



A VOW OF FOREVER

She was his—
To adore, to love and to cherish.
Till death do them part.

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**A VOW
OF FOREVER**

A Vow of Hate novella

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This novella is a sequel/extended epilogue to Killian's and Julianna's story. A VOW OF HATE must be read before A VOW OF FOREVER.

A VOW OF FOREVER

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CHAPTER ONE

Julianna

The last time I walked down the aisle, I was left a broken mess.

The last time I spoke my vows to Killian, I was self-destructing.

He had left me at the altar, after whispering vows of hate in my ears and without a kiss to seal our union. Without even lifting my veil. In my path of martyrdom, I thought that was what I deserved. I pushed Killian to hate me... for my own selfish reasons.

To atone for my sins.

To seek redemption.

Forgiveness.

But I only ended leaving a trail of pain and destruction in my wake. I tormented Killian with my lies while blindly believing I was doing the right thing.

How the tables have turned.

Fate has a way of messing things up, oh well... *fixing* things that we are so hell bent on breaking.

Maybe it was a work of kismet, maybe it was meant all along...

I was playing with our fates, risking both our hearts in my attempt to fix our chapter.

Except our love story had already been written in stars, long before we were born. No matter how hard I tried to change it, Killian and I found our way back to each other again.

They say you never forget your first.

First love. First kiss. First touch. First *everything*.

And it was all true. We never forgot our firsts, but now, we wanted to rewrite our story.

Starting from the very beginning.

Our vows.

I never thought I'd walk down the aisle again or renew my wedding vows. Except Killian had other ideas.

His kisses woke me up. A kiss behind my ear and then his mouth trailed down lower. The back of my neck tingled at the soft touch of his lips. "Good morning," Killian said in his raspy morning voice. He was spooning me from

behind, his chest against my back and when I wiggled back into him, I felt his hard length probing into the curve of my ass.

“What are you doing?” I teased.

“Kissing my wife.”

I pouted even though he couldn't see my face. “You woke me up.”

“I'm sorry for waking you up,” he said and I could feel his smirk against my flushed skin. “But I'm not sorry for kissing you. I've got three years of missing kisses to make up for, Princess.”

Was I swooning? Yes, a bit. My heart melted at the sound of adoration in his voice. I missed this side of Killian. The romantic side who treated me so delicately. Three years of hate and I finally had my old Killian back.

I let out an involuntary shudder when his strong arm curled around me and his hand drifted up to my chest. He cupped my breast, squeezing gently and a whimper escaped past my lips before I could stop myself.

“Sensitive?”

I gasped in response when he rolled my tight nipple between his fingers.

“Yeah. More sensitive than they were yesterday.”

My husband kissed down my spine before he rolled me on my back and settled himself between my spread thighs. He cupped my tiny baby bump, barely protruding but it was there. Visible and slightly swollen with life. Killian grinned down at me and I found myself lost in his dark bedroom eyes, once again. God, he was rugged and handsome. His nose was slightly crooked, his eyebrows thick and his lashes long – I was most definitely envious of them. His lips full and that sneaky dimple under his rough stubble.

I got very lucky with this man.

“Why are you smiling like that?” he questioned, eyebrow raised.

“Why are you grinning like that?” I shot back.

His hands curled around my hips. “Because I get to hold you and kiss you every morning.”

“That was quite cheesy, Spencer.”

“I spent three years waking up alone and cold,” Killian muttered. “I'm not wasting any more moments, Mrs. Spencer.”

I didn't think it was possible for my heart to be broken again, but this right there – his words and the torment in his eyes that he tried so hard to hide – it killed me.

“I'm so—”

His lips crashed against mine, silencing my heartbreak and swallowing my

words. He slid his tongue across my bottom lip, teasing me. My lips parted for him and then his taste invaded my mouth. The kiss sent shivers through my nerves and it felt like every cell in my body was finally coming alive.

A tender kiss of apology.

A slow kiss of forgiveness.

A delicate kiss of mercy.

