emotions through her eyes. But her gaze always spoke what she felt. Julianna might have been a good liar, but her eyes never lied.

“You can’t die,” she finally whispered. “You *can’t*.”

My fingers tightened around my fork at her soft whisper and the cracks in her voice. “You sound quite heartbroken at the thought. You’re a good actress, wife. I’ll give you credit for that. A good actress, sometimes a good liar, but always the villain,” I said coldly.

“There we go,” she snapped, waving a hand between us. “Asshole Killian is at it again. I almost missed him.”

“I knew you’d choose asshole Killian over the gentleman. You really do have a penchant for pain,” I drawled.

“And you really need to take that stick out of your ass.”

“Feeling quite bold today, aren’t you?”

Julianna sighed. “Civil and in love,” she reminded us, her voice softening.

“Civil and in love,” I agreed.

After a few seconds of silence, Julianna spoke again. “Your father said that he’ll be here next week, a few days before the masquerade ball.”

I nodded. “Yes, I know.”

“How many guests are we expecting?”

Once my plate was empty, I pushed it away and placed my elbows over the edge of the table. With my chin over my laced fingers, I regarded the navy and white vase – for Julianna’s face was hidden right behind it.

“Around two hundred,” I surmised thoughtfully. “And these are only the ones that matter.”

“In the public eye,” she amended.

“Exactly.”

“This is important for both our families,” Julianna mumbled and then sighed in what I presumed was anxiousness. “It’s our first event together since our marriage. In fact, it’s the first time we will be seen together since the wedding.”

Since you left me at the altar. Julianna didn’t say it out loud, but nonetheless, I heard her silent accusation. I ignored it.

“They will find your insecurities.” The warning in my voice might have caught her attention because I saw her shoulders pop back and she straightened in her seat. “They will drag your flaws from under your flesh and dig deep into your soul.”

“Like you do?” she shot back.

“You’re my wife,” I said blandly. “I can do whatever I want but I won’t give anyone else the opportunity to do the same.”

“So, you’ll protect me from the vultures?” And now she was mocking me. How brave of her.

“I’ll protect you from the vultures and once we are alone—”

Julianna cut me off. “You’ll go back to hating me, I know.”

I clucked my tongue at her, a grin spreading across my face. “Glad we’re on the same page, Beasty.”

“A protector with bitter words and a callous heart. I guess I can’t be too picky.”

“We’re married. It’s not like you have a choice anymore.”

And that was it. The rest of our dinner happened in silence. Dessert came next and that was also eaten without a word between us.

Eventually, our plates were cleared away and instead of leaving the table, I stayed seated. So did Julianna. “Killian,” she breathed my name and I *waited*.

She seemed to want to say something, but was holding herself back.

While the vase hid her face from me, I still caught a glimpse of the scarred side of her face from behind the flowers. The skin was stretched tightly,

almost painfully over her bones, with jagged lines running down her cheeks. With all the money she had at her disposal, it made me wonder why she never tried plastic surgery.

Fuck, she could have had a whole new face if she wanted.

And yet, she only wore a thin veil.

It made me curious as to why...

Julianna didn't seem like someone who was self-unconscious of her scars, but then, why the black veil?

"Go ahead, speak your mind." I gave her the push she needed and gestured for her to speak.

I saw Julianna's hand flutter over her face and I realized that she was pinning her veil back in place. Julianna stood up and my eyes roamed the length of her. Black hair in a messy bun, her black veil and this evening, she had chosen a navy-blue gown with a diamond choker around her throat.

She took a deep breath and I watched as she debated with herself, to speak or to not speak her mind.

Her fingers fluttered over the veil and then her throat. Her nervousness was practically seeping through her actions and this was exactly why the high society would chew her up and spit her out. If she was lucky enough, they'd drag her through the dirt for a few months and then move to the next weakling. Or if she was unfortunate, Julianna would never be able to face these people again.

She wouldn't stand a chance against them.

And I couldn't allow that.

Especially not when the Spencer's reputation was at risk. My wife would have to hold her own and I would have to be her shield, while they threw stones at her.

A protector.

To the woman who broke my heart.

How ironic.

"For what it's worth, I know you don't care for my apologies, but *I'm sorry*," Julianna finally spoke, her voice considerably soft, I almost missed her words.

I blinked.

It took a second for her words to register in my brain and then it came crashing down on me. Confused, I only stared at Julianna for a moment.

She apologized, yes.

But it was something else that nagged me...

With her apologies, she had poked what seemed like a distant memory, triggering me into remembering my dream.

Last night.

I had dreamed of Gracelynn.

Kissing her.

Breathing her.

Touching her.

The dream had been so vivid, but it was always like that whenever her ghost visited me in my nightmares.

But it had been a long time since I dreamed of Gracelynn like that. So close, I swore I smelled her perfume. So fucking close, her skin had felt real under my tingling fingertips.

Her whisper... her voice...

In my dream, she had apologized. *"I'm sorry."*

I had been too drugged last night to make sense of the dream, and when I woke up in the morning, I buried the memories in the back of my mind, refusing to delve into them.

But now that I thought of it, it wasn't Gracelynn's voice in my ears.

My breath slammed into my throat, as realization dawned on me.

It was Julianna's voice in my dream.

It had been her apologizing and...

The kiss.

That dream wasn't a dream, after all.

My head snapped toward her as she started to walk away, leaving me at the table as if she hadn't been in my room last night... as if she hadn't invaded my dreams and stole kisses that didn't belong to her.

Fury simmered underneath my skin, lava coursing through my veins. How fucking dared she?



Julianna

I closed the door behind me, not even bothering to lock it, and practically crumpled on my bed. Killian didn't care that I apologized. I knew he

wouldn't accept my apology but I hadn't expected the look of pure rage on his face. Indifference, yes. Another insult, yes. Maybe him taunting me with his casual drawl but not... such crazed *fury*.

I had come to a point where it felt like no matter what I said or did, I would never get Killian to understand me.

Beg for salvation.

I did, on my knees, every night...

Atone for your sins. Repent.

Marrying Killian and staying in this relationship was my atonement.

Redemption is in the hands of the one you have wronged.

Too bad for me, the man I had wronged hated me with every ounce of his being. I had come to understand that maybe, I would never find the redemption I was seeking. Not in this lifetime anyway.

This castle was cursed, I had begun to believe, and I'd only end up like the other souls who were trapped here. Just another unfinished story, another ghost roaming within these walls.

My door crashed open and I startled, practically jumping off the bed. Killian stalked inside with mad purpose. His long legs ate the distance between the door and my bed quickly, his face a masked of pure, unadulterated rage. His eyes were pitch-black and his jaw tightened, the muscle in his left cheek ticking under the pressure.

"Julianna." His frosty voice echoed in my ears, and I froze in my tracks. "Did you come into my room last night?"

My eyes widened and my heart dipped to my stomach. Something shifted inside of me, an invisible vise squeezing my heart with thorny vines and I wanted to break free... but I *couldn't*.

Killian knew...

Last night had been my secret to bear – something impulsive I had done, but I didn't think it'd come back to me, chasing me with its ugly truth, or that I would have had to face it so soon.

My lack of response was answer enough for him. He approached me, his presence reeking of brutal vengeance and merciless death. As he bypassed the coffee table, he grabbed for the knife that sat on the tray of fruits.

A choked sound escaped my throat and I stumbled back against the wall. I put a hand out to ward him off, but Killian lunged forward, crowding into my personal space and pinning me against the wall of my room with the length of his body.

Warm and solid.

Both my protector *and* my tormentor.

I quivered when he placed the tip of the knife against my throat, holding it there. A soft caress, but so goddamn deadly. His dark eyes were almost inhuman with mania and restrained violence.

And for the first time, I truly *feared* Killian. He was capable of doing anything but the only reason he had kept me alive for this long was because of our marriage contract.

But now, I had gone and crossed over a boundary that had been put there when Killian had left me at the altar.

My skin rippled with goosebumps, and I gulped, hard. The knife shifted against my skin and my breath stuttered.

“You stole something that didn’t belong to you, Julianna,” Killian hissed, his hot breath fanning over my veil. “You shouldn’t have fucking done that.”

Even through the fear swallowing me up – even with the guilt coursing through my body, there was anger simmering in the pit of my stomach. At the total unfairness of all of this.

I wanted to scream at him to look into my eyes, to see the *real* me.

But Killian was so blinded by his pain and his need for vengeance, he couldn’t see what was right in front of him.

“Why not?” I found myself saying before I could think twice of it. “I’m your wife, aren’t I? I took vows in front of God and witnesses. *You* are my *husband*... and you’re wrong. I didn’t steal that kiss. You gave it to me and I took it because it is rightfully mine. That kiss belonged to me.”

Oh, the glacial look on his face and in his soulless eyes.

His lips curled up in a snarl. “I save your life once and you suddenly think you can do whatever you want, say whatever you want. I don’t know if I should call you brave or a fool.”

A wave of shame ran through me, digging under my skin and filling my veins with acid, but I pushed it away. I pushed it all away – the guilt, the shame, the disappointment, all the pain and despair – and I said things I couldn’t take back.

Words that turned me into the villain and gave Killian another reason to hate me more.

He had been right – I was *self-destructing*.

“And why are you such a hypocrite?” I let out a humorless laugh and the tip of the knife pressed harder into my flesh, not enough to break skin, but

enough to *warn* me. “Didn’t you do the same in the labyrinth? Why is it you can kiss me whenever you damn well want to but I can’t do the same? *Then*, I was your wife but *now*, I’m the villain. You are the most hypocritical man I’ve ever met in my life.”

His chest vibrated with a sound that rippled across the bare skin of my arms. He looked like the reaper, coming for my soul and dragging me into the depths of hell.

Killian dragged the knife over my throat before pressing the sharp blade into my flesh, with the tiniest prick. “This is your jugular vein. I could easily slit your throat and end this but you don’t deserve such an easy death. I will make sure you suffer more than my Gracelynn has.”

I batted his hand away and the knife dropped to the ground next to our feet. His nostrils flared and I pushed at his chest, balled fists thumping over his chest. “You think I don’t know?” I cried out.

I pushed him again, hard enough he stumbled back two steps. “You think it doesn’t hurt me? You think it doesn’t pain me? Gracelynn was my *sister* before she was your lover. I knew her far longer than she was in your life. I loved her far longer than you have and I was *there*. I. Was. There. In that fucking car.”

I stabbed a finger into his chest with every punctuated word. I didn’t care that I was making the situation worse. I no longer cared that Killian would probably hate me for the rest of his life. I no longer cared about *anything*.

Because I had come to realize that no matter how hard I tried to fix things, the blood staining my hands would never let me be a better person, for my sins were too heavy to carry.

“For hours, I was trapped in that car with my sister’s dead body while it felt like I was burning from the inside out. I was alive, breathing, yet dying a slow, *painful* death. Look at me!” I screamed, pointing at my veiled face. “Look at me. These scars are my reminder every day. I was *there*... crying for her to open her eyes. Begging her to say a word. Pleading for her to breathe. Just one more breath.”

The ache in my chest intensified but I wasn’t done yet.

My fist slammed into his chest. “You aren’t the only one who lost someone that night. I lost her too. And I lost *more* than you will ever know.”

Killian surged forward and I tripped over my feet when he slammed me into the wall again, his hand going to the back of my head and his fingers gripping my hair.

“Shut up,” he snarled. “Shut the fuck up, you maddening woman.”

I let out a choked gasp and my vision grew blurry, but I blinked the tears away. Not today. His head lowered, so we were eye-level. He was so close; I could taste him on my tongue. His bitterness. His rage. His own suffering.

“Show me who you were before I broke your heart,” I breathed, the fight finally leaving my body. I wanted to see the man behind the mask. I wanted to see the man who was *hurt*, not the man who sought vengeance.

Killian’s fist tightened around my hair, his knuckles digging into my scalp. I didn’t even wince. It didn’t even hurt. Nothing hurt anymore.

“He’s dead,” he growled in such an abrasive voice, and I *trembled*.

I gave him a bittersweet smile. “I don’t believe that.”

His eyes darkened and his lips twitched with a cruel smile. He brought our faces closer, his breath fanning over my lips through the veil. “I’m the monster you created, Julianna.”

Killian released me and took a step back.

“If you’re looking for something out of this marriage, Beasty... then *know* this, *remember* this, we are fire and water. A story laced with sin and resentment. We are incapable of being anything other than what we are *now*. Fire burns; water drowns. And that’s exactly what we are – a catastrophe.”

My knees weakened.

Killian’s eyes roved my veiled face. For a simple second.

My breath lodged in my throat.

He spun around and walked away.

I slammed a hand over my mouth and my legs gave out. I sunk onto the ground and let out a silent scream into my fist.

Our story was made out of broken bones, built on a splintered spine; the pages stained with blood and words cursed with devastation.

We were battle worn.

And perhaps... if we had met in another lifetime, our story would have been different. Less grief and more tenderness.

Perhaps in another lifetime...

We would have been *just* Killian and Julianna – without a past to hold us back.

Without tragedy in our veins.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julianna



Dear Husband,

Some days, loneliness claws at me.

What I feel for you falls somewhere between unyielding loyalty and a pain that withers my heart.

Whether it is love or whether it is pain, I am filled with only one thought.

I miss the taste of you, I miss the warmth of your embrace at night, and I miss your unloving eyes and your indifferent touches.

You have never looked at me with anything more than respect, only because we took vows and for I am your wife.

Your eyes lack adoration, your touch lacks tenderness and your lips lack love.

Therefore, over the years, I have accepted that I will never be more than a responsibility to you...

Yet, here I am.

Still craving you.

The loss of our child has me lonely, my dear.

I just want one thing.

Is it too much to ask?

I just want my husband.

- A

“**H**ey there, my love. Did you miss me?” I whispered to Ragna, running my fingers through her wild mane. “I haven’t seen you in three days. God, why does it feel longer?”

She let out a snort in response, bumping her head into my shoulder. “Yes, I miss you too. Has Cerberus been nice to you while I was gone?”

After my seizure the day of the shooting, my body needed time to

recuperate. I was sleepy and sluggish most of the time, feeling somewhat out of sorts. My muscles were still sore and I still felt like I had been flung into a wall several times and then stomped on.

The shooting and the suicide of the maid was still a mystery to me. My body trembled at the thought, so I quickly quashed the memory down. That was exactly what I had been doing for the last three days. Every time I thought of Killian running over to me, shielding me with his body, the sound of the gun going off... and then his blood staining his white shirt and my hand – it *triggered* me.

So, I chose to trust Killian when he said that he had doubled the security on the island and that he was digging deeper into the matter.

“Do you want to go for a gallop?” I asked my mare. I rubbed a hand down her side, feeling how powerful she was. “I miss riding you.”

Our eyes locked and we seemed to have an understanding. My sweet girl had missed me too. I grabbed her by the bridle and led her away from her stall. She chewed on some hay while I prepared my saddle.

The sound of footsteps approaching made me pause and I looked over Ragna’s shoulder to find Killian walking into the stable.

Without as much of a single word, I looked away and ignored his presence. We barely said a word to each other since the night in my room. We had dinner in silence and once our plates were cleared away, we’d leave the table without as much of a glance at each other. I saw him with Samuel a few times, walking down the corridor, deep in conversation and every time, I went in the other direction. The distance between us had grown far wider than before.

Perhaps it was better this way...

“Say goodbye to your mare, Beasty,” Killian drawled, his tone frosty.

My head snapped in his direction, pausing while I had been trying to strap the saddle on Ragna. “Excuse me?”

I had been so surprised he was speaking to me that his words didn’t even register to my brain and when they did, I felt myself grow cold.

His head cocked to the side and his gaze ran down the length of me, taking in the riding clothes that molded to my body from my chest to my hips and shapely legs. “Come tomorrow, she won’t be here anymore,” he elaborated with a deadly calmness.

I should have known. I should have been prepared.

When Killian was *this* cool and collected, nothing good came out of it.

I had come to prefer his rage over his calm.

My heart stammered. “What are you talking about, Killian?”

“I sold her. To the highest bidder. She’s currently worth 250,000 dollars.”

My hand froze in mid-air, as I was about to give Ragna a pat. “What did you just say?” My tone was deceptively soft, but I was feeling anything but. My mind ran with all kind of thoughts and the ground swayed under my feet.

“Am I going to have to repeat everything I say?” His lips tugged to the side, but his expression lacked the warmth of any humane emotions. “I said, I sold her. Say goodbye, Julianna.”

I shook my head, madly, and my hair flew in my face. Even though it was a pretty warm day today, coldness seeped through my bones. “Ragna is not going anywhere,” I said fiercely. “She’s mine. Your father gifted her to me.”

The only difference in his calm and collected posture was his nostrils flaring. “Oh, really? Well, that’s too bad. The sale is final.”

“You can’t!”

“I can and I just did.” Killian spoke with such finality that it *hurt* to hear. “Say goodbye. It’s your last chance, Beasty. I won’t be so nice about it again.”

“No,” I choked, wrapping my arm around Ragna’s neck. “You can’t. *Please.*”

Ragna let out an alarmed neigh, and I could feel her grow agitated. As if she was in tune with my emotions. As if she understood what was happening. My mare stomped forward, putting herself between Killian and I.

I let out a sob, hugging her tighter. *I love you. I love you. I love you, my favorite girl. My best girl. My sweet love.*

Killian snatched the rein from my hand, guiding Ragna forward and away from me.

“Don’t... don’t take her away from me,” I pleaded, my voice breaking. Ragna was the only thing I had left. My only companion. She understood me better than anyone else. I couldn’t lose her, not when I no longer had anything to call my own.

Killian smile cruelly.

His head lowered, his nose brushing against my jaw, over the veil. His breath fanned over my ear and his whispers left cracks in my already fragmented heart. “*Atone for your sins, wife.*”

My face crumpled and a sob escaped past the lump in my throat as Killian led Ragna away. My mare looked back at me, confused and alarm. She let out

a snort, throwing her head back, her beautiful mane flying into the air, as her tail lashed back and forth.

I clutched my chest, willing for the ache to go away, but the pressure built and built, growing more intense. Ragna and Killian disappeared and I was left alone in the stables, without my mare and with only a bleeding heart.

Atone for your sins, Killian had said.

But that was exactly what I had been doing for the last three years.

Atoning.

Until I became a forgotten daughter, an unloved wife and a lost woman.

The tears spilled down my cheeks, drenching my black veil.

Ragna was the only thing that truly mattered. The beautiful creature I dreamed of in my fairy tales. I thought that even though there was no prince charming in my story... or a happy ending, at least I had my Ragna.

Sure, I didn't have a knight in shining armor riding on a white horse to save me from this cursed castle and cursed story.

But I didn't need a knight in shining armor.

For I was the one who rode on the white horse.

And now... she has been taken away from me.

Snatched away, so mercilessly.

How unfair, how cruel, how heartless.

I sunk to the ground, my fingers clenching the grass where Ragna had stood, just mere seconds before. Her hooves had left imprints in the grass, the only proof that she existed, that she had been here.

My Ragna.



Days had passed and I felt myself drifting further from reality. It was absolutely terrifying, to feel yourself lose control of your own mind, your own emotions and your own body. To suffer in silence, to breathe through a broken heart – the kind of deep suffering that changes who you are from the inside.

You become adrift, lost in a vast ocean of... nothingness. How could emptiness be so heavy?

To feel so unworthy of love, to feel so... *lost*.

The first time I had found myself in a confession box, spilling my fears to

the Priest, he had said, *atone for your sins. You will find salvation.*

And so, I had been doing that. For the last three years.

Yet, my salvation had only come with more heartbreak.

“Julianna?” The sound of my name being called out had me flinching.

I blinked and turned toward the owner of the voice. William Spencer. His fork had paused mid-way to his mouth and he gave me a concerned look.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

I licked my lips and shook my head. “No, I’m sorry. I got distracted.”

My father-in-law granted me a small smile. “Have you chosen your gown yet?”

Right, the masquerade ball. The reason why William came back to the Island. Three days from today, the ball would take place. The castle was more active than ever as arrangements were being made. *Nothing should be lacking*; William had strictly said. Including me.

It was going to be my first official appearance as Julianna *Spencer*.

I had to dress accordingly; I was expected to smile, to mingle, to laugh.

And to show the world just how in love my husband and I were.

An imperfect marriage but a perfect lie and a pretty façade.

William’s eyes darted between his son and me. His lips thinned when he noticed how rigid my shoulders were and just how tensed Killian was. We were sitting next to each other at the dining table, while William had his late lunch.

Killian and I had already eaten – *separately* – before his father had arrived on the Island an hour ago.

Our chairs had been pulled closely together, our shoulders touching, as if to give the perfect picture that we were one team. *Civil and in love*.

“Yes, I have chosen a gown already,” I said, keeping my tone mellow. The hand on my thigh tightened in what I assumed was... *satisfaction*.

My thigh burned under his touch, even though my dress kept him from touching my bare skin. I eyed Killian from the corner of my eye, watched him smile at his father as if everything was right in our marriage life.

Since he took Ragna away, a week ago, I barely even spoke a word to him. Selene had been right to warn me about him. She told me Killian would drag out all my vulnerabilities and use my weaknesses against me. I had been a fool to think that I could handle Killian Spencer and come out of this battle unscathed.

A fool who had been in love.

A fool who believed in second chances in life.

A fool who had thought she'd find redemption.

But I wasn't foolish to think that Killian was done with me. No, he still found ways to insult me, to humiliate me, to take away all the little things that made me happy.

William went on about the masquerade ball, telling us how he expected the night to go and then the conversation had moved to their work, talking about Killian's upcoming campaign for senator, which had nothing to do with me.

So, I sat back against my chair and just nodded along.

But even then, Killian didn't grant me peace. He really was a thorn stuck under my flesh. His thumb circled my knee and I frowned. What the hell?

His touch was tentative, almost *teasing*. Shocked, I found myself growing still as his fingers drifted past the slit in my dress, until his callous hand was on my bare skin. Gooseflesh peppered my skin and my breath hitched.

Oh God. What was he doing?

My eyes darted to William, but he was unaware of his son's intention. I gripped the table's edge when his fingers inched higher toward the juncture of my thighs.

My legs clenched, only to end up trapping his hand between my thighs, and Killian *grinned*.

I should have stopped him. I *really* should have, but it was the way he caressed me that made me pause. Tenderly. Deceptively gentle. Teasingly.

Aside from the two kisses we had shared, Killian hasn't touched me in any other way. He had told me very early on that he was disgusted by the idea of touching me; what changed now?

So, I knew... for the sake of my own sanity, I should have stopped him.

But I didn't.

Because I was glutton for punishment.

And because even though my husband was a brutal man, I *craved* his touch. Filled with longing, I allowed him to do as he pleased.

Call me weak; call me spineless – but you wouldn't understand. I had my reasons.

I let out a barely audible gasp when Killian reached my satin panties. My belly pooled with warmth and my core tightened, feeling suddenly so *empty*. When was the last time I enjoyed my own pleasure and brought myself to orgasm? I couldn't remember...

Maybe it was the fact that I hadn't been touched for so long, or perhaps it was just because I craved intimacy so much – I was *aroused* beyond belief.

To be touched by this cruel man and to allow myself to enjoy it, while his father sat there, eating lunch and conversing with his son – I really was a fool.

Killian dragged his index finger over my wet slit through my panties. My heart hammered at the delicious sensation rippling through my body. Carefully, he tugged my panties to the side and cool air wafted over my fevered flesh, wetness dripping between my thighs and down the crack of my asshole.

My breath hitched when his fingers brushed against my core. Holy shit. Oh God! With exquisite tenderness, he parted my wet folds, his thumb grazing my hardened nub. A soft whimper left me and I bit my lip, holding back the moan that threatened to escape my throat.

Stop him, my mind screamed.

Don't, my body begged.

It felt so good, even though it was so wrong. I wanted to cry; I wanted to plead for mercy; I wanted him to stop, but I needed him to *continue*.

I sounded maddening even to myself. So, how could I ever explain myself to anyone? To make them *understand* me?

The pulse between my legs was almost unbearable at this point and I feared that I might just orgasm at the table. How horrifying, yet still... I didn't stop Killian.

It was like all my senses had left me and I was left with a greedy body that needed his caress more than anything.

Killian continued his conversation with his father, with all the epitome of calmness. He was so *contained* while I was so... out of control.

His thumb moved in circles, massaging my flesh, a knowing smirk plastered over his lips. My clit swelled and throbbed under his thumb as he rubbed and pressed against the bundle of nerves. White hot pleasure ripped through me. There weren't butterflies in my stomach; it was pure fire burning through my veins.

My hips moved against my will, chasing his caress with my wanton need. I could feel just how wet and sticky I was.

My thighs quivered and my body tightened, on the precipice of orgasm. Almost frantically, I grasped his wrist, forcing him to stop. Killian's knowing fingers slowed to a pause, but he kept his hand between my legs, inside my

panties.

I was still on a high, drugged with lust and needy with desires, when Killian lowered his head, so he could whisper in my ears.

“My fingers were just inside another woman. Her cunt juices are now smeared all over yours. I’m not a loyal man, Beasty, but by letting me touch you... you just downgraded yourself to a *common whore*,” he rasped, repeating the words I had said to him.

And that was when my world came crashing down, reminding me that while I had been craving his touch, it had all been a pretty deception.

Fool me once, shame on you.

Fool me twice, shame on me.

*Fool me thrice? Shame on me **again**.*

Like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over me, the fiery hot pleasure coursing through my veins doused down, until I was shaking for a whole different reason.

“I’m sorry,” I choked, pushing the chair away from the table. Killian’s hand slid out from under my dress and with his other hand, he brought his flute to his lips, taking a slow sip. All nonchalant, without any remorse. “I have.... I’m not feeling quite well. I think I need to lay down. Excuse me.”

A concerned look flashed over William’s face, but I was already walking away, my legs trembling.

The moment I was in my room, I lunged toward the bed. But the wrinkled and torn papers on my mattress stopped me in my tracks. I had spent all morning reading through Arabella’s words again. Lost in her past, so inevitably intrigued by a ghost that I had forgotten just how tragic my own story was. With a deranged wail, I swiped a hand over my bed, shoving all of Arabella’s letters and poems onto the ground.

I fell onto my bed, shoving my face into my pillows and letting out the scream I had been holding. I screamed until my throat was raw and dry, until I couldn’t breathe. How stupid I had been. How foolish I had acted.

I could almost hear Arabella clucking her tongue at me in sympathy.

Go away.

I slapped my hands over my ears, shutting everything out. I was locked away in an ancient castle, with the ghosts of the past coming to haunt me. The old love stories didn’t survive in this cursed castle. How did I think mine would?

Killian’s hatred for me was unstrained... boundless...it was a never-

ending calamity of soul-wrenching malice and rage.

Loving Killian Spencer was a death sentence. What we had, it was a catastrophe in the making.

It wasn't like I expected a happy ending, anyway.

I didn't deserve a happy ending. I was the villain, after all.

A wretched scream left my throat, spilling into my pillows.

My door creaked open and I sucked in a harsh breath, swallowing my cries before I peeked up from my pillow to see Killian coming into my room. *Oh God, please. Have mercy.*

"Get out of my room, Killian." I pointed at the door, my tone frosty and without any emotion. "You're not welcome here."

"Why are you so angry, wife?" he taunted, closing the door with his feet. "You're acting like your panties aren't still soaked with your juices and that my hand wasn't just up in there."

He brought his hand up to his nose, inhaling with a wicked grin. "My fingers still smell like your cunt, Beasty."

My nostrils flared at his crude words. The calmness that existed inside of me for the last three years was gone, disappearing with a single moment. I heard something snap inside of me. I *felt* it.

"If you *dare* touch me ag—"

Killian chuckled. "If I want to fuck you – whenever, wherever and however I want, I will. If I want to hurt you, I will. You are my wife, Julianna. You took vows. To love, to cherish and to obey... till death do us part." His head cocked to the side, regarding me with such contained ease, it made me *mad*. "Do you remember *my* vows, wife?"

He took a step further inside my room, but I was done. So fucking done with him and his games. I bounced off the bed, shaking with fury.

I ripped through the laces of my bodice until my bra-clad breasts spilled out. His eyes flared with surprise and his jaw tightened, but I wasn't finished yet. If Killian thought he had such control over me and my body, then I was going to prove him wrong.

"Go ahead. Fuck me," I hissed, my voice dripping with venom. "Do it. But know... I will *never* give birth to your child if you force me."

My words stalled him. I finally got a reaction, breaking through his cool composure.

"You'll hurt my child?" he said, his voice deceptively soft.

I nudged my chin up, meeting his cold eyes without as much of a flinch.

“Yes.”

“You’ll kill another innocent life because of your selfish needs?” Killian sneered.

I laughed bitterly. “No, I will save my baby from having to have a monster as a father.”

That made *him* flinch and I realized that I had hit right where it hurt.

I stalked closer, feeling *truly* brave for the first time since the accident. “And from having to live a life filled with vicious hate. No child wants to find out he or she was conceived through rape. I’ll be doing the baby a favor because you’re not worthy enough to be my child’s father.”

We glared, fire burning between us until we stood in the ashes of what we used to be. His fists clenched at his sides, and then I saw the moment he chose to ignore my words and to turn the tables around again, in his favor.

But it was too late, for I already knew his weakness. I might have been battle worn, bruised and bleeding, but I have had enough of being Killian’s plaything. Atonement or not.

“Ballsy,” he mocked. “I have to say, I’ve missed your sharp tongue over the last week. You were too docile for my liking.”

“You got what you wanted. You humiliated me over and over again—”

“And yet you’re still standing here, with raging grey eyes and spitting fire.” He gestured toward me, where I was still in the state of half-undress.

“Because you can’t break what’s already broken,” I snarled through my veil. “How many times do I have to tell you this before it gets through your thick skull?”

He grinned, almost like he enjoyed seeing me snap.

When he took a step closer, I put a hand out in warning. “Take another step toward me and I will *scream*.”

Killian quirked an eyebrow in response. “Go ahead, Beasty. Be my guest. Scream as loud as you can, I dare you.”

If I wanted to win this battle, I had to play dirty. Like Killian had done to me multiple times. He had pushed so many of my buttons, that I had come undone and I didn’t know how to *stop*.

With jerky fingers, I laced up my bodice again. “You know what your problem is, Killian?” I said, my voice growing considerably soft.

Surprise flickered in his eyes and I *smiled*. “You’re not tormenting me because you want to avenge Gracelynn’s death. No.” I shook my head with a bitter laugh. “You needed someone to bear the brunt of your anger and your

own suffering. You used the fact that I was guilt-ridden over my sister's death and because you can't be happy in your life, you want everyone else around you to hurt. And I was the sacrificial lamb."

A shadow covered his face and I saw the moment his eyes grew darker, and for the first time, not with rage – but with something else. I had finally found the cracks through his cold, steel armor.

"It's not about vengeance any longer. It's not even about Gracelynn's death anymore," I continued, pushing through because I was finally in his head.

"It's purely about your ego, your arrogance and your need to blame someone else over the fact that you failed at protecting your lover. You weren't there when she needed you and that eats you alive. But you know what? Instead of trying to work on your own issues, you are so set on making *me* miserable, not realizing that it also makes *you* miserable. How fucking ironic, is it?"

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing with the hard gulp. "Are you done? Are you fucking done with your goddamn speech?" he barked, but I didn't miss the quiver in his voice.

Killian lunged forward with a snarl and slammed me into the wall. His body was on me, pinning me against the wall. I expected him to retaliate. I awaited his vicious words, but when his forehead dropped to mine and his wine breath fanned over my face, through the veil, my heart seized up.

"I will never forgive you for this," Killian whispered.

There was the crack I had been waiting for and I finally sunk through, fighting my way deeper. Under his skin and into his flesh. I was in his mind, delving into his broken heart and holding his shattered soul together with threads around my fingers.

I shook my head, a bittersweet smile on my lips. "You're not a bad person. I remember the man my sister fell in love with and that man is still there, buried underneath all that ugliness. You just need to let go, to accept that Grace is dead and to move on, Killian."

Killian clenched his eyes closed and he took a shuddering breath, his chest pressing into mine. "*I hate you.*"

"I know," I murmured.

His fingers circled my hips, digging into my skin but not to hurt. More like he was hanging on to me. Like he needed someone to ground him to the present, in this moment. "Grace would have hated the man I had become."

My chest *ached*.

My hand came up to his shoulder, my fingers inching to the back of his neck and then his head. My nails scraped over his scalp, the softest caress, the way he liked it. “Grace would have forgiven you if you had promised her to move on.”

His grip tightened on my hips. “She was the only good thing in my life,” he rasped.

As if Killian had finally realized what he was doing, he stumbled away from me. I watched him run a hand over his face, his eyes squeezed shut, his expression *pained*.

I reached for him, but pulled back right before my fingers could brush over his hand. He took a long, deep breath before his hand fell from his face.

Our eyes locked.

One painful moment.

Two shuddering breaths.

Three broken seconds.

That was how long Killian allowed me to see what he had been hiding behind that cold exterior. The pure misery in his dark eyes.

And then he blinked and it was gone.

Without a word, he spun on his heels and stalked away. I watched him leave, feeling the most painful ache in my chest. My stomach was hollowed and the room swayed beneath my feet.

“Julianna,” Killian said, one foot over the threshold of my bedroom and the other foot still inside. “Three days from now, our thirty nights are over. As per your compromise, we will fulfill the contract, however long it takes, and once you’re pregnant, we’ll go our separate ways, courteously.”

There was no taunting.

No sneers.

No Beasty.

My throat closed, but I found myself nodding. “Deal,” I breathed.

Killian walked away without a second glance.

Once he was gone, I crumpled to the ground and I let the tears fall, not holding back my cries. I let the pain wash over me, felt every crashing wave until my bones were shaking.

I had finally accomplished what I had set out to do.

I’ve torn through Killian Spencer’s façade.

And *now...*

He could move on.
With someone other than me.
But he'd find love again with someone worthy of him.
And that was all that ever mattered.
Since the beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Killian



The ballroom bustled with voices and laughter. I've heard over a hundred *congratulations* in the last twenty minutes, followed by handshakes and stiff smiles. The curiosity flickered in their eyes, but I did what I was best at.

Eye contact was the easiest and most powerful way to establish yourself in a crowd of vultures and gossipers.

Deliberate eye contact made the other person nervous.

Steady eye contact put me in control – and that was exactly what I did. I dominated the ballroom with my gaze, unflinching, calm and contained. They'd smile shakily and look away first, yielding to me.

At a very young age, my father had taught me how to place myself into political circles and how to make them bend to me and for my advantage. That was exactly why the Spencers were now one of the most influential families in the United States. My father was about to leave a legacy behind, a responsibility that now fell on my shoulders.

A legacy I had to continue... and my *heir* would be expected to do the same.

Bringing the champagne flute to my lips, I took a slow sip and nodded along at what Senator Richard Machias was saying. He was talking about a recent division in the Senate that had put all the members in a difficult position.

Anything political was messy and chaotic. Some were spiteful and just plain nasty and then we had a bunch of them who just didn't have any idea what the fuck they were doing.

"Killian–"

Richard said my name, but when the ballroom grew silent, buzzing with antsy energy, I instantly knew *who* had stolen everyone's attention.

I looked over to the entrance of the ballroom and my eyes found her.

There was a *breathless* second.

It *confused* me.

The way my heart seemed to *ache*.

Or the way my stomach dipped at the familiarity of this very scene.

Before these uncalled emotions could take root, I shoved them away.

Buried my feelings underneath my bones, because I'd rather *not* feel at all than feel *too* much.

Julianna Spencer walked in, her shoulders set straight, her chin nudged up as she regarded the room with a regal look, a confidence I had never seen before. But only I saw the slight quiver of her hands as she buried them in her sleeveless, floor-length dress.

Julianna wore a wine-red gown – with a sweetheart neckline that dipped dangerously too low. The satin bodice was a deeper color, cinched tightly around her waist in a corset style. The rest of the gown was flowy and heavy with multiple layers of tulle.

Her hair was put up in a simple bun, with a few stubborn curls framing her face. The heavy diamond choker around her neck gleamed under the chandeliers. But it wasn't her bold choice of gown or the expensive stones around her throat that caught my attention.

It was the fact that Julianna had forgone her black veil.

In its place, she had what appeared to be a custom-made lace and feather masquerade mask. The left side of her face was covered completely with the mask, while the other half of her face – only the right side of her lips and her jaw could be seen.

Whispers filled the silence and Julianna took a shaky step forward. I placed my flute on the tray of a passing waiter and strode toward my wife, who clearly looked like she had been dumped in the middle of a warfare.

The moment I reached her, her hand snaked out quickly and her fingers circled around my elbow, practically leaning her body weight into me.

My brows furrowed when the top of her head reached my shoulders, instead of my chest. "Are you wearing heels, Julianna?" I asked slowly.

She gave me a jerky nod.

"Are you fucking serious?" I hissed. "I thought you couldn't walk in heels because of your limp."

"I can't," she breathed. "But I've been practicing for the last six days. I didn't want to be found lacking by these people. And apparently, heels are the way to go when it came to masquerade balls and gowns."

My arm curled around her waist. “For fuck’s sake. They’ll find a reason to talk, alright. When you faceplant on the floor and embarrass yourself.”

Her hand tightened around my elbow. “You won’t let me.”

No, I wouldn’t.

Because embarrassing herself meant embarrassing *me*.

I could feel the stares of the guests burning holes into my back. My head lowered and I placed a chaste kiss along the length of her unveiled jaw, her skin soft under my lips. “How do you expect to walk and dance in these heels?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Julianna let out a small nervous laugh. “But I trust you won’t allow me to embarrass myself. So, dear husband, good luck.”

“You. Are. Such. A. Maddening. Woman.”

The right corner of her lips curled up. “And so, I’ve been told.”

It was the first time I had seen Julianna without her veil. Granted the black mask covered most of her face, except the right side of her lips and jaw...

But it was still something.

Her lips were full and soft, painted a deep red. *Familiar*.

From my peripheral vision, I saw both my father and Bishop Romano watching me carefully. “Your father is here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Julianna?”

“Just give me a second.” She took a deep breath and released a shuddering exhale. “Okay, I’m good now. Let’s show them how good of an actor and actress we are.”

“Civil and in love,” I said.

“Civil and in love,” she whispered.

That moment in her bedroom had cleared the bridge between us. Julianna had been correct in everything she had said to me, practically spitting venom in my face and hitting me right where it fucking hurt.

It should have made me more enraged, but it only doused the fire coursing through my veins. Sure, I still hated Julianna. She was still to blame for Gracelynn’s death and that would never not to be true.

But for the first time in three years, someone other than Grace had looked into my soul and saw *me* for who I was.

How ironic that that woman turned out to be the reason why my heart was dead.

As much as I found vast differences between the two sisters, there were

also too many similarities. How could two people be so different yet so alike?

It confused me.

It maddened me.

But insanity was just another word for tragedy. Because no insane lovers ever ended up with a happy ending.

And that was exactly my story – something half-written, left incomplete with the hopes that there would be a different ending in another lifetime.

Julianna and I couldn't ever be together. Our marriage began as a contract, stained by Gracelynn's blood and crumpled under my need for vengeance. We were poison and there was no antidote. We were too toxic together for us to be anything other than what we were now.

Husband and wife – in name only.

But at least we had found a middle-ground. Something we both agreed on.

An heir was needed.

And once that job was done, we would go our separate ways.

Until then, we would be... *courteous*.



Julianna

My fingers clenched around the curve of Killian's elbow as he guided me around the ballroom. His long legs were taking shorter steps, purposely matching my own shaky ones. I leaned into his side, feeling the strength in his body and he took my weight without any complaint.

Killian introduced me to the guests, one by one. All the names became jumbled in my head, until all I was doing was nodding and smiling along. Playing the perfect Spencer wife. My cheeks were starting to ache, but never once did my smile waver.

Once we had made our introductions, Killian guided me toward the far end of the ballroom. Away from everyone. He grabbed a flute of champagne, handing it to me. Even through the simple black masquerade mask he wore, I saw the grim look in his dark eyes and his lips thinned. "How are your legs? You're starting to limp more heavily."

If I didn't know better, I'd say he sounded like he cared. But I knew better, so I didn't let his words deceive me.

“Shaky, but I’m okay.”

“Don’t lie,” he deadpanned. “You’ve practically been leaning all your weight on me.”

“And you didn’t let me fall,” I snapped quietly. “Thank you for your kindness, husband.”

His arm curled tighter around my waist. “Stop antagonizing me, Julianna. You know very well how that will end.”

My eyes darted toward three of the guests who were looking at us carefully, practically drinking in our postures and probably listening to what we were saying. Goddamn it. I hated these vultures. They were looking for something to gossip about.

I took a deep breath and smiled up at Killian. “You didn’t tell me how I looked this evening? Do you like the gown? It’s your favorite color.”

Killian’s gaze met mine, his dark eyes flaring in surprise. I watched his Adam’s apple move as he swallowed. His head lowered, his cheek brushing against my mask. To someone else, this would have looked romantic and intimate.

“If your neckline was any lower, your nipples would be on display,” Killian rasped in my ear.

I asked for a compliment and I got a criticism instead. What else did I expect from my husband? Rolling my eyes, I dug my nails into the inside of his elbow. “That would be scandalizing, wouldn’t it?”

“All the more enticing.” I turned toward the voice that intruded our intimate exchange to find a man with dark hair, brown eyes, and a smirk on his lips. “I have to say, you look absolutely ravishing.”

“Watch it,” my husband growled.

“Oh, c’mon. I never took you for a territorial man, Killian. I’m just admiring your wife,” he drawled with a hint of a British accent.

“And you are?” I asked, eyeing him up and down. He was a big man, taller than Killian and with broader shoulders. But oh, his smirk was just as arrogant as my husband’s.

The man reached forward, and his hand practically engulfed mine – his brown skin, a stark contrast to my pale hand. He brought my hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. His lips lingered there for a second too long. “Gabriel Evans,” he said, his voice thick and teasing. “An old friend of Killian’s and a business partner. He’s such a grump, isn’t he?”

I pressed my lips together, fighting back a laugh. “He’s a bit mad,” I

agreed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gabriel.”

He grinned. “The pleasure is all mine, Julianna.”

“Mrs. Spencer,” Killian barked. “Gabriel, a word with you.”

Killian stalked away and Gabriel winked at me. “Grump,” he mouthed before following after my husband.

I took a sip of my champagne, watching the guests mingle together, while I felt so out of place. I did come from a wealthy family – the daughter of Bishop Romano – but this was only my second time at such an event.

Tonight, I was the center of attention. But I wasn’t used to crowds, let alone a whole masquerade ball – where I was openly on display for these people to pick apart, to judge and to dig for my vulnerabilities.

My father striding over to me caught my eyes. He ate the distance between us with powerful legs. William Spencer quickly followed and I found myself surrounded by the two men, both of them standing tall in expensive suits and practically crackling with testosterone.

“Where’s Killian?” William asked, coming to stand beside me.

I nodded toward the other end of the ballroom. “He’s talking to Gabriel. I guess it’s something important.”

Father nodded, his eyes darting to the guests before coming to me again. “You’re doing well, Julianna.”

My chest tightened. “You think so?”

“I never doubted it for a second,” he praised, his voice softening considerably.

How long had I waited for my father to say such words? God, this was exactly what I had wanted to hear for many years and he had said it so nonchalantly. Like this wasn’t the first time he had praised me so openly.

The back of my eyes burned and I blinked away the tears. This wasn’t the place to get emotional. I had to be regal and confident. Posh and *fake*. The perfect Spencer wife.

“Your father was just telling me that you play the cello,” William said slowly.

I smiled shakily. “I’m not a professional, but I can play fine. It used to be a hobby of mine.”

Gracelynn was a better cello player than me. She had taught me what I know and after years of practice, I was still not as good as she had been.

From my peripheral vision, I saw Killian crossing the ballroom, coming straight for me. So powerful, so confident, so *imposing*.

His dark gaze locked me in place, even though I was unsteady on my feet. My heart leaped at the sight of Killian – dressed in an all-black Armani suit, a black masquerade mask, stalking toward me with mad purpose.

My mouth went dry when he came to stand in front of me, towering over my much smaller figure. A commanding presence, with the perfect combination of eloquence and power. It was just the way he always had been – easily dominating me with a single dark gaze.

“Dance with me,” Killian said softly, to my surprise. My eyes darted to his out-stretched palm, *waiting*.

What a perfect façade.

A fake, happy marriage.

A handsome, loving husband asking his beloved wife for a dance.

Our first dance.

There was nothing sweet or romantic with the way he asked for the dance. It was only an obligation, I knew that.

My gaze found Killian’s father and he nodded, approvingly. The rest of the guests were waiting, with bated breath.

The tension around the ballroom made it almost impossible for me to breathe. I could taste the heavy silence on my tongue, bitter and cold, as everyone waited for my response. The red gown suddenly felt too tight, encasing me within its hold and trapping me without any escape.

The bodice pinched me, making the pressure on my chest feel heavier. *I can’t breathe...*

My eye twitched under my laced and feathered masquerade mask.

“Julianna,” he said, the tone of his voice dangerous. “Give me your hand.”

My face itched as I placed my palm in his waiting one.

Killian clasped my hand and gave me a hard tug. I gasped and skidded over the shiny floors, my heels catching the hem of my gown as I fell into his chest.

My breath stuttered.

He hissed, as if my touch burned him.

“Julianna,” Killian breathed in my ear. There was a warning in the way he said my name.

“Killian.” My voice wavered before I snapped my jaw close.

“May this be our first... and last dance, wife.”

My heart pounded in my ears, my body growing cold – but I *smiled* and nodded. “Shall we?” I whispered.

Killian guided us to the center of the ballroom. He tugged me closer, our chests *almost* touching. I could feel the guests' eyes on us, watching us carefully. Killian's arm curled around my waist, his palm pressing into my lower back – his fingers brushing over the curve of my ass. I brought my hand to his shoulder, feeling the muscle tense under my fingertips.

"I assume you know how to waltz, wife."

"I do," I breathed. "A bit."

"I won't let you fall," Killian whispered as the orchestra started to play.

We began to waltz, our feet moving to the slow, rhythmic music. Killian guided me, holding my hand firmly in his. We glided over the floor, spinning around the ballroom. I barely noticed the other couples joining us. When the music changed and our paces quickened, I let out a barely audible gasp, my feet now unsteady underneath me.

My dress got in the way and I grew clumsier in my heels, slightly stumbling into Killian. His eyes narrowed on me when he noticed my discomfort. The palm resting against my lower back pulled me closer and I released a shuddering breath the moment our chests touched.

My nipples puckered and I released an involuntary shudder when his warmth surrounded me, his spicy scent filling my nose – so wickedly intoxicating.

"Lean into me," Killian rasped in my ear. "I have you."

He changed his stance and his pace slowed down, making it easier for me to match his rhythm. Killian spun me around once, before tugging me back into his body. We flowed into the dance; our bodies locked together in what would seem like something intimate to an outsider.

"Have you found a suspect yet?" I asked.

To take my mind off this – how wonderful Killian felt against my body, how warm he was, how good he smelled or how much I wanted this moment to be *real* and not a ruse.

Killian Spencer was addictive and I was a willing victim.

His hatred for me, his unadulterated rage – I welcomed everything with open arms while I silently begged for more – his adoration and his devotion.

But I had long accepted my defeat.

Killian shook his head, bringing me out of my dreadful thoughts. "No. Our investigations have led to more dead ends. Samuel says it's possible the maid acted alone. We have no other evidence."

"A deranged maid? That's what we are labeling this attack?"

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound very convinced,” I muttered, watching the way his brow furrowed thoughtfully.

Killian’s jaw tightened. “I’ve doubled the security and they are all vigilant. You’ll be safe here on the island; I’ve made sure of it.”

Maybe I was truly foolish for believing him, but I trusted Killian. After all, he needed me alive to fulfill my end of the contract.

“Does your father know?”

His hand squeezed mine. “No. Yours?”

“No. It’s better this way.”

“I agree.”

My lips twitched with a smile. “We finally agree on something.”

Killian didn’t respond. Not that I expected him to. True, since the day in my bedroom, Killian had been civil with me. There were times when I had expected him to snap, but with his father’s shadow following us, keeping a careful eye on us – we had no choice but to act like the perfect married couple.

Killian and I had come to an unspoken understanding.

Civil and in love.

Until the end of our contract.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Killian



“I wouldn’t be surprised if Killian runs for President in the next election,” Richard said, gesturing toward me with his flute. “You’d be a popular candidate.”

“Yes,” I agreed absently, my eyes searching for Julianna across the ballroom.

I shouldn’t have left her alone for this long. God knows what trouble she was getting into now. When my gaze finally found her wine-red dress, I had to do a double take at the sight of her dancing – waltzing – with Gabriel.

For fuck’s sake.

Of course, Gabriel would jump at the opportunity to try and sweep Julianna off her feet. That was what he was good at. Gabriel was eight years older than me, a close friend and a business partner – but when it came to sex, our opinions were vastly different. He was a womanizer, through and through. A well-known rake and now he was trying to charm Julianna.

And my dear wife was falling for it as I watched her flutter her fucking lashes at him and smile prettily.

“Excuse me,” I said, my voice tight, as I stepped away from the group of gentlemen and stalked toward the dancing pair, bypassing other waltzing couples.

My shoulders tensed when I approached them and heard Julianna’s soft giggle. What was so fucking amusing? I didn’t know Gabriel was a goddamn comedian.

Once I was close enough to the dancing pair, I tapped Gabriel on the shoulder. “I’m going to have to steal my wife, Gabe. Find another dance partner.”

He grinned, mischief flashing in his dark eyes, but he wisely took a step away. I took his place, my arm curling around Julianna’s waist, tugging her

to me, and we continued where they had left off.

I spun Julianna once before pulling her to my chest again. Her hand went back to my shoulder, fingers digging into my muscles in warning.

“You looked quite cozy with Gabriel.”

Julianna made an exasperated sound in the back of her throat. “He’s your friend and a business partner. I was only trying to get along with him.”

Gabriel had a thing for married women. It was his hobby – to use and defile those women before sending them back to their clueless husbands. I remembered his words clearly. *A virgin was a risky fuck; they grew attached too quickly and too easily. But married women? Easy fuck and experienced – without any need to form an attachment.* He was the reason for many failed marriages.

I knew he respected our friendship enough that he would never make a move on Julianna – though he was going to be a shameless flirt. That was literally his character. Charming and a flirt who knew exactly how to get women to bow down to him.

But it wasn’t just Gabriel. I was more concerned about the other men staring and drooling at Julianna, like she was up for an auction and they were about to bid on her. And her dancing with Gabriel had unknowingly made her a willing target for these hungry wolves. Julianna had left herself open and vulnerable.

“A married woman like yourself shouldn’t be dancing so close with another man – especially not with a well-known rake. Your tits were smashed up against his chest, Julianna,” I practically barked in her face.

She glared at me, her grey eyes gleaming with something fierce. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say Killian Spencer is jealous.”

“Beasty,” I drawled. “If I were to be jealous, I would have to feel something for you.”

The corner of her lips pulled up. “You hate me. That’s quite a strong emotion, husband.”

“And you despise me. That’s a pity, wife.” My hand pressed into her lower back, guiding her around the ballroom as we danced in circles.

“What I feel for you is the opposite of disdain,” Julianna said, her voice softening.

I smiled, humorlessly. “Oh, please do tell. What do you feel for me, Beasty?”

“If I tell you, I would have to spill my secrets, but some secrets are not

meant to be told.”

“You’re talking in riddles again.”

She nudged her chin up, giving me that haughty look she has recently mastered. “And we’re currently sharing our second dance. I thought our first one would be our last, or so you said.”

My chest vibrated with a sound that even surprised me. Though Julianna was right, I didn’t want to admit it. I had vowed to keep my distance, yet here I was, saving my clueless wife from well-known philanderers who would do anything just to have five minutes with her behind the pillars. She was a wealthy married woman with class and respect – they’d love to defile her.

“Your taunting will cost you dearly, wife,” I warned thickly.

“I thought you didn’t like me docile,” she shot back.

“It appears that sometimes I would prefer when you shut up. If you don’t know how, I know a few ways to help.”

Julianna cracked a smile. “Very well, then. Would you mind helping me with that?”

“What?”

“Shutting me up. You offered to help me. Go ahead. Shut me up, husband.”

Her teeth grazed her lower pouty lip, biting down. For the briefest moment, I wondered how she’d look without the mask. Red lips. Fierce grey eyes. Silky black hair pinned up. A face with scars that told a sad fucking story.

“That’s very bold of you. Don’t challenge me; you don’t want to see what I can do.”

“I’m very curious, Killian. What *can* you do?”

Oh, she was feeling brave tonight. My wife wanted to play and so, I would grant her this one wish. One little game to be played.

I slightly bent my head so I could whisper in her ear, letting my lips brush against her earlobe. “I almost brought you to orgasm at our dining table, in front of my father – we both know very well what I *can* do.”

I didn’t miss the way her body tensed or the shaky breath she released. Her hand squeezed mine, almost involuntarily. “That was a rare circumstance. I was just—”

“Needy? So deprived of a man’s touch that you almost came from me barely even touching your cunt? I am the man you despise and yet, you were greedy for more.”

“– caught off guard, I was going to say,” she growled.

Such a pretty liar.

My wife could despise me as much as she wanted – but she burned for my touch. Her body responded to me like we had known each other for a lifetime, like she was born to be mine. Greedy. Wet. Needy. I could almost taste her yearning on my tongue – sweet and bitter.

“Do you touch yourself at night, when you’re alone in bed... at the memories of my fingers between your thighs, caressing your pussy?”

Julianna let out a choked sound and she stumbled, before quickly finding her footing again. “Excuse me?”

My lips curled at the way she stuttered, blinking up at me in what I assumed was embarrassment. I could almost imagine her cheeks flushing with heat.

“Now, now. Don’t be so shy. I haven’t come to your bed yet, so you must have touched yourself at least once since our marriage. If not before, then definitely after what happened in the dining hall. I did leave you wet and needy, after all. On the precipice of an orgasm. You must have *ached*, so badly. Or is it that you have taken another man to your bed since we married?”

My taunts made her eyes gleam darker. Her red lips thinned into a straight line and I felt myself grinning.

I knew very well Julianna hasn’t been with a man since our marriage – I was only taunting her, pushing her buttons because I quite enjoyed the look in her eyes whenever she snapped.

And even if she did take another man to her bed – I would have found out and the poor man would have been dead by now. His body, with all its shattered bones, dumped into the ocean, dragged away by the waves into the depth of the sea. Where no one would have found him. His existence very easily erased from history.

“Just because you seek pleasure elsewhere, other than your own wife’s bed, doesn’t mean I do the same,” she hissed.

I chuckled, appreciating the way she was spitting fire. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say Julianna Spencer sounds jealous.”

Her grey eyes darkened until they were almost black. “I could care less who you take to your bed.”

“Liar,” I rasped in her ear. “Tell me, do your nipples ache at the reminder of my touch? Does your clit throb when you close your eyes and think of how

good my fingers felt between your thighs?”

I pulled back and Julianna sucked in a shuddering breath. Her lips parted as if to speak before she closed her mouth again, eyes blinking up at me in a daze.

I arched an eyebrow. “There we go. I shut you up, wife. Without even having to touch you.”

Her eyes turned into slits and I pressed my lips together, holding back a laugh. “Need I remind you, our thirty-nights were over last night.”

“So, is tonight foreplay?” she questioned, her nails digging into my shoulders, and I *almost* winced.

“Does foreplay include me strangling you because I’m very tempted.”

“I might be into choking, who knows.”

I stumbled, almost stepping on her foot and let out a curse under my breath. Julianna released a soft giggle. “Did you just stutter?”

“You’re maddening,” I grunted.

She gasped, the sound fake and overexaggerated. “Are you flirting with me, Killian Spencer?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I was *this* close to throwing her out of the window. When I married Julianna, I thought I ended up with a docile, compliant and dutiful wife. A sacrificial lamb. A meek woman repenting for her sins. Somewhat tamed and obedient. What I didn’t expect was a sharp-tongued woman who would get on my goddamn nerves every second of the day.

I spun her around just as the music came to an end. Her back collided into my chest and my hands landed on her hips, keeping her trapped against me. My gaze slid over the back of her slender neck and I saw the way the tip of her ears pinkened.

“You’re a fucking thorn, Julianna.”

“We’ve established that,” she said coyly.

The guests clapped, and I grasped her hand in mine, guiding her away from the dance floor. My father came forward, bringing everyone’s attention to him. The sound of a spoon clinking against his champagne flute brought a hush to all conversations. Silence followed and he finally spoke.

“Indeed, it has been a lovely evening,” my father said.

There were murmurs and nods of agreement and he smiled. “My daughter-in-law has settled-in quite well with us and I couldn’t be happier to see my son in love.”

I scoffed at that and Julianna pinched the inside of my elbow.

“Civil and in love,” she muttered. “They are watching us.”

Goddamn it.

My father turned toward us. “I think we can make this evening even more lovely if Julianna would play the cello for us. I’ve heard she is a talented player and I can’t imagine a better moment for her to show off and play. Julianna, would you do us the honor?”

My body went cold, my heart pounding in my ears.

Time slowed.

Julianna released a panicked breath and I watched as she took shaky steps toward the center of the ballroom, where a chair had been put in place for her.

All the lights dimmed, except for the grand chandelier over her head. My chest tightened with unspoken grief.

A cello was given to her and I *watched*.

I bore the brunt of our tarnished past, feeling its poison sink into my veins.

She sat down, her dress pooling around the chair, and she arranged the instrument between her knees. Her head came up; our eyes locked as she placed the bow to the strings.

There was a single breath between a mocking silence and the first note she played.

Her fingers wielded the strings like a lover’s caress, her bow striking each chord with a sweet madness. Her grey eyes never wavered from mine and it killed me.

Julianna played the cello with such melancholy, each note hitting a different tune until she created a song of mad, ugly love – so beautiful, brutal and... *pained*.

Two lost lovers colliding together, with tainted memories and too much bitterness.

It was cruel and haunting. So fucking beautiful...

Her body became one with the cello and I watched her *feeling* the music, letting it bleed under her skin and into my soul.

The cello’s fury bounced off the wall of the ballroom and her agony bled through her bow and into the strings she played. The tempo intensified, becoming almost crazed as Julianna continued to play – her fingers wielding the strings masterfully and her bow sawing through the chords, sorrow bleeding into each note she played. Julianna tortured that cello like a mad woman.

Her tune finally slowed to a crescendo and came to an abrupt end; it was

almost like she had ripped apart two tortured lovers.
And Julianna broke, right in front of my eyes.
She *killed* me.
Looking like an angel and my goddamn nightmare.



Julianna

The moment my tune came to an end, I had forgotten how to breathe.
Our eyes were still locked together, his dark gaze still trapping me in place. My lungs clenched and my heart twisted in my chest.

I could almost hear Gracelynn's voice echoing in my ears – telling me how good I played, how proud she was of me.

But it wasn't Gracelynn's memories that broke me. It was the look on Killian's face. That *tortured* expression. Like he had just seen a ghost from his past and maybe he had.

I carried Gracelynn's ghost on my shoulders and Killian's lover in my eyes. I was Julianna, but I was also the ghost that haunted his dreams.

How unfair it was.

That our story had come to this.

Nothing more but wrath and sorrow.

Nothing less than a tainted past that wrote our future.

There was a single breath of silence before the ballroom erupted in claps and loud whispers. Killian and I both flinched, our gazes finally breaking apart.

My breath was lodged in my throat as I watched him walk away, disappearing behind the pillars, and tears burned the backs of my eyes.

William came to me first and I quickly took his out-stretched palm, glad for the help and stood up. Soon enough, I was surrounded by guests. Some praising how well I played; others asking where I had learned to play, while a few gentlemen were just vying for my attention.

They crowded around me and I didn't know what to do, my attention elsewhere – on the man who had just disappeared behind the pillars – leaving me with these vultures as my heart hammered against my ribs.

The ground swayed underneath my feet and my bodice seemed to be

squeezing my chest. I fought to inhale a desperate breath. My scars started to itch under the masquerade mask, my skin practically crawling. Sending the guests a tight smile, I excused myself and made my way out of the ballroom and into the dark, quiet corridor.

My eyes closed in relief and I inhaled shakily, my hand going to my chest – where a fathom of an ache seemed to burrow itself under my flesh.

A rough hand grasped my elbow and I gasped, my eyes flying open as I was slammed into one of the concrete pillars. A shadow towered over me, imposing and dangerous. Fear slithered down my spine until I caught a familiar spicy and musky scent.

My gaze roved his brutally handsome face. The masquerade mask was missing and now, I could see his dark eyes clearly.

“Killian,” I breathed.

“For the longest time I had wanted to hear Grace play the cello, but she was always too shy.” His chest danced against mine as he rumbled with a low, dangerous growl. “She said her sister played far better than her. I begged her, cajoled her to play for me, but she never did. Grace said she’d play it on our wedding day and I waited patiently for that day, only for it to never come. And here you are.”

My breath escaped me with a sharp exhale and my hands landed on his chest, trying to push him away – or maybe, to pull him *closer*. To wash away his pain and let it bleed into me.

“You’re taunting me,” Killian hissed before he flung himself backward, dragging himself away from me. “Tonight was your payback, wasn’t it? You must have known how much I wanted Grace to play the cello for me. She must have told you. You knew this and yet, you did it, on purpose. You. Taunt. Me. With your eyes. With this goddamn cello, reminding me of what I’ve lost.”

“No,” I choked. “That’s not true.”

His eyes blazed with rage. “Liar.”

He paced in front of me and I watched him drag a hand over his face, almost like he was fighting for control. The truth was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it, tasting its bitterness. I shook my head, strands of my hair coming undone from their pins.

“You told me once that Gracelynn would have hated the man I had become. Well then, let me ask you this.” Killian sneered, taking a step toward me, forcing me to move backward. “Would Grace ever forgive you? For

taking her life? For taking away her chance at happiness and love?”

No.

Please.

Don't.

His brutal words cut through me, as if he wanted me to bleed – like he was desperate to make *me* hurt. My chest ached and I breathed at him to stop. I looked for an escape but there was none. I was trapped against the wall. It hurt. But he wasn't done yet.

“Don't you think... Gracelynn would have hated the woman you have become?” he snapped, throwing my words back at me... so carelessly, so heartlessly. “You're not the Julianna your sister loved either. How hypocritical of you to judge me when you're the exact same.”

With a growl of fury, I lunged sideways and grabbed the sword – a rapier – off the wall. Killian came to a halt when I pointed the tip of the sword at him.

He grinned, almost cruelly. “What are you going to do with that, Beasty?”

“I thought we agreed to be courteous with each other,” I clipped

He straightened to his imposing height, his jaw clenching. “You pointing a sword at my face is most definitely not *courteous*,” he said, as if he didn't just insult me, didn't just throw such vicious words into my face without any care.

My fingers shook around the handle of the sword, but I didn't let it deter me. I didn't let Killian's rigid expression stop me because that was exactly his game. Back and forth, playing with my feelings – being a monster underneath that gentleman façade.

“You started it. With your taunting and mocking words. When will you ever stop throwing my sister's death in my face, Killian? I thought we were way past that.”

Killian took a step forward, without any care that I currently had a sharp sword pointed at him. The tip of the double-edged blade brushed against the middle of his neck. My eyes widened when it pricked his skin and a drop of blood trickled down his throat.

“You drive me utterly mad,” he said, his voice softening in such a deceptive manner. It was enough to make me waver and that was my mistake.

Killian surged sideways; his arm snaked out and I didn't even have a chance to blink. He grasped my elbow, tugging me toward him and spinning me around so quickly, I *gasped*. My heels slid on the floor; my back collided

into his chest and his hand grasped mine, the one holding the rapier until the sharp blade was no longer pointed at him. But the side of the sword was now against *my* throat, while he trapped me against his chest.

His head lowered, his lips brushing against my earlobe. “You drive me utterly mad,” he repeated, his voice still *soft*, against the back of my neck. “With that fucking cello. Looking like a goddamn angel under that chandelier sent to taunt me with her pretty fucking grey eyes. Playing the cello like a sad love song, your broken soul bleeding through it.”

His hand tightened around mine, pressing the blade deeper against my throat, enough that I felt a burning sensation and I just knew, the sword had cut through my skin. A drop of my blood trickled down my throat and my chest heaved with a shaky breath.

“So fucking haunting. So goddamn beautiful. How dare you, Julianna?” Killian rasped into my ear. “How dare you make me look at you as someone other than Gracelynn’s killer? It’s not fair for you to have such power over me.”

His confession almost broke me completely, his words a lethal combination of wrath and confusion. A hint of awe and a lot of sorrow.

Killian pulled away, his warmth leaving my back, no longer cocooning me with its sweet poison. I dropped the rapier at my feet, my body trembling. When I spun around, he was *gone*.

Killian had disappeared as if he had never been here as if the memory was all in my head. But his scent still lingered and I tasted it on my tongue. My skin still tingled from his touch and my heart was in shambles, his words still echoing in my ears.

I couldn’t go back in that ballroom. I couldn’t face these people without Killian as my shield. And I couldn’t look into their eyes and act like my marriage was anything but perfect.

Because my story was a flawed and an imperfect tale.

And I no longer had the courage to keep up with this pretty lie and perfect ruse.

I took off my heels and with unsteady bare feet, I walked away and took the stairs to the East wing. The longer I stayed in this cursed castle, the harder it came to hang onto my sanity – or whatever was left of it. These ghosts haunted me, reminding me of how this castle held nothing but tragic love stories.

My repentance came with a cost.

My bleeding heart. My shattered soul. And my fragile sanity.

Have I atoned for my sins now? How much more before it's enough?

I limped into my room, but came to a halt at the doorway. The stranger sitting on my bed stood up when he realized I was standing there.

“Julianna,” he said, a voice so familiar – a voice I haven’t heard in three long years and my stomach hollowed, a sick feeling curling inside me.

He lifted his masquerade mask off his face and gave me a grin, filled with pain and longing.

“Simon,” I breathed.

It didn’t matter how desperate I was to bury my secrets.

When it came to all my lies, my past was quickly catching up to me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Killian



“**K**illian,” my father called out as I stalked down the corridor, away from the ballroom, away from everyone.

I came to a halt, my fists clenching at my side. “Yes, father?”

He stomped over, coming to stand in front of me, blocking my escape.

“Where’s Julianna?”

I flinched at the sound of her name. “I don’t know,” I gritted.

His eyes turned into slits and his jaw tightened in a way that should have been a warning. But I just didn’t give a shit anymore.

Julianna Spencer had me in knots and I was just so goddamn confused. I was supposed to hate her; I still did – but why the fuck did my heart *ache* when I looked at her?

Thirty days and thirty nights with Julianna and now I was questioning my own feelings for her. How ironic. I vowed to make her life miserable, yet she was *my* nightmare. I was the monster; she was the villain. What a fucking pair, we were.

“You can’t just leave the guests like this. Both you and Julianna left the ballroom and the guests will talk,” my father said, his voice thick with warning. I could see him controlling his temper.

He knew this was all a ruse – this perfect image of Julianna and I as a couple.

But how long could I and Julianna keep this façade going, when we couldn’t even spend *one* day without turning our marriage into a bloody battlefield?

There was too much history between Julianna and I – our pasts way too intertwined with our present for us to have a better future. My hatred and her repentance. Her sorrow and my rage.

I took a deep breath and concealed my emotions, giving my father a calm

and composed expression. I was Killian Spencer – a man with restraint. It didn't matter that I had a wife who made me feel so out of control, I had to be *contained*.

“You can just tell them that Julianna was feeling unwell, so we're retiring early. I have to take care of my wife,” I said.

His brows furrowed. “That will spread more gossip.”

I raked a hand through my hair and dug my fingers into the back of my neck, massaging the tensed muscles there. “What gossip now?”

“You know damn well what I'm talking about,” my father growled.

Realization dawned on me a bit too late and I nodded. Right. *Pregnancy rumors*.

“Isn't that even better then? What more proof do they need that Julianna and I are happily married than the news of a child? Let them gossip. It will keep them busy until we are ready to announce the good news.”

“And when will that be?” he questioned icily, crossing his arms over his chest.

For fuck's sake.

“I know what I have to do, what is expected of me – Julianna and I both. When the time is right, it will happen. You'll be the first to know,” I fumed, the words tasting acidic on my tongue, and I swallowed it down, feeling the way it burned my throat.

“A child is a blessing,” my father conferred.

I scoffed, but he glared and I wisely shut up. My father was practically on his deathbed and I had neither the energy nor the courage to argue with him.

He wanted to see his grandchild before he died and I'd grant him that – it didn't matter how much it *pained* me to do so. The rage festered underneath my skin, feeding on my flesh and burrowing itself into my bones, the very marrow of who I am.

“This is not a *job*, Killian,” my father reprimanded and I arched an eyebrow in response. “A baby is the physical symbol of a couple's love. It is to be treasured and pregnancy is a time that bonds the to-be parents. It'll be an intimate nine months. You'll have to care for her.”

Fucking Julianna was one thing.

Taking care of her was asking too much of me.

Anyway, Julianna and I had a deal.

“She has plenty of people ready to care and serve her. She doesn't need me.”

My father made an exasperated sound in the back of his throat. “No. *You* have to care for her. Julianna doesn’t need you, but she will want you. There’s a very big difference between the two.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I shot back.

“Because I need you to realize that your job doesn’t end the moment Julianna becomes pregnant. Your real job as her husband and a father begins *then*.”

“Julianna and I made a deal—”

“I don’t care about your deal with Julianna.” He stabbed a finger into my chest. “You. Are. Married. You have responsibilities. You want to be the President of the United States? Well, guess what – figure out how to keep your marriage together first before you try to keep a whole goddamn country together. I don’t doubt for a second that you have all the characteristics a future leader needs and you’re capable of being someone big, someone with much power – but right now? You’re just a wounded man. Figure out your priorities, Killian. Before it’s too late.”

My father stomped away and I was left with a hollow chest, an aching heart, and his brutal words echoing in my ears.

He was right, though – every word he uttered rang with bitter truth.

Fists clenching at my sides, I stalked away – further into the shadows of the dark corridor.

Marrying Julianna was more than an arrangement between two families. It was my act of vengeance, but seven months into our marriage and I was starting to see a different version of my wife. I had expected a haughty heiress. I thought her atonement was only an *act*. So that people would pity her.

But instead, I found myself with a spitfire wife; a broken Julianna – who was deep in her own misery, her repentance ugly and messy. She suffered in silence and I watched her, gleefully.

Until her pain became my own – without me even realizing it.

How? *I don’t know*.

She *maddened* me.

She *confused* me.

Julianna was not the woman I imagined her to be.

And I was a lost sailor in a storm – my heart had been shipwrecked and I was *drowning*.

A long moment later, I found myself in the East wing, as if I was only a

puppet being dragged by the strings of a puppet master. Right fucking here.

I shouldn't have been here – not when I was in this state, yet I found myself at the doorstep of her bedroom. Unwillingly. Unconsciously. As if I had been called here by something invisible – *intangible*. I released a shuddering breath, feeling the way my heart thudded in my chest.

How goddamn ironic that the woman who was the cause of my dead heart was also behind my untold solace.

Her door was slightly ajar and when hushed voices came to my attention, I leaned forward, peeking inside.

The first thing I saw was Julianna sitting on the bed, her back to me.

With a man, standing over her. A man I didn't recognize.

His expression morphed into something akin to *misery*. There was just something in the way he looked at her, or just how comfortable Julianna seemed to be in his presence. They looked like old friends or *more* – someone important to each other – it was written all over their body language. How familiar they were in each other's presence.

My hand tightened around the doorknob when he gave her a bittersweet smile.

“Did you know? That Grace was pregnant with your baby?” Julianna whispered.

He shook his head sharply. “She didn't tell me but I *knew*.”

My brain stuttered for a moment until it dawned on me. What Julianna had said. What they were whispering about.

My body tensed as my blood grew cold.

No. This couldn't be right.

I stumbled away from the door, but their voices still followed me, like a mad storm lashing through the air and cutting through me with such violence.

Grace was pregnant?

My chest tightened and the *ache* intensified.

Fuck.

Goddamn it.

The truth of my love tasted like ash in my mouth. I couldn't *breathe*. All this time, I had thought my love story was some tragic tale. But my love was anything but pure – it had been stained.

Not by Julianna or the blood she spilled that night.

It had been tarnished by Gracelynn herself.

My pride had shattered at my feet. My love had been nothing but ugly. My

story wasn't tragic. It was a reckless first love and I had been cut, bone-deep by my own stupidity.

What a *fucking* fool I had been.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julianna



*Your mouth tastes of cigar and sorrow,
I like the way my name sounds on your lips.
But your smile will fade come morrow.
It is wintry and I am lonely,
Please come back.
Your mouth tastes of cigar and sorrow,
I like the way you hold me,
Even when I know it is all a ruse – a bleeding arrow.
For you still envisage her when you bed me.
Your mouth tastes of cigar and sorrow,
I like the way you touch me,
So coldly, like the dead wings of a sparrow,
And I have begun to crave your warmth.
Your mouth tastes of cigar and sorrow,
I do not like the way you left me without a second glance,
After your soft caress had been so thorough.
Please come back.*

- A

I settled on the bed, my body tingling with frayed nerves. I had never imagined seeing Simon again, not after... *everything*.

He paced around the room, taking a quick look into my adjoined bathroom and library and then out of the window. Simon had always been vigilant and it seemed like he hadn't changed a bit. Old habits die hard, I presumed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my voice shaking.

Simon, with his curly hair slicked back and glassy green eyes, smiled at

me. “I wanted to see how you were doing.”

I gestured around the room, a humorless laugh leaving my lips. “As you can see, I’m doing quite well. I’m married and very much in love with my husband.”

His eyes narrowed on me. “What a pretty liar you are.”

We both stared at each other for a second before I cracked a smile. “How are you doing, Simon?”

“Surviving,” he deadpanned. “You?”

“Surviving,” I repeated softly.

I watched him run a hand over his face, almost tiredly. “I thought this would be easy but I never considered that looking at you would stir up old memories.”

“Old memories are hard to let go, especially when they are good memories,” I said, the words practically coming out choked.

His gaze brushed over me, from head to toe. Lingering for a second too long on my black hair and then my masquerade mask. “Sometimes good memories can turn out to be bitter.”

I swallowed, fighting down the ball of tears in my throat. “Life would be boring without some bitterness every now and then.”

I watched as he walked toward the window, leaning against the sill. He was trying to act composed, but I could see how tensed he was. Like he was getting ready to jump out of the window at any moment. Like he didn’t want to be here, but he was forced to. “When did you become so...*perceptive*?” he grumbled.

“When I realized that I was a murderer – *unknowingly*.”

Simon inhaled sharply and his eyes darted away from me, his expression growing tight. “Fuck, Julianna. It’s like you want us to hate you.”

I lifted a shoulder, half-shrugging. “That would make it a lot easier than sympathy.”

His lips thinned. “And this is why you’re still lying to your husband?”

I could feel my hackles rising as he openly judged me. Simon knew a lot about my secrets and he shouldn’t have been here. This was a bad idea. “My lies are none of your concern.”

“It is when it has to do with Grace,” he said sharply.

My eyes turned into slits, glaring at the man standing in front of me – *questioning* me as if he had the right to – as if he knew what it felt like to live with the man I loved, yet he loathed me with every cell in his body.

“Our secrets were buried with her,” I said, trying to be firm, but the moment the words were spilled, I realized how weak they sounded.

He arched an eyebrow, almost mockingly. “You can’t bury a secret like that. It will come back to haunt you, now or tomorrow. One day, for sure.”

I shook my head but Simon took a step forward, advancing toward me. “You fooled him, then *and* now. That’s not fair, Julianna.”

My fingers clenched the fabric of my dress. “You don’t know what’s fair.”

“You’re not the only one hurting,” Simon snapped. “Stop making yourself out to be the martyr.”

“I was the one in that car with her,” I hissed. “You don’t know what that’s like.”

“I understand it was traumatic—”

I scoffed. “Traumatic? That’s an easy word to describe looking into your sister’s bloodied and mangled face for three hours, staring into her dead eyes with the pungent scent of death cocooning you. That’s not trauma, Simon. That’s *hell*.”

We stared at each other for a minute too long, both of us breathing heavily, the tension thick in the air.

I swallowed numbly and shook my head. “I’m so – I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair to you.”

When Simon didn’t respond, only kept staring at me like he was seeing a ghost, I let out a muffled sob. “*Why* are you here?”

“I guess I wanted to torture myself some more.”

I ruined so many lives that night...

And we were all stuck in a never-ending loop of torment and rage. *How do we break free?* I didn’t fucking know. I didn’t know where to start or how to end this suffering, because *I* was the reason behind it all.

“Did you know? That Grace was pregnant with your baby?” I whispered.

He shook his head sharply. “She didn’t tell me but I *knew*.”

Simon took a deep breath, his wide chest rattling from it. His fists clenched at his sides.

“Her period was late. Then, I saw the small changes on her body. And she was sick in the morning for two weeks straight,” he explained. “I was her bodyguard, Julianna. I was supposed to notice every little detail about her. I was waiting for her to tell me.”

I was the first to find out about Gracelynn’s pregnancy. I still remembered vividly the look of pure terror on her face, before it morphed into a confused

giggle and happy tears. I was the one who held her when she broke down – when she realized that a baby would change *everything*.

She was betrothed to one man.

But loved another.

She danced with one man.

But made love to another.

Gracelynn was set to marry Killian.

But was carrying Simon's baby.

"And she never got a chance to," I murmured. "Do you hate me?"

Simon gave me a bittersweet smile. "I want to. I think I do hate you, but I'm also bound by the vows I made to Grace."

I flinched at the mention of vows. The vows I was familiar with only came with destruction, violence and rage. My failed marriage began with such promises.

"What vows?"

"She asked me – no – she *told* me to always take care of you if anything ever happens to her. I don't think you know how much she loved and adored you. Grace would have used herself as a shield to protect you if she had to."

It felt like my chest had been split open, sending tiny cracks of my heart and fissures of my soul in all direction. A single tear slid down my scarred cheek, hidden behind my masquerade mask. "*I know.*"

"I can't even scream at you or *hurt* you for all the pain you've caused – because it would go against all of what Grace would have wanted. So, I'm bound by my vows and Gracelynn's love. I hate you, but I *can't* hate you."

His words made me want to crawl into a ball and die. He didn't even realize it but every word he spoke stabbed me with such ruthlessness; I didn't know if I could bleed more than I already did. "So, you're forced to tolerate me with that smile on your lips and with such pain in your eyes. How cruel."

Simon shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks, rocking back onto the balls of his feet. He stared at me for a moment, his eyes going to my left hand, where I was moving my wedding ring around my finger. I had been doing it unconsciously until he brought my attention to it.

"What are you doing to yourself, Julianna?" he sighed, suddenly looking more weary than ever.

I gestured around the room and then to myself. "This is my atonement."

"How cruel," he said, repeating my own words.

"You have to go; don't come to see me again," I said, my voice shaking

and thick with unshed tears. “Stop tormenting yourself.”

Simon gave me a long stare and I could almost see him debating with himself, trying to find the right words to pacify me. To make it better. But really, there was nothing he could say that would change the past.

All it took was a single second.

One very impulsive decision.

And here I was.

Watching the aftermath – the destruction – of my mistakes.

Simon finally nodded, sharply. I watched him walk away, taking with him the last bit of Gracelynn that I carried in my bloodied hands.

The bodice of my gown felt too tight around my chest, pinching me until I couldn't really breathe. I released a harsh exhale, puffing and dragging a desperate breath into my lungs.

I closed my hands into fists, my nails digging into my palm. It stung, like thorns pricking my flesh. I dug my nails deeper, cutting through my skin. I barely winced.

The pain started with a pinch, almost unnoticeable, before it flared up. The harder I pushed my nails into the cut I had made, the burning sensation intensified. My palm throbbed.

It *distracted* me.

I opened my hand, utterly mesmerized by the sight of blood staining my palm.

It hurt.

But I liked the pain.

I *needed* it.

It called to me.

Pain soothed me and I submerged myself in it.



Killian

“I want to wait... for our wedding night. For it to be special.”

My fingers clenched around the whiskey glass, fury coursing through my veins. Hot and burning. With a loud bellow, I tossed the glass across the room. It crashed into the wall, breaking into tiny pieces and scattering around

the room. The whiskey soaked the carpet while staining the wallpaper, a dark brown.

When I was fourteen years old and I had realized the truth behind my parents' marriage, I had vowed to myself that I would never settle for less than true love.

I had thought I found that with Gracelynn.

I had to hand it to my dead lover, though. She played me so fucking well, and I fell for it, like a fool I was. So blindly in love with her that I didn't see her betrayal.

All this time, I thought Julianna was the villain. But it was Gracelynn who had managed to break me, to crack me open completely.

The woman I mourned for three years cheated on me. The woman I was meant to marry was carrying another man's child.

How fucking pathetic.

Julianna knew. She fucking *knew*. Her sister was a cheater and a traitor, and while I mourned her, my wife didn't even bother to tell me. Both Romano sisters played me well, it seemed.

No more.

I was done.

Done being played.

Done being the fool that I was for the wrong women.

My father was right when he said I had to figure out my priorities. It was about fucking time I did so. Grabbing the bottle of whiskey, I bolted out of my room and blindly followed the path to the East wing.

My body was tensed with suppressed anger. The poison of it ate at my flesh, sinking into my bones, into the marrow of me until I became one with it.

My fury churned within, hungry for destruction. It hovered over me like a morning fog, clouding my judgment. Rage was deceitful, but goddamn it, right now – it tasted so fucking sweet on my tongue.

In the back of my head, warning bells sounded. The maddening ghost on my shoulder hissed, telling me to *stop*. Urging me to *think*. Screaming at me that once the rage dissipated, I would be left with more regret than I could bear.

But I wasn't listening.

I was beyond that.

"I want to wait... for our wedding night. For it to be special."

I laughed, without any humor, but my laughter sounded just as mad as I felt. My legs carried me to my destination.

I stalked inside Julianna's room, her door slamming into the wall next to it. Julianna jumped, her hand going to her chest frantically. Her eyes darted around her room until they landed on me. She was still dressed in her wine-red gown, her masquerade mask hiding her face from me.

"What are—"

"Do you consent?" I asked, practically snarling the words. I kicked the door close with my foot.

Her eyes widened. "You – I mean, *tonight*?"

I brought the bottle of whiskey to my mouth and took a huge gulp, feeling the alcohol burn down my throat and that was the only thing keeping me somewhat sane. "Yes, tonight. Right now. Get fucking undressed, Julianna."

Her hand fluttered over her chest and she looked left and right, seeking some kind of answer from the boring walls. And when she couldn't find any, her gaze landed on mine again.

"Do you consent, wife?" I gritted.

Her fingers fisted the tulle of her dress, burying her hands into the fabric. Her body was practically trembling with nerves and I almost felt sorry for her. "I'm willing," she breathed.

"Your red lips speak beautiful lies, wife."

She shook her head, vengefully. "No, I want this. Killian, I offer myself to you – willingly. I need this."

I gestured toward her with the bottle. "What are you waiting for then? I don't mind fucking you in that dress, but we both know I will *ruin* it and you seem quite partial to this gown."

Advancing toward her, I slammed the whiskey bottle onto the nearest coffee table. I carelessly tugged on my tie, sliding it from my neck, and threw it somewhere on the floor. I watched as Julianna unlaced her bodice from the back, her hands clumsy and slow. Once her dress had come loose, she lowered the top, her breasts spilling out.