I drew in a staggered breath as a phantom fist squeezed my heart. I thought it'd be easy to move on, to start anew – but this was no fairy tale. My lies caused both of us indescribable pain and that hurt couldn't just be forgotten. It was forever inked onto the pages of our story, a train wreck of a chapter before finding our happy ending.

“Marry me,” he rasped into my lips.

Confused, I pulled back. “What?”

*“Marry me,” Killian repeated. “Marry me **again.**”*

“Killian,” I breathed.

He grasped my left hand, lacing our fingers together before bringing the back of my hand to his mouth. His lips brushed over the engagement ring he gave me almost four years ago. “You wanted to rewrite our story, didn't you?”

I nodded, speechlessly.

“Then we need to have a second wedding, with proper vows this time. No hate. No pretense. No lies. A real wedding, Julianna.”

“A real wedding,” I whispered.

Killian gave me a true smile. “A real wedding,” he agreed.

“I don't want anything fancy.”

“Neither do I.”

“I want to have the wedding here, on the island,” I demanded, half-expecting him to refuse.

He leaned down and pressed his lip against my scarred cheek. My breath hitched at his touch and my scars tingled. “I agree. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” I squealed. “How-

“I'm not waiting any longer. I was going to demand today, but you'll need to choose a dress.” The corner of his lips curled. “So, I'm settling for tomorrow and that's it. I'm not waiting more.”

“There's no rush, Killian. We are already married,” I tried to explain but he was shaking his head.

“On paper, yes. But our marriage is based on vows that I spoke out of

anger and hatred. Those vows are now null. If we want to re-write our story, we need to start with our vows, Princess.”

When he proposed yesterday, it was nothing fancy. But it was enough for me. Enough for *us*.

And now I was getting ready to walk down the aisle. A second time. A real wedding, with true vows.

“There you go. All done,” Mirai announced, snapping me out of my thoughts. She moved beside me, so we were both facing the mirror. My makeup was minimal as I had asked; Mirai did a perfect job and my scars looked less prominent under the layers of foundation. I wasn’t exactly self-conscious about them, but my scars always reminded of *that* night.

It was an ugly, constant reminder of Gracelynn’s death.

That my sister died and I somehow survived.

That she lost her happy ending...

While I got my own.

My vision blurred before a lonely tear slid down my scarred cheek. God, I missed her. Especially *today*. I missed her easy smile and her deep laughter. I missed my sister, plain and simple.

My father’s hurt ego robbed my sister of her happily ever after. Of her unborn child and her love. How unfair it was that while he hated me; while I was always meant to be the victim of his elaborate murder plans – his real daughter turned out to be the casualty.

I thought I’d eventually become numb to the memories, to the pain of losing Gracelynn – but I was wrong. The pain never lessened. The misery never wavered. The guilt never eased. They were still heavy in my heart and my nightmares were a constant reminder of that. The anguish of that night; the despair of living with those memories; the grief of moving on without her.

“Julianna!” Mirai admonished. “You’re going to mess up your makeup.”

She dabbed my tears away, while mumbling under her breath. “No crying today, please.”

“I just–” I choked on my tears and swallowed my cry. “Sorry, you’re right. No crying today.”

“It’s a happy day.”

My heart swelled at her tender smile. “It’s a happy day,” I agreed.

Mirai took a step back and admired me from head to toe. She clucked her

tongue in approval, nodding. “I can’t lie, I love this dress better than your other one.”

My wedding dress was simple compared to the extravagant one I wore to my first wedding. Yesterday, Killian had arranged for a wedding dress designer to come to the Island with over twenty dresses option. While they all ranged from simple to extravagantly beautiful, only one captured my eyes.

My chosen dress was composed of sheer lace and layers of tulle, with tiny flowers motif along the bodice and long sleeves, adding a whimsical touch. The bodice the dress was also delicately peppered with sheer of tulle, which complemented the sexy illusion neckline. Elegant and pretty.

I hoped Killian liked this dress. We were doing the “can’t see the bride before the wedding” ritual, and while he was pissed – of course, he was – Emily and Mirai had teamed up against him and had locked him out of the bedroom.

He pounded on the door for the first hour. He cursed a few times. Then tried to sweet talk me into opening the door for him... when that didn’t work, he went back to cursing.