The moment the cool air touched her bare skin, she flinched and her fingers clenched around her dress, holding it to her stomach. Gooseflesh peppered her skin and I could see her tight nipples through her thin bra.

"Drop the dress, Julianna," I said, my voice so deep and thick – I barely even recognized it.

Her chest heaved with a shuddering breath, before doing as she was told.

Her dress pooled at her bare feet until she was standing in front of me in only her silk bra and panties.

Something twisted in my gut and my dick twitched in my slacks, hardening at the sight of my wife, standing in front of me – *offering* herself to me.

Her surrender.

Her devotion.

Her undoing.

Fuck.

Julianna Spencer was so goddamn maddening.

This was twisted and utterly insane. Our whole relationship was toxic and this moment itself was proof of it.

I wanted this, even though I hated her.

Julianna needed this, even though she despised me.

I didn't know what I expected when I came to her room, but it was definitely not me being aroused by the simple sight of her bare skin.

Her slender shoulders caved in before she took a deep breath and straightened. "I need the lights off."

I pointed at the lavish chair beside her bed, while unbuttoning my cuff links. "Sit down, Julianna. Discard the rest of your virtue and show me how you touch yourself."

"What?" she breathed.

"How do you touch yourself at night, wife?" I leaned back against the table, crossing my ankles. "Show me."

I watched as Julianna swallowed, watched as she debated with herself and then finally surrendered to my demands. She limped toward the chair and took a seat.

I arched an eyebrow as I unbuttoned my black dress shirt. Her gaze lingered over my exposed skin before she slowly dragged down her panties and dropped the thin fabric beside her feet. Her bra soon followed until she was naked to my eyes, except for the masquerade mask.

Her breasts were heavy and swollen, her nipples puckering tight in the cold air. Or was it *anticipation*?

Her hand inched between her thighs and she quivered. I was already rock hard, my dick pushing against my slacks in a very obvious manner. Her gaze darted there for a second before she gasped and looked away.

My lips curled as her whole body flushed. "Hook your left knee over the

armrest and spread yourself for me, wife. I want you to delve into your deepest desires and show me the woman behind the prim and proper façade, the expensive gowns and jewelleryes.”

Her grey eyes flared. “Why? Why can’t you just—”

“I will hurt you,” I rasped. I didn’t want to have to *touch* her, in the way she needed to be caressed and devoured before I took her. To make this more intimate than it already was.

Me fucking her would just be... mechanical. Detached from any type of romance or intimacy. It was only my duty as her husband. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“Maybe I want it,” she shot back, nudging her chin up like a haughty princess.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for, Julianna.”

Julianna slowly brought her leg up, hooking her left knee over the armrest, just like I had ordered her to do. So vulnerable – there was beauty in surrender and it looked decadently sinful on Julianna Spencer.

In this position, spread wide open, I could see the sheen of wetness over her slit.

“Pain is subjective,” she whispered.

“I’m doing you a favor, wife. Accept it or leave it – but know this, I won’t be gentle with you. I will hurt you.”

Her fingers delved between her thighs, parting her folds. Her breath came as a sharp inhale and her legs twitched before tensing. I watched as her thumb circled her hardened nub, pinching and rolling it between her fingers.

Her arousal dripped onto the white cushion of the chair, her wetness sliding between the cleft of her ass.

“What do you think about when you touch yourself at night?” I asked, my voice gritty and rough to my own ears.

“You,” she breathed. Julianna slid a single digit inside her core; her back arched and her lips parted with a tiniest whimper.

Goddamn it.

She was pink and wet, clenching and inviting.

Julianna Spencer wasn’t only a good actress, a pretty manipulator and dubious liar – but she was also a tantalizing seductress – an intriguing combination of innocence and lust.

I should have been smarter than my body’s urges. I should have been more in control of my impulses – but my cock throbbed and I was just a goner.

My fists clenched as she fingered herself, her moans spilling past her red lips. The musky scent of her arousal was now heavy in the room and I practically ripped my shirt off my body. Her gaze lingered on my chest and I watched as her hips started to move in rhythm with her finger, chasing her release.

Her back bowed and she threw her head back, on the precipice of orgasm. “Stop,” I hissed.

She whimpered, her body tensing. “No,” she mewled, her thumb circling her clit with frantic need, desperate for a release. “Please.”

I surged forward, the table screeching back, and I heard the whiskey bottle crashing onto the floor. But I didn’t care.

Julianna yelped when my arm curled around her waist, pulling her up. Her hands slammed into my chest in surprise, her wet fingers splaying over my pecs. Smearing my bare skin with her sweet fucking juices.

I dumped Julianna on the bed and she bounced with a gasp. She swallowed hard and looked at me with those grey eyes I loathed so much. Her hands came up and she covered her chest, as if to hide her nakedness from me.

So vulnerable, I could easily break her.

Her whole body trembled as she stayed on her back, completely bare to me except for the black lace mask.

“Killian—”

My jaw clenched at the sound of my name on her tongue. “Turn around. On your hands and knees,” I snapped. Angry at her ugly deception. Furious at myself for feeling something at the sight of her naked and flushed body, needy and so goddamn... *beautiful*, like the temptress she was. It wasn’t fair that Julianna had such power over my thoughts, my heart and now my dick.

“Now,” I clipped, my voice hoarse. Flustered, she scrambled to her hands and knees. She was still somewhat in a needy trance after I had denied her the orgasm she had been so desperately chasing.

I didn’t want to look at Julianna when I was fucking her, didn’t want to look in the eyes that haunted me.

I was merely doing my husbandly duty. There would be no pleasure from this.

Not for her.

Not for me.

Our intimacy started and ended with this. A simple fuck.

Once she was on her knees on the edge of the bed, and against my own accord, I took a single second to appreciate the elegant curve of her back and her round ass.

With a growl, I unzipped myself and pushed down my pants, freeing my hardened length. I fisted myself, squeezing my erection from the tip to the base.

I lowered my body atop of hers, rubbing my shaft against her wet folds. Her back arched and I curled an arm around her hips, holding her still before I pushed inside – with one forceful thrust, I wedged myself deep inside her. I wasn't gentle, as I had promised, but she took all of me, stretched tight around my thick erection.

Julianna let out a choked cry and her body spasmed, her pussy tightening around my dick, practically strangling it.

"Fuck," I hissed. She was as tight as a fist and her core pulsed around my length.

My heart thudded.

Her fingers clawed at the bedsheets, her back arching against my groin. "Killian," she gasped, almost in pain.

"I told you," my chest rattled with a harsh growl, "I won't be gentle. I will hurt you. Wreck you. Possess you."

"Shut up and fuck me," Julianna hissed.

My lips curled, feeling both pleased and cruel. "Gladly, *Beasty*."

I pulled out, almost completely – leaving only the tip inside her before slamming back into her tight channel. Her body trembled, gooseflesh peppering her back and she *whimpered*.

I liked the sounds she made. Like she was fighting pain and pleasure, craving both – *needing* both.

I pumped into her again, each thrust harder and deeper than the one before. I quickly found my stride and she rocked her hips back to meet mine. The wet sounds of our bodies slamming together filled the room, echoing against the walls.

She pressed her face into the mattress, muffling her needy whimpers and moans of pleasure. A groan vibrated from my chest as I plunged inside again, feeling the way she clenched around me. My balls tightened and I knew I was close.

Her wetness, hot and sticky, dripped between our joined bodies.

With a grunt, I drove into her hard and stayed rooted there, the tip of my

hardness brushing against her womb. The muscles in my stomach and thighs tightened as I came, my seed pouring into her.

My heart pounded in my ears, loudly. I shuddered as my orgasm rattled through my body. Julianna quivered under me, a moan spilling from her lips. Her body tightened and there was a rush of wetness between us as she found her own release.

I pulled out and she gasped, almost pained. As the fog of rage and pleasure dissipated, my stomach twisted and rolled as I realized what I had just done. Bile tasted acidic on my tongue and I fought the urge to retch.

I just fucked my wife.

After vowing to never touch another woman after Gracelynn.

My gaze quickly darted to the juncture of her thighs and my heart thudded at the sight of my seed spilling out of her and...

What the hell?

...*blood*?

My brows furrowed. Julianna collapsed onto the bed. There was blood, coating the inside of her pale thighs and on the white linen underneath her.

“Julianna,” I rasped, my voice gruff and confused. The room swayed under my feet.

She rolled over and dragged the bedsheet over her body, shaking. “I – you... Are we done?”

I stumbled back, suddenly feeling *sick*. My blood pounded in my ears and my vision blurred. My throat became dry and when I tried to breathe, my lungs tightened, fighting against my desperate need to inhale.

“Killian?” Her soft voice sounded far away. Julianna sat up, wincing, but she reached out for me.

I stumbled back, knocking into the chair before I rushed into her adjoined bathroom, slamming the door closed behind me.

Frantic, I opened the tap and splashed water on my face. The pressure on my chest grew heavier as I stared at the man in the reflection, barely recognizing him.

My eyes darted to my semi-hard length, stained with blood, and I flinched. What have I done?

She was a virgin. *Had been.*

Like me.

Goddamn it.

All this time... I thought...

FUCK!

I couldn't think straight. For the longest time, I saved myself for the day I'd meet the woman I loved. I was willing to wait for Gracelynn – for our wedding night – she wanted it to be special and so did I.

After she died, I vowed that I would never touch another woman – not in the way I touched Gracelynn.

Except, my father had told me that I needed to marry, needed an heir. So, I agreed. It would be a job – a husbandly duty – nothing more. I wasn't going to make love to my wife. It would be a simple, mechanical fuck.

I was a goddamn virgin until tonight.

I had fucked Julianna thinking she was already spoiled – *not* a virgin – that another man had already broke her in. Made the job easy for me. It would have made *this* less intimate, less meaningful. For both of us.

Jesus Christ!

Guilt gnawed at me.

I remembered the way her body had tensed underneath mine.

Her pained whimper.

Her clawing at the bedsheet.

I had hurt her.

In ways I never should have.

But I was so goddamn angry. Why didn't she tell me? After all those insults I had thrown at her, why did she let me believe that she had already been with another man?

This whole marriage was in shambles and tonight was just more proof of that.

I had been honest with Julianna from the beginning – with my hatred and my rage, my vows. I never once made false promises or gave her fake hope. But she walked into this marriage with lies and deceit.

I zipped up my slacks and stalked out of the bathroom. Julianna was pulling the bloodied linens off the bed, dressed in a navy blue, silk robe. She spun around at the sound of me coming out of the bathroom. The masquerade mask was gone, but her black veil was once again pinned up in its place, hiding her face from me.

She always hid behind that black fucking veil. I wanted to rip it off her face and expose her truth to the world.

That she was a deceitful woman.

And that three years ago, she killed my heart. Oh, how I loathed her for it.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said bitterly.

Her hand fluttered to her chest and she swallowed. “You already believed that I wasn’t a virgin and I didn’t find any reason to correct you.”

“Stop. Playing. The. Martyr.” I advanced toward her and she stumbled back. Her legs were weak and her limp was more pronounced after our... recent activities.

“I’m not,” she snapped. “*You* always believed the worst of me.”

“Because you *allowed* me to believe that with your goddamn lies!”

Her eyes flared up, in dread. “What lies?” she sputtered.

“What do you hide behind your veil, Beasty?” I grinned, with every bit of malice I felt in my bones. “If this is your atonement, then let me tell you – you will never find salvation.”

I surged forward, pushing her back into the wall. Julianna cried out, moving her head to the side, as if to dodge my intention. My fingers curled around her veil and I ripped it off her face.

My heart thudded.

The blood pumping through my veins grew cold.

Time slowed.

My eyes landed on the unmarred, right side of her face. Her skin was soft and flawless, without an inch of imperfection. Her cheek was round; her jaw delicate.

Beautiful.

My breath stuttered.

Familiar.

Julianna’s grey eyes widened in horror and she gasped, quickly turning her face – so I was staring at the scars on the left side of her face. She was almost unrecognizable this way.

But it was too late.

I had already seen what she had been trying to hide for so long.

I pushed away from her, as if I had been burned by her touch – by the sight of her face – and I stumbled back. My throat closed and I tried to breathe, but I couldn’t. As I stared at the ghost in front of me.

A single tear slid down her scarred cheek. She let out a tortured whimper, her hand slamming over her mouth to muffle the sound.

My legs weakened, and I dropped to my knees.

“*Gracelynn.*”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE PAST

Julianna



“Stay calm,” he rasped, grasping my hand in his and bringing it up to Coal’s muzzle. “He can smell you on me.”

The stallion snorted, but otherwise stayed still. His black coat was soft and smooth under my fingertips. “Do horses remember our scent?”

He kept his hand curled around mine, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. His gentle caress sent a shiver down my body and my toes tingled. The slight callouses on his finger pads felt rough against my skin, but I liked it. I liked how warm he was.

And his manly scent – a unique spicy and earthy smell, with a mix of his aftershave and expensive cologne.

The fact that I have never been in the presence of a man, except my father – let alone, *this* close to another man, sent a thrill of excitement down my spine.

It was wrong.

But the idea of indulging in something so forbidden was quite exhilarating.

And especially with a man like *him*.

Killian Spencer.

His chest pressed into my back, his deep voice sliding over my skin like a soft caress. “Horses have a much better sense of smell than us humans. They aren’t as good at scent recognition as a dog, but they are able to identify predators, other horses and their owners by their voices and smell.”

He dragged my hand over to the stallion’s shoulder, making sure our touch was gentle and slow, so not to frighten the horse. “Coal has been spending a lot of time with me for the last two weeks. I’m his only human interaction.

He's practically used to my appearance, voice and smell now. And because he's such a wild horse, he doesn't play nice with other humans. But Coal can smell me on you, so let's see if he'll be more accepting today."

My body tensed. "Am I an experiment for him to practice being nice with other humans?"

Killian chuckled, the deep timbre of his laugh vibrating through my body. My stomach fluttered. His laugh was smooth and warm. Decadent and addictive. There was *something* about the way it made me feel. "Basically."

"So, there's a possibility of him kicking me in the stomach or stomping on me?"

"I would say so," he said.

Fear slithered through me and I stumbled back. "Oh, no. Nope. Get it away from me. Now!"

Killian released my hand, only to grasp me by the waist, holding me against him. "Shh, slow down." His fingers curled around my hips and he stopped my frantic struggling with a firm hold.

His warm breath whispered along the back of my neck. "I got you and I won't let Coal hurt you."

"You just said—"

"I was joking."

I hissed through my clenched teeth. "That wasn't a nice joke!"

His thumb brushed over the curve of my hips, moving in circles, as if to soothe me. And it did. Shockingly. His touch had such an effect on me that it left me more confused than ever. "I can see that now. My apologies," Killian said, his voice softening to a low resonance. "I got you."

His lips brushed against my ear. "I would have never allowed you this close to Coal if I thought he was dangerous. I won't let him hurt you. Trust me."

I blinked, trying to focus on his words and not the way my body seemed to react to his maddening touch. Spinning around, I wrenched myself from his grasp and stumbled away. "I don't trust people easily and you're practically a stranger."

Killian arched a perfect eyebrow at me and the side of his lips curled up in a half-smile. "I won't bite, you know."

My heart stuttered. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you keep running away from me." He advanced toward me, stealthily, and I took a step back. He paused and gave me a look as if to prove

his point.

I met Killian three days ago, after he found me hiding behind a stack of hay, spying on him and the black stallion.

I had watched him for two weeks before that. From my window. How fortunate it was that my room overlooked the stables. I waited for him each morning, right at sunrise. I'd watch as he wrestled with the black stallion while I drank my tea and munched on freshly baked cookies. Sometimes, I expected him to give up on the wild horse, but Killian always came back the next day. More determined than he was the day before.

Before Killian, I never realized the beauty of the sunrise, but now I had a newfound appreciation for it. He would take Coal for a walk as the sun rose over the horizon – the warmest hues of a rainbow turning the sky into a canvas of colors. It was breathtaking.

But what was more exhilarating was watching Killian ride the black stallion, like a dark knight on his horse.

When he wasn't there in the morning, I waited all day and watched the window until late into the evening. Just to catch a glimpse of him as he worked with Coal. His strength and determination. How controlled he was and how easily he dominated the black stallion. There was something regal about him.

Killian *intrigued* me.

And that was exactly why I had escaped the confines of my room and found myself in the stables. Not once. But three times now.

If my father found out...

"Do I scare you? I didn't know I could be so frightening."

The first day we met, I thought he was a simple stableman – someone without a title, a nobody. But that was a mere fantasy.

Until I found out he was *the Killian Spencer*.

The former President's son.

A man with power and exemplary wealth.

A billionaire.

And a man useful to my father – his lucky chess piece, as he'd say.

Killian and I were never supposed to cross paths. But it was my one mistake that led me here. And like an invisible string, something intangible kept pulling me closer to him. Wanting to be in his presence. Needing to talk to him. Craving the sound of his voice.

I should have never come back after the first day. Should have stayed away,

but here I was.

“You don’t scare me.” My gaze roved his handsome face and solid build. He was tall – taller than my father and with broader shoulders. “You’re just... intimidating.”

“That’s a compliment, Princess” he drawled, all confident and nonchalant. I swallowed. “I have to go.”

I spun around, ready to leave and never come back, but his voice stopped me. “You still haven’t told me your name.”

Panic rose in my chest and a familiar, paranoid fear crashed through me. My muscles tensed and my stomach churned with nausea. If my father found out I had been seeing Killian, secretly...

Oh God.

That was the moment that ruined the rest of our story.

My first mistake was coming to the stables.

My second mistake was...

“My name is Gracelynn,” I whispered, before taking off into a sprint.

Away from him.

And my lies.



One week later

Killian removed his black blazer and threw it my way, smacking me right in the face with it. I sputtered and glared, but he only gave me a crooked grin in response. He unbuttoned his cuff links and hiked his sleeves up his muscled forearms.

I practically drooled, but I was a respectable and proper lady, so I didn’t.

I climbed over a stack of hay, perching atop and draping Killian’s blazer over my knees.

“A white dress in the stables? I’m questioning your choices,” Killian said.

I nudged my chin high. “Why? You don’t like it?”

He flashed me a crooked grin. “White is very...*pure*. It doesn’t suit my liking, although, you look exceptional in white.”

“What is your favorite color then?”

He led Coal by his bridle, pulling the stallion from his stall. “Red,” Killian

deadpanned.

“Why red?” I questioned.

“Red is the color of extremes, Princess. It’s many things. Violence. Passion. Wrath.” He paused; his eyes lingered over my lips and his voice softened, to almost a tantalizing low undertone. “Longing. Seduction. *Lust.*”

My belly pooled with warmth and there was a fluttering in the pit of my stomach. My thighs tightened, involuntarily.

Coal let out a neigh and I exhaled a shuddering breath. I looked away first, but not before I saw the flash of mischief on Killian’s face.

The black stallion strutted toward me with a snort, but it was more playful than grumpy.

“Coal and I are starting to get along,” I observed, swinging my legs back and forth.

Killian brushed the horse’s black coat with exquisite tenderness and I wondered how it’d feel to have his hands on me like that. The moment that thought came to me, I shook my head.

Nope. This was *very* wrong.

“Why are you so scared of horses?” Killian asked, looking both thoughtful and interested in what my response would be.

I gave him a half-shrug, even when I fought a shiver at the memories – they were still so vivid, though it had been almost eight years.

“I had a little accident when I was ten,” I explained. “Fell off my horse while I was learning to ride and sustained a brain injury. I haven’t been allowed near a horse since then.”

In fact, I haven’t been allowed out of my father’s estate since then.

When I was eleven, he put me in an all-girls boarding school. But when my seizures became ‘troublesome’ and my father worried that the public would come to know about my epilepsy – and what he perceived as a weakness – he pulled me out. Then, both my sister and I were home schooled.

While I rarely left the Romano’s Estate, my sister traveled to France when she became nineteen and studied fashion design for three years before recently coming back to America, a month ago.

My sister who was the real Gracelynn Romano.

And I was *just*... Julianna. Forgotten daughter, a shadow and a nobody.

My sister – who was to be betrothed to Killian Spencer. Our father was expecting an alliance between the Romanos and Spencers, soon enough. It

was a chase for power and more wealth for him.

I knew my lie would catch up to me.

I knew Killian would soon find out that I wasn't the real Gracelynn. I should have told him the truth by now... but I wanted to buy more time with him.

Before he became my sister's.

So, I lied. Over and over again.

Killian clucked his tongue. "Fear can be both adaptive and maladaptive. It can be deceiving, once it holds you captive. You just have to *learn* how to break free."

He strode over to me and my heart stuttered once he was close enough that I could *feel* his warmth. Killian braced his hands on either side of me, beside my thighs. With me sitting atop the stack of hay, it put us eye-levelled with each other. Face to face and chest to chest.

He leaned forward, so close I could smell his minty breath, could taste it on my own lips. "Do you trust me?"

My lips quivered with the tiniest smile. "Not yet."

He nodded, once, and took a step back. "We'll work on that," he crooned.

I inhaled sharply and thrust the paper bag I was holding toward him.

"Cookies."

He quirked up an eyebrow in question and I chewed on my lips, suddenly feeling shy and nervous. He took the paper bag from me and peered inside.

"I made them," I said, quickly. "Without raisins. Because last time... you said, I mean... you didn't like the raisins. So, I made these. For you. The way you like it. Oh my God, I'm just going to shut up now."

"Are you flustered, Princess?" Killian drawled.

"I'm not," I snapped, but secretly swooned at him calling me *Princess*. He didn't mock me, but it was almost like he enjoyed teasing me.

He brought one of the cookies to his mouth and took a small bite. His gaze roved my body, leisurely and blatant. Killian didn't even hide the fact that he was *staring*. Our eyes locked and he licked his lips, deliberately slow and enticing. "Hmm, soft and sweet. The way I like it."

Goosebumps peppered my skin and my nipples tightened. "What?" I breathed.

"The cookies, Princess."

Oh. Right. The cookies.

"Did you think I meant something else?" he inquired, taking another bite

of the cookie. Killian was so calm and composed and I was so... *not* calm.

“No,” I denied too quickly, and he gave me that signature crooked grin of his.

Was Killian Spencer being flirtatious?

And why did I like it?

After eating two cookies, he handed me the paper bag again. “Thank you, Grace. That was very thoughtful of you.”

Grace.

It was almost on the tip of my tongue – to tell him the truth. That I wasn’t Gracelynn. I wanted to scream that I was Julianna.

But in the end, I only nodded and smiled.

My lies tasted bitter on my tongue but I swallowed them.

For the first time in my life, I felt seen and wanted. Desired. I felt... *important.*

And I wanted more.

Not knowing that it would be the reason I would later lose *everything.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE PAST

Julianna



Two weeks later

“**N**ope,” I deadpanned.

Killian stood in front of me, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the first three buttons of his black dress shirt undone. His dark hair was messy as if he had raked his fingers through them way too many times.

My gaze darted to the riding crop in his hand and then quickly back to his eyes. It was the way Killian carried himself – so confident and controlled, the air practically crackling with his dominant energy – it made me nervous and on *edge*.

Coal took the apple that I was offering him, his breath warm and wet on my hand, and I pulled back, hastily. “That’s it. I pet him and feed him apples, but I’m *not* getting on him.”

Killian sighed. “He’s safe. I wouldn’t let you near him, let alone ride him, if he wasn’t, Grace.”

Over the last two weeks, I had learned to ignore the way Gracelynn’s name sounded on his lips when he spoke to *me*. It was my fault he still thought me Bishop Romano’s eldest daughter.

Yes, I should have told him the truth by now.

But I *couldn’t*.

I didn’t want to.

Every time my lips parted to speak the truth, it felt like I had swallowed something big and I choked on my own lies. My brain told me one thing, but my heart wanted something else entirely.

At first, guilt gnawed at me when Killian flirted with me. If he knew who I really was or how old I was – seventeen and underage – he wouldn't have spared me another glance.

He thought I was Gracelynn and that I was twenty-two.

Killian was almost ten years older than me, a wealthy and experienced *man*. I was a nobody and too young for him.

But three days ago, I turned eighteen. That made me feel a bit *less* guilty at tricking him into believing that I was Gracelynn. I knew that didn't make me a better person or fixed this situation, but I guessed... I was trying to make myself feel better.

That I wasn't doing anything *too* wrong.

That this wasn't forbidden.

Or immoral.

Even though, it was all three.

Killian crowded into me, his chest pressing against mine, forcing my attention back to him. I shook my head. "Oh no. No. I'm not getting on him!"

"Trust me, Princess," he breathed.

"I trust you but—"

Killian grinned, pleased at my answer. I hadn't even realized that I said the words out loud – that I *trusted* him.

"No buts," he crooned. "You can't take this back. Remember what I said? Fear is deceitful. It holds you captive and you need to break free. I won't let anything hurt you."

My hand landed on his chest and I gave him a gentle push, but it did nothing. He barely even budged, not that I wanted him too. I liked him this close. His strong, manly scent filling my nose and his warmth caressing my skin. "You can't say that with such conviction. You can't protect me all the time."

"Yes, I can."

"You're not invincible," I shot back.

"Says who?"

I licked my lips and his dark eyes flared with decadent mischief.

"Arrogance has a limit, Killian Spencer."

"Arrogance is a debatable and subjective matter," he said.

I groaned. "You're impossible."

"And you're cute."

I gave him another push, my brow furrowed. "Don't patronize me."

“I’m not,” he growled. “You *are* cute, pouting like this.”

“I don’t pout.” My lips pursed.

He arched a brow and I rolled my eyes. “Fine! I pout. So what?”

“Beautiful,” he mouthed.

I swooned for the second time since I met Killian.

“Now, trust me.” He grasped my hips and lifted me so suddenly, I gasped. “Left foot in the stirrup, Princess. And your right leg over the horse.”

I quickly did as I was told, only squeaking once when I sat in the saddle. Coal shifted under me, almost restlessly, and my fingers curled into his beautiful, silky mane.

“There you go,” Killian praised. “Look at you. Fearless. You’ve mounted a horse, Grace.”

So I did.

But oh God, my heart hammered against my ribs, blood roaring in my ears and I felt... *breathless*.

“The horse can feel it when you’re tensed and that will agitate him.” Killian brushed the riding crop lightly along my back and I trembled. “Relax your muscles and arch your back.”

I did as I was instructed, eventually finding myself seated more securely on the saddle – which was too big for me. Killian dragged the riding crop along the curve of my back once again, almost teasingly. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I squeezed my thighs, feeling an insistent ache between them.

“Killian,” I squeaked when Coal let out a loud breath and stomped.

“It’s okay,” he soothed, his hand on my thigh. Firm and strong. *Trustworthy*. “I’m right here.”

And then Killian did the one thing I didn’t expect him to. He swung up behind me, settling onto Coal. “I got you,” he whispered on my neck, pressing close into my back.

His strong thighs caged my hips and his legs dangled behind me. He was so close, so warm... so *strong*.

The stallion snorted, growing restless under both our weight, but Killian patted his black coat, making soothing sounds at the back of his throat. Coal eventually settled and grew still, awaiting patiently for Killian’s next command.

“You’re a horse whisperer,” I murmured.

“Do you trust me, Princess?”

I nodded, voicelessly.

His fingers curled around my hips and he clicked Coal into a trot. The horse moved a few steps and I yelped, my body tensing. “Relax. Ease up your muscles. Let me guide you.”

“Easy for you to say,” I quavered.

“Grace,” he said, his voice holding a warning tone. “Listen to me.”

“I am!”

“No, you’re letting your fear get in the way again.”

My voice trembled when I spoke. “Killian, *please*.”

He grabbed the rein with one hand, keeping the other one on my waist. “Ride the wave,” he instructed, his voice deep and calm. “Don’t fight Coal. Rock your hips to his movement, back and forth. Feel it. Feel him. Loosen your spine, relax your muscles.”

I tried, but every time the stallion moved a step, I tensed up again.

Killian lowered his head, his lips brushing against the curve of my ear.

“I’m in control, Princess. You just have to move with Coal. Now, clutch him with your thighs.”

I gasped and quickly did like I was commanded. Killian clucked his tongue in approval and I flushed under his silent praise.

His fingers tightened around my hips. “Don’t just bounce on him. Rock your hips, baby. Move it. It’s all in your spine and your seat. Don’t try to ride him. Don’t force it. Let him take you on the ride.”

Coal trotted and Killian gripped my hips, moving me up and down with the stallion’s momentum. “There you go. That’s more like it,” he praised, his voice softening into a sweet caress.

My heart seemed to beat right out of my chest. Heat bloomed up my neck and my face until I felt *heated* and out of breath. Eventually, the movement started to feel more natural to me.

The fear was still there, simmering under my flesh and digging into my bones. But slowly, my muscles started to relax on their own. My spine loosened, like Killian had instructed me.

I squeezed my thighs, feeling Coal’s strength. He was a beast, but a warm and gentle creature. Killian leaned into my back and I could *feel* his smile.

With a shuddering breath, I relaxed into the saddle and allowed myself to move with Coal’s rhythm. Up and down, rocking my hips in the seat, *feeling* the stallion and letting him take me on the ride.

Killian shifted behind me, leaning in closer. My brow furrowed when I felt

a hardness poking into my back. When I realized what it was, I let out a barely audible gasp.

Yes, I was a virgin, inexperienced, knowing very little about sex. But I wasn't innocent. I watched porn a few times. I knew enough about the male anatomy to know what was currently pressing against the curve of my ass.

But fuck – I didn't know how to react. *Do I lean back into him?*

Except he made the decision for me. Killian shifted again and I no longer felt his erection pressing into me. I almost whimpered in disappointment.

“Perfect, baby,” he whispered roughly in my ears. “You're a natural, Grace.”

Sweet hell, I almost combusted right there.

Fire blazed through my veins and I nodded, licking my lips. “Thank you.”

We did one more lap around the open field before we slowed to a stop. “How do you feel?” Killian asked.

“I... I don't... know,” I stuttered.

He grasped my right hand in his and brought it to my chest, pressing my open palm over my beating heart. “Let me ask you again, how do you feel?”

My heart thudded, adrenaline coursing through my body. I felt hazy and... almost intoxicated.

“I feel... exhilarated. Like I had just done the impossible,” I breathed through the lump in my throat. “I feel heady and fuzzy. And happy. I feel... warm.”

“Good,” Killian praised, releasing my hand.

He dismounted first. Coal neighed in response, stomping once. I leaned down to Killian and he pulled me off the horse. It was a clumsy attempt and I stumbled into him, once my feet were on the ground. My legs were shaky, but he wrapped one strong arm around my waist, anchoring me to him.

Killian helped me to a stack of hay, before leading Coal back into his stall.

When he returned, he found me still perched in the spot he had left me. “You look beautifully flushed,” Killian noted, coming to stand in front of me. Our shoes touched and he was close enough for me to reach out and touch him.

I looked up at his face, into his dark eyes. “You think I'm beautiful?”

“Oh, is the lady looking for a compliment?”

My lips pursed. “Fine. You know what, don't say anything else. I'm leaving.”

He chuckled but when I made a move to get off the hay, Killian leaned

forward and braced his hands on either side of me. He caged me between his arms. “I know very well how to tame brats, Gracelynn. So, don’t be a brat.”

I flushed, feeling the heat rise up to my cheeks. “How dare you—”

“Gorgeous,” he said and I shut up.

“Fascinating. Delicate. Graceful. Dazzling. Stunning. You’re not just beautiful, Grace. You’re *bewitching* and so fucking divine. I want—”

My fingers gripped the collar of his shirt and I pulled him to me, slamming my lips against his. I gasped and he *groaned*.

The deep rumble resonated through my body. His lips were full and soft. He tasted of mint, rich chocolate and sin.

My heart dipped into my stomach and my head swam. We stayed like this for a second, both of us surprised by my impulsive action.

One heartbeat. Thud.

Two heartbeats. Thud. Thud.

His scent surrounded me; his taste engulfed me.

Killian nipped my lower lips, teasingly. The gentle bite stung and I whimpered.

My eyes fluttered closed as Killian lowered his body atop of mine, pushing me back into the hay. He clutched the back of my neck as he deepened the kiss, fiercely and almost obsessively. As if he had hungered for me for a decade. Like he had been dying to do just that for the longest time. To kiss me.

To devour me.

He licked the seams of my lips and I gasped, which opened my mouth for him. His tongue slid inside, tasting me. I burned for him, my body melting into his solid strength, and I was weak and powerless.

A woman full of need. I craved Killian Spencer.

I had never been kissed before and had nothing to compare to this moment – but this kiss, it was *everything*.

His lips on mine.

His body against mine.

His need reflecting my own.

Killian swallowed my moan and breathed into my mouth, feeding me his taste. It wasn’t just a nest of butterflies in my stomach. It was the whole damn zoo, while my heart was *torn*.

My body was no longer my own as I curled my arms around the back of his neck. My tongue met his, inexperienced and tentative. His tongue tangled

with mine and then he used his teeth, biting down on my swollen lips.

I was starved for him and he kissed me like he was a warrior who had just come from a bloody battle and I was his prize.

Killian brutalized my lips and the kiss turned feral.

Sweet hell.

The inside of my thighs was coated with lust for him and I squeezed my legs together, trying to alleviate the intense ache between them. My hips arched up, involuntarily rocking against his. His hard length dug between the juncture of my thighs.

“Grace,” he groaned.

That did it. As if cold water had been dumped over my head, I froze. My brain scurried, chasing the haze away.

What have I done?

My eyes snapped open and I gasped, pushing against Killian’s chest.

He pulled back, our lips finally finding reprieve from each other. His dark gaze, intense and burning with desires, landed on mine. His black hair was tousled and he licked his lips, deliberately slow, as if to taste the remnant of our kiss.

Guilt slashed through me, like a sharp blade cutting my flesh open. I *bled*, with agony coursing through my cold veins.

I exhaled, my chest rattling with a shudder. “We shouldn’t have—”

Killian pressed his index finger to my swollen lips, effectively shutting me up. “Don’t regret this now, Grace.”

My eyes squeezed shut as he said that name – *her* name.

His lips whispered over the corner of my mouth and then along my jaw, a featherlight touch. “Please,” he said, his voice deep and thick like sweet molasses.

“I don’t regret it.” I lied between my teeth.

I felt his smile on my skin. “Good. Because I want to do it again. Not today. You already look well ravished and I don’t want to scare you away.”

“You can’t scare me away,” I breathed, my eyes fluttering open.

*It is **me** who will scare **you** away. My truth will.*

Killian pulled me up and he let out a deep chuckle, picking the hay out of my hair. “Jesus, I’m a mess,” I grumbled under my breath.

“I quite approve of you being a mess, Miss Romano,” he rasped, with a pleased look on his handsome face. “Especially since I’m responsible for it.”

I patted my rumpled dress, making sure I was decent enough. “And you’re

a rogue, Mr. Spencer.”

Killian raked his fingers through my wild, platinum-blond hair, before curling a strand around his index finger. “Your hair... was the first thing that captured my attention. It’s such a light blond, it’s almost white when the sunlight catches it.”

Bringing the curled strand to his nose, he inhaled. “And it smells like strawberry.”

“It’s my shampoo,” I said, my voice quaking.

Killian’s lips curled up into a crooked grin. “I have a newfound appetite for strawberries.”

He released my hair and I licked my lips, taking a step back away from him. “I have to go now.”

Killian gave me a slight bow. “Good day, Miss Romano.”

“Good day, Killian.”

I spun around and ran.

I didn’t stop until I bolted through the door of my room and crashed onto my bed. Shoving my face into my pillows.

A wounded scream spilled from my throat.

And for the first time since I met Killian Spencer, a lonely tear slid down my cheek.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PAST

Julianna



I sat on my bed, wringing my hands on my lap while my sister paced back and forth.

“Julianna,” she hissed through clenched teeth. Her forehead creased with tension lines, and I worried that the stress wouldn’t be good for her and the baby.

Four hour ago, her pregnancy test came back positive. My sister was pregnant, and the way she had collapsed in horror, I knew this wasn’t planned.

After the shock had worn off, I realized just how much more complicated the situation had become. And it was time to tell Gracelynn the truth.

About my forbidden affair... with the man she was betrothed to.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. For the fourth time. But my apologies weren’t going to fix this situation. I couldn’t go back and change the past. And as much as I hated to admit it, I didn’t want to undo my lies.

As bitter as my lies were – I found peace within them. I found Killian.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?”

I nodded, voicelessly. I wanted to defend myself, but I couldn’t find the words to do so. Gracelynn speared me with a dark look before she resumed going back and forth, her fists clenched at her sides. Her pacing was making me dizzy.

My left leg jerked, barely noticeable, but I felt the muscle spasm. My fingertips tingled and I worried that this could be one of my symptoms for an oncoming seizure. God, I hoped not. I haven’t had a seizure in almost four months. This was my longest streak.

“Dad is going to blow a fuse,” she warned.

“You’re not interested in Killian, anyway. You’re in love with Simon,” I muttered, as if that excused what I had done.

“Yes, but I am betrothed to Killian! You – oh for Pete’s sake. This is a mess! How did you even fool him?”

“I didn’t fool him,” I cried. “That was never my intention. When I introduced myself as Gracelynn, I never expected to see him again. But then, it was like something kept pulling me to him. I tried to stop, Gracelynn. Trust me, I *tried*.”

“You didn’t try hard enough,” she accused. “You don’t realize just how dangerous your lies are.”

“It’s more than that. We, uh...kissed.”

“What? When?” she growled.

“Two weeks ago... and there have been a lot more kisses since then.”

She rubbed a hand over her face, an exasperated sound rumbling from her throat. “How long has this been going on? When did you and Killian start – whatever it is you started?”

“About two months,” I whispered.

Gracelynn gasped. “Two months! And you’re just telling me this now?”

“I was scared!” I cried.

“Scared of *me*?”

I blinked, appalled she’d think such a thing. “What – no! I just wanted... I didn’t want it to end. I was, *am* scared of losing Killian.”

My sister and I had always been very close and the only reason I told her the truth was because I *trusted* her. Gracelynn would never betray me. Especially when it came to my happiness.

Her expression turned forlorn, almost like she pitied me. “You’ve lost him anyway when you started this relationship based on a lie.”

“You don’t understand,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

Gracelynn came closer, kneeling in front of me. She grasped my hands in hers, squeezing. There was tenderness in her gaze, almost motherly. “Then make me understand, Jules. Tell me what’s in your head. I need to know.”

I remembered the first time I saw Killian, when I thought he was a simple stableman. A man with no status. And now, I wished he really was. It would have made it so much easier to love him.

And I did. Love him.

I didn’t know when it happened or how it happened. It was painful loving someone from afar, in the shadows – in secret, while knowing your love was

never to be. From the beginning.

I let a secret love kindle within me, knowing full well it could never be returned. But when it was reciprocated, I realized just how dangerous it was. Just how cruel fate could be.

Killian Spencer was everything I could ever need – the Prince Charming I had dreamed of when I was a little girl – but he was nothing I could ever have.

Still, I loved him.

And I wanted to defy the odds to have him.

For once, I wanted to be selfish.

“Killian,” I started, swallowing. “No one ever sees me for who I am, but with Killian, he makes me feel important and heard. I feel seen for the first time in my life, Gracelynn. Wanted and desired. He understands me, the woman behind Julianna Romano.”

I squeezed Gracelynn’s hand, remembering the day I told him about my accident and my fear of horses. How he neither judged, nor looked at me like I was someone *insignificant*.

While my father sought to trap me, Killian simply wanted me to let go of my fear. To live. To feel.

“Killian doesn’t see me as a weakness or treat me like I’m fragile. He doesn’t look at me as if I *lack* something and I don’t feel incomplete with him. Or that my existence is wrong and futile. Because Killian sees me for who I am and that’s enough. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Gracelynn sighed, her brows furrowing. “Oh, Julianna.”

“I fear losing that. Him. The feeling he gives me. The emotions he evokes in me. I don’t want to lose that, Gracelynn,” I confessed, my deepest fear pouring into my words.

“Yes, but our father – I am the woman Killian is meant to marry,” my sister said, deeply troubled. “In fact, Killian thinks he’s marrying Gracelynn, the eldest daughter of Bishop Romano.”

Even though my sister wasn’t in love with Killian, she would never disappoint our father. She’d go ahead with this marriage, even if it meant losing the man she loved.

She was selfless.

And I was selfish.

My heart seized in my chest. The mere thought of my sister and Killian together made me *sick*. I imagined his lips on hers and bitter jealous crawled

up my body, digging itself deep into the pit of my stomach. I couldn't bear it – to watch him hold Gracelynn as tenderly as he held me.

I knew that eventually Killian would fall in love with my sister. It was bound to happen. Gracelynn was beautiful, smart, selfless, understanding... everything Killian Spencer needed in a wife. Someone who would rule by his side – his Queen. His equal.

My stomach hollowed and I fought the urge to retch.

“But he's been courting me,” I whispered. “He's *mine*.”

“Killian is not an object, sister.”

“I know that,” I hissed.

When I tried to pull my hand away, Gracelynn held fast. Our eyes locked and she held my gaze with utter seriousness. “He needs to know the truth, so he can make his choice.”

“I *can't*,” I choked, my chest tightening in a way that *hurt*. “He'll hate me.”

My sister shook her head, solemnly. “He'll find out either way. Soon enough. But he needs to hear it from you than someone else.”

“You don't even want to marry him,” I said, lamely. “You're pregnant with Simon's child and I know abortion is not an option for you. How unfair is that to Killian if you marry him?”

That made Gracelynn pause. She cocked her head to the side, her brows furrowing thoughtfully. “You're right. I don't want to marry Killian. I think... we might have a solution to our problems.”

I straightened at that, hope blooming in my chest like a fragile rose. “What do you mean?”

Gracelynn had been in love with Simon for three years. He was her bodyguard in France. They spent every breathing moment together – of course, it was bound to happen. Simon was everything my sister wanted in a man.

And I knew their love was true. I saw it in Simon's eyes. The way his gaze tracked my sister, so carefully, so tenderly whenever they were in the same room together.

I noticed his mischievous grin and her hidden smile.

The look of longing and the little stolen touches.

Their love was never meant to be, like my own with Killian.

But fate – oh how cruel it was. Destiny brought two men into our lives. Men we couldn't have, yet we had succumbed to their charms. Such

forbidden love was a tragedy in the making.

Gracelynn's gaze met mine. "What?" I breathed, my heart galloping.
"I think I have a plan."



I curled my arm around Killian's waist, pressing my face into his neck. My nose brushed along his throat and I inhaled his musky and earthy scent. "My father would blow a fuse if he were to see us like this, alone," I whispered.

Killian worked through my thick tresses with expert fingers. My lips twitched with a knowing smile. "You do this on purpose," he accused, softly. "I used to hate strawberries, but now I find myself eating them more often because they remind me of you."

I swooned. For the third time in my life.

All three times had to do with Killian Spencer.

Once my tresses had come undone, he made a sound of approval in the back of his throat and my smile widened. Killian raked his fingers through my blonde hair, curling a strand around his finger. "You're my wife-to-be. Your father can't stop me from seeing you."

"Yes, but he specifically said we needed a chaperone," I said. "He's old-fashioned like that."

"Fuck that." Killian rolled over, dragging me under his body and pushing my back into the blanket. He hovered over me. "We were seeing each other before we were even betrothed. If I hadn't defiled you then, I promise to protect your virtue now. I mean, apart from some stolen kisses and touches..."

We were both still fully clothed, but his warmth seeped through our many layers and I could *feel* it on my skin. "Oh please, don't ever say that in front of my father."

Killian gave me his signature crooked grin. "It's our secret," he breathed.

"Our secret," I whispered.

Little does he know...

My eyes darted to the dark sky, just in time to catch what we had been waiting for. "Look!" I whisper-yelled, excitement coursing through my body.

“The first shooting star. Oh my, it’s beautiful.”

“Hmm.”

I pushed at his shoulders. “Killian, look!”

“I am,” he rasped, before leaning down and claiming my lips.

Oh.

His body covered mine, arms wrapped around me like a vise. Chest to chest. Hips to hips. My thighs caged between his strong ones. I could feel the length of his body on mine, every inch of him. Strong and warm.

His lips were soft on mine, demanding. I opened for him, without any resistance, and his tongue slid against my own. Tasting me. Licking and devouring me, like a starving lover.

My eyes fluttered closed.

Killian groaned, the vibration rumbling through my body. My chest tightened and my belly pooled with warmth. There seemed to be an insistent pulse between the juncture of my thighs, aching and almost fevered.

God, I *hungered* for Killian.

The kiss deepened, and when he nipped on my lower lip, almost teasingly – I whimpered while he laved the sting with his tongue. His lips left my mouth, trailing along my jaw and down my neck. His kisses whispered over my throat and the hollow of my collarbone.

My body was aflame and I burned, with such fevered need.

When Killian started to pull away, leaving me empty and suddenly cold without his tender caress, I opened my eyes. His dark gaze was already on my face. “I’m not sure if you’re an angel or a she-devil, you temptress,” he muttered.

“Why can’t I be both?”

His lips quirked with a half-smile. “I approve.”

Killian rolled over, taking me with him, so that I was half-lying on top of his body. His arm curled around my hips, anchoring me to him. My gaze darted up to the dark sky again, finding another fiery shooting star.

I wondered if this counted as a date.

Killian and I had found another place for us to meet on my father’s estate, other than the stables. It was lovely spot atop of a hill. When I found there would be a meteor shower tonight, I had asked Killian if he wanted to watch it with me. He had already agreed before I even finished my sentence.

So, here we were.

Laying on a blanket, curled in each other’s embrace. On top of a hill,

under the midnight sky. Watching a meteor shower.

It started with two lonely shooting stars.

Before, soon enough, the dark sky became alight with bright neon stardust, raining down into a shower of shooting stars. So many at once – fiery and mesmerizing.

The night sky became *alive*.

My heart thudded at the sight of it. I had never seen something so magical.

I couldn't tear my eyes away until the meteor shower came to a slow end, leaving only a few shooting stars in the midnight sky.

Killian's fingers trailed along the curve of my back. "Do you miss your mom?"

I blinked at the randomness of the question. "Um, she died when I was very young, so I barely remember her. The only memory I have of my mom, and it's so vivid, is her brushing my hair. I guess, I miss *having* a mother."

Folding my arms over his wide chest, I rested my chin on my hands. My eyes roved his handsome, slightly stubbled face. "Are you close to your mother? You've never mentioned her before."

"My parents," Killian swallowed, his chest rattling with a sharp exhale. "It was an arranged marriage. I was fourteen when I found out my parents weren't in love. In fact, they despised each other."

"Oh." That was harsh. I didn't know much about my own parents' marriage, but I heard it was marriage of love. Well, at least – my father was in love, or so he told us. He said it was love at first sight. And he instantly knew my mother was the woman for him.

"I walked in on my mother," Killian sighed, his brows furrowed. "I found her in bed with another man, the very same bed she was supposed to share with my father. Two months later, I realized my father was a cheater too. They slept with other people during their marriage, never faithful to each other. Their marriage was a farce."

My fingers brushed his cheek, feeling his rough stubble under my fingertips. I placed a chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. I didn't know why I did it, but it was almost instinctual. "I'm sorry about your parents."

Our eyes locked and I saw what I needed to see in his dark gaze. *Longing*.

"When I was sixteen, they finally got a divorce. It was a scandal and the tabloids turned it into an ugly warfare, but my mother didn't care. That night she left for France with her new beau and in the last ten years, she's had about four new lovers. She's living her best life, traveling the world with the

money my father deposits in her bank account every month.”

How cruel. My mom died when I was too young to remember her. While Killian’s was still alive, but he was also without a mother.

My chest tightened, my heart aching at his words. “You’re not close to your mother.”

He shook his head. “Not at all; she wasn’t mother material. My father raised me. I’m not particularly close to him, but we get along.”

Killian was silent for a moment, before he rolled over until we were both lying on our sides. Chest to chest, hips to hips, face to face.

Our bodies were aligned and his fingers curled around my hip. “I want my marriage to be full of love and laughter, Grace. I don’t want something fake or a ruse to fool the public. I want something *real*.”

My heart squeezed and I bit my tongue until the taste of the copper tang of blood filled my mouth. It was almost like Killian *knew*. But he couldn’t. If he was still calling me Grace, he didn’t know my truth.

And that was the moment I could have undone my lies.

I wanted to scream that I was Julianna, but I only bit on my tongue harder, until it bled more. It wasn’t fair to him, not when he was practically begging me for something *real*.

The back of my eyes burned and I blinked the tears away. God, the pain. It hurt. The pressure on my chest grew heavier, more intense. It felt like thorny vines had wrapped themselves around my heart, crushing me. My skin crawled with the bitterness of my lies. My body recoiled with how ugly my secrets were.

“I know we’re basically already betrothed. Our fathers have finalized this arranged marriage, but I want to make it official with you.” Killian spoke, his voice strong and confident.

He brought my left hand to his lips and my eyes widened at the sight of the ring. When did he – Oh God.

“When you were looking at the shooting stars,” he answered my silent question.

I stared at the ring, a cushion-cut halo diamond ring. It wasn’t too big or too fancy; it was *perfect*. Killian had chosen a ring that suited me and my preferences.

“Marry me, Gracelynn,” he rasped.

“Are you... asking me or telling me?” I stuttered.

He grinned. “I don’t want to ask because I fear you’ll say no and I’m the

mad bastard who doesn't want to give you that choice, but fuck it, I'll do it the proper way. The proposal you deserve, Princess."

Killian nipped the tip of my finger, almost teasingly. Before he licked the sting away, his tongue laving over the burn. The tension between my legs was back again, intense and aching. His dark gaze glinted with mischief, as if he knew the effect he had on my body.

"Will you marry me?" he asked. "Spend the rest of your life with me? I don't want something fake. I want a real marriage. Love and obsession. Laughter and tears. I want all the ugly and the beautiful that comes with a marriage. Can you give me that, Grace?"

I nodded my head, voicelessly.

Killian's eyes flared with adoration.

His lips touched mine.

And my heart withered.

I was a deceitful woman.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE PAST

Julianna



“**Y**ou gotta stop staring at your ring,” Gracelynn teased. “Did you even hear anything I said?”

My head snapped up while I rubbed my thumb over the ring. “Huh? Sorry, what did you say?”

Was it possible to grow attached to a ring? It wasn’t because of materialistic reasons. But more because it represented Killian’s love for me. I’ve always dreamed of a fairy-tale romance, and I guessed... I got it.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it was *my* fairy tale, nonetheless. Riddled with more imperfections than what the naked eyes could see, more flaws than the love story I had dreamed – but it was *mine*.

My sister placed her hands on her hips, giving me a haughty look, but she was grinning. “Oh, wipe that smile off your face. You’re so in love it’s almost cheesy.”

I spun my ring around my finger, feeling the weight of it. “Please, I have to endure you and Simon giving each other heart eyes all the time. Now, that’s cheesy.”

“To be in love,” Gracelyn sighed. “Is such a wonderful feeling. How did we get into such an impossible situation?”

I half-shrugged, the pressure on my chest was back again. Weighing me down. “Did you tell Simon yet?”

“I haven’t but I think he knows. I woke up last night to his head on my stomach.” Her brows furrowed and I hated the look of despair on her face. I knew she was probably thinking about her... *plans*.

My lips parted and I was ready to tell her to forget her plans and that we

would figure something else out. But the knock of my door interrupted us.

“Gracelynn?”

We both flinched at our father’s voice. I bounced off my bed and practically tore my engagement ring off my finger, giving it to my sister.

“Come in,” Gracelynn squeaked, hastily dragging the ring onto her finger. It was slightly too small for her and I could see how tight it was around her finger.

Our father walked in, the air practically crackling with intensity. He was tall, although not as tall as Killian. Bishop Romano walked with a confident stature; his shoulders squared. At the sight of his two daughters together, he gave the rare smile he only reserved for us.

“I heard a rumor. That your fiancé has given you a ring,” Father said, coming to stand in front of Gracelynn. “Let me see so I can judge if he has given my daughter what she is worth.”

Our father grasped Gracelynn’s hand in his and his brows wrinkled. He let out a *humph* in response. “It’s smaller than what I would expect from a Spencer.”

“It’s perfect,” I said, defensively. Before I could stop myself or think it through. How could he judge Killian’s love for me with just a stone? It wasn’t fair. Killian could have afforded a million-dollar ring easily, with a huge diamond, but he chose to give me this one – because he knew it was what I’d preferred.

Something simple and elegant.

My father shot me a confused glance, but Gracelynn was already clearing her throat, bringing his attention back to her. “I like it,” she said, giving our father a perfect smile.

Even I would have believed her if I didn’t know the truth already.

He cupped her cheek, smiling. “My daughter deserves nothing less than the most expensive stone in the world.”

“Killian knows my preferences,” Gracelynn explained. “This ring is perfect for me.”

“If you say so.” Our father nodded. “I’m proud of you, Gracelynn. To celebrate this engagement, I’m throwing a party next weekend. It is time for the people to know that a Spencer and Romano have been joined together, by blood and loyalty.”

My eyes widened, my heart stuttering at his announcement. Father nodded at both of us before leaving. Gracelynn locked the door behind him and I

slumped on the bed, shaking.

“Shit,” I cursed, as my sister came back to me. She handed my ring back, placing it in the middle of my palm. My fingers curled around the diamond ring, keeping it in my fist.

“We need to tell him the truth,” Gracelynn said.

“Father will never accept this marriage. You’re the eldest daughter –”

My sister made an exasperated sound in the back of her throat, before cutting my rambling off. “It doesn’t matter what Dad wants. Killian needs to know the truth and he’ll make the decision.”

All the warmth left my body and I felt cold, as if I had been dumped into a tub of ice. “What if...”

Gracelynn was already shaking her head. “He loves you and he’ll always choose you,” she assured me with such certainty that I almost believed her. “Dad needs this contract marriage. At the end of the day, it really doesn’t matter who Killian marries. Me or you. And anyway, you know my plans.”

Her plans... yes, of course.

Her plans would solve our messy situation but...

“How can I convince you to stay?” I whispered. My chest tightened, the ache burrowing deeper under my flesh, into my bones.

Gracelynn sat down beside me on the bed. She curled an arm around my shoulders and I wrapped mine around her waist. She sniffled and tears burned the back of my eyes. “I’m doing it for my baby and Simon,” she said, her voice breaking. “I can’t stay here.”

Bishop Romano would never accept a mere bodyguard as his eldest daughter’s husband. In fact, he would do anything to ruin Gracelynn and Simon’s relationship, if he were to come to know of it.

Simon wasn’t born with a golden spoon in his mouth. In fact, he was an orphan. Simon was common folk while Gracelynn was royalty.

Bishop Romano wasn’t exactly a bad father; he just cared more about his status in high society than his children’s happiness. His heir marrying a bodyguard, without status and without a family’s wealth, would be a disgrace to him. He would *never* accept such an alliance.

“Is running away really the answer?” I questioned.

“Running away is the only option,” Gracelynn whispered. “Once our father is calmed down and he marries you off to Killian... I’ll send Dad a letter. But I won’t come back until I know he accepts Simon as my love and the father of my baby.”

Gracelynn was able to launder three hundred thousand dollars from her trust fund, without our father noticing thus far. And with Simon's savings... they had enough to settle down somewhere very far away from here.

I pulled away, swiping at my wet cheeks. I hadn't even realized that I was crying. "Where do you plan to go?"

My sister shook her head; her grey eyes – identical to mine – were glassy and wet. "I can't tell you. The less you know, the better it is for both of us. Because the first person dad will question when he finds out I'm gone is you."

"Is this your final decision?"

"Yes. You'll have Killian and I'll Simon and my baby. It's the best decision for both of us," she said, resolute and unswerving when it came to her decision.

I grasped her hands in mine, squeezing.

God, I hoped so.



Two days later, Gracelynn walked into my room without knocking, her grey eyes shining with mischief. "A package from Killian," she said, handing me the small, well-wrapped box. "It was addressed to Gracelynn. But we both knew *who* Gracelynn was to him. So, I believe this is yours."

"A gift," I gasped, taking the package from her and practically tearing through the wrapping. I opened the box, delving through all the muslin papers to find an antique looking hardcover. "Holy shit. Is that?"

My eyes darted to the thick, black spine. I already knew what the title would say, but somehow needed confirmation. When my gaze landed on the bold letters, I let out a barely audible gasp. Too in shock to even make a sound.

Wuthering Heights.

No way! This couldn't possibly be.

"Woah," Gracelynn breathed.

My breathing stuttered as I opened the first page, carefully... almost too scared to accidentally rip a page. A paper, folded in half, slid onto my lap and I blinked, confused. A letter? I unfolded it to find Killian's careful and fine penmanship.

To my wife-to-be,

Two weeks ago, you spoke of your love for Edgar Allan Poe and the Brontë sisters. The way your grey eyes shone fierce with such eagerness in that moment, I knew what I had do.

We are engaged to be married, but I realized that while I courted you, there were no presents or flowers. I apologize, Princess.

This is me trying to rectify my shortcomings.

Therefore, here's my first courting gift to you.

A rare copy of the first American edition of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

*"It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles,
but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn."*

I remember...

Your fiancé,
Killian Spencer.

My heart thundered in my chest, almost like it was trying to escape through my rib cage.

I had thought Killian was bored while I had talked endlessly about my love for anything classic, especially Edgar Allan Poe and the Brontë sisters. I remembered him staring into my face, without saying a word, just listening. And that had made me pause, thinking that he probably found it annoying, and boring so I had switched the topic to something else.

But...

Killian was truly *listening*.

"He remembered my... favorite quote from the book. I only told him once, but he *remembered*," I whispered, both shocked and pleased.

"Your fiancé is nuts!" my sister exclaimed. "Do you know how much this cost?"

"What?" I looked up to find her staring at her phone, gaping. Gracelynn shook her head, her jaw went slack. She turned her phone toward me, showing me her screen and her recent google search.

“This was up on an auction last week in London. A rare copy of the first edition of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*,” she explained. “The highest bidder was an American and you know what the bid was? Nine thousand pounds. Which is approximately twelve thousand dollars!”

I gaped. “No,” I breathed, appalled.

“Yes!” Gracelynn declared, before laughing.

“This is too much.” I shook my head, carefully placing the book back into the box.

Gracelynn rolled her eyes and she flicked me on the forehead. “Killian is courting you. Accept the gift. And he’s filthy rich, anyway. He can afford this and much more.”

Yes, but still...

Long after Gracelynn had left the room, I was still staring at the box. There was a phantom of an ache in my chest, delving in my heart and feeding into my soul.

Killian was so thoughtful.

And my deception was poison.

Killian,

Your gift is very thoughtful.

*I can’t believe you remember my favorite quote from *Wuthering Heights*. In fact, I can’t believe you were actually listening to everything I said. I had believed that I bored you with my endless talking about classic poetry and novels.*

I miss you, but I know that you’re busy. And now that Coal is well-trained, there’s no reason for you to come to the Romano’s Estate every day. When will we see each other again?

At least once before the party my father is throwing this weekend?

Yours truly,

Your wife-to-be.

A second letter came the next day, bearing another gift.

Five hundred pink ranunculus. Enough to cover every surface of

Gracelynn's room – which should have been my room. But a secret was a secret. To my father, Killian's fiancée was Gracelynn.

My Gracelynn,

It appears that we won't see each other until this weekend. My father and I are flying to Chicago tomorrow morning – duty calls, Princess.

Today's courting gift is ranunculus.

I hope you like this shade of pink. I was able to find a farm where they planted unique flowers. So, I handpicked all five hundred of these ranunculi myself.

The mad things we do when we're in love...

You've enchanted me, Princess.

Your fiancé,

Killian Spencer

The day after that, Killian gifted me a ruby jewelry set – necklace, earrings and bracelet. He said it had been passed down in his family for over a century.

On the fourth day, the present came in a small box, tiny enough to fit in the palm of my hand. Curious, I opened the gift to find a single red hair ribbon. Silky and simple.

With KS stitched in gold, at the end of the ribbon – tiny and almost unnoticeable.

You always wear hair ribbons instead of hair-ties, so I guess you're fond of them.

Red is for my favorite color.

And KS is because you're mine.

Your fiancé,

Killian Spencer.

The last day – the day before the party – I got another well-wrapped

package. Similar to my first courting gift. I ripped through the wrappings to find another antique hardcover. My legs weakened and I slumped on my bed, too shocked to continue standing.

Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, a collection of poems by the three Brontë sisters using their pseudonym. The collection was published in 1846.

No way. How did Killian even get a hold of the first edition of this collection?

Out of one hundred original copies, only thirty-nine were sold. While the unsold stock was discarded and later acquired by a publisher who re-issued the collection but with a different title page.

But the one I was holding was the first edition, the original copy... with the original title page. One of the thirty-nine that were sold in 1846. This should have been *impossible* to acquire.

Killian,

You really shouldn't have. After doing a quick google search, I found out that you bought this from an auction in London for 95,000 dollars! Are you absolutely insane?

I mean I love it and that was very thoughtful of you. I will treasure this courting gift for the rest of my life, but...

I feel unworthy of such a grand gift. And I haven't even given you something in return.

*Yours truly,
Your wife-to-be.*

I didn't get a reply this time, but it didn't matter.

I saw Killian the next day.

At our engagement party.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE PAST

Julianna



“What if tonight flops? What if my truth comes out?” I whispered, squeezing my sister’s hand in a death grip.

“Dear Lord, calm down.” Gracelynn placed a hand on my knee, forcing me to stop bouncing my legs. “You’re so jittery, it’s making *me* nervous.”

I burrowed my other hand into my black satin gown, trying to hide my shaking from her. The bodice was too tight, or it felt like it. When I left home, the sapphire and diamond necklace was light as a feather, but now it *felt* heavy. Almost like a weight around my neck.

Maybe it wasn’t the necklace.

Maybe it was the ball of emotions and anxiety stuck in my throat.

The engagement party was tonight. And this was the first time both my sister and I were making an appearance in public, at such a grand event. Our father had kept us living quite a private life. I had never been photographed and my sister only had one of her photos swimming around on the internet, but that was almost eight years ago and she was barely thirteen.

Gracelynn and I had social media, but our accounts were on private and we never posted any of our photos online either. While our father attended many parties and events amongst the high society, we never accompanied him.

In fact, this would be our debut as Bishop Romano’s daughters.

All eyes would be on us, full of judgment and gossip.

And not to forget... my *secret* would possibly not be a secret anymore by the end of tonight, if my sister and I were not careful enough.

“How are you not nervous?” I hissed under my breath.

She brushed a hand down her emerald gown, smoothing out the wrinkles.

My sister and I wore a similar gown. Mine was black and strapless, with a long slit along my right leg. Gracelynn wore the same gown, but in an emerald shade and hers was a sweetheart neckline with long sleeves.

“Because I have faith it’ll all work out.”

I shoved my hand into the pocket of my gown, curling my fingers into a fist. I just couldn’t stop the tremors. “You’re way too optimistic.”

Gracelynn rolled her eyes. “And you’re way too cynical. Always have been.”

“No, I’m not,” I shot back, defensively.

“Are to.”

“I’m not.”

“Will you two stop the jabbering?” Simon’s deep voice broke in. He was sitting in the passenger’s seat at the front. He shook his head. “You act like kids sometimes.”

“We don’t,” Gracelynn and I growled together.

“Sisters,” he muttered. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Was that meant to be an insult?” my sister said through clenched teeth.

Simon brought his hands up in mock defense. “No, milady. I wouldn’t dare.”

He caught Gracelynn’s gaze through the rear-view mirror. He grinned a secret smile before winking, once.

My sister blushed and she stuck her tongue out, before slumping back against the backseat.

Ten minutes later, the car came to a slow stop. The driver cleared his throat. “We’re here.”

“I think I prefer to stay in the car,” I mumbled.

Gracelynn punched me in the arm and she leveled me with a glare. “Get yourself together.” She leaned in closer, to whisper in a low voice so that the driver wouldn’t hear. “You’re about to be married to Killian Spencer. You can’t hide anymore, Sister. You need to be the woman he needs you to be. His equal. He needs you strong and *fierce*. A lioness. He protects you. You protect him.”

“I don’t know how to be...”

“You do,” my sister cut in. “And you are. A strong woman. Believe that.”

A resigned sigh left my chest and I nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Simon opened the door for us and we climbed out of the car. The engagement party was held in one of my father’s five-star hotels and the

entrance itself was grand.

The moment we stepped out of the car, there were multiple flashes and several fast clicks. “Shit,” I cursed under my breath, before plastering a smile on my face.

Gracelynn did the same. We allowed the photographers to take a few photos of us before Simon quickly escorted us inside.

“I didn’t expect them to jump on us like that.”

“What did you expect?” I said, my voice shaking. “This is our first public appearance. And I’m – well, *you* are engaged to Killian Spencer.”

It was in this very moment that I realized *why* Killian hated the paparazzi and tabloids so much.

His mother was an A-list actress, so he had been photographed since he was a child. And then his father ran for President for two consecutive terms, which brought Killian more into the limelight. It must have been exhausting, to grow up and mature in such an environment.

We walked past the double door, leading into the banquet hall of the hotel. Gracelynn and I both came to a halt at the entrance, as everyone slowly turned around, their eyes landing on us.

My sister was more comfortable around people and having attention on her. But me? Not so much. *How do I stand? Where do I put my hands?*

God, I was hyperventilating.

My gaze darted around the banquet hall and when I met familiar dark eyes, I stilled. Killian stood tall and proud, amongst a sea of people, in a black tuxedo. He always looked so graceful and contained. And this self-assured man... belonged to *me*.

His gaze was riveted on mine, his lips twitching in a half-smile.

My father came to my sister and I. “You two are late,” he whispered, a tight smile plastered on his face.

“Sorry,” Gracelynn apologized. “I had an issue with my outfit.”

What our father didn’t know was that we were *purposely* late. Our plan was to walk in and out quickly. The less time we spent at this engagement party, the easier it would be for us to keep up our ruse.

Father guided us toward the middle of the room. Killian stood on his right and Father clasped him by the shoulder. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sure you’re aware already of why we are here tonight. But I still want to make this announcement public. It’s with utmost pride to welcome Killian into the Romano family as my son-in-law. My eldest daughter Gracelynn and Killian

are to be married in four months.”

Father gestured toward Gracelynn and I with one hand. We were practically stuck to the hip and we both smiled. To the guests, Gracelynn was my sister.

To Killian, *I was Grace.*

My heart withered when Killian gave me his signature smirk, looking decadently sinful. I hated how innocently he loved me...while I had been deceiving him from the start.

My secrets had turned our love story into something *ugly.*

It was unfair and cruel to the man I loved. The guilt of it was too heavy to bear anymore. The longer I dragged these lies, the harder it became for me to look into Killian’s eyes and act like everything was fine and perfect.

I had to tell him the truth.

I have to.

The next thirty minutes passed in a blur. Gracelynn and I stayed together, smiling at the guests, speaking when we were expected to. There were more than a hundred congratulations and my cheeks had started to ache from the stiff smile glued on my face.

Every now and then, I sneaked a glance at my fiancé. Killian was on the other side of the room, talking with a group of gentlemen. Once, our gaze met, and there was something in his dark eyes. Something akin to mischief and *need.*

Without him even saying a word to me thus far tonight, I *knew* what he wanted. What he was waiting for.

We both craved to be alone together, in each other’s presence. Away from the crowd. Away from all the judgmental eyes of these people.

When the orchestra started playing something different, a waltz tune, my eyes widened and I grasped for Gracelynn’s elbow. She went rigid too as we watched a few people move toward the center of the room, for a *couple* dance.

From my peripheral vision, I watched Killian stride toward Gracelynn and I.

“He’s coming,” I hissed to my sister. “I think he’s going to ask me for a dance. Do something!”

William Spencer and my father were watching us carefully, pride shining in their eyes. There was more attention on us now when the guests noticed Killian coming toward the Romano sisters.

As Killian approached us, coming toward *me* – Gracelynn quickly sidestepped into his path, halting him. She smiled, her hand fluttering to his chest. “I think you owe me a dance, Killian.”

“I do?” Killian muttered in a tight voice.

Her eyes widened with feigned innocence and even I was fooled to almost believe that her smile was *real*. “Of course, you do.” Her voice softened to a low whisper, only loud enough for me and Killian to hear. “If you think you can waltz my sister away so easily, think again. You have to work for it.”

Killian made an impatient sound in the back of his throat but nodded nonetheless. Gracelynn wrapped her hand around the crook of his elbow. My fiancé gave me a look filled with longing, before guiding my sister toward the rest of the waltzing couples.

I grabbed a glass of fruit punch off a server’s tray and watched Killian and my sister dance. To an outsider, they looked like a normal couple. Gracelynn fluttered her lashes up at Killian and her pretty smile never wavered. She was a good actress; I had to give it to her.

I peeked at my father and saw him nodding approvingly, looking quite pleased at the sight of Gracelynn and Killian dancing.

She successfully convinced Killian to dance two songs. Afterward, he guided Gracelynn back to where I was standing.

My sister appeared flustered, showing the guests just how amorous and captivated she was by her *fiancé*, while Killian’s attention was solely on me.

“Dance with me,” he said in a low voice, loud enough for my ears only. I swallowed, my eyes darting to his outstretched hand and back to his handsome, sculptured face.

“Are you asking or telling me?” I whispered.

His dark eyes flared. “May I have this dance, Princess?”

I nodded, while handing my glass to my sister, and Killian grasped my hand in his.

Once we were in the middle of the dance floor, his hand curled around my waist. Since my gown was backless, it was skin to skin. His callous fingers brushed along the curve of my back, my bare skin erupting with goosebumps at his teasing touch. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

My left hand went to his shoulder and he grasped my right one in his. The orchestra began a new song, and Killian guided me through the rhythm. It wasn’t a waltz, but it was a slow dance.

“You look enticing tonight,” he said, the rough timbre of his voice

caressing my skin. “I’m more than pleased that you didn’t braid or put your hair up in a bun.”

I had kept my hair down, in soft waves, the way Killian liked it. The only thing fancy I did with it, was my hair being pearl-speckled – the tiny pearls woven and scattered into the platinum strands of my hair.

I matched Killian’s pace, making sure I didn’t step on his foot. “I wanted to wear a red dress, but then I thought it would be *too bold*.”

“You made the right choice, because if you had worn a red dress – I would have *defiled* you right there behind a pillar.”

“Maybe another time,” I breathed.

“Indeed,” Killian rasped. “Patience is a virtue, but mine has been stretched thin. I *throb* for you, Princess.”

He pulled me closer, so that our bodies were touching – so close, I could feel his breath fanning against my cheeks and his...

Oh.

Is that –

His erection pressed into my stomach and I stumbled, my heels catching the back of my dress. That was what Killian meant when he said he throbbed for me.

His arm tightened around my waist as he helped me regain my footing before I could further embarrass myself.

“You – I mean,” I stuttered before clearing my throat. “Your courting gifts were very thoughtful, Killian. But I truly feel like you shouldn’t have–”

“You’re worth it,” Killian said, cutting through my useless rant. “And as for my gift... well, you’ll be giving me something on our wedding night, alright. I can be... *patient* until then.”

It was then I realized that he was responding to my last letter.

“That’s very gentlemanly of you, Mr. Spencer.”

“You won’t be calling me a gentleman when I’m between your thighs and taking what belongs to me, Miss Romano,” he said, in a gravelly calm tone.

“Killian,” I hissed.

“What?” he said, feigning innocence.

“Not here,” I stuttered.

He brushed his fingers over my back, caressing my bare skin with such tenderness, it made me *ache*. “Shall we go somewhere else then? Somewhere more private.”

I dug my nails into his shoulders, but he didn’t even flinch. In fact, he just

gave me a lazy half-smile, his dark eyes hooded with unmasked lust. “I thought you were supposed to protect my virtue, Killian Spencer.”

“Your virtue will stay very much intact till our wedding night, but there’s a lot of things I can still do to you, Princess.”

“Killian—”

“I can make you feel good,” he rasped in my ear.

“You’re being inappropriate,” I gasped. “My father is right *there*.”

“If I slide my hand under your dress right now, will I find you wet, Miss Romano?”

Sweet hell.

Killian was tormenting me and he was enjoying it – if I were to say so by that smirk on his face.

He spun me around once, before dragging me back into him, our bodies colliding together. “Do you touch yourself at night?”

My eyes widened and I gaped. “What?” I sputtered.

“Answer the question, Princess.”

My thighs clenched, involuntarily. The ache between them grew more intense and I felt strangely so... *empty*. “Yes. S-sometimes.”

“Hmm. How do you think it’ll feel if instead of your fingers, *I* touch you there?”

Holy shit. Flustered, I stumbled and stepped on his foot. An apology spilled past my lips and I prayed that no one had noticed my mishap. “Uh, *now*?” I croaked.

My body burned at the vivid image he had painted for me.

His voice had deepened when he spoke again. “Now.”

Killian’s eyes darted around the room, almost lazily, but I could see that he was trying to check if my father was watching or not. Once he realized that we were no longer the center of attention, he grasped my hand and practically dragged me away.

We quickly sneaked out of the banquet hall and into a lonely corridor. Killian pulled me behind a pillar, so we were completely out of sight and our figures were hidden in the shadows.

I gasped, my chest heaving. The air crackled with thick tension between us and I licked my dry lips. “If anyone sees us together, like this...”

I left my sentence hanging.

It was more complicated than that. If I were truly betrothed to him, this wouldn’t have been such a big issue. But the fact that he was, in reality,

engaged to my sister... if anyone were to see us together, it would be a scandal.

And my father – *oh God*.

“Do you trust me?” Killian questioned in a low tone, a raspy voice.

“You know I do.”

“Then you should know that I will never put you in the middle of a scandal,” he said. “I will never let anyone question your virtue, especially not your father. You’re *mine*, Grace. Mine to cherish. And mine to *protect*.”

He pressed into me, caging me between the wall and his solid body. “If I were to slide my hand under your dress right now, would you let me? Would you let me feel just how warm and wet you are for me? How needy you are?”

My throat suddenly felt parched. His hand brushed against my thigh, over the dress, before he slid his palm under the split. Skin to skin.

“Tell me, Princess.”

My head bobbed with a sharp nod. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” he questioned; his voice deceptively calm.

Flustered, I released a shuddering breath before speaking. “Yes... touch me.”

His lips whispered along my jaw and I threw my head back with a soft whimper. My fingers curled around the back of his neck, holding him against me. He kissed and nibbled down the column of my throat and along the length of my collarbone.

Maybe it was the idea of something *forbidden*...

Something dirty, for Killian to be touching me like this, behind a pillar.

Maybe it was the idea of possibly getting caught or someone finding us, in such a compromised position...

Even though it made me anxious, it also turned me on.

His hand trailed along my thigh, before circling around my knee. A shaky breath rattled from my chest when he lifted my leg up, forcing me to hook my thigh around his hips. In this position, it left me vulnerable and open to his slow teasing and torturous caresses.

I can't breathe...

I wanted Killian – *no* – I needed him, but it felt like I was about to combust in his embrace. My body felt overly sensitive to his touches. How could I be so aroused by just Killian’s voice and such simple caresses? He hadn’t even truly *touch* me yet.

Was it even possible to want someone this much? With such intense need?

He pulled his head back and his dark gaze met mine.

A quiver ran down my body when his hand snaked under my dress and his fingers teased my slit through my silk panties. Killian hissed when he found me wet, the fabric of my panties sticking to my flesh like a second skin and my arousal coating the inside of my thighs. “Princess, you’re *soaked* and I’ve barely even touched you.”

Sweet hell. What was he doing to me? How could he have such control over my body?

I burned with need for Killian. He pressed into me, his erection digging into my hips and my lips parted, with a barely audible gasp.

Slowly, almost like he wanted to tease me, Killian tugged my panties aside. His knuckles brushed against my wet folds and I flinched before a slight moan spilled from my lips.

His finger teased my opening and my core clenched. I could feel just how sticky my wetness was as Killian masterfully played me under my dress.

His caress was deliberately slow as he traced my wet folds, parting my lower lips and seeking my clit. His eyes never wavered from mine as he took my hardened nub between his forefinger and thumb and he pinched the sensitive bundle of nerves.

My lips parted with a silent scream and my back bowed, my hips bucking against his cruel hand. “Oh,” I gasped, before biting down on my lips – *hard*.

It hurt.

But... Oh God.

It hurt so good.

The pain mixed with forbidden pleasure and I whimpered.

His thumb circled my clit, as if to soothe the sting away, and I liked it. Liked the way his touch felt on my sensitive flesh. Liked how he knew where to touch me, in the way that made me mad with desire.

My nipples puckered tightly through my dress and they ached, while my whole body throbbed.

Killian slowly pushed a single digit inside my tight core, my inner walls clenching around it. He didn’t shove all of his finger inside me. Only halfway past his first knuckle. Almost like he just wanted to know how it’d feel to be *inside* me.

I tensed against him when he pulled out and I moaned impatiently. His lips twitched with a half-smile before he used two fingers to rub my clit.

“K- Killian.” Like a wanton woman in need, I choked out his name in a

moan, before I quickly captured my lips between my teeth.

My eyes widened when I heard whispers and more voices in the corridor. They were far-away, but my heart practically hammered in my chest, almost like it was trying to break through the confines of my rib cage.

Someone was coming.

Not just one person.

I could hear more than three different voices mingling together.

Thud. My heartbeat echoed in my ears.

Killian didn't pull away.

In fact, he showed no reaction except...

His eyes flashed with something dark – with lust and mischief.

Thud. Thud.

His thumb worked my oversensitive clit, switching between pinching and caressing before rubbing his two fingers between my folds. He traced my slit, gathering more of my sticky arousal.

I could feel... no, I could *hear* just how wet I was. The sound of his fingers working my sex was filthy and...

“My, my. The idea of getting caught with my hand under your dress just made you even wetter. You like the idea of exhibitionism, Princess?” he rasped, his teeth grazing my ear. His thumb circled my clit faster, like he was desperate to force me over the edge.

The sound of footsteps and the voices grew closer.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My hips bucked into his hand, grinding and trying to chase my orgasm.

He nipped my earlobe again and I responded with a sharp hiss.

“Uhh.” Another whimper spilled from my lips, this time louder. Killian slapped a hand over my mouth, smothering my moans. My eyes fluttered close as the tingles coursing through my body grew more intense.

My legs quivered and I clenched my thigh around Killian's hips. His erection dug harder into my hips, warm and *hard*. I almost worried he'd leave me with a bruise tomorrow.

“There's a deviant, filthy woman hiding under all that proper and respectful ruse,” Killian growled in a low voice, the sound rumbling from his wide chest. “And she's all *mine*.”

Killian shifted his body so that he was fully standing in front of me, pushing me against the wall. My fingers clawed at his shoulders, feeling the strength of his muscles under his tuxedo. It was then I realized that he was hiding me.

Killian was much taller and bigger than me, so his body was the perfect cover. And with us hidden in the shadows... even if someone were to walk up on us, they would only see the back of him. And if they were to recognize Killian, they wouldn't be able to see *who* he was with.

My hips bucked into his hand as a wave rolled through my body, intense and acute. Powerful and all-consuming.

In the back of my mind, I heard the voices and footsteps fading away, heading farther from our hiding spot. But that was before my brain completely shut down.

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my heartbeat in my ears as I tensed into Killian's arms. My climax bubbled in my blood, before crashing through me like a hurricane. His hand muffled my choked, desperate moan.

I shattered.

Thud.

The pieces of me scattered on the floor.

Thud. Thud.

I quivered with the aftershocks of my climax.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Killian pulled his hand from under my dress. While I was utterly transfixed by the sight of his brutally handsome face, his hand fell away from my mouth before he brushed his wet fingers over my swollen lips.

"Suck." It was one simple command, his voice gravelly and low.

My lips parted and he pushed his two fingers into my mouth. I sucked, like he had commanded me to. The taste of me was musky and strange, but it was the utter filthiness of this situation that made my core clench again.

As if one climax wasn't enough.

As if my body wanted *more*.

My tongue swirled around his fingers before he pulled away with a low snarl. Like he had snapped.

His mouth landed on mine, hard and bruising. He didn't just kiss me.

He devoured me, like a mad man. Like an obsessed man who had been denied this kiss for far too long. His tongue meeting mine in an erotic dance had me whimpering into his mouth.

His hand curled around my neck, his fingers brushing over the pulsing veins in my throat.

The kiss consumed me.

Suffocated me. Confused me.

My mind had been utterly captivated by this man. Who kissed like a brutal savage, who touched like a soft lover and who loved like a gentle beast.

I had come undone in his arms and I didn't know how to go back to the old Julianna. The one before she knew what it felt like to be touched by Killian Spencer.

I exhaled a shuddering breath into his mouth as I whispered his name, and he swallowed my moan. Killian licked my lips and the inside of my mouth, as if to taste the remnant of me, of my lust.

When he finally pulled away, our chest heaved as we shuddered with an inhale – almost desperate for our next breath.

Our eyes met.

Thud.

He grinned.

Thud. Thud.

“Happy engagement to us, Miss Romano.”

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My lungs squeezed as we silently put ourselves together again.

Killian trailed a finger along the curve of my throat. “I can't wait to start our life together.”

My heart withered, like a wilting rose.

I opened my mouth to tell him the truth.

It was on the tip of my tongue.

I craved to be without the burden of guilt once again. I hungered for the weight to be lifted off my chest. The truth tasted almost sweet.

“Killian–”

“Gracelynn.” My head snapped toward the direction of my sister's voice.

Her eyes darted between Killian and I. “We have to go. Uh, can we leave... early? My stomach... um, is hurting.”

I blinked. “Oh, yes. Right.”

My sister grasped my elbow, practically dragging me away from Killian. “Dad was looking for Killian. And then he noticed you were missing too,” she hissed under her breath. “So, I told him you weren't feeling well, so we're leaving the party early.”

I nodded along, not really paying attention to what she was saying. I looked over my shoulder and found Killian still standing there. Bringing my hand up for a quick wave, I mouthed, “Sorry.”

My apology was more than this – being dragged away from him or leaving our engagement party so early and so quickly.

My apology was for my bitter lies and cruel secrets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE PRESENT

Julianna



I told my husband *everything*. Starting from the very beginning, until now. The first time we met – how scared I had been to reveal my identity, and then how the fear of losing him had kept me from telling him the truth for the longest time.

Knowing he was betrothed to my sister, that he was meant to be married to her – I just wanted to have him a bit longer.

For him to be *mine* before he became hers.

And then I explained to him how I hid my identity after the accident. Dyeing my hair black and changing my voice. Controlling my pitch when I was heavily emotional was hard at first, but after two years of practice, I was able to carefully modulate my voice to sound different than how I usually sounded.

And with my black veil covering my face, it was easier to become someone else in Killian's eyes than the woman he loved.

Halfway through my story, I started choking on my tears, but Killian's face remained expressionless. *Impassive*. Almost like he wasn't even here. Killian sat up against the wall, one of his legs stretched out in front of him and the other bent to the knee. He was still bare-chested and my gaze brushed over the bullet scar on his stomach.

The bullet he took for me.

The scar he got from *protecting* me.

The only indication I got that he was listening to my version of our story was the way his jaw tightened, in the slightest way. There was a muscle tick in his left cheek as he gritted his teeth. As if to force himself to remain silent.

His eyes darted to me once, over the unmarred side of my face before his

gaze lingered on my left side, my scars – before looking away and at the wall beside my head. His arm was rested on his bent knee and I watched him clenching and unclenching his fist.