After a while, Killian finally gave up.

Or I thought so.

My phone pinged with a message and I rolled my eyes.

“Does he ever give up?” Mirai mumbled.

I grabbed my phone off the vanity, only to see that it was in fact Killian messaging me. A giddy smile spread across my lips. “I guess not.”

Killian: *Let me in.*

Me: *Why?*

Killian: *I want a kiss.*

It wasn’t the first time Killian tried to convince me to open the door through texting. He almost succeeded a few hours ago, when he decided not to play fair by sending me dirty texts and getting me aroused.

Since I was pregnant, my libido was all time high. So I quickly figured out that his goal was to get me to come to him by having me all excited for his touch.

He almost won if it wasn’t for Mirai catching me trying to sneak out of the room.

Neither Killian nor I believed in superstitions. But if we could avoid any bad luck from hereafter, I wasn't risking it.

Me: *You can kiss me at the altar.*

Killian: *I want more than a kiss. Can't do that at the altar.*

By now, I was grinning so bad my cheeks were beginning to hurt. I had been so touch deprived, so love deprived for the last four years that I was now practically swooning at every little attention. Romantic Killian was my favorite Killian.

Me: *You can do that after the wedding.*

Killian: *I fucked up.*

Me: *What do you mean?*

Killian: *I imagined you in your wedding dress, walking down the aisle to me... and then I imagined how fucking good it'd feel to rip that dress off you and eat you out like my favorite dessert. So now my dick is aching. You're killing me, Princess.*

Me: *First, it's not my fault your imagination decided to run so wild. Second, you ARE NOT ripping my dress off. I'll be mad and instead of "consummating" our marriage as you desperately want to, you'll be sleeping on the floor.*

Killian: *Let me in. Please.*

Me: *You really thought saying please was going to help your case?*

Killian: *Yes?*

He sounded so hopeful in that one-word text that I imagined him pouting as he waited for me to open the door. A giggle escaped past my lips while I quickly typed back a message.

Me: *Patience is a virtue.*

Killian: *I'm not fucking virtuous.*

Me: *I love you.*

Killian: *I love you too. Now, can I have pussy for a late lunch?*

Me: *Dinner.*

Killian: *Afternoon snack?*

Me: *Dinner.*

Killian. *Fuck.*

Mirai let out a choked cough and I dropped my phone on the vanity, before meeting her eyes through the mirror. Her cheeks were tinted pink and she was biting back a smile.

A flush sneaked up my neck and my cheeks at the knowing look she was giving me. “Were you reading my texts?”

“Nope.”

I squinted at her suspiciously. “Liar.”

“You should have agreed to the afternoon snack.”

“Afternoon snack?” Emily bustled into the room, my white veil in her hands. “Are you hungry? I can make you a snack.”

“I don’t know about Julianna but I definitely think Killian is hungry,” Mirai mumbled.

Oh my God.

I let out a silent gasp but Emily was oblivious, thank God.

Mirai took my white, lace veil from her grandmother and came back to me. “Here it is.”

“Thank you.” My smile widened. “Can you help me?”

I faced the mirror and Mirai secured the veil over my head with the gorgeous handmade leaf tiara, embellished with tiny crystals, that Emily made me – as a wedding present. It was the only sparkly thing about my wedding outfit.

I had forgone any expensive jewellery, except for the simple pearl earrings that was my *something borrowed* from Selene. After my mother’s death, she was the only mother figure I had. And when Gracelynn was gone, Selene was my only friend until I came to the island.

The last year, Selene wasn’t much in my life and I had missed her. One

phone call later and after a few arrangements, she was able to make it to my second wedding.

“Where’s Selene?” I asked Emily as she helped Mirai arrange my veil.

“She’s doing a final check before the wedding.” She met my eyes through our reflection, smiling encouragingly. “To make sure all the arrangements are done properly and then she’ll get ready.”

I had everything now. Everything I wanted; everything I dreamed of. A real father – Gideon. Emily and Mirai were my friends. Selene was here, with her motherly smile. My husband loved me. I was only missing...