“I wanted to tell you the truth, so many times,” I said, my voice breaking. “Especially after our engagement party. But it was never the right moment. I *tried*; I really did. You have to believe me, Killian.”

The accident happened exactly a week after our engagement party. I had seven days to tell him the truth, and every time it was on the tip on my tongue, I swallowed my bitter lies.

I thought I would have more time. We still had two weeks before my sister’s plan to run away and four months before our wedding.

The night of the accident, it was completely out of character for both of us to sneak out.

I never had any friends. Hell, I didn’t even know what girls my age would talk about or what they’d do for fun. I was confined within the four walls of my room and that was my life. I only had Selene and Gracelynn...

Until Killian.

Gracelynn was planning to run away the next week and we didn’t know when we’d see each other again or if ever... We wanted good memories, something fun that normal sisters would do together. Sneaking out, going to a party, just... *living*. Instead of being a *proper* lady, sitting quietly and nodding, smiling when we were told to, speaking when we were expected to.

For just one night, I had wanted to experience something other than the confines of the Romano’s manor. I wanted to live beyond my father’s expectations.

Just one night.

With my sister.

Only for it to end in tragedy.

When Gracelynn had gotten the invitation, she had simply refused. She wasn’t interested in parties and getting drunk anymore. There were more important issues for her to worry about. Simon and her baby – and their plan to elope. I was the one who convinced her to go the party, thinking it would be a good idea to get her mind off things, to be less stressed.

If only we hadn’t...

I wanted to defend my impulsive decision, but at the end, it wouldn’t change what happened that night.

I wiped my tears, my fingers brushing over the jagged lines of my scars. I

never thought this day would come, where I would stand in front of Killian without my veil.

Where my lies had come undone and I was *bare* in front of him – my scars on display and my secrets no longer hidden.

If he had cut open my chest and tore out my heart – it would have probably hurt less.

“Say something,” I begged him, when the silence became too heavy to bear. My fingers curled into the bedsheet, where I was sitting on the edge of the bed. “*Please.*”

Killian worked his jaw, his fists clenching and unclenching, but didn’t respond to my pleading.

“Tell me you hate me,” I cried. “Scream at me. Say something, please!”

“Why?” he questioned, his voice composed. It surprised me, but I had learned to fear Killian’s calm over his rage. There was something serene about his calm – quiet and peaceful, like the eye of a hurricane before it forces you to collapse under the weight of the destruction it brings.

His calm should never be trusted.

It was deceitful.

Like *me*.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth *after* the accident?”

“There was no way for me to get out of this marriage,” I explained. “I couldn’t go against my father and I knew how important this union was for our families. But I thought that once we were married, it would be easier to make you hate me more than you already did and we’d eventually go our separate ways – that way, you would be able to move on. I wanted to make sure that you *could* move on. To find love again. With another woman, who deserved you more. No lies, no deceit, no secrets.”

The ache in my chest grew more intense and I practically gagged at how bitter the words tasted on my tongue. It *hurt*, confessing that truth out loud. To tell Killian that I wanted him to move on with another woman...

For my love was a catastrophe.

It didn’t matter that it *killed* me, the mere thought of my husband being with another woman. Touching her. Bedding her. *Loving* her.

It was so unfair, but our love story was just that.

Something tragic.

An incomplete story, with missing pages and a dubious ending.

“That should have been *my* choice. Not yours,” Killian hissed. He surged

to his feet in a quick motion and straightened to his full height, imposing and *menacing*. There was a deadly glint in his dark gaze that worried me. “You took that choice away from me. You don’t get to choose when or how I move on, Julianna. You should have told me the truth and I would have decided if I still wanted you or not, despite the lies and the scheming. You didn’t give me a chance to *choose you!*”

“Because I didn’t want you to choose me,” I bellowed, lunging off the bed. I stood on unsteady feet, practically swaying. My left leg jerked, a muscle spasming up my calf and into my knee. “Don’t you get it, Killian? I didn’t want a happily ever after with you. Not after what happened. Not after my sister... I *couldn’t*.”

Killian released a bitter laugh, filled with venom and sorrow. I swiped my tears away. “Marrying you was supposed to be my repentance.”

His body tensed, the muscles of his shoulders growing rigid. “That was where you went wrong. I’m not your atonement; I never was.” He shook his head, his jaw tight and dark eyes violent with rage. “It was always about *self-loathing*. I was right, you have a penchant for pain. You needed to somehow alleviate your guilt. So you thought the best way to hurt yourself, to destroy yourself was to marry the man you loved but have him hate you. *Self-destruction*.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I choked, my hands shaking so bad I didn’t know how to stop my tremors. There was an insistent tingle growing inside my body. It slithered through my arms, burrowing into my chest and then down to my legs. My toes were starting to feel numb.

“If it’s sympathy you want, you won’t get it from me,” Killian said flatly, devoid of any humane emotions.

“Pity is the last thing I want from you,” I cried. My heart hammered in my chest and my body felt out of sorts, odd and detached. My emotions were in turmoil, but my brain didn’t seem to register them.

The warning signs were clear, but I was too slow at recognizing them. Too lost in this moment, in the madness in Killian’s eyes and the unmasked sorrow in his voice.

He advanced toward me, his steps slowed and measured, almost like he was trying to remain in control. “It’s ironic how you called me out on my rage; you said a lot of things about how I can’t deal with my issues, therefore I was taking them out on you. You fucking *preached* about how problematic I was. That I was the reason for my own unhappiness. But yet, we are so

alike. Goddamn it. You're self-destructing and bringing everyone else down with you," Killian snarled. "You are no better, Julianna! Huh, how ironic, is that?"

My whole body flinched at the cruelty of his words, their hostility. I wanted to scream that none of it was true... that I wasn't self-destructing. That he was *wrong*.

But it would just be another lie.

Killian read me like an open book and he clawed out all my insecurities, all my thoughts and ugly emotions. He tore apart my pages and forced me to bare myself completely open, before shoving my own words back into my face.

He saw me.

Like he did three years ago.

Killian saw the *real* Julianna.

The one who was tormented by the ghost of her sister. The one who succumbed to the disease that was guilt. Cursed with memories that were moored inside of me – my sister's bloodied and mangled face. A soul that howled in despair, a resentment that had burrowed itself inside my bones and sorrow that was too heavy to carry.

Atonement was only an illusion that I was desperate to believe in.

With each step he took toward me, I moved back. But he quickly erased the distance between us, pushing me into the wall behind me. The room still smelled of sex and our arousal, but it was his scent that engulfed me. Musky and earthy.

"You were in that car with her, I get it. You watched your sister die, I get it. It was traumatic for you, I get it. You suffered physically and mentally, and you're guilt-ridden, I. Fucking. Get. It. But that doesn't give you the right to play with me and my feelings, to deceive me or to make me *mourn* the woman I loved when she wasn't even dead!" His palm slapped over the wall beside my head and I flinched, hiccupping back a sob.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, so softly the words were barely audible.

Killian pulled away quickly, as if I had burned him with my words, with my apology.

I wished I could tell him just how sorry I was, but where to begin? The only thing I could mutter was a useless *sorry*.

"Did you even love me? Was anything that we had even real, Grace?" He shook his head, smiling bitterly. "Sorry, I mean... *Julianna*."

“I didn’t fall in love with you,” I whispered. His dark eyes flared and his chest rattled with a shuddering breath. The torment on his face killed me. It shattered whatever was left of my already broken heart.

I dug my nail into my thighs, feeling the burn. The pain kept me grounded. “I *plummeted* into chaos because your love was everything beautiful and pure, but my love was everything deceitful and destructive. So, I didn’t just fall in love with you, Killian. I crawled, on my knees, bleeding for you. So, it was real. Every moment, every smile, every kiss... it was *real* and it *hurt*.”

The pounding ache in the back of my head grew more acute and I blinked several times, trying to clear my blurry vision.

“I mourned you,” he said, his voice breaking for the first time. “You were right here, in front of me, while I was chasing a ghost. I fucking *mourned* you for three years, Julianna. How do you think I can... move past this? You turned this marriage into a joke!”

Killian took a step back. He made it obvious that he couldn’t bear to be close to me, to be in my presence. His hands shook and he brought a fist to his mouth, his expression pinched in agony.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated when my words failed me.

“I told you... I told what I wanted,” he said darkly. “I whispered things to you that I never spoke with anyone else. My fears, my dreams, my secrets. You knew what my parents’ marriage did to me. And you knew what I wanted for myself. Something real. But you walked into this marriage with lies and secrets...and FUCK!”

He stabbed a finger into my direction. “You’re a deceitful woman and I can’t even fucking trust you anymore. No, goddamn it. I don’t even know if what I feel for you is *love* anymore.”

“No,” I choked. The room swayed and I reached out for him, limping. More tears slid down my cheeks, my throat closing around the large lump.

“I crashed and burned for you,” Killian hissed. “And you left me there, *bleeding*. So cruelly. So mercilessly.”

His lips curled, in an almost threatening manner. “There’s a fine line between love and hate. And I just realized that I love you as much as I fucking hate you, Julianna.”

I thought giving up on Killian as part of my atonement was difficult. It killed me, to marry him, to watch him hate me while I loved him in silent. To swallow my lies like a bitter pill. To enter this marriage with deceit. My repentance had shattered my heart and turned my love story into something

ugly and tragic.

But I hadn't been prepared for this moment.

When my truth came out and I truly lost him.

I stumbled back into the wall as my body grew cold, *numb*.

My brain stuttered.

My left leg spasmed again and the muscle in my bicep jerked.

His face hardened, cold and impassive. "I thought you were just a mere storm, but you are the goddamn hurricane – fascinating but deceptive. Tempting but destructive. You're pure chaos. Once upon a time, I would have gladly let myself be destroyed by you and counted it as a blessing, but now I want absolutely nothing to do with your martyrdom."

A sob spilled from my throat and I clutched my chest, feeling as if I had been torn open and ripped apart.

This was what I wanted, I thought guiltily.

For him to hate me.

For him to *leave*.

So he could move on. Start over again.

For the burden of my guilt would not be so heavy anymore.

And I could finally find *peace*.

I had waited for this day – for my atonement to come to an end.

But God, it *hurt*.

The agony was brutal, cutting through me so mercilessly. I reminisced of my love, but it was a seed that never sprouted. That was never meant to be.

Tragedy ran through our blood and our love story was just a mere wilted rose.

Our beginning was tainted with lies.

Our ending was stained by my deception.

But it was the wailing of our broken hearts that tormented me.

Killian's gaze roamed my face, lingering over my scars before meeting my eyes.

One heartbreaking eye-lock.

Two agonized heartbeats.

Three shattering seconds.

"You were the thorn, Julianna. You always were," Killian said, his voice deceptively soft.

When he spun around, a devastating sob spilled from my throat.

I watched him walk away.

Thud.

The numbness spread through my body.

Thud...Thud...

The room swayed. I gasped.

My tremors started from my toes, slithering up my legs, digging into my stomach and slicing through my chest. My tongue grew heavy in my mouth and my jaw locked.

Thud... Thud... Thud...

The moment my body seized; the world went pitch black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Killian



It was Julianna’s pained whisper, my name on her lips, that made me pause at the threshold of her bedroom. And then a *crash* – something slamming into the floor had me spinning around.

My stomach dropped when I saw Julianna’s body on the floor, seizing. The rage immediately dissipated, like ice water had been dumped over my head, and I jerked into motion without really thinking. My heart thudded in my chest as I rushed to her side, kneeling by her convulsing body.

“Grace–”

My immediate reaction was to gather her in my arms, but her body was almost rigid and her limbs jerking rhythmically.

I didn’t know where to touch her... how to...

Oh fuck.

“Help! Shit!” I screamed. Where the fuck was Emily or Stephen? Goddamn it, who would even hear me? We were in the middle of the night and the castle was big enough that no one would hear me screaming from the East wing. Hell, someone could be murdered in here and no one would know until they’d stumble upon the rotting dead body.

I tried to remember what I read about seizures three years ago, when Gracelynn first told me about her epilepsy. My brain stuttered for a moment before I jumped into action.

Something soft... I needed something soft to put under her head.

My eyes darted around the room before I lunged for the blankets, dragging them off the bed and rolling them into a makeshift pillow. I cupped the back of her head, stopping it from slamming into the ground again, and slid the blanket under her head.

Her jaw was locked tight as spit gathered at the corner of her lips. Her eyes were pinched closed and her face scrunched as her body spasmed, again

and with rhythmic motion. Frantically, I took out my phone and started a timer.

I remembered reading about this. It was important to time her epileptic seizures.

With my heart practically in my throat, I watched my wife – the woman I *loved* – go through a seizure. I kept an eye on the timer and the seconds ticked by as I quickly googled how to help a person going through an epileptic seizure.

At two minutes and fifteen seconds, her body went slack and her head lolled to the side. If I added the time before I started the timer, her seizure lasted less than four minutes.

Her chest heaved with each ragged breath she took. Her eyes stayed closed, but I saw her fingers moving, twitching slightly.

“Grace – *Julianna*?” I whispered hoarsely. “Can you hear me?”

Her lips parted with a slight moan. There were no words, but it was a response nonetheless. And when she didn’t immediately go into another seizure, I slowly rolled her over to her side, in the recovery position. “You’re safe,” I muttered. “You’re okay. I have you.”

I gently wiped away the spit that had gathered around the corner of her mouth with the back of my hand. Julianna let out a soft whimper again, but she didn’t open her eyes. I grasped her limp hand in mine and my heart stuttered when I felt a light squeeze from her. It was almost like an involuntary squeeze, weak and drowsy.

I almost missed it.

After a few minutes, Julianna remained somewhat unconscious – but thankfully, no more seizures, so I gathered her in my arms and carried her to the bed.

I pulled the blanket over her body, tucking her in before slumping into the chair next to her bed. There was an awful feeling pricking my chest, a mix of despair and frustration.

Anguished.

And rage.

Goddamn it, I didn’t know *how* to feel. I was so fucking confused. The fury that I had quickly pushed aside and buried within when Julianna had relapsed into a seizure was now back at full force. Slithering through my veins and burrowing itself into my bones.

I shook with how *furious* I was.

The sick feeling in my gut churned heavily, nausea bubbling in my stomach, and bile rose in my throat. Tasting acrid on my tongue.

My Gracelynn was Julianna.

Julianna was Gracelynn.

The same woman who was scared of horses, who smiled at me so tenderly, who *trusted* me to guide her through her fears...

I married the woman I loved through deceit.

I mourned the woman I loved, when she wasn't even fucking dead.

I ran my fingers through her wild, platinum-blonde hair, before wrapping the length around my wrist, once then twice. The kiss deepened, her lips soft and inviting. Her tongue tentatively met mine, shy but curious.

"I want to wait for our wedding night... for it to be special," she breathed into the kiss.

My lips curled into a half-smile. "I burn for you, Princess. But I'll wait for you if it means finally having you in the way I desperately crave."

"You're a silver-tongued devil, Mr. Spencer."

"You're a devious temptress, Miss Romano."

I remembered the first time I saw her, how utterly captivated I had been.

It was her hair, so unique.

Her eyes, so alluring.

Her lips, so sinful.

Every moment we had together, every kiss, every forbidden touch...

As much as it was real, it had all been based on a dubious lie. A cruel deception. I always thought Julianna and I were toxic together, but it was now I realized just how *poisonous* we were. We were fatal together, utterly destructive.

Our story was everything ugly and cataclysmic.

Anger was a silent huntress looming in the shadows, poised and ready to strike. It hovered over me like a fog, clouding my judgment. But it wasn't just rage that held me captive.

It was the utter despair and agony at Julianna's deception that made me *sick*.

My gaze roved her face, scars and all, before brushing over the unmarred side of her face. My head spun at the familiarity of it – of her delicate jaw, the curve of her full lips, her naturally long lashes and the tiny beauty spot on the bridge of her nose.

Gracelynn was a ghost, but she was here... in the shape and form of

Julianna Spencer.

My wife.

A ghost I had loved and mourned for the last three years.

I rubbed a hand over my face, exhaustion finally hitting me. My head slumped back against the chair and I gazed at the ceiling. I must have dozed off, somehow my brain still active but also drifting into the world of unconsciousness, because I immediately jerked awake when I heard a rustling in bed.

My eyes met Julianna's drowsy grey ones. She looked confused, her eyes slowly darting between my face and then around the room, almost sleepily.

I took a moment to admire her face, the familiarity of it without her black veil. The face that was ever-present in my dreams and the ghost that haunted my nightmares. It was in this moment that I realized her scars did nothing to hinder her beauty.

No one looked at the moon and thought of how bruised it was for the scarred moon's beauty was more *mesmerizing*.

Her scars told a story, written on her flesh like a tragic tale. She was still the same Gracelynn – goddamn it – *Julianna*, from three years ago. Scarred, yet beautiful like the moon.

I thought of how easily it'd be to let myself be swept away by her tortured grey eyes and broken soul, but she had already killed my heart once.

The trust between my wife and I had already been so fragile. Now that it was broken, with some of the shattered pieces missing – there was no love, where there was no trust.

The unfairness of this situation filled my veins with poison. I should had been happy that she was alive. That I married the woman I *loved* – yet I felt anything *but* love for her in this very moment. There was a fine line between love and hate... but the lines had been blurred and the boundaries were no longer intact.

The walls had crumpled and we stood naked and bare, in the face of a bleeding love. It was *tormenting* to watch Julianna's face, to be in her presence now that I had come to know of her lies.

"Killian," she whispered my name, her lips barely moving.

Julianna lifted her arm from under the blankets and reached out for me. "Come closer," she begged, her voice breaking. "Please."

I grasped her hand in mine, our fingers interlacing together. My body shuddered at the touch and I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm here," I said,

reassuring her.

She gripped my hand weakly, before dozing off again. I watched her sleep, the ache in my chest growing more intense. *Unbearable.*

How could we put all of this behind us and move on together?

My fingers dug into the wet dirt over Gracelynn's fresh grave – where she had been buried, only an hour ago.

Thunder bellowed loudly, crashing through before the sky opened up. The storm raged around me, the skies crying agonized tears as I let out a pained roar.

The rain didn't stop and it washed away my tears.

My clothes were soaked through as my body grew numb.

She... left.

She... was... gone.

The pain sliced through me at the memory of me kissing her, just last night. The taste of her lips still lingered on my own. My fingertips still tingled at the memory of how soft her skin was under my touch.

In a split second, our future had been ripped away from us. How cruel could fate be?

*We were to be married in four months. The dreams of us being together, having kids and growing old together... they were all just that – a **dream**.*

Nothing more, because reality was more brutal.

It wasn't fair.

Our future had shattered. Now, there was just a grave. A stone that bore her name and her cold bones beneath the same dirt I was kneeling on, my fingers digging into it – as if I could reach deeper inside and gather her into my arms. One last time.

To brush my fingers over her face, one last time.

To feel her lips on my own, one last time.

To stare into her pretty grey eyes, one last time.

To feel her... one last time.

The numbness of her loss had passed. When the pain finally hit me, the reality of this finally crashing through me – the agony had me doubling over, my body racking with wretched sobs.

I roared, my own pain muffled by the storm raging above me, until my throat became parched. Until there was nothing but raw emptiness nibbling at my skin, digging itself under my flesh and burrowing into my chest. Like a disease.

Sick and deadly.

I grieved her.

For three years.

I mourned her.

For three very long years.

I carried my pain, turning my grief into an armor of rage.

She killed my heart.

She deceived my love.

She turned us into a tragic tale.

It was so unfair...

That I still cared for Julianna. Because I was so goddamn *weak* for her. On my knees, *bleeding* for her.

How was it possible to love and hate a person with the same passion?

Our story was tarnished with lies, deceit and death. And I didn't know how to rewrite our story without the tragedy we had already gone through.

When the sun rose, the light shining through her curtains, I pulled my hand away from hers. Julianna slept on, her face serene under the morning light. My body was treacherous, because the moment my eyes slid over her pink lips, the urge to kiss her – to *feel* her lips on my own after three years – gnawed at me.

It was in that moment that I realized just how weak I was for Julianna Spencer.

I stood up, pushing the chair away. My gaze roamed her sleeping body, lingering over her face. Tattooing the sight of her into my brain. Scars and all.

My chest tightened, but I forced myself to take a step back. To walk away.

Because where there was no trust... there was no love.

And I didn't know if I would ever love her again, without *loathing* her to the same degree.



Julianna

Day five and Killian's absence still gnawed at my insides like an untreated wound, festering pus. It had been five days since I woke up from my seizure.

I vaguely remembered Killian staying by my side through the night. Even though I had been drowsy and sleepy, I did wake up a few times in the middle of the night.

And Killian was always there, holding my hand.

But when I regained full consciousness in the morning, he was gone.

And I haven't seen him since then.

He was still here, in the castle, that I knew. Mirai told me so.

The night of the masquerade ball, most of the guests had left the island. The morning after, I heard that our fathers and the rest of the guests left. So, Isle Rosa-Maria went back to its lonely state once again.

I expected Killian to leave too, especially after knowing my truth. A pang of distress spread through my body at just the mere thought of Killian leaving and never coming back.

He had all the reasons to *leave* now, to end this ruse. This was what I wanted, anyway. For him to leave. For him to finally walk away from this farce of a marriage and to move on.

But now that it has happened, the despair and agony was almost too much to bear.

Was this what *heartbreak* felt like?

The kind that kills you from the inside, wrenches your heart from your body and leaves it bleeding at your feet.

The kind that feels like a slow, torturous death.

Because that was exactly what it felt like to watch Killian walk away.

I thought the guilt over my sister's death was a heavy burden, but *God* – Killian's absence in the last five days had left an aching hole in my chest. The sorrow of his loss burrowed itself so deep inside me, I didn't know how to separate that feeling from my other emotions.

I almost wanted him to barge into my room, to scream at me for all the unfairness. To *hate* me for my lies. I waited for five days, my eyes on the door, *hoping* he'd walk through them.

I would bear the brunt of his anger and frustration.

It was my fault, anyway... that we were in this situation.

So I wouldn't blame him.

Because I'd rather his rage than his silence.

Our love was cursed, to be told like a tragic tale of two lovers never coming together as one. Our story was one of melancholy and self-destruction. Sweet poison, with no real antidote.

How do I fix this?

The pressure in my chest grew heavy and I fisted the blankets, while I forced myself to remember to *breathe*. My eyes darted around the room, before landing on the stack of unopened letters on my nightstand.

While I haven't left my room since *that* night, trying to regain my strength after my epileptic seizure, I had one constant companion. Mirai came to my room every morning, so we'd eat breakfast together and she'd talk non-stop. Telling me about her day, gossiping about the maids and basically recounting anything about everyone who lived in the castle. Past and present.

Mirai was also my unofficial spy. She stalked my husband around the castle, but Killian had also confined himself to his room. He only left for each meal and that was it. There was nothing much for Mirai to report back. But at least I knew he was still *here*, on the island.

So close, yet so far.

The stack of letters left on my nightstand, was by Mirai. She said she found these in a chest in Arabella's room. They were from the Marquees of Wingintam – Elias, but though they were old and looked quite ruffled, they were *unopened*. Mirai left these letters two days ago, but for some reason... I didn't feel the need to open them.

I had been so lost in Arabella's sad love story that I had forgotten how tragic my own was. It'd be easy to blame it on this cursed castle, but the real reason was my own lies and deception.



There was force pressing down on my body, feeding my exhaustion. After fighting it for so many days, I *surrendered*.

I no longer had the strength to keep fighting, because I found comfort in the coldness of an empty void. Numbness was better than feeling too much.

I remembered the storm inside of me, the swirl of emotions. How I'd look in the mirror, and every time I saw my reflection, I didn't know who was staring back.

My guilt rattled its chain of regret within me. The shackles around my ankles dragged me under their weight. My need for atonement no longer stirred within the ruins of my broken soul.

My repentance had come to an end.

For I found salvation. Or I thought I did.
My salvation was only a pretty *illusion*.
Because now that I had truly lost Killian, I didn't know what else to do
with myself. I didn't know what my purpose was anymore.

What to live for?

How to *feel*...

I just... didn't know.

Lost in the sea of confusion, I surrendered to the numbness nibbling at my
flesh.

There was a silence in my soul that I had never felt before. It wasn't
peaceful. It was eerie and... *unsettling*. Like the silence didn't belong there.

I felt the chill in my veins, coldness bringing all the nerves of my brain to
a standstill. It was like a never-ending dark void that consumes everything, so
I was left feeling *nothing*. Total emptiness. There was nothing to abate my
hollow soul that crept in the shadows, away from any other human contact
because the barrenness was so consuming, I couldn't bear to pretend that
everything was okay.

Because nothing was going to be okay again.

The ghost of my sister still haunted me.

I forced Killian to hate me.

I pushed Mirai and Emily away, closing the door in their face more times
than I could count. They tried to reach out for me, but they didn't know that I
was poison.

That I could burn them. That I only *ruined* lives. And I would destroy
theirs too, because I was only capable of that.

And now, I was alone. Again.

Alone with the ghosts of these castle whispering in my ears. Alone with
my own empty thoughts.

My bare feet padded against the wet grass, taking me away.

Mindless.

To be anywhere other than within the cursed walls of this castle.

To be away... from Killian's silence.

To be free of such torment.

I belatedly realized that I was in the stables when the neigh of a horse
drifted into my ears. My gaze darted around the stalls, searching for my mare.

But I was searching for naught – Ragna wasn't here. A pang of anguish
slithered through me. The back of my eyes burned, but the tears didn't fall.

They never did anymore.

Cerberus stomped his hooves, bringing my attention to him. I reached over, petting his muzzle. “Do you miss her?” I said to the black stallion. He released a loud, wet breath in response.

“Yeah, me too.” I rubbed my hand over his side. His black coat was warm and smooth under my fingertips. Comforting. “How do you think she’s doing? Do you think she misses us too?”

Cerberus, who was usually grumpy, silently stared at me. As if he understood what I was saying and he was trying to communicate with me.

So I told him a secret.

“Sometimes I feel like running away. To go somewhere so far away, to cease to exist,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “To shut down my emotions and all that guilt.”

I ran my fingers through his silk mane. “Do you want to run away?”

The moment I said those words, something shifted inside me. An intense need for... *something* unknown. I didn’t know exactly when it happened or why I did it, but somehow, Cerberus trotted free from his stall, his big body moving in a curious circle around me.

I reached out a hand and he bumped his forehead into my palm. “Do you ever just want to be free, Cerberus?”

He let out a soft snort in response. I climbed onto a stack of hay, so that I was more eye-level to the stallion, since he was such a tall horse. With shaky hands, I grabbed onto Cerberus and swung up onto his back. I settled against him, without a saddle. Without a rein. There was nothing between us, just me and him.

My fingers curled into his black mane, feeling his strength underneath my body and on the tip of my fingers. He tossed his head up once, trotting around in a small circle.

I clenched my thighs. “Take me away from here,” I breathed.

As if Cerberus could understand me, his body shifted under me and then we broke into a gallop. The trees whizzed by as dirt was kicked up behind us. The pounding of Cerberus’s hooves echoed through my ears, thumping with the same heavy beat as my heart.

I leaned forward and the stallion ran faster. I tipped to the left, my body unstable on Cerberus without the saddle, but I didn’t let go. I urged him to run even faster and he did.

Away from the castle...

And deeper into the woods.

The whispers in my head fell quiet. The ghosts couldn't follow me here and my demons were forced to surrender to Cerberus's wilderness.

My existence became one with the black stallion. His hooves thundered against the dirt and my heart raced, beating to Cerberus's wild tempo.

There was no fear.

No guilt.

No burden.

Only the cool wind in my hair, the warmth of Cerberus, and it felt like nothing I've ever felt. He took me away, from my sins and the pretty illusion that was my salvation.

The thunder rolled and the sky opened up, *raging*. The rain pelted down on us, violent and brutal. The rain soaked through my white dress and my teeth shattered, the cold seeping through my bones. But I didn't care.

I flattened myself on the horse's back, clenching his sides with my thighs.

Cerberus raced faster and it was then that I realized...

Feeling numb and empty wasn't really being empty on the inside. Humans are so used to chasing happiness and we like it, the pleasing and soft weight of it that envelops us. Happiness cocoons us within its warmth. Because it's so familiar, we never notice the weight of it until it's gone. When happiness is replaced with something else, it gives us the illusion that the comforting weight is gone. So now... we're weightless. *Empty*.

But I was never really empty... I was just full of all the wrong things.

And I had forced myself to be numb. To not feel how wrong I felt inside.

That was until now, on the back of Cerberus as he ran free and wild...

I finally tasted *freedom*.

And it was pure ecstasy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Killian



Her fingers wielded the strings like a lover's caress, her bow striking each chord with a sweet madness. Her grey eyes never wavered from mine and it killed me.

Julianna played the cello with such melancholy, each note hitting a different tune until she created a song of mad, ugly love – so beautiful and sweet, yet brutal and pained.

Two lost lovers colliding together, with tainted memories and too much bitterness.

It was cruel and haunting. So fucking beautiful...

My fingers clenched around my whiskey glass at the memory.

Julianna was no longer a ghost from my past, but yet... she haunted me, day and night.

It had been a week since the night her truth came out and I still didn't have the energy to look into the face of betrayal. To know that while she was the woman I mourned, she was also the reason behind my half-dead heart.

How could I be happy that she was alive and breathing and forget the last three years of suffering and pure torment as I grieved her supposed death?

It was a bitter pill to swallow and I didn't know how to move on from that. From such cruel deception. Julianna got what she wanted, anyway.

She wanted me to leave, I did.

She wanted me to hate her – I did, with such brutal passion.

Julianna thought that by ruining her own life, her own love story, she was somehow repenting for her sins. It would somehow alleviate the guilt over her sister's death.

I guessed it was survivor's guilt.

Self-loathing.

Self-destruction.

Self-condemnation.

Her reasonings, though, was severely flawed.

It didn't matter anymore. It was already too late. Julianna and I lost three years and we'd never get a chance to live those years again.

While time was somehow infinite, we were just mere humans. We couldn't go back in time, to change the past, to relive a moment...

What had been lost in the past, it was *gone*. Our love story was just that. Lost in the past.

A loud thunder crashed through the sky again. It had been raining heavily for the last two hours, proof of an incoming storm. Rain pelted loudly on my foggy windows and lightning struck through the heavy, dark clouds. After checking the weather forecast two days ago, Samuel had told me that a storm was coming.

I figured it was finally here.

I should have checked on Cerberus this morning. While he was a stubborn and fearless horse – grumpier than most stallions – he sure didn't like storms. He must have felt it coming. His senses were very acute.

But being in the presence of Cerberus reminded me too much of Ragna. A vivid image of Julianna crying and begging for me not to take away her mare flashed through my exhausted brain. Guilt gnawed at me, but I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing the memory away.

Julianna wanted to *hurt*... she had been desperate to atone for her sins. Well, I made it real fucking easy for her.

Throwing the rest of the whiskey down my throat, I slammed the empty glass onto the coffee table. I had to stop thinking about my wife.

Her grey eyes.

Her full lips that begged to be kissed.

Had to stop thinking about how much I wanted to suck and bite on her delicate jaw and her slender throat, to leave my marks... and to paint her pale skin with my bruises.

Had to stop wanting her – *needing* her.

My dick throbbed at the thought and I shifted on the chair. Goddamn it.

Dead or alive, Julianna was fucking with my head.

I clenched my fists and leaned my head back against the chair, gazing at the ceiling. She had way too much control over me and that was the problem.

Love made me weak.

Weak for *her*.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, I woke up to fists pounding on my door. *Frantically*. “The door is open. Come in,” I answered, groggily. It had to be Samuel. He was the only one allowed in my room anyway.

While I was on the island, Samuel kept me up-to-date on the things from the outside world. My father’s health and our business, to name a few.

My assistant sent me a detailed email every day, while Samuel gave me a rundown of things. But he had already done so for today, this morning while I was having breakfast.

So, what was so urgent now?

My door crashed open and I jerked forward in my chair. “What the fu—” It wasn’t Samuel, alright.

It was Mirai, Emily’s granddaughter. She barged into my room, chest heaving, and her eyes panicked.

“Julianna,” she gasped.

My body tensed at her name. “What?”

Mirai swallowed, her shaky hands fluttering to her chest. The poor girl looked absolutely frantic and my gut churned. “What’s wrong? What happened to Julianna?” I surged forward, pushing the chair away to stand up. I towered over the girl. “Did she have another seizure? I made sure to relocate Rani two rooms down from hers. I told you that last week.”

Rani was the general physician who was ever present on Isle Rosa-Maria. But she lived on the opposite side of the castle, too far away from Julianna – if ever there was an emergency. After her seizure last week, I had made sure to place Rani closer to her.

Mirai shook her head. “No, no seizures. Not that I know of. Oh God, now that you mentioned it, what if... shit,” she said, growing even more panicked. Her eyes filled with tears; her cheeks flushed with distress.

“Would you just tell me what the hell is going on?” I hissed. I didn’t have time for games and hysteria.

“Julianna is missing,” Mirai wheezed.

I blinked before my stomach dropped. My room swayed for a second before the world righted itself again. “What did you just say?”

“I went to her this morning, to give her breakfast. Julianna refused. She hadn’t eaten anything yesterday either,” she explained hurriedly. “I went back for lunch, knocked at her door several times, but when she didn’t answer, I walked in to find her room empty.”

Mirai broke off, hiccupping back a sob. “She hasn’t left her room for a week. So, I thought it was weird. I went to search for her, everywhere that I thought she might be. In the library. In Arabella’s room. But I couldn’t find her anywhere. And... and then, I told my grandma and all the maids set off to search for her, but she’s nowhere to be found within the castle walls.”

I was already striding away before she had even finished her story. Mirai shouted my name, but I broke into a run, fear beating strongly in my chest. I blindly ran down the corridor and the stairs, with only one destination in mind.

Mirai said Julianna couldn’t be found anywhere within the castle. That could only mean one thing – she had gone out. And if I knew my wife the way I thought I did, there was only one place she’d go to.

The moment I stepped outside, the rain pelted down on me, soaking through my clothes. I flinched as the coldness seeped through my wet clothes and into my bones. The clouds were dark and heavy. Thunder rolled through the sky, followed by more lightning.

Julianna wouldn’t be so *stupid* to go out during a storm?

“Fuck,” I swore under my breath, taking off into a dead run toward the stables.

I didn’t want it to be true. I hoped my suspicion would be just that. A doubt, and nothing more. Because the reality would be more dangerous.

I came to a halt when I found the stables empty. The stall at the very end was deserted.

Though his saddle was still here, Cerberus was gone.

And Julianna was nowhere to be found.

Goddamn it.

The stallion was stubborn and bad-tempered. He wouldn’t let anyone else mount him, except myself. And Julianna, while she was comfortable with Ragna, she wouldn’t be able to stay in control with Cerberus.

Didn’t she know how dangerous this could be? She purposely put herself in harm’s way. What the fuck was going on in her head?

A painful burning sensation slithered into my chest as I followed the tracks of Cerberus’s hooves in the wet dirt, as it was quickly being washed away by the rain. It looked like he took off on a run.

My eyes darted between the stables and the thick trees on the opposite side, a long distance away. The tracks that Cerberus left behind, its path led straight to the woods.

He went in there, possibly with Julianna on his back. Saddleless and with how unpredictable Cerberus was...

My heart thudded wildly as I ran toward the trees. My legs ate the distance quickly, but the woods were much farther than what they appeared to be.

I would never get to her in time and it would take me hours to find them. They could be anywhere in the woods and I didn't even have a horse of my own.

Maybe if Ragna was still here...

Julianna wouldn't have taken such drastic steps to get on a bad-tempered stallion. And even if she had gotten lost in the woods with Ragna, I would have had Cerberus with me. We would have found Ragna and Julianna together.

No, I shook my head. There was no point dwelling on the *what-ifs*.

My eyes widened, the lump in my throat growing larger and heavier, when I saw a tall form through the fog and rain, racing in my direction.

I came to a halt at the sight of Cerberus.

Alone...without Julianna.

Dread filled my chest. Cerberus galloped toward me and he let out a loud neigh, throwing his two front legs into the air. I reached out for him as he circled around me, snorting and stomping. I ran my fingers through his thick, wet mane. "Where is she?" I questioned harshly, as if he could understand me. And maybe he did.

Cerberus stomped again and I could tell he was in distress. "Take me to her," I demanded, swinging myself onto his back. "I need to find her, Cerberus. Take me to her."

I didn't have to tell him again. My stallion *understood* me. He knew the severity of this situation and he understood how important it was for me to find Julianna.

She could be severely hurt or...

I flattened myself against his back, urging him into a gallop. Cerberus took off, racing toward the woods with mad purpose. The rain continued to pelt down on us, obscuring my vision as the storm became worse with each passing minute.

Another thunder crashed through the sky and Cerberus grew more agitated and distressed, but he didn't stop. He kept racing between the trees, jumping off the fallen logs and upturned, dead roots.

Rage and fear bubbled inside me.

Why?

Why would she put herself at such risk?

If anything were to happen to her... again...

Fuck.

My stomach churned with nausea as I pushed onward through the storm. Cerberus let out a snort, as if to alarm me. I squinted in front of us to find a lump on the ground.

Julianna.

She was almost camouflaged between the fallen trees, dead leaves and dirt. The stallion reared back, coming to a stop.

I dismounted in a hurry, slipping onto the wet dirt and lunging toward Julianna. I rushed forward and dropped to my knees beside her. I gathered her in my arms, my lungs clenching so tightly that I almost couldn't breathe.

"Julianna?" I choked. "Julianna, goddamn it!" I repeated louder when she didn't answer me. Her eyes were closed, her skin pale and freezing. Her lips were starting to turn into a shade of blue and I pressed my ear to her nose. When I felt the light brush of her breath against my skin, I almost collapsed in relief.

But her breathing was too slow.

And Julianna was *too* still.

I pressed my hand over the back of her head, looking for an injury. But she appeared unscathed, other than a few scratches over her cheek and her arms.

That would mean that Cerberus didn't buck her off, because if he had done so, there would have been grave injuries. She, herself, must have accidentally fell off his back and passed out.

I gathered Julianna in my arms and stood up on shaky legs. After securing her on Cerberus, I swung myself onto his back again and urged him into a slow gallop, as to not jostle Julianna too much.

When I got back to the stables, both Stephen and Gideon were already there. I dismounted first and then reached for Julianna while Gideon held onto Cerberus.

"When we saw you and Cerberus rush into the woods, we figured that was where Julianna had gone," Stephen explained. "I already told Emily and she's filling a tub with warm water. Hurry."

I nodded, gathering Julianna back into my arms and I strode inside. When I reached her room, it bustled with activity. Mirai was there, a near frantic

look on her face, and she let out a relieved breath at the sight of a soaked and limp Julianna in my arms.

“I’ve filled the tub. She needs to be warmed up, immediately,” Emily said.

I nodded. “Everyone out, please.”

I didn’t pay them any more attention and stalked into the bathroom. Sitting on the edge of the tub, I settled Julianna on my lap and quickly rid her of her wet dress. The fact that she didn’t stir at all worried me.

Her body was too cold and her breathing too shallow. For how long had she been passed out in the rain? Two hours?

I sure fucking hope not. One hour was too long, let alone... two goddamn hours.

Once she was naked, I gently placed her into the warm water. After making sure she wouldn’t slide under, I quickly got rid of my own clothing and got into the tub behind her. The water was almost too hot, but it was perfect for Julianna’s freezing body.

Warming her up was important. To get her blood circulating through her body again, warm and *alive*.

Julianna remained unconscious as I settled her back against my chest, her body small and fragile in my arms. I made quick work of shampooing and washing her hair, careful to check for any injuries. There were no open wounds or bumps.

Thank the fucking Lord.

I sat in the tub with her until the water started to get cold. The water sluiced to the side when I stood up, with Julianna in my arms. I made quick work of wrapping a towel around her before carrying her to the bed.

My gaze briefly darted to the fireplace and it appeared that someone had been smart enough to start the fire. The room was hotter than usual, but Julianna was still too cold for my liking.

I climbed in bed beside her, tucking the comforter around us. Without really thinking about it, because I was acting on pure instinct, I curled my body around hers.

And soon enough, with the help of the fire, two heavy comforters and my own body heat, Julianna’s skin started growing warmer. Her lips were no longer blue, but a pale color.

Once she was warm, the shivering started. Her body practically rattled with the tremors, from head to toe. Her teeth clattered violently and Julianna whimpered.

My chest squeezed when her eyelids fluttered open and she stared at me, eyes dazed and confused. “Killian...” Julianna muttered weakly.

My arm curled around her hips. “I’m here, Princess.”

“C-c-cold,” she stuttered.

“I know.” I brushed my thumb over her jaw. “I’m going to warm you up. Nothing is going to happen to you. I won’t allow it.”

My wife snuggled further into my arms, pressing her face into my throat. The familiarity of this position hit me like a tidal wave, the old memories slicing through me so brutally. But I shoved them away.

Her eyes closed again and she let out another soft whimper. Another shiver racked through her body. Julianna slid a hand over my chest, her fingers digging into my flesh. Almost like she was desperately seeking my warmth.

“I have you,” I reassured her, even though I didn’t think she heard me.

Hours later, I woke up to Julianna’s restless movement, heart-wrenching whimpers and soft cries. I had stayed awake for hours, watching her breathe; her shivering turning into gentle tremors until her body had been warmed enough that her shaking had subsided.

I hadn’t even realized that I somehow dozed off.

Pushing myself up on my elbow, I studied Julianna to find her soaked in sweat, her forehead furrowed in distress and her jaw tightening in pain.

I touched her cheek to find her hot. That would have been a good sign, if she wasn’t burning with a fever.

Fucking hell!

I got off the bed and quickly pulled on the sweatpants that Samuel had left behind for me earlier and called for Rani.

She came into the room again and gave Julianna another thorough check.

“Your wife is breaking into a fever. I would say it’s normal, but you’ll have to keep a close eye on her,” Rani said grimly. “Especially with her history of epilepsy, Julianna will be prone to seizures in this condition.”

The older woman gave me an assessing look. “I can stay with her,” she volunteered.

“No,” I snapped, before I could stop myself.

Clearing my throat, I gestured for her to leave. “Thank you, but I’ll take care of my wife myself. I will call for you if you’re needed.”

Rani left after giving Julianna another quick check. Once the door closed behind her, I climbed into the bed again. She immediately rolled over to me,

her body curling into mine. Julianna threw a leg between mine and her arm slid over my chest as she burrowed her fevered self against my body.

Helplessness gripped me as Julianna suffered through a brutal fever.

It lasted through the night, into the morning and through the next... four days.

I stayed by her side, never leaving her for more than fifteen minutes and that was only to use the restroom and for a quick shower each day.

In her feverish state, Julianna struggled through nightmares and hallucinations. More than often, she cried in her sleep. Her demons continued to plague her without mercy. And even when she regained consciousness a few times during the day, she was always confused and drowsy. Rani made sure to check on Julianna every day and each time, she repeated the same thing to me.

“She’s been in that rain for too long, it’s completely normal for her to suffer through a fever like this. She’ll be fine in a few days. Give her time to heal.”

I hated how I couldn’t do anything more than stay by her side.

I fucking *loathed* how helpless I felt.

I spent the day holding a cold compress to her forehead. Sometimes, I’d drag the cloth down her neck, over her chest and arms, trying to keep her cool. Every day her temperature rose before cooling down for a few hours and then the fever was back again.

While she was feverish, Julianna suffered through three epileptic seizures and ended up wetting the bed twice.

And each time, I carried her to the tub and bathed her, before changing the bedsheets for cleaned ones.

On the fourth day, her flesh was dry and hot. Julianna let out a pained moan, her eyes fluttering open. “Do... you hate... me?” she croaked.

I stiffened at the question. This was the first time she had addressed me directly since her fever had set in. My breath hitched when Julianna brought her hand up, cupping my cheek. Her thumb brushed over my jaw and then my lower lips. “Don’t... hate... me.”

My throat closed. “Julianna,” I practically choked her name.

My heart thudded in my chest, hard.

It fucking *hurt*.

Her weak voice.

And how fragile she was.

Her weary eyes were filled with pure desperation.

Instead of responding, I rubbed Vaseline over her cracked lips. Like I had done several times for the last four days.

“Please,” she pleaded, before burrowing her face into my neck.

Her lips brushed against the pulse in my throat. Julianna let out a breathy sigh. “I love... the way you... smell. It comforts... me. Don’t l-l-leave me,” she confessed softly, her voice breaking at the end.

“Shhh, I’m right here,” I reassured her fevered self. “Not going anywhere. You just sleep and focus on getting better.”

Julianna made a weak sound in the back of her throat. “Killian...”

“Yes.”

“I wish... our story was different,” she whispered sleepily. “I wish you... didn’t hate me and that... I didn’t lie to you. I wish we could start over again. Julianna and Killian.”

My arm curled around her, my chest rattling with a shuddering breath. “I wish the same too, Princess.”

I didn’t know if she heard me, because when I peeked down at her flushed face, Julianna’s eyes were closed. She had fallen back asleep.

I leaned back into my pillow, squeezing my eyes shut.

Why was I here? What the fuck was I even doing?

Taking care of her... getting close to her again, when I should have long left the island.

I should have let Rani take care of her.

I should have left the night Julianna told me her truth.

Yet, here I was.

I had accused Julianna of being a martyr, but we were so fucking alike.

I guessed we both had a penchant for self-destruction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Killian



I walked into the dining hall to find the table set for two. That made me pause.

The last time the table had been set for both Julianna and I was *before...*

Before her truth came out.

Before the masquerade ball.

Was she planning to join me for dinner?

My eyes darted between the two places, finding something amiss. But when realization dawned on me, my fists clenched at my side. There was nothing amiss.

In fact, something that was previously wrong had been fixed.

Instead of our plates being set on either end of the table, so that we were sitting opposite of each other, with a great distance between us – our plates were now next to each other.

While I might have approved of this change before... now? Not so much. I wanted to hang onto my rage, but the more time I spent with Julianna, I was once again allowing myself to grow *weak* for her.

Every time I tried to put distance between us, somehow, we were pulled together again.

A rustling sound from behind me caught my attention and I already knew who it was. My body recognized her before my other senses did. My heart leaped to my throat as I settled in my chair at one end of the table, without looking back at my wife.

Julianna made a small sound at the back of her throat, before coming forward and taking the seat to my left on the side of the table.

“Hi,” she said timidly, folding her hands over her lap.

Hi? That was all she had to say?

What the hell were we? Two teenagers on our first fucking date?

It was on the tip of my tongue to say something shitty to her, to make sure she understood that while I stayed by her side through her fever, that didn't mean that I hated her less or had forgiven her yet.

But the moment I finally looked at her, I forgot everything I was going to say.

My brain stuttered for a moment, as if I had seen a ghost.

And I did.

Because Julianna was gone.

And in her place was... Gracelynn.

No, I was wrong. This was the *real* Julianna.

Pale blonde hair and the prettiest grey eyes.

Her black hair was gone and it finally dawned on me that Julianna didn't have to hide her identity anymore. The right side of her face was turned toward me, the unmarred side.

The woman who I fell in love with three years ago was sitting next to me.

The one who haunted me day and night for the last three years.

And the same woman whom I mourned.

The lump in my throat grew larger and I swallowed past it, trying to force myself to *think*. Julianna Spencer had thrown me off my equilibrium and left me reeling.

She neither had to wear that black veil anymore nor hide behind those vases at the dining table.

No more hiding.

No more lies.

It was all in the open now.

Her truth and her scars.

"You're staring," Julianna said, reaching for her cutlery.

I almost flinched, but instead my jaw tightened. I leaned back into my chair, crossing my right ankle over my opposite knee. My gaze swept over her body, lazily. Making an obvious show of checking her out. I took in the expensive white sequin dress, the ruby and diamond jewelry around her throat – the same one I had given her as a courting gift three years ago – and how her platinum blonde hair was left loose in soft waves.

She was always dressed in expensive gowns and jewels for dinner. If she wasn't adorned in diamonds, she wore sapphires, rubies or emeralds. Almost like she had been wanting to make a point, to prove that she was more than what our contract had said.

More than just a human vessel who was expected to carry my child. My heir.

But tonight, Julianna was specifically dressed to remind me that she was no less than a Queen. My equal. She was making a silent statement, when she chose to wear the ruby set I had gifted her.

Julianna nudged her chin up in a haughty look and my lips twitched, involuntarily. That was such a *Gracelynn* thing for her to do. How did I never notice that before?

There had been two many familiarities between past and present Julianna. But I had been so blind by my need for vengeance and the rage churning inside me that I never *allowed* myself to notice the similarities.

“I am staring,” I drawled. “So what?”

Her gaze held mine and I was shocked by her newfound confidence. This wasn't the woman I left in her room three days ago.

On the fifth day since the horse incident, Julianna's fever finally subsided. She was fully conscious at this point, just weary and *fragile*. I still remembered the look on her face when she found me sitting on the chair beside her bed.

A look of utter tenderness.

And eyes silently and desperately begging for forgiveness.

Julianna finally woke up, free from her tormenting fever, to find me sitting on the chair next to her bed. Her eyes were hooded, still somewhat drowsy, but I knew she was fully awake now. Fully conscious.

She had sweated the fever last night and Rani did say that while Julianna would feel like shit the next morning, she would be more alert and cognizant.

Julianna's gaze locked on mine. We stared at each other for what seemed like a long eternity. Time slowed down and it was only me and her.

Julianna and Killian.

Our tarnished past was forgotten for a second.

Julianna slowly rose from the bed and limped over to me in a pale blue nightgown. My fists clenched on the armrests, so that I wouldn't do something stupid like reach out for her.

To my utter astonishment, she lowered herself onto her knees between my spread thighs.

“What do you think you're doing?” I questioned; my voice harsh to my own ears.

Silently, Julianna grasped my hand in hers, bringing it to her mouth. Her

lips brushed against the center of my palm in a tender kiss.

A kiss asking for forgiveness.

A silent kiss of redemption.

“I still haven’t forgiven you,” I muttered, feeling the way my heart thudded in my chest at her small touch.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed.

I learned forward, bringing our faces closer. “You hurt me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I mourned you,” I said, venom dripping in my tone.

Julianna flinched. “I’m sorry.”

My lips curled into a bitter smile. “I hate you.”

“I’m sorry.”

My chest rumbled with a low snarl as my arm snaked out and I grasped the back of her neck. Tugging her forward. She leaned into me, without any resistance.

Her breath whispered over my lips, so fucking close. It was a moment of weakness when I leaned forward. My heart and brain wanted two different things. But in the end, my body won over.

My lips slammed over hers, kissing her into silence. I didn’t want to hear her weak apologies, for they meant absolutely fucking nothing to me anymore.

It was three years too late for apologies.

Julianna gasped once, before quickly falling into the kiss. Almost like she had been waiting for this.

“I fucking hate you, Julianna,” I rasped into her lips.

She whimpered and pressed her mouth harder against mine. Wanting more. Needing more. It took all of my willpower to wrench myself away from the kiss. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, my lips curling bitterly. A smile with no warmth.

Her chin trembled and her eyes welled with tears.

It pained me, but for my own goddamn sanity, I forced myself to walk away from my wife.

That was three days ago. Once I knew her fever was gone, I left her with Rani and Mirai. And we didn’t see each other again. Until tonight.

So, when did she get all her sass back?

Julianna Spencer was once again the poised and sharp-tongued woman that she had been before the masquerade ball.

“You like the dress?” she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I cut my steak into precise pieces. “White is too pure.”

Her eyes flared. “Oh. What is your favorite color then?”

“Red is the color of extremes, wife,” I said, my voice gravelly calm. I knew what she was doing – trying to remind me of our past. How cruel could she be? “It’s many things. Violence. Passion. *Wrath.*”

“Lust,” she breathed. “Seduction. *Longing.*”

“Do you long for something, Princess?”

The term of endearment slipped past my lips before I could think twice of it. Julianna must have caught my slip of tongue, because she granted me one of her rare smiles. A real fucking smile.

But instead of answering, she went back to her food. We didn’t speak for the rest of the dinner and the dining hall was only filled with the unsettling sounds of our cutlery against our plates.

Julianna finished her dinner before me and she dabbed the corner of her mouth with a napkin, delicate and poised.

“I long for salvation,” she crooned slowly, to my utter surprise. “But I’ve realized that salvation can only be found in the arms of the person you love. Salvation is just a pretty word for peace and comfort.”

I clucked my tongue at her. “You’re more clever than I thought, wife.”

“Why, thank you. Such a nice compliment coming from you.”

“Maybe you should just accept the compliment, instead of throwing that sass around,” I deadpanned.

She arched one perfect eyebrow at me. “You seem to quite enjoy my sass, husband.”

“I would rather a docile wife, wife.”

“Liar,” she breathed, the corner of her lips quirking up.

I slammed my fork onto my plate, my veins growing cold, and I shook with rage. “We both know who the liar is in this marriage,” I spat, my hands fisted over the table

Julianna nudged her chin up, not before I caught a flash of grief in her grey eyes, but she quickly masked it away. “I well expect you to throw our past in my face with every opportunity you get.”

“And you’re just going to be a martyr, once again. How very typical of you.”

She let out a soft laugh, both melodious and painful to my ears. “No, this time I’ve come prepared for a battle, husband.”

Oh.

Now that was unexpected. What exactly was she going to do?

Julianna pushed her chair away, standing up. She leaned forward, bringing our faces closer and giving me the perfect view of her cleavage. The neckline was way too low, showing a great deal of her full, enticing breasts. I didn't know if she did it on purpose or not, but fuck.

My dick twitched in my pants and I swallowed my groan.

"I realized three things when I was sick and you took care of me," she said, her lips brushing over my ear. "One, I was very wrong for what I did to you. You were right that night. Everything you said to me was the harsh truth I had been refusing to acknowledge for the last three years. Two, I wasn't chasing redemption. I was only trying to hurt myself. And three, I want to find *real* salvation. Fight me, Killian. And I'll fight you back until there's nothing left for us to fight about."

My heart thudded and I could only blink. Julianna straightened, her lips curling with a warm smile. I watched her walk away, the dress tight around the curve of her hips and over her ass. Did she just—

I snapped my jaw close, refusing to believe that my wife had just left me speechless.

When I had the opportunity to leave the island, I chose to stay.

When I could have kept my distance, I chose to care for Julianna when she needed me.

And now...

Julianna Spencer was a wicked woman and I had fallen into her trap, not once, but three times. I really was a goddamn *fool*.



Julianna

Dear husband,

*Your absence has made it harder for me.
Though, I never received your love,
Your presence brought me comfort.
Now, I am wounded in silence.*

*I breathed the scent you left behind,
But even that has faded now.
I grow weaker while I wait for your return.
I mourn your loss,
And my heart no longer feels the need to fight any longer.
I burn in your presence.
I ache in your absence.
I want to see you, one last time.
Before I go...
Before I fade...
Please come back.*

- A

It was this very letter from Arabella that changed my focus a week ago. Her words resonated with me and I understood them, on a personal level.

I burned in Killian's presence and I ached in his absence.

It was ironic how I wanted him to leave, to move on – but when he was doing exactly that, I couldn't bear to lose him.

Killian told me he hated me. And I believed him.

But as much as he'd want to deny it – he still loved me the same. I felt it in his tender touch while I was sick. Felt it in the way he took care of me, so patiently.

Though he walked away afterward, I already saw what I needed to see. It made me realize two things.

1. How wrong I had been before, when it came to my atonement.
2. And how much I needed my husband.

Maybe it was my feverish brain that had triggered something in me. The idea of death used to feel like home to me. Peaceful. But now, it unsettled me.

I wanted to live.

I wanted to fix what I broke.

Not in the twisted and irrational way that I was trying to do before.

But I wanted to fix it, the right way this time around.

Then, I was consumed with self-loathing.

Now, I was consumed with the idea of true salvation. Not the pretty illusion I had been chasing for the last three years.

While I used to find comfort in Arabella's tragic tale, because of how similar we were. Now, I could clearly read between the lines of her letters. Her unwritten words.

Arabella had wanted to fight for her husband's love. But she gave up too easily and, in the end, she was left to die alone. When her sickness took over, the Marquess was on an expedition. Too far out of reach.

Arabella died before Elias could come home. She no longer had the energy to fight anymore, no reason to stay alive. And so, she withered without the love of her husband.

The night of the masquerade ball, Killian showed me the mirror of truth, forcing me to take a look at my soul in the reflection.

I didn't want to be a martyr anymore. To dwell in self-destruction, thinking that this was my only option. To allow the self-loathing to fester inside of me.

I wanted a different story. Not another tragic tale...

I didn't want a half-written story. I wanted the complete ending. With my newfound conviction, I got ready for the battle of my life.

To win back my husband's trust and love.

Killian and I were two halves of a ruined soul and I needed to fix what was broken so we could be whole again. That was what Gracelynn would have wanted for me, anyway. To find true solace.

While Killian had been blind before, by his rage and hatred, I was blind with guilt and allowed it to consume, to become one with me until I couldn't separate myself from that emotion. It clouded my judgment and ended up masking my other feelings.

I folded Arabella's letters and placed them back in the drawers I found them. It was time to put Arabella's story away, so I could focus on my own.

It didn't matter how many similarities I found between us; Arabella wasn't me and I wasn't her. Our story was and would be different. Cursed castle or not.

Two hours later, Mirai barged into my private library. Her eyes wide, cheeks flushed and a grin on her face.

"That's a refreshing look to see. I need some good news, anyway," I said, placing my book next to me on the window seat. "Go ahead, do tell me. Don't be shy now."

"Ragna," she breathed shakily. "She's here."

I reared back at her words, gaping. “What did you just say?”

“Killian brought her back!” Mirai practically screamed in excitement. Before she could even finish her sentence, I was already on my feet and sprinting out of the West wing.

Running through the corridor, past my room and down the stairs. My bare feet padded against the dewy grass as I ran toward the stable.

I came to a halt when I heard Cerberus delighted neigh and then... Ragna’s snort in response. Oh God, that was music to my ears.

There was a burning sensation in my chest and my stomach fluttered as I rounded the corner of the stables. The urge to run and wrap my arms around my mare was strong, but I held myself back. I watched the three of them together, admiring the view of my husband with the two beautiful horses. Though they were both horses, they were two different creatures, if they were ever compared.

Cerberus was black and stubborn. Grumpy and unpredictable.

Ragna was white and soft. Friendly and teasing.

Complete opposites, the perfect yin and yang.

Killian had his back to me, strong and formidable. His blazer was discarded carelessly on a stack of hay and he was only in a black dress shirt and slacks.

He was brushing his horse’s black coat while Ragna pranced around them, tossing her head and nudging Cerberus with her head. The stallion didn’t appear annoyed but, in fact, it looked like he was appreciating Ragna’s attention on him.

Was this some type of courting between them? I never thought one day I’d see two horses romancing each other.

My hands shook and I buried them in my flowy pastel-blue skirt.

“I know you’re there,” Killian said smoothly. Uh-oh, busted. “Stop hiding and come forth. Your mare grows restless without your presence.”

I let out a squeak in response and Ragna’s head snapped up in my direction. She let out a loud neigh and strutted to me with unmasked enthusiasm.

I lunged forward, wrapping my arms around her long neck. “Oh, how I missed you, my love,” I sighed against her warm skin.

She butted me with her forehead, releasing a loud, wet breath that fanned against my cheek. “You missed me too?”

Ragna snorted in response and the back of my eyes burned with unshed

tears. She was still the same Ragna, hale and hearty, strong and lithe. The most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. “I love you, sweet girl.”

Though I found freedom on Cerberus’s back when we ran through the woods, Ragna had half of my heart. She was my mare, my best friend and my favorite companion. She was only a horse, yet she understood me better than most humans did.

“What a tearful reunion.” Killian’s voice cut through my thoughts, equally smooth and calm. “I have to say, I’m very touched.”

I pulled away from Ragna, but didn’t let her completely go. Keeping a hand on her muzzle, I gently petted my mare. “Do you have to be an asshole in a moment like this?”

“Hmm, good question. Let me think about it.” Killian made a show of being thoughtful and it was utterly fake, before he gave me a lazy half-shrug. “The answer is yes. Being an asshole is part of my charms, wife.”

I let out an exasperated sound. “Actually, I don’t find it charming at all.”

“Too bad, you’re forever stuck with an asshole husband.”

Ragna pranced away from me, going back to Cerberus. She brushed against his side, before she tossed her head, her tail lashing behind her in what I assumed was part enthusiasm and part teasing.

“Forever, huh? I guess I can’t be too picky,” I said with a fake dreadful sigh. “I’ll take what I can get. Consider my membership renewed.”

Killian swung up on his stallion’s back and he grabbed the reins. “Your membership renewal has been declined, Mrs. Spencer.”

“Is that so, Killian?”

His gaze roved my face, lingering over my scars before meeting my eyes. Like the last few days, I had left my black veil behind. I had been hiding behind it for too long and now that my sins were in the open, the black veil was no longer important.

Killian urged his horse closer to me and I had to crane my neck up to stare at his brutally, handsome face. “You’ll have to try harder, wife.”

“I *am* trying.” Though I wanted to sound determined and confident, my voice ended up coming out breathy and shaky. “Where are you going?”

“The question is, where are we going.” Killian nodded toward Ragna. “I’ve saddled her up for you.”

I blinked in confusion. “We?”

He tsked, before giving me an eye-roll. Such a simple action shouldn’t be sexy, but apparently on Killian it was. “Do I have to repeat everything?”

“It’s because you’re so confusing!” I whisper-yelled, hands on my hips and I glared up at him. He wasn’t even bothered at my outburst. In fact, his lips curled in a half-smile.

“And you’re so goddamn maddening. What a pair we are.”

I threw my hands in the air. “One minute you hate me and can’t bear to be in my presence. Then, you bring back Ragna and now you’re talking about going somewhere together as if everything is completely normal.”

“Would you rather I continue hating and ignoring your existence?”

“No,” I gritted. “I would rather you pick an emotion and stick with it.”

He chuckled humorlessly. “That’s rather rich coming from you, wife.”

I stomped over to Ragna and she stayed still, allowing me to mount on her back without any difficulties. My sweet and patient girl. So unlike my husband and his stubborn stallion.

“Why are you trying to provoke me?” I hissed, once I was settled on the saddle.

“Why did you ruin us?” he said, toneless.

My jaw snapped shut and my breath hitched. “That’s unfair, Killian.”

He would always do this – throwing my lies and deception back in my face, so carelessly and heartlessly. As if to remind me that we were broken and maybe beyond fixing. I didn’t exactly blame him; I deserved it.

But I just wanted to have one freaking conversation without us shedding each other’s blood. Figuratively, of course.

We’ve had dinner every night for the last six days and our conversations were sometimes dull, sometimes entertaining, but always ending up in an argument. Killian and I were two unlikely forces, colliding together. Stubborn and furious. Guilty but determined.

“What’s unfair is you thinking I can forget everything and be the old Killian,” he said, harshly. “I’m not him anymore and nothing will ever be normal again with us.”

I swallowed, looking away from him and the raw intensity in his dark gaze. “Where are we going?”

He was silent for a second and I imagined he was trying to remain calm and aloof. When Killian spoke again, he sounded *composed*. “I can assume with much certainty that you have neither left the castle grounds nor explored the island yet. Well, except for your reckless trip into the woods.”

“Yes and yes.” My lips thinned at his cruel jab. “And to make matters clear, it was reckless but I wasn’t left with much of a choice either. You took

Ragna away from me.”

I didn't admit that I wasn't *thinking* clearly that day, when I took Cerberus away from the stables. Not caring that he was an unpredictable stallion and that a storm was raging around us. My thoughts and emotions had been in turmoil and I was just desperate to be *free* of the shackles weighing me down.

“And that's why I brought her back,” Killian said.

My fists clenched at my side. “Guilt or sympathy?”

“Neither,” he deadpanned, his face devoid of any humane emotions.

“Bullshit,” I shot back.

Cerberus shifted under Killian's weight, growing impatient. I could tell he was itching for a run. “I feel neither guilt nor pity for you, Julianna. You're the sole reason for your own unhappiness.”

I scoffed. “It's ironic how alike we are.”

“I'd suggest you shut up now.” The warning in his voice didn't deter me. Instead, it urged me on. I could handle Killian's threats and cruel words. I'd rather those than his unsettling silence.

“Make me,” I urged.

“Julianna,” he growled, low and threatening.

“Does verbally sparring with me make you hard, husband?”

I was walking on a thin thread, crushing through the carefully laid boundaries between us. Forcing Killian to acknowledge what we had – the brewing tension and the unspoken feelings.

His shoulders tensed. “You keep testing the limits of my sanity, wife.” He gripped the reins tighter, his eyes flaring with something dark and dangerous. “It's quite clear now. You only married me to make my life miserable. Because why the fuck would *you* provoke me so much?”

“Provocation is something we're both familiar with.” Gripping the reins with one hand, I urged Ragna forward, so the two horses were standing beside each other, perfectly aligned. Like two fitting puzzles. “Shall we?”

Without a word, Killian urged Cerberus into a gallop. Ragna and I followed behind him, until I pushed my mare to match Cerberus's speed, so that Killian and I were riding side by side.

The trees whizzed past us, our horses running free and wild. The air was cool on my skin, comforting. I didn't have adequate words to express the *freedom* that came with this moment.

It tasted bittersweet on my tongue and I savored it.

We rode for about twenty minutes, the castle fading into the distance as

we raced toward the opposite side of the island. Going deeper into the woods.

The first thing that caught my attention was the sound of rushing water before Killian came to a stop and Ragna reared back, also coming to a halt. Next to Cerberus.

Surprised, I gaped and took in the sight in front of me – the trees and the rocks... and the small pool of water that glistened several feet from us. A waterfall.

“I didn’t know–”

“Of course, you didn’t.”

Killian dismounted, before helping me down from my own horse. My feet were unsteady underneath me as I limped closer to the water. “Why did you bring here?”

“You must be bored out of your mind, to be stuck within that castle all day and night,” he explained smoothly.

“This place is magical.”

“Serene, yes. But magical is a far-fetched word to describe a waterfall,” he drawled.

“It’s magical when I’ve never seen something like this before,” I said.

Killian circled around Cerberus, reaching into the pouch attached to the horse’s side and took out two red apples. He fed his stallion and then my mare.

I watched him pet Cerberus before my eyes went back to the waterfall. It beckoned me, silently tempting me.

And I allowed myself to be swept away by its beauty. I sneaked a peek at Killian and saw that his attention was on our horses.

I didn’t know where the newfound confidence came to be. Or maybe I just simply wanted to test how far I could push Killian until he snapped.

It intrigued me.

And that made me bold.

With the sound of rushing water echoing in my ears, I slowly got rid of my clothing. My skirt went first and then my blouse, until I was partially naked.

Killian’s breath hitched behind me. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

“Disrobing.” I discarded my underwear, carelessly throwing my panties and bra over my pile of clothes so that I was standing bare in front of my husband.

I spun around to face him. His body tensed, eyes raking over my chest and then the juncture of my thighs.

“Why?” he questioned hoarsely.

My nipples puckered at his attention. “Because I want to get in the water. Do you want to join me?”

“Julianna,” he warned.

My lips curled. “You hate me, right?”

His fists clenched in a silent response. The tension between us was palpable.

Quirking up an eyebrow, I gestured toward him. “You’re hard.”

“For fuck’s sake,” he swore.

I smiled before turning around and walking into the pool of water. It was neither too cold nor too hot. Just the perfect temperature. I made sure to stay by the edge, where my feet were still touching the rocks below the surface.

I kept my back to Killian as I waded through the soothing water. A few seconds later, I heard a splash and then...

Fingers circled my hips and he tugged me into his body. His wet, naked body. My back was plastered against his front, his hardness digging into the curve of my ass.

“You’re so maddening,” he rasped in my ear. “I don’t know what to do with you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I breathed when his lips brushed over the pulse in my throat.

“Why are you doing this, Julianna?” The raw pain in his voice made me pause and my smile slid away.

I let my head fall back against his shoulders, leaning my weight into him. “I don’t want to hurt you, Killian.”

“But you are.”

“Tell me how to fix it then.”

“You crashed into my life like a hurricane and you promised me forever. But you stole that forever from us,” he accused, his voice cracking at the end.

“Tell me how to fix it,” I repeated, more urgently now. His body was warm against mine in the cool water and I didn’t want to ruin this moment. I wanted it to last longer. The last time we had been this physically intimate was the night of the masquerade ball and I had been craving more of that intimacy since then.

His hands tightened on my hips and his chest rattled with a sound, a mix of frustration and agony. “Don’t make me fall in love with you again.”

“I can’t promise that,” I whispered. “Because it doesn’t matter how hard I

try, I can't take you out of my heart. You're so deep under my skin that you've burrowed yourself into a corner of my soul, Killian."

Almost like my words had snapped the last of his self-control, Killian let out a low snarl. His arm circled around my waist and he dragged me deeper into the water. I gasped, before going limp in his embrace.

Trust. That was exactly what we lacked in our marriage.

So I gave him the fragile piece of my heart. I *trusted* him, yet again.

Killian pulled us under the waterfall and I spluttered, but then he was pushing up against the rocks. I blinked, letting the droplets of water fall from my lashes before my blurry vision cleared. When I looked around, trying to make sense of our surroundings, I realized that Killian had dragged us behind the waterfall, though our bodies were still submerged in the water.

"You're a wicked woman," he said huskily. "A good liar, a pretty manipulator, and a deceiving wife. Congratulations, Mrs. Spencer. You should win an Oscar. What a flawless act that was."

I curled my arms around his neck and it was almost like our bodies were in sync, refusing to listen to our brains. His hands cupped my ass, lifting me, and I instinctively wrapped my thighs around his hips.

Our bodies collided together, chest to chest. Hips to hips. My tight nipples rubbed against his chest and I swallowed my needy moan. Gooseflesh peppered my skin and I shuddered when the tip of his erection brushed against my opening. His hips bucked upward, rubbing the length of his hardness against my oversensitive clit.

"My love is true," I breathed shakily. "It always has been. Believe me, Kill—"

I broke off with a gasp when Killian shoved inside me, one punishing thrust. It stole my breath from my lungs and I clung to him, my lips parted with a silent cry.

His shaft jerked inside me and I pulsed, clenching around his length. Almost desperately. Like I wanted to keep him inside my body. Locked together.

Our hearts thudded to the same harmony.

His jaw was tight, his brow furrowed and his eyes pitch-black. Tension rolled through his shoulders when he pulled out, almost all the way, before thrusting back inside with the same brutal pace as before.

I cried out and my inner walls spasmed as he seated himself fully inside my pussy, buried to the hilt. "You." *Thrust.* "Drive. *Thrust.* "Me." *Thrust.*

“Absolutely.” *Thrust.* “Insane.”

“Do you hate me?” I whimpered.

“Yes,” he snarled.

“Hate is better than nothing,” I cried out as Killian pounded inside me like a madman. His hips jerked against mine as he found a savage and painful rhythm. My eyes rolling back into my head.

The water sloshed around us as my husband fucked me against the rocks of the waterfall. My back was scratched raw and burning, but I couldn’t find myself to care.

The pain became pleasure and I found solace in it. This was hate and love colliding together. Nothing about it was beautiful or romantic.

It was simply one dirty fuck to rid us of three years of sexual tension. An intense need for a quick rutting. It was filthy and desperate.

My climax rolled through my body unexpectedly, fast and hard. I shuddered and cried out his name, my core squeezing his dick.

“Oh fuck,” he swore, a guttural groan spilling from his lips. “*Julianna.*”

Killian plunged hard inside, stretching me with every thick inch of him. One last brutal thrust and he stayed there, his length jerking inside me. Filling me with his seed.

His forehead touched mine, as our chests heaved, and we both struggled to breathe. Killian’s eyes were squeezed shut.

A few short seconds later, he untangled himself from me. My thighs clenched, my sex equally sore and hypersensitive from our recent fucking.

Without a word, Killian gathered me in his arms and waded through the water. He carried me out to where our pile of clothes laid on the rocks.

“Let’s go, Princess,” he muttered, his voice deep and hoarse. “You’ve done enough damage for today and you’re not fully healed yet.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and quickly got dressed, my clothes sticking to my wet body. Killian did the same before we both mounted our horses. The tension was heavy between us, but I didn’t dare say something to ruin this moment.

Ragna and Cerberus led us back to the stables. Once both horses were in their respective stalls, I turned to Killian, palm stretched out.

He stared at me like I was crazy and maybe I was...

But I couldn’t allow us to go back to the silence – the hatred and the rage. I knew it wouldn’t be easy to get my husband to trust me again, but I wasn’t

giving up hope. Not yet, atleast.

The only way for us to walk away from our tarnished past was for us to start over again. We couldn't erase our past, but we could fix our present so that our future wouldn't be stained with tragedy.

"I was just all up in your cunt twenty minutes ago. You were screaming my name and practically begging me to fuck you harder and now you're asking for a handshake?"

I ignored his careless jab because I had grown used to his provoking remarks. He wanted to get under my skin, waiting for me to snap – well, he could damn well keep trying.

I knew all of Killian's tactics now and I was using them against him.

"Hi," I said, my eyes darting to my out-stretched hand and back to his dark gaze. "I'm Julianna. Nice to meet you."

Killian's brows rose up in surprise. "Did I just fuck you into insanity?"

"Your assholeness has no limits."

"Your audacity has no limits," he shot back, before reaching out. To my utter delight, he grasped my hand in his. "Killian."

"Killian," I breathed, his name rolling on my tongue.

His hand squeezed mine. "What are you doing, Julianna?"

"Re-writing our story."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Killian



Two weeks later

Sex.
Fucking.
Love-making.
Rutting.

Sex came in all different words, but the meaning was still the same.

Though our relationship was still shaky, we didn't lack physical intimacy in our married life. Julianna and I had consummated our marriage on every possible surface of our rooms. In the stables, in the corridor hidden by the shadows and a few more times behind the waterfall.

That was three long years of sexual tension and we were still greedy for each other. Our appetite for sex only grew more intense each passing day, instead of being subsided after a few fucks here and there.

While we were physically intimate, I kept a careful distance between us when it came to my feelings. Though, it wasn't from Julianna's lack of trying. Because she had been intensely persistent to make me fall for her again.

She tried every trick in the book, going as far as to make me mad with jealousy as she recklessly flirted with Gabriel when he came to the island a week ago, bringing two new and wild horses for me to train.

As much as I hated to admit it, Julianna succeeded that day. I fucked her in the stables, on a stack of hay while Gabriel stood only a few feet away, his back to us while he spoke on the phone. One quick dirty rut to show her exactly *who* was in control.

Little did she know...

I never fell *out* of love with her.

I still did love her. It was just that now, that love was stained with my

hatred.

But with each passing day, I realized that it wasn't even about hate anymore. It was always about trust and allowing myself to be *weak* for her again.

I had been a fool in love and ended up with a half-dead heart. A piece of her soul died with her sister that night and in return, she killed me too. I didn't think I could handle another heartbreak at the hands of Julianna.

I poured myself a glass of whiskey before I did something stupid like stalk back to Julianna's room and fall asleep beside her. It was torture to untangle myself from her every night, so I could come back to my room... to an empty, cold bed.

I downed the liquid in two big gulps and poured myself another drink. The glass was a hairbreadth away from my mouth when I paused. The door of my bedroom squeaked open. My wife peered inside and when she found me still awake, she let herself in.

My brows furrowed at her state of disarray. Something was really wrong here. My gut churned at the sight of her like this. So desolated and heartbroken.

Her hair was piled up in the messiest bun atop her head; her face was sweaty and flushed in distress. Julianna wrung her hands together, but I noticed how they shook. "I need a drink," she croaked, her voice stuffy as if she had just spent hours crying.

I gestured toward the whiskey bottle next to me. "Be my guest."

Julianna didn't need to be told twice. She practically lunged for it, taking a sip right from the bottle instead of pouring it into a glass. I settled back into my chair, propping my ankle over my opposite knee. "You want to tell me what's wrong?"

She swallowed and then grimaced. "I had a nightmare. My sister..."

Julianna left the sentence hanging and I nodded in understanding. While she might have realized that she had been trying to atone for her sins in an irrational way, Julianna still carried shame and regret in her very soul.

To be relieved from the heavy burden of survivor's guilt wasn't any easy feat.

Her face was etched with sorrow and despair, her scars appearing more pronounced over her pale skin. If it was salvation Julianna wanted, she had to forgive herself first.

Atonement was righting the wrong.

Not causing more harm. Especially to her own self.

I wished I could make her understand that, but she was so stubborn in trying to chase her version of redemption.

“Do you often get these nightmares?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. While Julianna had been battling her fever and I stayed by her side, she ended up with more than one nightmare every night, thrashing and screaming.

At first, I blamed it on her sickness and thought she was hallucinating because of how high her fever was. But then I quickly realized the nightmares probably plagued her every night and it wasn’t just because she was sick.

“More than often,” she responded, her voice breaking. Julianna took another sip of the whiskey and then coughed. “This is disgusting.”

I placed my empty glass on the coffee table. “What are your nightmares about?”

“The accident,” she choked. “But it’s never the same. The scene is always changing in my head, different versions of the accident and I don’t even know which one is real anymore.”

I blinked, confused. “You’re saying that you don’t remember the accident?”

Julianna shook her head. “Not exactly, the details are all blurred. That night is literally a huge empty gap in my memory.”

“Selective amnesia,” I concluded. My wife nodded, looking more dejected than ever.

“She haunts me, Killian.” Her hand clutched her chest as if it pained her. “I can still hear her screams, the smell of blood and how pungent the scent of death was. As if it happened just yesterday.”

Julianna slammed the bottle on the table and surged forward, falling to her knees in front of me. Almost frantically, she grasped for my hand.

“Hurt me,” she begged, her voice cracking.

My heart hammered against my rib cage. “What—”

“You don’t understand.” Tears welled in her grey eyes. “I need *pain*.”

“Julianna,” I started, but she was already shaking her head.

“You said I self-destruct and it’s true,” she wheezed, a lonely tear sliding down her scarred cheek. “The reason is because I need pain. It grounds me. Keeps me focused. And because I don’t want to fall back into that void of nothingness once again...I don’t want to mess this up again. I want to fix it,

fix us... but I need to stay focused for that.”

Her nails dug into my hand. “I crave pain, Killian. Tell me you understand. Tell me you can give me what I need.”

Her hair was a messy nest on her head and she was shivering. Julianna blinked, her smoky grey eyes trapping me once again. Her full lips were swollen pink as if she had just been chewing on them. She licked her lips, slowly, and my dick twitched. And it was the desperate look in her eyes that got me – *fuck* – she was so damn addictive and far too fascinating for her own good.

“Do you hate me, Killian?” Julianna asked, and I knew where she was going with this.

“Yes,” I rasped.

“Good. Then, hurt me. *Please.*”

I tugged my wife forward, caging her between my legs. “We need a safe word,” I advised calmly. “The moment you say your safe word, everything stops.”

“Thorn,” she replied quickly. “Thorn is my safe word.”

I nodded, while unbuckling my pants. “Thorn, it is.”

Julianna reached for me, placing her palm over my bare chest. Her thumb brushed over my nipple, tentatively. I gripped her wrist, pulling her hand away and squeezing enough to leave my marks but not to cause her pain. “You don’t get to touch me unless I tell you to.”

She gasped and then a shiver racked through her body. Julianna nodded, shyly.

Releasing her wrist, my hand went to the back of her head. I did quick work of undoing her bun before my fingers tangled in her blonde hair, wrapping the length of it around my fist. Once and then twice, my knuckles digging into her scalp. I gripped her hard, pulling her head back and baring the length of her neck for me. She moaned softly and her eyes darkened with depraved need. Like me.

Bringing my head to her neck, I inhaled her sweet scent. Strawberries. “How far will you go to please me, Julianna?”

“Anything and everything you want,” she whispered.

I chuckled against her throat. My teeth grazed the sensitive skin there, the place I knew that made her wet. I felt her clenching her thighs. I knew her body better than she did.

I licked the column of her neck, tasting her sweetness. “Good girl.” I could

hear the rough huskiness of my own voice. “Open your mouth, big and wide for me.”

It was a pretty fucking sight, her on her knees for me, and when she opened her mouth, waiting patiently for me to feed her my cock, I almost spent my seed in my pants.

I pushed my boxers down and freed my erection from the material. I grasped my length in my palm and then gripped the back of Julianna’s head. Her mouth stayed wide open and I slowly pushed my cock into her warm heat. The moment my hardness was halfway sheathed into her mouth, I let out the deepest groan.

Fuck, this felt so good.

Julianna swallowed against my thick length and before I could stop myself, my hips bucked forward and I shoved the rest of me down her throat.

She gagged at first and her throat tried to fight the harsh intrusion. But I kept a firm hold on the back of her head, pushing her down onto my shaft until her lips met the base of my length and my heavy sack thudded against her chin. She wiggled in my grasp and I saw her eyes shining with tears as she fought to breathe.

“Shh. Take it, Julianna,” I muttered in response to her gagging, breathless sounds. “Don’t disappoint me.”

Her pretty eyes widened at my words and she tried to shake her head, looking quite frightened at the thought of not pleasing me. “No? You don’t want to disappoint me, right?”

Her gaze screamed YES as tears slid down her flushed cheeks. Saliva was also starting to dribble down her chin. *Beautiful.*

I groaned, and if possible, my erection swelled bigger in her mouth. The sight of her lips stretched wide apart to take me and the wet sound of her throat swallowing against my length, was almost too much for me.

Jaw clenched, I withdrew from her mouth and then thrust back inside. She gagged again, but this time, she didn’t try to wiggle away. The tears were a continuous river down her cheeks. I loved the sight of it, as barbaric as that sounded.

I watched as Julianna breathed through her nose and then her cheeks hollowed as she sucked me. “Good girl. Now, let me fuck your pretty mouth.”

I pulled out again, but Julianna kept her mouth open, inviting, waiting so submissively. Grasping the length of me, I rubbed the tip of my shaft over her

fuckable lips. My seed coated the swollen pink lushness. Then, I slowly thrust back into her mouth until I felt the back of her throat.

My hips started to move faster. Bucking in and out of her mouth, pulling out and shoving back inside. I was big, I knew that. Julianna had a small, pretty mouth. Too small to take my cock easily. But I still forced her to take every inch of me, even when she started sobbing and gagging furiously.

A few times, I settled and let her breathe. She would then suck me leisurely, happy and content to serve me, before I picked up my pace again.

Julianna gagged tearfully, looking so perfect and gorgeous with her mouth full of my dick. My abs clenched as I felt my climax quickly approaching. Shit.

I pulled out, just in time to shoot my release all over Julianna's lips and chin. She was a pretty mess and I admired my work of art.

Her cheeks were tearstained, face coated with my essence – looking utterly mesmerizing as a submissive.

Chest heaving, I clenched my fists over my thighs. “Get undressed,” I said, keeping my voice contained. Though I felt anything but calm.

Julianna made quick work of her clothes, throwing them carelessly on the floor before kneeling back between my legs. Her eyes darted to my belt as I dragged it through the loops of my pants, with a loud swishing sound.

Her delicate throat moved as she swallowed, hard.

Her grey eyes flared wide when I wrapped my belt around her neck.

“Do you want to use your safe word?” I asked, gravelly.

“No,” she confirmed, breathless.

Thank the fucking Lord for that.

Julianna whimpered as I tightened my belt around her throat and dragged her closer to me. She came willingly, her body flushed and gooseflesh peppering her skin.

Julianna had no black veil to hide behind.

She was bare and open for me, not a stitch of clothing covering her pale skin.

Vulnerable.

And so fucking beautiful; it hurt to look at her.



Julianna

My hand fluttered to my neck, where his belt was looped around my throat. Killian tsked darkly and my thighs clenched. I was so wet, achy and needy.

“How will you pay for your sins, Julianna? How far will you let me go?” His fingers wrapped around my wrist, squeezing hard enough that I felt how strong he was but not enough to cause any real harm. “How much will you let me hurt you?”

I swallowed before meeting his eyes. “How far can you go, Killian?”

His eyes darkened. “You don’t want to know, Princess.”

“Show me,” I pleaded hoarsely.

His lips curled into a wicked grin.

Thud. My heart was trying to pound right out of my chest.

Killian stood, dragging me up by the belt. To be controlled by this man, who was so confident in his own skin and so self-assured about his own lust, it made me feel vulnerable.

And safe.

Warm and protected.

Thud. Thud.

He led me to the bed, then gestured for me to climb on. “On your hands and knees, Julianna.”

I quickly got into the position he wanted me in. On my hands and knees, back arching, my ass in the air. His fingers trailed along the curve of my back, then between my butt cheeks, before brushing against my wet lips, over my most sensitive flesh.

His touch disappeared from my skin and then I heard a rustling somewhere in the room. Drawers opening and closing.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I was anxious, but anticipation licked its way through my fevered body. I waited for the pain, wanting it... craving it. A second later, Killian came to stand behind me again. His warmth cocooned me. *Safe.*

“Pain is subjective,” he said slowly. “But this is going to *hurt.*”

I turned my head slightly to the side and my eyes found the hairbrush in his hand.

Oh. My mind went blank, blood roaring between my ears and my heart pounding heavily against my rib cage.

My fingers curled around the bedsheet just when he brought down the back of the hairbrush over my left cheek. First, I heard the sound of it colliding against my flesh. Then, I felt the *burn*.

“Oh God,” I whimpered. The sudden stinging pain took me by surprise. I was ready for the next one as it landed on my right cheek. I gasped, my body arching.

He rubbed his palm over my ass, his touch cool on my burning skin. “Atone for you sins, wife,” he rasped.

I nodded, voicelessly.

Pain seared my skin and tears slid down my cheeks.

Killian didn’t go slow and he wasn’t soft either. He punished me, brutally. The hairbrush hitting my ass over and over again, until it felt like my flesh was swollen and aflame.

The agony somehow blended with pleasure. It was almost addictive. It was an exquisite ache, my veins burning with fire and lust. My wetness coated the inside of my thighs.

This was real punishment.

It hurt so bad.

It hurt so good.

I lost count how many times Killian peppered my ass with the hairbrush. But soon enough, I didn’t care. I just wanted to *feel*.

And so, I did.

I sobbed as the pain racked through my body, then followed by the sweet ache of pleasure. My climax slithered through my veins and I grew closer to the peak, dangling over the edge – waiting for his permission to fall.

My vision grew dazed, my mind somehow drowsy and my eyes fluttered closed. This was everything I craved, everything I *needed*.

Somewhere in the background, I heard something hit the ground and then my husband was on me. Covering my body with his own. Mounting me like a stallion that wanted to breed his mare.

His erection brushed over my sensitive flesh between the juncture of my thighs, stabbing at my opening, but not yet breaching me.

“My sweet masochistic wife,” Killian growled in my ear. There was unmistakable pride in his voice and I reveled in it.

I had been chasing an unknown release for so long, not knowing that this was exactly what I needed. I found salvation here, on my hands and knees. In Killian’s arms.

His hand wrapped around his belt and he pulled my head back, forcing my body into an arch. His grunt was the only warning I got before Killian rammed inside the tight sheath of my sex. One forceful thrust.

“Julianna.” My name rolled over his tongue, like a silent prayer.

My lips parted with a silent scream and my climax rushed through me. I shuddered with how intense my orgasm was. My knees weakened and I slumped over. Killian had me pinned under his body as he pounded inside me like a savage beast. No longer composed or contained.

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.

His fingers dug almost painfully into my hips and I knew that would bruise tomorrow. My husband manipulated my body, forcing another orgasm from me. My breath caught and my eyes blurred as my second climax hit me. Fast and heavy.

The sound of two bodies colliding together echoed through the walls of his room.

His grunts; my moans.

His groans, my whimpers.

Killian came with a loud grunt, buried to the hilt, before he slumped over me.

Chest heaving and our sweaty bodies entangled together...

I had never felt safer or more desired, than in this moment.

I found beauty in pain. Pleasure in agony. And salvation in my husband's brutal yet exquisite touch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Julianna



Two weeks later

“You’re making me uncomfortable. Can you step back, please?” I said to the guy, who was around my age, as he crowded into my personal space. His breath reeked of alcohol and I grimaced.

The house was loud and bustling with drunk young adults. Why did I convince my sister to come to this party? It was a bad idea and the moment I stepped through the door, I knew I was going to hate it. It was too loud and the smell of sweat and alcohol was heavy in the air.

It unsettled me.

“Oh c’mon,” he croaked, his fingers brushing over my stomach. “You’ve been eyeing me. Don’t play hard to get.”

Eyeing him? When? I didn’t know who he was and I didn’t even remember looking at him. Fear slithered through my veins and I pushed at his chest, but he barely even moved.

My breath hitched and my heart slammed into my throat when his hand slid under my shirt, over my bare skin. “No! Let me go, right now.”

He snarled in response, his face hardening at my refusal to succumb to his invasive touches. He slammed my body into the wall, the back of my head knocking against it. My ears were ringing and my vision blurred.

I felt wet lips against my throat and that was when it happened.

He was wrenched away from me and Gracelynn stepped in front of me, shielding my body with her own. My eyes widened when my sister reared back and then her fist met his face. I heard the sound of bones breaking and he howled.

“She said to let go, loser. What the hell. No is no,” she hissed. The guy was sprawled on the floor. He let out a pained groan before his eyes rolled back into his head.

At the commotion, the crowd turned their attention on us and my knees weakened. Gracelynn grasped me by the elbow, pulling me through the sweaty bodies. The moment we stepped out of the loud house and we were hit with fresh air, I could finally breathe again.

“Shit,” my sister grunted, shaking her right hand. “I think I broke my hand. Oh shit, it hurts.”

“What?” I gasped, gently reaching for her, so I could take a look. It was red, but quickly turning into a purple shade and her hand was already swelling. “Oh no. This doesn’t look good. I’m so sorry.”

Gracelynn let out a pained groan. “This is my dominant hand. Ugh. Do you think you’ll be able to drive us back home?”

I nodded. Gracelynn had taught me how to drive. Though I didn’t have my driver’s licence yet, I was pretty confident I would be able to drive us home. It wasn’t that complicated. Just a few easy turns.

I started the car while my sister got in the passenger seat. She let out another agonized hiss and guilt gnawed at me. This was my fault.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated.

Gracelynn shook her head. “It’s fine. Not your fault. That asshole deserved it.”

I pulled the car out of the driveway and made an easy turn to the left. It was past two AM and the streets were pretty much deserted. So, I wasn’t worried about traffic or panicking over too many cars driving past me.

But a few minutes later, Gracelynn made a strange sound in the back of her throat. At first, I thought she was in pain, but after taking a quick glance at her, I saw unsettling fear and distress on her face.

“Julianna,” my sister started slowly, “I don’t want you to panic, but I think a car has been following us since we left the party.”

My heart leaped to my throat. “What?”

I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a black Range Rover behind us, all its windows tinted. “Do you think it’s the guy you punched?” I asked shakily.

My sister shook her head. “No. He was still inside, passed out when we left. That Range Rover was parked outside of the house and started following us the moment we pulled out from the driveway.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Father has a lot of enemies, Julianna. And now we’re publicly connected to the Spencers.”

My stomach churned with nausea. “You think someone wants to harm us?”

“Take a random right,” Gracelynn instructed me, instead of responding to my question.

I nodded, my fingers clenching the steering wheel, and I took the next right. Taking a quick peek in rear-view again, I saw that the Range Rover had taken the same turn and was still following closely behind us.

My sister cursed under her breath. “Take another random turn, this time left.”

I did as I was instructed and again, it took the same turn. Gracelynn fumbled with her phone, calling someone. It had to be Simon. When no one picked up, she dialed the number two more times.

“Fuck,” she cursed again. “Simon is not picking up.”

So my assumption was correct. I swallowed. “Call Dad.”

She did but nothing. Our calls ended up unanswered.

Just when I was about to tell her to call Killian, something collided into the back of our car. Gracelynn let out a startled scream and she cupped her stomach.

I gasped, belatedly realizing that the car that had been following us closely had rear-ended us. Panicked, I kept my feet on the accelerator.

I didn’t obey the traffic laws, burning through two red lights, trying to escape whoever was following us.

“Julianna,” my sister whispered.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to pacify her. “Nothing is going to happen to us.”

I took another peek in the rear-view mirror and my eyes widened. My lips parted with a silent scream and my arm snaked out in front of my sister, as if to protect her from the impact.

The Range Rover crashed into the back of our car again. My head slammed into the steering wheel, pain slithering through my skull. Too late, I realized that I had lost control and our car spun in a circle.

My ears were ringing and I blinked several times, trying to clear my vision. Gracelynn let out a whimper and I focused on her. Tears slid down her cheeks and she cupped her stomach, protectively.

“I’m scared, Julianna.”

Thud.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Thud. Thud.

I saw it coming, through the window where my sister was seated.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The black Range Rover drove toward us at full speed. It collided against the passenger's side, Gracelynn being the first to feel the impact.

I heard my sister's scream first.

And then my own.

Before the world went pitch-black.

“NO!” I bellowed, my eyes snapping open. Next to me, Killian startled awake.

“Julianna?” He questioned carefully, brushing my damp hair away from my face.

My chest tightened, and I wheezed, sobbing heavily. Shivers racked through my body. Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I fought the urge to retch.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the memories flashed behind my closed lids, in black-and-white images, as if the accident had been documented through a Polaroid.

Oh my God. I was going to be sick.

“Julianna,” Killian called out my name, more urgently now. “Did you have another nightmare? What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

My lungs squeezed as I struggled to breathe.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

My stomach churned with nausea, tears sliding down my cheeks. I couldn’t control the tremors, and I couldn’t stop crying.

“It... wasn’t an accident,” I wheezed through my choked cries. “I remember. I remember... *everything.*”

Killian pulled me into his lap, rocking me back and forth. I buried my face in his neck and let out an anguished wail.

His lips brushed against my temple and he was whispering comforting words to me, but I didn’t understand them. Blood roared between my ears and my brain stuttered.

“It wasn’t an accident,” I repeated. “Someone tried... to kill us.”



My father slammed his fist onto his desk and I flinched. “Why am I just learning about this now?” he roared. “Someone attempted to kill my daughter while she was on *your* island and you hid something so important from me?”

Last night, after I had woken from my nightmare – which turned out to be my real memory of the accident – Killian and I came to one conclusion.

Gracelynn and I weren’t drunk that night, but how did my hospital records show alcohol in my blood at the time of the accident?

Everything was slowly making sense now.

The accident was a planned murder.

And the maid who tried to kill me? That wasn’t a separate incident. The person who wanted Gracelynn and I dead that night, was still out there, hunting me.

I was a target and the maid was the second attempt at my life.

Gracelynn and I didn’t have any personal enemies... so whoever wanted us dead was either an enemy of my father or the Spencers.

In the morning, Killian and I left the island. Now, this was a truth we couldn’t hide from our fathers. Our first stop was the Spencer Manor and while William was shocked and deeply troubled, he reacted less angrily than my father.

My eyes darted to my husband, who was sitting beside me on the couch in my father’s office. Killian rubbed his thumb over his jaw, lazily. Not at all concerned about my father’s outburst. But me? I was practically shaking on the inside.

“Dad–”

My father’s eyes darted to me, furiously. “I didn’t expect this from you, Julianna. To hide such dangerous truth!”

He pushed away from his desk, pacing back and forth. “Killian obviously doesn’t care about the threat, but *you* – how could you be so irresponsible?” he accused, throwing his words at me, so carelessly. “Do you even realize that you could be carrying the Romano’s heir right now? How are you so reckless?”

When I flinched again, Killian’s chest rumbled with a threatening growl. “Watch your tone when you speak to my wife.”

“She’s my *daughter*,” my father hissed. “I already lost one and now I learn that Julianna’s life is also in danger? How do you think that makes me feel?”

Killian sat forward, dark eyes flaring with something dangerous. “Still, that doesn’t give you the right to raise your voice at Julianna when she’s also

a victim. She wasn't irresponsible, like you claimed. She was being a considerate and thoughtful daughter."

"As if you care," my father spat. "You hate Julianna and I'm sure you wouldn't give a shit if she died. You'd probably think good riddance."

I grimaced and bile rose in my throat, tasting bitter on my tongue.

"That's rich coming from you, Bishop," Killian said, his voice deep and gravelly. "You were aware of how much I *loathed* your daughter, yet I was the husband you chose for her. For your own personal gains. So, spare me the fucking speech."

"Stop," I whispered, wringing my hands together. "Please, stop arguing."

Killian's jaw snapped close. I could hear him grounding his molars together.

"Can we focus on what's important right now?" I asked shakily. "Dad, do you know who would want me dead?"

My father rubbed a hand over his face, with a frustrated grunt. "I have way too many enemies, Julianna."

"Are you doubtful of a specific person?" Killian questioned, brows furrowing.

Father nodded, letting out a weary sigh. "I have two people in mind. But it's only a suspicion until we have further proof."

"Send the details to me. I'll have someone look into it," my husband demanded.

"Whoever is responsible for this, I'll fucking kill them myself," my father spat, his dark eyes enraged.

Killian's nostrils flared. "Not if I get to them first."

Father's fists clenched and he planted them on his desk. "I don't trust you to take care of my daughter. She will stay here, with me, where I can protect her."

Killian's chest rumbled with a deep growl. "I took a bullet for my wife," he snarled. "I've done everything to protect Julianna and to make sure she doesn't get put in harm's way."

My husband stood up and stalked forward. He braced his hands over my father's desk and leaned forward, locking eyes with his father-in-law. The air in the room felt heavy and thick with tension. The silent, unspoken threat crawled over my skin and I fought back a shiver.

Killian Spencer was confident in his own skin, in the way he walked and in the power he had. He knew *who* he was and he was never one to bow.

People bent over backwards for him, but Killian was the most self-assured person I knew.

Even more than my father.

“Let me remind you again, Julianna is my *wife*,” Killian said calmly, but his voice was laced with a silent warning. “And she will be staying with me. End of discussion.”

My father wasn’t one to accept defeat so easily. I could see the dark fury on his face. “How about we let Julianna choose where she wants to stay?”

“Julianna,” Killian said my name, keeping his back to me. His gaze didn’t waver from my father’s face. “Make your choice. Your father or me?”

I didn’t even have to think about it. That was an easy choice. I stood up and limped over to my husband. My fingers curled around his elbow and Killian’s lips twitched.

“Dad, please,” I started, only to pause at the look of utter betrayal on my father’s face. When he suggested for me to make a choice, he had been so sure I would choose him. But by choosing Killian, I had marked my father’s defeat.

And that made Bishop Romano bitter.

“Gracelynn would have chosen differently,” he muttered under his breath, loud enough for me to hear.

I winced and my stomach churned with nausea. Killian tensed beside me, but before he could say anything, I cleared my throat. Shoved away the pain my father caused with five simple words. I wanted to say that I had grown used to my father’s lack of concern for my emotional well-being, but even after so many years – it still *hurt*.

That he always saw me as a burden.

And that I was never his priority.

“I know you’re worried because you care,” I choked through the lump in my throat. “But I should go home with Killian. I trust him to keep me safe.”

“And there you go, Bishop. My *wife* has spoken,” Killian hissed.

He grasped my hand in his, lacing our fingers together to show our solid union before he tugged me out of my father’s office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Julianna



I sat on the king-size bed, hands on my lap. The shower turned off and a few minutes later, Killian walked out with only a towel wrapped around his waist.

This was my first time staying at the Spencer Manor. While I thought I would have my own bedroom, like on the island, I had been wrong. Because the butler brought my suitcase to Killian's room.

I waited for my husband to kick me out, but when he didn't, it became clear that my suitcase wasn't brought here by mistake.

Killian's bedroom was elegant and immaculate. While I was used to something brighter and livelier, his room was all black and grey. *Moody*. But it suited him well.

The only thing fancy about the room was the crystal chandelier hanging in the center of the ceiling and the painting of a black horse running wild and free, attached to the wall over his headboard.

"We're sharing a room?" I questioned, licking my dry lips.

"Yes," he deadpanned, without elaborating further on that.

"Why?" My eyes followed him around *his* room as he stalked into his walk-in closet.

He came back out, wearing grey sweatpants. His chest was bare and his hair was still damp from his shower. "Because it'd be safer if you stay close to me," Killian finally responded to my question.

He took a seat on the chair, on the opposite end of the room, and he stretched out his legs in front of him. We sat facing each other, the tension in the air thick and palpable.

We still haven't acknowledged the fact that last night, after our midnight sex, we had somehow fallen asleep tangled together. It was a first and, coincidentally, that was the same night my memories came back to me.

As if it was meant to happen that way. For Killian to be there with me when I woke up from that horrid nightmare – to *soothe* me.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “The accident... I wasn’t drunk that night. It wasn’t my fault.”

This whole day had been a mess and I never got a chance to *think* or to acknowledge the emotions I had buried inside me.

The harsh realization was that... for three years, I bore the heavy burden of guilt and allowed it to stain my life because I thought I was the culprit – the one who killed my sister.

“But I was still the reason why we sneaked out that night.” I wiped my tears away. Hot anguish burned through me. “Maybe if... we hadn’t...”

“Come here,” Killian ordered, beckoning for me to come closer.

I went to him and his arm snaked out, grasping my hand in his and tugging me onto his lap. His body was strong and warm. Both dominating and comforting. I burrowed my face into the crook of his shoulders, inhaling his fresh and natural manly scent.

His lips brushed against my temple, so tenderly, it surprised me. “You have to forgive yourself first and that’s when you will find true salvation.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting back the tears. “I don’t know how.”

“Guilt is toxic, Julianna,” he said. “As long as you carry that burden, you will continue to relive the past over and over again. You’ll never be able to forgive yourself then. We’re humans and we’re severely flawed. You and Gracelynn innocently sneaked out that night. Like most young adults do. So, forgive yourself because you can’t see the future. You didn’t know this accident would have happened.”

I fell silent, considering his words. Tears flooded down my cheeks and I sniffled, quietly. Killian could probably hear me since I was doing such a bad job at being quiet, but he allowed me to have this moment.

Everything he said made sense, but there was an ache burrowed deep inside my chest. I didn’t know if I’d ever be rid of it. I might forgive myself one day, but I would never be able to forget the look of death on my sister’s bloodied and mangled face.

I had lost three years, tormenting myself. Atoning for a sin that wasn’t mine.

Self-destructing because I thought I deserved it. Because I thought it was all my fault.

But I wasn’t Gracelynn’s killer.

And once that realization dawned to me, it was like a whole burden had been lifted off my chest. My shoulders slumped and I felt... *weightless*.

Killian and I sat like this for a long time, finding comfort in the silence. And in each other's arms. I half-expected him to initiate sex, but when he didn't, I found myself surprisingly relieved. Because I wanted more than just something physical.

Atleast for tonight.

I wanted tenderness and intimacy.

"Do you still hate me?" I whispered, when I started to fall asleep. I blinked hard once then twice, forcing myself to say awake so I could hear his answer.

His fingers stroking down my bare arm paused. "Just like pain is subjective... hate is all grey areas, no black-and-white certainties." His hand brushed over my breasts, cupping one heavy mound, before pinching my nipple. Hard.

"I hate you but I crave you. I hate you but I need you." As if to prove his words, he bucked his hips up, his hardness digging into the curve of my ass. "Hate is too simple a word to describe what we have, what I feel for you. It's not hatred, Princess. It's so much more. It's chaos," he rasped in my ear.



Julianna

One month later

My phone rang, rousing me from my dead sleep. I picked up the call without looking at the screen, already knowing who it was. "Good morning, Mirai. Isn't it too early?" I greeted her, groggily.

"Too early?" she scoffed. "It's almost noon, Julianna."

My eyes snapped open and I sat up on the bed, startled. I looked at the digital clock on the nightstand, gaping. Mirai was right; it was almost noon. How did I sleep through the morning without even rousing once? I didn't even remember waking up when Killian left the bed.

My husband had a habit of waking up, an hour before the sunrise. His routine was going for a quick run while it was still dark outside and then coming back to his home gym and doing a thirty-minute intensive workout.

Then it was shower and breakfast, before he sat down for work.

While I hadn't left the Spencer Manor since we got here, Killian found a few ways to entertain me. We had all our meals together and we were very active, when it came to sex. This relationship most definitely didn't lack physical intimacy.

During the day, I chatted with Mirai over the phone and then I would browse through my kindle, looking for my next read.

Some days, I'd find myself in the kitchen, trying a new recipe. But I didn't enjoy baking as much as I enjoyed horseback riding.

Spencer Manor was cold and boring. The staff was welcoming and pleasant, but they kept their distance. It was a solid boss and employee relationship, nothing more than that.

I missed the island. Mirai and Emily. Ragna and Cerberus.

But it was safer here, at the Spencer Manor. We were surrounded twenty-four-seven by security and I knew Killian was doing his best to keep me protected. And it was a duty he took very seriously.

Even though he was good at hiding his feelings, always wearing that cold mask – I could tell he was stressed and frustrated.

So far, all of their investigations had led to dead ends. That made the situation even more dangerous, because we were completely blind when it came to whoever was the culprit. We had no idea who was behind the accident and who was still hunting me, three years later.

"Julianna?" Mirai said, her chirpy voice breaking through my thoughts.

"Hmm. Yes, I'm listening."

"Remember the unopened letters we found? From Elias?" she asked.

Right, *those*. After putting Arabella's letters and poems back into her drawers, I decided against opening the letters from Elias. The past should be kept in the past, where it belonged.

I no longer felt the need, the insistent pull toward Arabella's tragic tale. Maybe it was because I had somehow broken the invisible chains that kept me shackled to the past stories of the castle when I decided to give my own tale another chance.

To re-write my own story, without the tragic ending.

"I left them unopened," I said to Mirai. For specific reasons that I didn't have to tell her.

"Yes, about that. Don't be mad at me," she started, practically pleading. "I was just so curious and I couldn't stop myself. So um, I opened those letters

and read through them.”

“Oh.” I shook my head, half-smiling. “Why am I not surprised?”

“But Julianna, you have to see this!” Her shrill voice came through the phone and I winced. “All this time, we thought wrong. You have to read through Elias’s letters. It gives you a whole new perspective of things.”

My chest squeezed at the thought of going back down that path. Obsessing over that cursed story, like it was my own. “I don’t think I should.”

“Fine,” she said, quickly relenting. “You don’t have to read through all of them. I’ll send you the only important one. It’s short, but it tells you everything we need to know. The details we were missing in Arabella’s story.”

To appease Mirai and her pure enthusiasm, I agreed. “Send me a photo.”

“Yes!” I imagined her pumping her fists in the air. She really was a ball of innocence and joy. Though her story was also tainted by the cruelty of fate, Mirai didn’t allow it to deter her from finding joy in the little things in life.

Two seconds later, my phone vibrated with a notification. I opened the message and tapped on the photo that Mirai sent me. “Did you get it?” she questioned.

I hummed in response. “Yes, give me a minute to read through it.”

Arabella,

I have thought of how to start this letter more times than I could count. Though every time I begin to write the first sentence, I find myself without words.

I did not know when it started or how it started.

Maybe it was the first time when you openly wept in my arms after the loss of our first child. Or maybe it was the time when we waltzed at Appleton’s Ball and you had worn that emerald dress, matching the color of your eyes. I remembered your shy smile when I had complimented your looks.

And I still do remember the taste of that peach tart on your lips.

I do not know when but somehow, you have started to take over my thoughts.

Your shy smile. Your tender touch. Your soft lips.

I now noticed things I never did before.

The way your fingers glide over the piano with sweet precision.

You prefer peaches over strawberries.

*You prefer reading Shakespearean tragedies over watching an opera.
Your favorite color is pastel-blue, specifically.*

*I notice the way your lips curl with a gentle smile at Charlotte's laughter.
I can see how much you adore my sister's baby and I can feel how much it
pains you.*

*What I had with Rosa was young love, pretty and immature. Reckless. For
the longest time, I thought I knew what it meant to be in love. But I had not
even scratched the surface of it.*

*Until my feelings for you matured over the last four years of our marriage.
It started slow, burning through me, but I was too foolish to understand it.*

*Now that I do, I fear it has taken me too long and that I might have lost
you forever.*

I hope you can forgive me.

I hope you allow me another chance.

Our marriage is more than a ruse, my sweet Arabella.

*When I return from this expedition, I vow to woo you the way you
deserved to be wooed from the very beginning.*

*Your husband,
Elias.*

My heart stammered in my chest and I reread the letter again, to confirm that what I read was indeed correct.

"Have you read it yet?" Mirai asked.

"Yes." How cruel could fate be?

The only thing Arabella ever wanted was to have her husband's love and adoration. She craved Elias's undivided attention. She waited for four very long years, while her husband loved another.

"His letters didn't reach her on time," Mirai whispered, sounding quite heartbroken. "While Elias was cutting his trip short to surprise his wife, Arabella died thinking she was unloved."

Arabella persevered through her marriage and when it was finally time to reap the sweet fruits of her patience, fate decided to play a twisted joke on her. How unfair that her story was written with such cruelty and tragedy.

"Elias died two months after Arabella, right?" I asked Mirai for confirmation.

"Yes. The rumors were that he died of heartbreak when he found out that

his ex-lover had married another man.”

“The rumors were not true,” I muttered.

“No. There are more letters written by Elias after the passing of Arabella, detailing his distress and heartache over his wife’s death,” Mirai said, her voice thick with emotion. “It’s true he died of heartbreak. But not because of his ex-lover. He mourned Arabella’s death and the pain was too much for him to bear. He died of heartbreak...”

“For Arabella,” I finished.

“A lost love story, based on misunderstandings and too much wasted time,” Mirai sighed.

Arabella’s life was a tragic tale and I was almost convinced that the castle was truly cursed. There were no happy endings for any of the four couples who lived there.

I wanted my own love story to be different, cursed castle or not.

Killian and I were not going to be a tragedy.

After all the pain and sorrow – despair and heartache – we deserved our own happy ending.

My love story might not have been a perfect fairy tale.

It was messy and ugly, stained by guilt and tarnished with grief. Killian and I were a tale of flawed love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Julianna



Killian glanced up my bare body as I straddled him. “Feeling bold today, wife?” His voice was deep and warm, like sweet molasses and melted chocolate.

“You like me bold,” I said, tossing my hair over my shoulders.

His eyes gleamed devilishly. “Arrogance suits you.”

“I am a Spencer now.” His approval of my boldness was evident in his arousal. His erection dug in the curve of my ass as I lowered myself over his thighs. “Bold and arrogant seem like Spencer traits I had to become familiar with.”

Killian threw his phone on the nightstand, finally giving me his undivided attention. He crossed his arms behind his head and gave me a lazy look.

“What do you think you’re going to do now?”

I circled his nipple with my thumb, feeling it pucker under my teasing touch before I trailed a finger down his strong abs. “I am going to fuck you,” I breathed, with a newfound confidence that I didn’t have before.

His nostrils flared and his lips twitched into a half-smile. “Tempting,” he rasped. “Don’t disappoint me, wife.”

I was only teasing, but now he had to go and turn this into a challenge. With my hands planted over his chest, I leaned forward so that my breasts were up close to his face.

My nipple brushed over his mouth. “Suck me,” I ordered. “My nipples. I want you to lick and bite me. Make it good. Make it hurt. Don’t disappoint me, husband.”

Killian was always the dominant one in bed and he was, of course, a generous lover but tonight, he has relinquished that tight control. And I was planning to take full advantage of that.

His eyes darkened before he took my aching nipple between his lips. The

warm suction of his mouth as he suckled me had my eyes almost rolling in the back of my head. His teeth grazed the tight bud before biting down, enough to hurt. But it was a sweet pain.

I gasped, my hips bucking over his erection. His tongue laved the sting away before he turned his head to the side, giving my other nipple the same careful attention.

All the while, I grinded on his lap. My lust coated the inside of my thighs as I rubbed myself against him. His thick length parted my lower lips, rubbing along my sex as my hips moved back and forth.

“What else?” he questioned roughly.

Instead of responding, I brushed my lips over his. A tender kiss, waiting and testing to see if he’d fight for dominance. Killian’s body tensed but he otherwise remained passive, yielding to my control.

Oh God.

To dominate a man like Killian Spencer was an exquisite feeling.

Addictive.

My kiss turned more demanding, my tongue plunging into his mouth – tasting him. He kissed me back, with the same fevered passion. He was intoxicating and I was drunk on him, on the way he felt against my lips, the taste of him and his grunts of pleasure.

When our lips separated, I was breathless, my chest heaving. Sweet hell.

There was nothing more addicting than Killian’s dominance, but his surrender made me *ache*. I swallowed, before letting out a breathy gasp when the tip of his hardness slid over my sensitive clit.

Killian kept his hands behind his head and he laid still, allowing me free rein over his body. But I noticed the dark glint in his eyes and the way his shoulders were tensed, almost like he was holding himself back from touching me.

My eyes darted between our bodies and my mouth went dry at the sight of his thick erection nestled between us, swollen and hard against my wet and pink sex. His length was coated with my arousal.

I found myself growing more damp at the lewd sight. I liked how seductive and powerful I felt right now and how Killian was carefully restraining himself to allow me this moment.

My hands wandered over his abs, feeling his muscles ripple under my teasing touch. When I reached his pelvis, the only reaction I got from my husband was a sharp intake of breath.

I lifted my hips so I could wrap my hand around his length. He was so big and swollen in my palm as I squeezed him.

I shifted until my entrance was right over his tip. My thighs tightened around him while Killian clenched his jaw. "It's cruel for you to tease me like this," he hissed.

"Whoops."

His chest rumbled with a deep sound. "Julianna."

"Killian," I breathed. With our eyes locked on each other, I slowly lowered myself onto his shaft.

Killian grunted in response.

I let out the softest whimper as his thickness stretched me. I paused when he reached the depth of me, my inner walls spasming around him.

"Fuck," he swore, his voice gravelly. His dark eyes were laced with pure, unadulterated lust. And I reveled in his gaze.

I circled my hips tentatively and Killian groaned. "You're such a goddamn tease."

I lifted myself over his hardness, watching my husband grind his jaw as he fought to remain *contained*. His breathing was ragged, almost painful, and sweat formed over his forehead.

"You feel so good inside me," I confessed shakily.

I quickly found a rhythm, bouncing up and down on his erection. My nails dug into his chest and his hips jerked up. *Finally*.

Killian was losing his calm composure and I watched him come undone beneath me.

I leaned forward, still fucking him – and my lips feathered over his.

"You're so big, I like how you stretch me. Almost painfully, but it's a sweet burn."

"Goddamn it," he growled. "*Julianna*."

Finally, he snapped.

Killian rose in a seated position, his hands circling my hips, digging hard into my flesh. I was certain his touch would leave bruises tomorrow morning. This new position pushed me farther down onto his cock, the tip of him hitting deep inside of me. My hands flew to his shoulders, nail digging into his flesh.

Fire burned through my veins and my core tightened around him. The deep ache in the pit of my stomach grew fierce, spreading through my body.

I burned.

I ached, with such exquisite pain.

With almost a frantic need, my pace quickened. I bounced up and down on his hard length, taking him inside the tight sheath of my sex, over and over again. Feeling him. Burning for him. *Needing* him so desperately like I needed my next breath.

His hips bucked every time to meet mine. Our bodies collided together, simply driven by unleashed passion.

Almost too soon, I peaked over the edge and my climax rolled through my body, hard and fast. My back arched and the chords of my neck strained as my eyes fluttered closed.

“Killian,” I gasped. “Oh, oh God!” My mind was fuzzy as my release washed over me, cocooning me like a thick blanket.

My pace slowed as my body grew languid and Killian growled. “Don’t you dare fucking stop.”

He lifted me up in his arms, before thrusting up hard. I cried out, my body spasming.

Killian’s chest rumbled against mine. With a grunt, he flipped us over, losing the rest of his tight control. While I enjoyed his short surrender, I had been waiting for him to snap.

And, he did.

I gasped, my back arching off the bed when Killian pummeled inside me. His hand slid behind me, cupping my ass and raising my hips off the bed. He settled between my thighs, spreading them farther apart until I was wide open for him.

To be taken.

To be devoured.

To be fucked.

Killian pounded inside me, losing the last bit of his control. *Thrust*. I gasped. *Thrust*. He grunted. *Thrust*. I whimpered and he groaned.

His face was hard, eyes gleaming with untamed lust, and his body shuddered as he filled me with his release, his length jerking with spurt after spurt of his seed.

Killian collapsed on top of me, his body strong and warm. My arms curled around his shoulders and he buried his face into the crook of my neck.

“Do you still hate me?” I asked, repeating the very same question every day.

And his answer was always different.

His lips whispered over my pulse in my throat, teeth grazing my sensitive skin. “How can I hate you, Julianna?” he said huskily.

My heart slammed into my rib cage at his choice of words.

Killian propped himself up on his elbows, gazing down at my flushed face. “You’ve dug yourself under my skin, into my bones. You fucking stabbed me in the chest, I’m bleeding for you, Princess. You kill me and I still fucking need you like I need my next breath. I need you as much as I want to destroy you. How is that possible?”

“My love is toxic,” I said, my voice groggy and thick with emotion.

“It’s fucking poison,” he agreed.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I sniffled. “I’m sorry.”

His thumb stroke along my jaw, before brushing over my lips. The mask fell away from his face and I finally saw what he was holding back... the *real* Killian.

“I did things to you, things I’ll never forgive myself for,” he confessed hoarsely. The look of anguish in his dark eyes broke me.

I shook my head. “I’m not holding it against you.”

His head lowered and our lips met, feverish and needy. There was urgency in our kiss, but also exquisite tenderness. Killian kissed me like he feared I would disappear. My arms tightened around him, while he clung to me.

A tear slid down my scarred cheek.

I found both my redemption and salvation on his lips.



I woke up, my body exhausted, but my mind completely rested. For the first time in three years, I felt *peaceful*. Like I finally belonged.

The urge to hurt myself wasn’t there. The guilt and despair that used to gnaw at my inside was silent. I stretched before rolling over to grab Killian’s pillow. I pulled it against me and tucked my head into it, inhaling his lasting scent.

A grin spread over my lips, but it fell away when I noticed something different. Something that wasn’t there before.

I blinked, staring at my left hand. Was this—?

My eyes widened and I gasped, sitting up straight. My humongous diamond ring was gone. Replaced by a cushion-cut halo diamond ring. The

very same one that Killian gave me the first time we became engaged, before the accident.

When Gracelynn died, I was forced to give up my ring too. Killian had taken it away, thinking that his fiancée was dead and there was no need for the Romano family to keep the engagement ring.

I stared at my left hand, my heart stammering in my chest. Killian must have exchanged the rings while I was asleep.

I missed that side of Killian – the considerate and romantic side of him.

Tears of joy flooded down my cheeks and I clutched my aching chest, not knowing if I should be happy or fearful.

Because whenever I was happy and each time I found solace in the arms of Killian... something bad always happened. Tragedy after tragedy.

I guessed I was afraid to be happy.

But for once, I just wanted to forget all the bad and think of all the good.

So, I quickly shoved away the feeling of dread.

A knock rapped against my door. After securely wrapping the sheets around my naked body, I called for the person to enter. Malay, the housekeeper, walked inside with a tray. “Killian asked me to deliver your late breakfast to you in bed. He said you might be too *exhausted* to come down,” she said smoothly.

“Oh.” I cleared my throat, fighting back a smile. He was right. I was pretty sore after last night’s activity. Killian took me twice before we fell asleep, tangled in each other’s arm. And then he woke me up in the middle of the night, for a quick fuck. It was hard and fast – the reason *why* I was sore this morning.

“Is he home?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

She shook her head. “He left for an urgent meeting an hour ago.”

“Okay, thank you.” I smiled.

Malay placed the tray on the coffee table and then excused herself, shutting the door behind her.

The bling on my left hand caught my attention again and I sighed, falling back against my pillows. Today was going to be a good day, I firmly believed.

The smell of warm butter and toast filled the room, teasing my nostrils and I gagged.

What the hell?

Since when did the smell of toast make me want to retch?

I reached for the glass of water on my nightstand and took a big gulp, hoping that it would alleviate the sick feeling in my stomach. But it only made it worse. Bile rose in my throat, tasting acidic on my tongue.

Oh God, I was going to puke.

I sprung out of bed and rushed to the bathroom, kneeling by the toilet – just in time for me to vomit my dinner from last night. I gagged, letting out a pitiful cry.

God, I hated puking.

My stomach churned and I continued gagging, even though I was done vomiting. There was nothing left but bile and an empty stomach. After flushing the toilet, I brushed my teeth and rinsed my mouth, trying to get rid of the taste of vomit on my tongue.

It wasn't until after I had pulled on a dress over my head and the room swayed under my feet that realization dawned on me.

The reason behind my constant exhaustion over the last two weeks; my breasts being extremely sensitive, me being overly emotional and now... puking.

No.

This couldn't be happening, right?

I quickly counted the dates in the back of my head, only to realize that I was ten days late for my period. I was *never* late. My period was regular, always on time or some times, a day early. But never late. And especially not by ten freaking days!

How did I miss all these signs?

Rushing to the bathroom, I fumbled through the cabinets and drawers to find the pregnancy test I always kept on me. When my marriage began with a contract, stating that I was practically a walking womb for the Romano and Spencer family, I had to be always prepared.

When I found the pregnancy test, my heart stuttered.

My stomach churned as I peed on the stick and then placed it on a napkin on the counter.

I didn't know if I was scared or pleased...

Killian and I both knew what was expected from this marriage. An heir. We never used any protection, so this was bound to happen. Eventually. But we never specifically talked about kids.

The deal was for us to go our separate ways once I gave birth.

But that has changed now, right?

Our marriage was no longer a ruse. We were together for *real*.

Maybe we needed more time together...

Just the two of us.

We lost three years and while our relationship was somewhat stable now, we still needed more time to recover from all that went wrong between us.

Doubt crept in, slithering into my heart, and I felt nauseous again. I walked away from the pregnancy test and paced the length of the bedroom.

There was anticipation burning under my skin – the thought that I could be carrying Killian’s baby pleased me.

But the worry coursing through my vein unsettled me.

After a few minutes, I started toward the bathroom again. To check for the result of the pregnancy test.

Except, I never reached the bathroom.

There was a rustling sound behind me, strange and uninvited. I fought back a shiver of dread. Someone was in my room...

I had been so consumed by the thought of finding out that I could be pregnant, I hadn’t noticed that there was someone else in the bedroom, other than myself.

My heart leaped in my throat and I lunged for the vase.

Too late.

A heavy arm snaked around my waist, tugging me back into an unfamiliar body and then a hand slammed over my mouth, muffling my scream.

I felt a tiny prick in my right arm, right above my elbow. My body went rigid before I started struggling, trying to escape my captor.

But he was strong and much heavier than me.

Whatever he injected in my veins was making me drowsy and...

No. Please, no.

I *tried* to struggle but my limbs wouldn’t cooperate.

The room swayed.

My vision blurred.

I heard a familiar voice, but I couldn’t place it.

A small groan rattled from me before my eyes rolled back into my head.

And everything ceased to exist.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Killian



I realized one thing in the last month. Loving Julianna was easy. Trying to hate her with no more apparent reason was difficult and pure torture.

I tried to find a reason to be angry at her, but I had long forgiven her lies and deception. It was that I never knew *how* to tell her that.

I was in love with my wife.

Recklessly and irrevocably in love with her.

It was a mad, mad love – and sometimes, I worried that I might scare her away with how intense my feelings were for her.

My gaze darted to the bouquet of ranunculi in my hand. It was time to put the past behind us and to start anew. Julianna wanted to re-write our story and I was going to grant her that wish.

I took the stairs to my room, my palms sweating and my heart racing. Why the fuck was I so nervous, acting like an amorous teenager who was about to go on his first date?

Goddamn it, I was whipped for my wife.

A grin spread across my lips as I stalked into our bedroom. “Julianna?” I called out, when I found the room empty.

The bathroom lights were on and the door was ajar, so I took a peek inside. But Julianna wasn’t there either. I turned to leave when something unusual caught my eye.

I slowly blinked and walked further into the bathroom, toward the counter.

A pregnancy test.

I peered closer at it and my heart leaped to my throat.

A *positive* pregnancy test.

Dumbfounded, this took a second to sink in.

Julianna was... pregnant.

I didn’t know why I was so shocked. We never used any protection,

because the sole purpose of our marriage was to provide an heir. Though, everything changed when Julianna's truth was revealed.

Our marriage was more than that now.

My legs shook and the room swayed for a moment before I quickly regained my composure. Julianna was pregnant with my baby.

Jesus Christ.

I was going to be a father.

But where the fuck was my woman?

I clenched the bouquet in my hand and rushed out of the room and down the stairs, calling out for her. Malay came forward, her hands fluttering to her chest. "Killian, is something amiss?"

I looked around, as if my wife would somehow materialize into thin air. "Where's Julianna?"

"She has been in her room all this time," Malay said, her brows furrowing. "I brought her breakfast in bed, like you instructed."

Though I had rushed out of the room, I remembered seeing the breakfast tray on the coffee table. It was untouched.

My blood ran cold. "When did you bring her breakfast?"

Malay looked thoughtful for a second before nodding. "About three hours ago."

"She's not in the room," I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat. My mind raced. "I want every single staff looking for her. Right now!"

Thirty minutes later, the search party was unsuccessful. Julianna was nowhere to be found and apparently no one had seen her.

I scrubbed a shaky hand over my face. "Samuel, I need you to check all the security footage," I ordered, trying to remain calm, except I felt anything but.

My insides churned and it felt like acid was flowing through my veins. I followed Samuel into the basement, where our security room was. He ran through all the video footage that surrounded the premises of Spencer Manor and my stomach dropped when he rewound through one specific piece of footage. The balcony outside my room – *three hours ago*.

Terror gripped me when I saw a masked man carrying Julianna over his shoulders. He climbed down from my balcony, almost expertly, as if he had done such a thing many times.

Bile rose in my throat when I saw Julianna's precarious position. She was

limp, hanging dangerously over her captor's shoulders. She was absolutely helpless to prevent herself from a deadly fall.

My fists clenched at my sides. Samuel rewound through different footage, this one showing the masked man dumping an unconscious Julianna into a black car, with tinted windows.

"Fuck," Samuel swore. "How did he get through our security?"

"It doesn't matter how," I growled, fury burning through my veins. "Too bad for him, I'm one step ahead."

I fished out my phone and opened the tracking app.

It was her ring. The one I put back on her finger last night. Once I found out that someone was hunting Julianna, I knew I had to take drastic steps.

Which included putting a tracking device on her.

And what better way to hide a tracking device than in a diamond ring?

But it was sheer luck that I replaced her rings last night and she was kidnapped today. What were the odds?

If I were one day later...

I shook my head, refusing to think of the outcome.

Right now, my priority was saving Julianna and my unborn baby. From now on, they were my sole focus.



Two hours later, the car slowed in front of a two-story house, in quite an old neighborhood. I lunged out of the car before it even came to a complete stop and took a quick peek at the tracking app. We were right over the red mark. Julianna had to be here.

"That's the car," Samuel barked. "The one from the video footage. I recognize it."

I was already stalking to the front door, my men following closely behind me. Not bothering to knock, Samuel and I used our combined strength to kick the door open.

A man, with spiky hair and a scarred face, came running at the sound of his door crashing open. His eyes widened at the sight of me and ten more bulky men standing behind me.

"What—"

I lunged forward, not even giving him a chance to finish his thoughts. My

fingers wrapped around his throat and I slammed him into the wall.

“Where is Julianna?” I snarled. “What. Did. You. Do. To. Her?”

His face turned purple as he struggled to breathe. My thumbs pressed deeper into his throat, feeling the fragile pulsing veins under my fingertips.

I brought my face closer, staring him down. He watched me with dark, frightened eyes.

“If anything happened to my wife, if she and my baby were harmed in any way possible, I’ll make sure you regret the day you were born,” I hissed into his purple chocking face. “I’ll make your life a living hell. And that’s a Spencer’s vow.”

I released him and he stumbled back, gasping for breath. “I don’t... know what... you’re talking about.”

Samuel rushed back down the stairs. “She’s not here. We looked everywhere. But we checked all the footage carefully. That’s the same car that she was taken away in and the tracking device...”

“Boss,” George called, cutting off Samuel. My head snapped toward him and he was holding...Julianna’s ring between his fingers.

My blood ran cold.

“I found it in the car, under the seat.”

“My car?” the man choked, his face white as a ghost. He slumped against the wall, falling onto his ass. “That doesn’t make any sense. I don’t know what you’re taking about.”

His face paled and then he stuttered, looking both panicked and fearful. “W-wait. My brother used... my car today.”

“Who is your brother?” I barked, glaring down at him.

“Simon Jones? He used to work for Bishop Romano, as a bodyguard.”

Simon...

The name was familiar and when realization dawned on me, my heart rate sped up.

Gracelynn’s lover?

He did have a motive for wanting to harm Julianna – an act of vengeance. But was he also behind the accident that night?

That didn’t make any fucking sense.

“Where’s your brother right now?” I asked, my voice cold and low with warning.

“I don’t know,” he cried.

I slammed my foot over his knee, hearing the bone crack. He howled, his

face twisting in agony. “That’s not the right answer. Try again. Where’s your brother right now?”

“I don’t... know...” he chattered. “We used to live... together, up until last week. It was unlike him, but he suddenly said that he was moving out. He’s been renting... this place. It’s up north, an hour from here.”

That was all the information I needed. After he gave us the address, I silently motioned for George to stay behind. To keep an eye on Simon’s brother so there would be no communication between the two.

We broke all traffic laws, cutting the driving time from one hour to thirty-five minutes.

Please be okay, Princess. I’m coming for you.

As soon as I pulled into the driveway of the address that was given to me, my gut churned with a sick sense of dread. The house was in the middle of nowhere, lonely and looking practically deserted. The closest neighbor was probably twenty miles away from here.

As much as I hated it, this was the perfect place to hold someone captive.

Instead of going through the front door, we entered the house through the side door, which was real fucking easy to crash open. The house was eerily quiet. My men rushed inside, checking every corner of every room.

I made my way upstairs, gun in one hand. After checking the bedrooms and finding them all empty, I went to the last door at the end of the hallway. It was closed and locked from the outside.

My chest squeezed as I opened the latch. Julianna had to be in here.

Please be in here. Please let this be the room.

I pushed the door open, eyes darting around the room – only to find it empty. I walked inside, fist clenching and my heart dropping to my stomach in dread.

She wasn’t in here...

SLAM!

Pain exploded inside my head.

I turned around, my head pounding. I blinked several times. It fucking hurt and I staggered on my feet. The world spun and my vision blurred. I was bleeding. I had to be.

My gaze caught Julianna’s wild hair and feral grey eyes, before drifting down to the metal rod she was holding in her hands.

Blood dripped down my temple.

“Jules...” my lips parted to say her name before my knees buckled and my

world went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Julianna



The moment my gaze met Killian's dark one, I was too late to realize that I had attacked the wrong person. His eyes rolled back into his head and my husband slumped to the ground with a hard thud.

I didn't hit my captor.

I ended up unknowingly attacking my savior.

God, how much of a fool I was!

I fell to my knees next to Killian's body, shaking his shoulders. "Killian?" I said, heart in my throat. "Open your eyes."

Frantically, I looked around the room and then peeked outside. The hall was empty. How long did we have before Simon came back? Did Killian come to rescue me alone? My throat went dry at the thought. I would hope not, because we were going to need back-up.

A bump was forming over the spot where I had hit him and he was bleeding. Not heavily though. It was a small wound, thank God.

Killian groaned and after much cajoling from me, he finally blinked his eyes open. Dazed and pained. But when his dark gaze met mine, I saw fear and wonderment. "I found you," he grunted.

"You found me," I whispered, sniffing. "I was so scared, but I knew you'd come."

Killian sat up, wincing, but I saw the unmasked rage in his eyes. "I'm going to kill him. Simon is a dead fucking man," my husband growled.

I shook my head. "It's not Simon who wants me dead. He has been used as an alibi. A cover up. Like the maid."

His chest rattled with a sound and his fists clenched. "Who would want you dead then? Who is trying to kill you?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"I know who it is," I confessed softly.

His eyes flared and his jaw tightened. “Who?”

It pained me to say it, but sometimes the truth was more bitter than lies and deception.

“My father.”

Two hours ago.

I woke up with a pounding headache, drowsy at first, but then my memories came crashing back to me. My heart stammered in my chest. With a gasp, I sat up. My eyes searched my surroundings, only to realize that I was in a windowless room.

The room was bare of any furniture except the bed that I was sitting on and the wooden chair across the room.

*I had been captured, taken. By the person who had been hunting me. My hands shook and I tried to remain calm, but I **couldn't**.*

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I blinked them away. No, this was not the time to cry. I had to figure out how to get out of this place.

*For too long, I had been **weak**. Depending on my father and husband to protect me.*

Not anymore.

I spent the next twenty minutes trying to break free from the room, only to realize that there was no escape. The door was locked from the outside.

*I had to wait for whoever had kidnapped me. I had to know **who** it was and then I could decide the probability of me successfully escaping this place.*

Dread filled me because I knew how hard it was going to be. To escape when I had no idea where I was.

Where are you, Killian?

I sat on the bed, fidgeting for the next few minutes until I heard the rattling of the lock. My eyes widened as the door slid open.

Thud.

A shadow loomed at the doorway, big and imposing. It was a man.

Thud. Thud.

My hands shook, my palms clammy.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I blinked when the man finally walked inside, revealing his face.

“Father?” I gasped before letting out a choked sob. “Oh my God! You found me!” I lunged off the bed, as if to hug him, but came to a halt when I

saw his twisted expression.

The air felt tight, heavy with tension.

He didn't look happy to see me. In fact, he looked **disgusted** at the sight of me. The door closed behind him, locking us back inside.

My stomach churned and I took a shaky step back. "W-what is going on?" I asked, fear slithering through me.

His lips curled, an evil smile spreading across his face. My whole body shook and I took several steps back, until I bumped into the bed. He wasn't here to rescue me.

No...

This can't be happening.

When he finally spoke, my world came crashing down on me. "You're the product of adultery."

I blinked, confused. "What?"

"Allow me to tell you a little story," he said, smoothly. As if he was talking about the weather.

I slumped on the bed, numb. My father brought the chair closer to me and took a seat, looking so at ease while I was panicking. "Your mother had an affair with her bodyguard," he said and my brain stuttered. "The man I paid to keep her safe. She cheated on me throughout our marriage and I was too late to realize that."

"No," I breathed, shaking my head. "I don't believe you."

He didn't even bother to acknowledge my words. His expression twisted with disgust. "I wasn't about to be cuckolded by that bitch anymore. So, I made an easy decision for both of us."

He clucked his tongue. "Except, I didn't realize you weren't mine until way after she passed."

My head reeled from all the things my father was saying. If I understood him correctly... did he just confess to the murder of my mother?

He leaned forward, bringing his face closer to me, his lips curled up in distaste. "I raised you, knowing you were the child of another man. The product of my wife's adultery," he hissed, spitting in my face. "I raised you with one purpose. Your mother got an easy fucking death, but you would pay. I wanted to hurt you, so I could hurt him."

My mouth was dry, my tongue heavy, as I choked on my own breath.

"You should have died that night. Not Gracelynn."

His cruel words finally snapped something in me and I found my voice.

“You put her in danger,” I whispered. “Just so you could kill me?”

“I needed your death to look like an accident. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make.”

My chest ached; the burning sensation was fierce. It hurt. “The one behind the accident was... you.”

He let out a dark chuckle and my blood ran cold. “Oh, you poor thing. Look at how heartbroken you are. To realize that father dearest has nothing but hate for you.”

*I always knew that I wasn't my father's priority. I would just classify his lack of care under him not being father material. It was to appease my own self, my own lonely heart that craved my father's attention. But I never thought that Bishop **hated** me.*

But I could see the utter distaste and loathing for me in his dangerously gleaming eyes.

This man hated me so much that he wanted me dead.

He tried to kill me. Twice. And now, this was his third attempt. The last time Killian took the bullet that was meant for me, but he wasn't here now. Once again, I found myself unprotected and vulnerable.

My stomach rolled and fear slithered through me once I realized the grave danger I was in.

Oh God, my baby.

My body rattled with a cold shudder. I never even got a chance to check if that pregnancy test was positive, but I knew it as much as I knew my love for Killian was true. I felt it.

I was carrying Killian's baby.

My chin trembled, but I refused to cry, to allow this man to see me as weak. How long was I out for? Killian was probably aware that I was missing by now.

***He's looking for me**, I chose to believe. Killian was going to come. He would find me.*

“It wasn't easy to get you this time, with your foolish husband protecting you like a fierce beast. If it wasn't for Simon, I probably wouldn't have succeeded.”

In his deranged state, Bishop Romano revealed his plan. Of how he knew of my sister's affair. And how he fooled a heartbroken Simon to join his side. Turning him against me.

*My father was **poisonous**.*

“I was going to wait until you gave birth to that bastard’s child before killing you. I needed the heir to keep myself connected with the Spencer family, but Killian–” He shook his head. “The investigator he had following this case was getting too close to my truth and I couldn’t afford for that to happen. So, I had to choose. The heir I needed or the empire I built with my bare hands?”

He grinned an evil grin. “The decision was easy for me.”

Bishop then went ahead, ranting about how he couldn’t let Killian know the reality of the Romano’s business. The one thing he kept carefully hidden for the last two and a half decades.

The reality of how corrupt he was.

Loan sharking. Money laundering. Weapon and human trafficking. And drugs.

Everything illegal and wrong.

I knew that my father was corrupt and he probably did some shady things under the table, but I thought that was just how high society worked.

Corruption bleeds through their veins.

*I just never imagined that my father was **that** bad. Bishop Romano was more than just crooked and shady. He was immoral and his wealth came from filth.*

He wasn’t worried about revealing the truth to me. Because it was simple...

I wasn’t getting out of here alive.

And his truth would be buried with me while he continued his illegal business deals.

“How do you want to die, Julianna?” Bishop said, his voice laced with cruelty. It was like staring into the eyes of a rabid animal, his hatred for me written all over his face and I was trapped. He shook with pure malevolence and my flesh crawled.

“Slow and painful? Or quick but still painful?”

“Killian will find out, one way or another.”

*My father – **no** – Bishop cocked his head to the side, giving me an evil grin. “He won’t because I have been careful to cover all my tracks. Simon is your murderer, Julianna. He killed you and then... he committed suicide.” He paused; his brows furrowed – a fake mask falling over his face. His expression turned soft as he feigned innocence. “That’s the story. That’s the truth the world will see. The enraged lover of your dead sister, taking his*

vengeance on you and then ending his own life. A murder-suicide. And I will grieve, the father who lost both of his beloved daughters.”

Fire, hot and burning like lava, slithered through my veins. I was scared shitless, but I was beyond furious. “I’ve never met someone as cruel as you,” I hissed.

Bishop backhanded me and my head snapped to the side before he gripped my jaw, his fingers digging into my skin. I winced, my face throbbing.

“That’s because you’ve never seen the real world, Julianna. You were living under the roof of a made man and called him father. Such naïve. So innocent. Such a foolish girl.”

“You’re sick,” I spat.

He dug his fingers deeper into my flesh and I finally cried out. Bishop released me before taking a step back. “Since you didn’t choose an option, I’ll make the choice for you. Slow but painful.”

“My father,” I told Killian. At his shocked expression, I nodded.

But I never got a chance to tell him all of it – Bishop’s truth – because the next thing I knew, a loud gunshot rang through the house. I flinched, my brain stuttering, and Killian jumped to his feet. My pulse beat with anxiety, frantic and terrified.

He swore under his breath, grasping my hand in his and holding his gun in the other one. “Stay behind me,” he ordered.

Killian dragged me out of the room, shielding my body with his own. There were two more gunshots, except this time... it came from outside of the house.

I swallowed the bile gathering in my mouth and I fought the nausea creeping into my throat. Bishop wasn’t going to let us out of here alive. He had the house surrounded by his men.

We came to a stop in the hallway as a bald man, looking absolutely deranged, rushed toward us, gun in one hand.

Killian released me, only to push me back. He then stepped in front of me, his gun pointed forward and my stomach dropped in fear. He fired a single shot and the man crumpled to the ground.

Tears slid down my cheeks as I choked out a gasp in relief. Killian spun around, reaching out for me again, but he stopped, eyes flaring.

The sound of a gun cocking filled my ears and then I felt the barrel of it pressing into the back of my head. My eyes widened and heart stammered.

Numbness washed over me and my blood roared between my ears.

“Put your gun down, Spencer,” Simon ordered harshly, his voice thick with threat. “Or I blow her brains out and you watch them splatter all over the walls.”

My head ran wild, my stomach tightening with a cramp. Panic clawed at my throat, but I forced myself to swallow it down.

“Give up, Killian. The house is surrounded and your men are outnumbered,” Simon hissed. “Put the fucking gun down. I won’t ask again.”

“Okay,” Killian conceded calmly. He bent down, placing his gun on the ground before he straightened again, hands up in surrender. “I did what you asked. Let her go and we can talk about this.”

“Don’t do this, Simon,” I begged shakily. “My father has filled your mind with poison. I know you’re not this person. Gracelynn wouldn’t want this. I didn’t cause the accident that night, please believe me. Just listen to me. Please.

He pressed the barrel of the gun harder into my skull and I winced. “I would suggest you shut up, Julianna,” he snarled. “You. Killed. Her.”

I tried to shake my head but the gun stopped me. “No,” I choked, pleading. “I didn’t. *Please.*”

But Simon wasn’t ready to listen. He had allowed himself to build such hatred for me in his heart, that he wasn’t ready to see the truth. I didn’t blame him; it was all my father’s doing. He took advantage of Simon’s broken heart and used it against us.

My eyes met Killian’s, a silent understanding between us.

He lunged forward and I ducked. Killian slammed into Simon, both of them falling to the ground. I watched as the two men tackled each other. Simon was a trained fighter and he had an upper hand, but Killian was consumed with rage and his need to protect me.

I stood frozen in fear and panic, watching them roll on the ground – both of them fighting to have an upper hand. Fists colliding against flesh and their heavy grunts filled my ears.

Simon reared his head back before slamming his forehead into Killian’s nose. They both stumbled away from each other, staggering to their feet.

My heart was trying to pound its way out of my chest and my hand slid over my belly. I cupped my stomach, protectively.

It was almost like they shared one brain, both of them diving for their respective guns at the same time.

My eyes widened in horror.

Time slowed then.

And it happened in almost slow motion.

Killian was too late.

I watched in absolute terror as Simon pointed the gun at my husband. I broke into a cold sweat and my flesh crawled with fear.

No. Please... no.

My mind went blank and my feet moved before I could *think*. My reaction was pure instinct.

It happened so fast.

A gunshot sounded as I stumbled in front of Killian.

My eyes met Simon's mad ones, as pain laced through my body and my knees weakened.

The floor swayed under my feet as agony burned through me.

I heard Killian's horrified roar...

Before the world went black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Killian



I saw the flash of platinum blonde hair as Julianna stumbled in front of me. It happened too quickly for me to make sense of it. There was a gunshot and my whole body flinched. I expected pain, but it was only cold dread filling my chest.

A mean fist gripped my heart as Julianna crumpled to the ground, listlessly.

No. My heart stammered.

With a roar, I turned on Simon, aiming for his head. I didn't think twice before I pulled the trigger.

One single shot. Right between his fucking brows.

Simon's lips parted with a quiet gasp and he stumbled back before his body fell backward. My attention flew back to Julianna and I fell to my knees, beside her limp body.

Terror seized me. My stomach twisted painfully at the sight of blood soaking through the top of her dress. I couldn't tell exactly where she got shot because there was just so much blood.

"Jules," I said, my voice cracking. It felt like every part of me was breaking.

No. This couldn't be happening.

I tried to tell myself that she might be fine, that she would survive this... maybe the wound was superficial. But my mind wasn't working right. I couldn't think because all I could focus on was how much she was bleeding. There was too much blood, it had to be a fatal wound.

A small guttural cry escaped my throat. In the end, I couldn't protect her. I failed her. My Julianna. My wife. I had been careless and she paid the price.

But why... *why* the fuck did she get in the middle of Simon and me? Why did she jump in front of me...?

Julianna took the bullet that was meant for *me*.

The realization of that crushed my soul and my heart *bled*.

Raw sounds of anguish tore through me as I gathered Julianna in my arms and pulled her close to my chest. Her breathing was too shallow, almost like she was taking her last breath. “Julianna? Open your eyes, Princess.”

My hands shook, cold blood flowing through my veins. I wouldn’t survive this. I lost her once, I couldn’t lose her again. Not when we just found each other after so much suffering.

Julianna wanted to re-write our story. She wanted a happy ending, and just this morning, I was thinking of how to make her dreams come true. How to give her our own version of happily ever after.

I didn’t want to live if she died. I couldn’t bear the loss of her again.

I can’t...

“Why?” My voice quivered. “Why, Julianna? Please, wake up. Open your eyes, show me those gorgeous grey eyes of yours, Princess.”

Somewhere in the house, there were more gunshots and I brought Julianna closer to me, her blood soaking through my own shirt. My mind wasn’t processing the situation the way it should be.

I heard voices. Familiar voices.

My vision was blurred and I couldn’t seem to focus on anything other than my wife in my arms, her body cold and limp. I wanted to prolong this moment with Julianna, if it was to be our final one.

Someone called out loudly and more voices joined in. I didn’t realize they were speaking to me until someone nudged my shoulders, shaking me.

My eyes darted to Samuel, not really seeing him. He watched me grimly. My chest filled with a stark desolation that made it hard for me to breathe.

Samuel reached for Julianna and that was when I went absolutely ballistic. I lost my mind, fighting him while I clutched my wife to my chest.

I wasn’t going to let him take her away from me. I *couldn’t*.

“We have to get her to the hospital, ASAP,” he said, almost frantic.

My brain stuttered. “W-what?”

He made an impatient sound in the back of his throat. “She’s bleeding a lot, but her chance of survival depends on how fast we can get her help.”

My mind was slow at trying to make sense of his words. It felt like there was a hand digging into my chest, a heavy fist closing around my heart. Squeezing.

Samuel was talking about bringing her to the hospital. He said survival,

which meant...

They weren't taking her away from me because she was dead. He was trying to help her. Help *me*.

Samuel took Julianna from me, gathering her in his arms, and he stood up. He was already stalking away before I could fully process his words. My heart hammered in my chest like a wild thing. Julianna was *alive* and fighting for her life.

I clung, almost desperately, to the sliver of hope that seemed to burrow itself into the marrow of my being. I got to my feet, staggering after Samuel.

I barely focused on the bodies lying around the house or the others outside in the front yard. Swallowing the acidic bile in my mouth, I got in the car and Samuel relinquished his hold on Julianna. He placed her on my lap and my wife was my sole focus.

I watched her chest, slowly moving up and down, as she breathed faintly. Her face was too pale, her scars looking more pronounced against her clammy skin. The drive to the nearest hospital lasted an eternity. But I made sure to put pressure on her wound, trying to stop it from bleeding.

Once we reached the hospital, I carried her inside. Everything happened quickly then.

The nurses loaded her onto a stretcher and I watched, helplessly, as they took my wife away from me. I felt almost disconnected from reality. Maybe it was from the shock... I didn't know. I just couldn't seem to think straight.

But I knew one thing for sure.

I didn't want a life where there was no Julianna.



Julianna

I jerked awake, almost like I had been dragged from a nightmare. But I couldn't... *remember* what my nightmare was about. My brain was fuzzy and eerily quiet.

My eyes darted around the strange room and I realized that I was in a hospital.

Why...?

When my gaze finally landed on Killian's grief-stricken face, the

memories came flooding back to me.

The kidnapping.

The truth about my father...

And Simon's gun pointed at Killian.

My chest burned fiercely and I winced. "Killian...?" I whimpered. My tongue felt swollen and sore in my throat. It actually hurt.

His eyes were bloodshot, agony written all over his weary face. His hand gripped mine tighter and his chest rattled with a sharp inhale – as if he could finally *breathe*.

He blinked once then twice, before swallowing hard. "You scared me, Princess," he said, his raspy voice cracking. "You scared the life out of me. Don't do that... ever again. *Please*."

"You protect me," I croaked. "I protect you. That's how a relationship works, right?"

Killian's jaw locked and he shook his head sharply. "No, Julianna. You can't. I fucking died a thousand deaths watching you lay so helplessly in this bed for the last five days, not knowing if you were going to make it or not."

"I'm alive," I breathed, trying to pacify my husband.

"Barely," he gritted out. "While the bullet missed your heart, it punctured a lung. You barely survived that wound, Princess." Killian squeezed his eyes shut, before scrubbing a hand over his face. "I almost lost you. *Again*."

I laced my fingers through his, firmly squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry I made you go through that. But I'm not sorry for taking that bullet. My chest hurts, but I'm *fine*."

Even as I said the words, my other hand cupped my still-flat stomach. For a moment, panic and horror washed through me. Tears welled up in my eyes. My baby.

Oh God.

Killian's hand slid over mine. My chin trembled as I choked back a cry. But it was the look of tenderness on my husband's face that kept me from panicking even more.

"You were showing early signs of a miscarriage after your surgery, but our baby is fine now. Nestled safely inside your womb," Killian confirmed.

He said *our* baby.

I could see the look of pure relief on his face as he spoke those words, as if he hadn't only been worrying about me – but he also feared losing our baby.

"You knew?"

He nodded. "I found the pregnancy test on the bathroom counter."

"I never even got a chance to look at it before Simon..." I snapped my jaw shut and swallowed down a cry. "What happened to Simon?"

"He's dead," Killian deadpanned.

I nodded, figuring as much, without him having to tell me. But I wanted to hear the words. My heart pained for Simon; he was just another casualty in Bishop Romano's scheme.

"Killian, there's something I need to tell you about my father."

His eyes darkened and he worked his jaw back and forth, grounding his teeth together. But he, otherwise, stayed quiet as I began to tell him what Bishop revealed to me.

I didn't spare any details. I told my husband *everything*, including Bishop's illegal business. "Now that I know his truth, he won't let me live. I will always be in danger unless—"

A dangerous sound rumbled through Killian's chest. "He will *never* harm you again."

"But—"

"The world knows his truth now," Killian said.

I blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

His hand squeezed mine. "Though you didn't get a chance to tell me the truth before, you did say that your father wanted you dead. I was able to investigate further, to dig deeper into Bishop's life. I found the truth two days ago."

"You were able to find evidence about his illegal businesses?" I gasped. "How?"

His lips twitched. "You seem to forget that my father used to be the President of the United States. The Spencer family has a lot of connections, Princess," Killian said. "My father was able to pull a few strings and we enlisted all the help at our disposal to get Bishop's truth out in front of the world."

"What does that mean for Bishop? Has he been arrested?" I asked, scared to be hopeful.

"An arrest warrant has been issued for Bishop Romano," Killian confirmed, his voice growing rough. "But he went into hiding. He's one of the most wanted fugitives in America right now. The FBI is on him and it doesn't matter where he hides, the whole country is looking for him."

I nodded slowly, trying to process all of what he just told me.

Though my wound burned fiercely, my chest ached for a whole other reason. I thought of the cruel death that my mother and sister suffered... only because Bishop's ego had been bruised. My mother might have cheated, but the penalty of that should have never been death.

I licked my dry lips, focusing on Killian again. "If Bishop isn't my father...then who is?" I questioned hoarsely. "He said that my mother had an affair with her bodyguard, but where will I find him? I don't know if he is even alive. Knowing Bishop now for who he truly is, he would have already hunted my real father down."

Killian leaned forward, brushing his lips over my furrowed brow. He kissed my forehead with such tenderness that it brought tears to my eyes. "He was closer than you would think. Always has been," he muttered. "Your father is here, waiting for you to wake up."

"What?" I breathed shakily. "You found my father?"

"Well, not exactly. *He* found you, Princess."

"You're not making any sense," I whispered, my heart pounding and blood rushing between my ears.

Instead of responding, Killian quickly sent out a text.

A moment later, the door to my hospital room opened. A man walked in, dressed in a suit. Tall, strong hands and a familiar face, eyes that I recognized and a smile I knew so well.

"Gideon?" I gulped and practically choked out his name.

"Hello, Julianna," he said, taking a step closer. His voice was calm and smooth, but thick with emotion.

My eyes darted to Killian, looking at him for confirmation, and he gave me a single nod. My stomach twisted, fluttering with disbelief. "How?" I questioned softly.

Gideon took a seat next to my hospital bed, his fists clenched atop his knees. Almost like he was trying to stop himself from reaching out to me.

His kind eyes roved my face. "I had been in hiding ever since Bishop..." he swallowed, wincing. "Ever since he killed Eliza."

My breath hitched, a lonely tear sliding down my cheek.

"Bishop never loved your mother. It was obsession and that only lasted for the first year of their marriage," Gideon lamented. "Eliza was merely a trophy wife. She felt suffocated and I saw how much she hated Bishop. We grew closer and it just happened. You don't choose who you love..."

He broke off, his expression growing bleak.

I figured as much – that while my mother might have had an affair, there had to be some kind of reason behind it. I knew it wasn't a love marriage and though, I wasn't condoning cheating... I didn't blame my mother for wanting to have love, to find peace in another man's embrace.

Especially now that I knew the type of man Bishop Romano was, I could only imagine how he was as a husband.

Shaking his head, Gideon ran a hand over his face, his body shaking. With anger and deep sorrow. "When I found out that you were supposed to marry Killian, I got a job as the stableman on Isle Rosa-Maria, with the hope of finally seeing you again. I just wanted to see my daughter, in person, instead of photos I saw online and from the media."

"You never said anything to me," I whispered.

A wave of pain crossed his face before he gave me a bittersweet smile. "I couldn't. It would have been too dangerous and I had to tread carefully. In order to keep you safe. Anyway, I don't think you would have believed me then, without proof, and sadly, I didn't have any."

I reached out for him and Gideon quickly grasped my hand in his, squeezing as if his life depended on it. His chest rattled with a relieved sigh.

I swallowed past the ball of heavy emotion in my throat and blinked the tears away. "Can you tell me a little bit more about my mother?"

Gideon smiled, real and kind. The type of fatherly smile I had craved for the longest time.

"Of course," my *father* said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Julianna



One month later

His lips whispered over the back of my neck, his hands stroking down my arms before he cupped my small bump. At eleven weeks pregnant, my stomach was slightly protruding now, visible proof that there was, indeed, an innocent life growing inside of me.

My eyes caught his black wedding band and my chest filled with warmth at the sight of it. A week ago, Killian and I married *again*. It was a very small ceremony with only Emily, Stephen, William, Mirai, Selene and my father present.

This time, instead of vows of hate ... Killian spoke about his love for me. He vowed to love me, to protect me and to cherish me for the rest of our days.

He didn't leave me at the altar, of course. He lifted my veil and placed the most tender kiss on my lips. If I had to choose the best days of my life...

I had two of them.

The day I met Killian.

And the day I married him. Well, the second time I married him.

If Gracelynn was looking down at me right now, I wondered if she would be proud of me. That in the end, I chose love and happiness. I chose to *live*.

I knew it was what she would have wanted for me.

"I'm healed enough that I can bathe on my own now," I said, fighting back a smile.

Killian hummed in response. "Is there a problem with me regularly bathing you, wife?"

"Not at all. I was just saying..."

His teeth grazed the sensitive spot behind my ear. "I like taking care of you."

Taking care of me was an *understatement*. After I got discharged from the hospital, we came back to the island. The security had been tripled and was strict. No one was allowed on Isle Rosa-Maria without Killian's written permission.

My husband had barely left my side for the last four weeks. If I winced, he was calling for Rani, our general physician, who was at our disposal on the island. If I made as much of a pained sound, he was on me, asking dozens of questions.

Where are you hurt? Is it the baby? Does your wound hurt? Should I call for Rani? Do you need the bathroom? Is it another headache? Are you feeling nauseous?

I haven't had a seizure since we came back to the island, thankfully. The last one I had was while I was still unconscious, in the hospital. Killian had told me it was my worst one yet. I scratched my face, bit my tongue so hard it bled and somehow managed to re-open my stitches.

Killian helped me out of the tub and before I could reach for my towel, he was already grabbing it himself and patting down my wet skin.

I sighed. "Stop treating me like I'm so fragile, Killian."

He wrapped the towel around me before his arms curled around my hips. "You're not fragile, but you're my *wife* – the woman I love and I almost lost you a month ago. Please, humor me. Let me do this," he rasped.

His dark gaze pleaded with me. I knew how badly he was affected by this whole ordeal, probably more than *me*. While I found it easy to move on after we came back to the island, it was Killian who was plagued with nightmares – of me bleeding and him not being able to reach me on time.

He would thrash and scream out my name. Every time Killian woke up from one of those nightmares, he would cling to me, burying his face into my throat as he gasped for air.

He was so fiercely protective of me and the baby, it was almost like he was *obsessed* about our safety.

I went on my tippy toes and my hands landed on his chest. My lips feathered over his. "Kiss me, husband."

I didn't have to ask him twice. His lips moved underneath mine before he took over the kiss, his tongue plunging into my mouth. Our tongues met in an erotic dance and I moaned into his mouth.

I felt his groan vibrating through his chest under my palm. It was so sexy and I melted in his arms. My core tightened and I felt needy for my husband.

“I don’t want to wait anymore,” I whimpered, my nails digging into his chest.

He hissed, before biting down on my lower lip. It stung but that only made me more damp between my legs. “You’re not fully heal yet,” he growled.

“Goddamn it, Killian! I am fine. I just need you. *Please.*”

As if my begging had snapped something in him, Killian bent low and then swung me up in his arms. He stalked over to the bed and placed me gently onto the mattress. I quickly discarded my towel, as to not give my husband a chance to change his mind.

Killian’s eyes flared with unadulterated lust before he lowered himself between my thighs. “Hurry,” I pleaded.

“So impatient, Princess,” he said, his voice gravelly. With exquisite gentleness, he slowly thrust inside me.

My inner walls stretched around every delicious thick inch of him. My back arched off the bed, a moan spilling past my lips. Killian pulled out before shoving inside again, with the same maddening slow pace.

He pushed my legs up, bending my knees so that I was fully open to him. I throbbed between my legs, pulsing with need. His pelvis brushed against my clit and I bit my lip, holding back a choked cry.

My hands slid to his back, my nails digging into his skin. This seemed to spur him on, because his pace picked up. Hard and fast. *Thrust.* His lips brushed over my scarred cheek. *Thrust.* “I love you,” he rasped. *Thrust.* “You complete me,” he said.

My hips rose up to meet each of his thrusts with my own. “Killian,” I whimpered.

My body tightened, and I was deliciously close. Killian’s muscles corded and his face hardened. “Fuck,” he swore. “I need you with me. Tell me you’re close.”

I moaned in response. Killian shoved inside me one last time, holding himself there, buried to the hilt. He shuddered and I felt his release pouring inside me.

My lips parted with a cry as my climax slammed through my body. “Killian!”

Spent, he laid his forehead against mine. Our chests heaved as we tried to catch our breaths. When Killian tried to roll off my body, I tightened my thighs around him and my arms locked behind his neck. “Stay,” I breathed.

I liked how he felt on top of me, inside me. I missed him, this intimacy, in

the past month. Sex had always been explosive for us, but today felt different. The tenderness in his eyes, and his gentle touches. The way he took me slow and deep, almost like he wanted to savor this moment.

He brushed his lips over my scars, almost adoringly. My breath hitched as he kissed the jagged ugly scars and mangled flesh.

“I love you too,” I whispered. “More than I can describe in words.”

Killian gifted me his signature smirk and my body tingled, needing him again.

My core tightened around him, still pulsing, and his cock jerked inside me.

“Again?” he asked.

“Again,” I breathed.

Hours later, I laid in his arms, sated and feeling more at peace than ever. “What do you want for dinner?” Killian asked, running his fingers through my hair.

“I’m craving guavas,” I mumbled, scrolling through my phone.

“You can’t have guavas for dinner, Julianna. Dessert and as a treat, yes. Not dinner.”

I rolled my eyes. “Says who.”

“Says me.”

“Bossy much.”

His hand tightened around my hips. “You like me bossy.”

Oh yeah, I definitely did.

I didn’t usually check the news, but since Bishop was still missing, I made it a habit of checking the news and my social media a few times a day. To see if there were any updates about Bishop Romano.

My eyes widened and I sat forward when I saw the headline for the top news.

WAS IT SUICIDE? BISHOP ROMANO FOUND DEAD!

“Killian,” I gasped. I felt him move behind me, looking over my shoulder as I opened the article. My eyes quickly darted over the words.

Bishop Romano was found dead – hanging from a ceiling fan – in an apartment, which the FBI assumed was his hideout. After autopsy, they found that he had been injected with something lethal. While it was possible that he was murdered, after further investigation, his death has been filed under suicide.

I shook with relief, my breathing coming out in short gasps and my chest

tightened.

The last sentence of the article glared back at me and I read over it again. *Is it possible that Bishop Romano felt cornered and he knew that he was running out of time? So instead of surrendering, he decided to end his own life?*

No, I refused to believe that.

Bishop Romano was cruel and vindictive. Yes, it was true that he would never surrender, but I also *knew* he would never take his own life, choosing the easy way out of this situation.

I dropped my phone on my lap and turned to face Killian. I watched his cool and composed expression, carefully assessing my husband. He didn't even acknowledge the fact that our enemy was found dead. His face was impassive, not at all surprised after reading the article. Almost like he already knew...

I straddled him, my arms curling around his neck. Our foreheads touched and I breathed in his musky and spicy scent. Unique. Manly and *mine*.

"Are you behind this?" I didn't beat around the bush. After all, I already had my answer. I just wanted him to confirm it.

"No," he deadpanned, without any emotions.

Killian was a good liar, but I found the truth in his eyes.

He lied, while his hands were tainted with blood.

He killed to protect me and our baby.

EPILOGUE

Killian



Six months later

I walked out of the bathroom with a wet cloth in my hand. Julianna was sprawled in bed, where I had left her, naked and smiling. Her hand was rubbing her pregnant belly and I found myself smiling at the sight.

Julianna was ten days past her due date and we had been impatiently waiting for the arrival of our first child. But it appeared that our son was in no hurry to leave his mother's womb just yet.

"He's already like you. Stubborn and doing things his way," Julianna had said to me the night before. Well, if my son was anything like me, Julianna was in for a ride.

Though I didn't doubt for a second that she would be the perfect mother to our children. Patient. Kind. Gentle. Understanding.

With a knee on the mattress, I leaned forward and pressed the warm cloth between her thighs, wiping away my seed.

Julianna hummed in response and her eyes fluttered close. "Tired?"

She let out a big yawn in response. "I'm *really* sore."

My lips twitched. My wife was insatiable during her pregnancy. Julianna wanted sex all the time and she didn't care where it was or if it wasn't an appropriate time to attack her husband.

Like yesterday, she had straddled me, bouncing up and down on my cock while I was on the phone with my father. Not that I was complaining.

I guessed we were making up for lost time – three very long years.

After making sure she was clean, I threw the cloth into our laundry basket and then brought her the plate of guavas, honey and whip cream she had asked for.

Weird pregnancy cravings.

I wasn't sure how that would taste, but I didn't question her choice.

I was about to pass Julianna the plate when her face twisted. Her body tightened and then she gasped. “Oh, no.”

My eyes darted between her legs, finding a wet spot. Julianna flushed, her eyes growing wide and she sat there, appalled.

I acted on instinct, as I bent forward and lifted her off the bed.

“It’s okay,” I soothed, gathering her in my arms. “Let’s get you in the tub and I’ll change the bedsheets.”

“Wait,” she said softly. “I don’t think I peed the bed.”

I blinked, confused. “Huh?”

Her eyes met mine and she swallowed. “I think my water just broke.”

Thud. My heart leaped in my throat.

“Ready to be a daddy?” my wife asked, smiling.

Fuck no.

But I nodded, nonetheless. Because it didn’t matter if I was ready or not, my son was coming.

Six hours later, Cameron Theodore Spencer made his grand entrance, wailing at the top of his little lungs. Almost like he rejected the idea of being pulled out of his safe and warm cocoon.

Julianna sagged against my chest and I curled my arm around her. “He’s here,” I said to her. “You’re so fucking amazing, Princess.”

I had watched her go through an intense labor in the last six hours and she left me in awe with her strength and perseverance. Fuck, I was madly in love with this woman.

Cameron was still screaming, thrusting his tiny fists into the air. Rani wrapped up my crying son in a yellow blanket, like a burrito, before she placed him in Julianna’s arms.

The moment he was in her arms, his cries quieted down. Cameron blinked up at his mother, mesmerized. He let out a hiccup, his lips pursing as if he was debating if he should cry or just enjoy his mother’s embrace.

Our son.

He had my black hair and nose and...his eyes were grey, like his mother’s.

My wife let out a choked sob, laughing through her tears. “Look at you, my sweet little angel,” she whispered. “So strong and stubborn like your daddy. What am I going to do with the two of you?”

My shoulders shook with silent laughter. “You promised me four more babies.”

Julianna leveled me with a glare. “Two.”

“Four,” I shot back.

Her lips pursed. “Three.”

“Deal.”

Julianna rolled her eyes before passing me our son. I cradled him in my arms, bringing him closer against my chest. We stared at each other, quiet and serious.

My chest tightened with various emotions crashing through me like a wave. But the most prominent feeling was violent protectiveness for my son.

A part of me and a part of Julianna.

I would tear the world down if anything were to happen to him.

“Hello, son.” He hiccupped at my voice, his tiny fists flailing.

My wife leaned into me, letting her head fall on my shoulder.

“Julianna,” I started.

“Hmm.”

My heart thudded in my chest. “We are not Arabella and Elias or Sierra and Jonathan, or Camille and Lucas, or Mackenzie and Elliot.”

The four tragic couple of this cursed castle.

Julianna laced her fingers through mine, squeezing. “Fate had been cruel to us. I made choices that I’ve lived to regret. We both made mistakes. We had to fight for our happily ever after. In the end, I chose you. You chose me.”

“We’re Julianna and Killian, and we deserve our happy ending,” I said to my wife.

This wasn’t a pretty fairy tale.

Our love story was messy and flawed – a twisted tale.

But it was perfect in the most imperfect way.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lylah James uses all her spare time to write. If she is not studying, sleeping, writing or working—she can be found with her nose buried in a good romance book, preferably with a hot alpha male. Writing is her passion. The voices in her head won't stop, and she believes they deserve to be heard and read. Lylah James writes about drool worthy and total alpha males and strong and sweet heroines. She makes her readers cry—sob their eyes out, swoon, curse, rage, and fall in love. Mostly known as the Queen of Cliffhangers and the #evilauthorwithablacksoul, she likes to break her readers' hearts and then mend them.

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