Gracelynn.

My chest tightened and I shook my head, refusing to think about how it *hurt*.

Taking a shaky breath, I smiled at my reflection. I was finally getting a real wedding and today was a happy day. Killian made sure of it. I wasn’t going to ruin it by being so *bleak* on such a joyous occasion.

An hour later, I found myself standing in front of the door that led to the back of the castle. My father’s gaze flitted to mine, cocking his head to the side as he studied me closely. “You look a little nervous.”

“Do you think Killian is nervous?”

He chuckled. “Not exactly. He’s just impatient.”

“Of course, he is,” I mumbled. “As long as he doesn’t leave me at the altar again.”

My father scowled. “He wouldn’t–”

“I’m joking,” I was quick to say. “I know he wouldn’t. Not this time. I’m not worried about that. Actually, I don’t know why I’m nervous. We’re already legally married and we’re just saying our vows again. But I think... yeah, I’m just a *little* nervous and a lot excited.”

“That’s expected from a bride,” he acknowledged before shaking his head, his lips curling with a rueful smile. “Killian drove everyone crazy today. He hasn’t been good company at all.”

“He hasn’t left my side since we came back from the hospital,” I said defensively.

It was true, Killian had been hovering since I woke up in the hospital. The surgery might have been a success and while the bullet left a physical scar, it was nothing compared to Killian’s trauma. He barely left my side since then

and some nights, I'd wake up to him covered in cold sweats and lost in a nightmare where I couldn't reach him.

"The man needs to let you breathe. His overprotectiveness will eventually suffocate you."

I curled my fingers around the crook of his elbow. "I don't mind it."

"You say that now." My father scoffed.

"He lost me once and almost lost me *again*," I explained. "I think I understand why he won't let me out of his sight for too lo—"

I hesitated when I noticed his half-smile. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"I like seeing you defending him, Jules," he said slowly, with that same affectionate look in his eyes. "He loves you and I know you love him too. Hang on to that when your marriage gets hard."

My throat constricted with heavy emotions and I gave my father a slow nod.

"Are you ready?" he asked in that fatherly tone he always used with me.

"Ready," I whispered as he opened the door and we took our first step outside.

The sun was bright, in the afternoon sky and there was no music except for my own shaky breath. I curled my bare toes into the grass, feeling the slight dampness after the rain yesterday.

Oh God.

There were flowers *everywhere*.

That was the first thing I noticed and then my eyes caught him.

Killian.

He was standing at the end of the flowered aisle, under the domed gazebo that Elias had built for Arabella. He turned around and our eyes met.

Time slowed.

My heart drummed in my chest, so loudly I thought everyone could hear it.

A second passed.

I limped towards my husband. He was wearing a black suit, similar to what he always wore, and it appeared like he had been running his fingers through his hair too many times from the messy look of it.

Killian seemed completely bewildered at the sight of me walking down the aisle to him; completely and utterly *dumbstruck*. I watched as his expression changed from grumpy to awe and then adoration. The last time I had walked down the aisle, Killian hadn't even bothered to turn around and this time...

He was right; if we wanted to re-write our story – this was where we

needed to begin. Our vows.

The closer I got to him, the harder my heart raced. My stomach fluttered and dipped when we were finally within an arm distance.

As if he was too impatient to wait, Killian walked down the step and came to me. “I got her,” he said to my father, before curling his arm around my waist.

“You do?” my father questioned; his voice more serious than I had ever heard.

Killian’s arm tightened around me. “I got her *then*. I got her *now* and until my last breath.”

“You sound very arrogant, son.”

“I’m *confident* enough in the love I have for your daughter.” His voice deepened in a way that had a shiver zipped down my spine. “I made a mistake in the past but I’m not letting her go this time.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” My father finally released me and I leaned into Killian, the scent of him making me all warm and giddy.

He pressed his lips against my temple and my heart swooned. “Ranunculi, huh,” Killian remarked.

I looked down at my bouquet and nodded. “Our flowers. I specifically asked for white and pink Ranunculi.”

We walked up the steps and stood under the decorated gazebo, before the old and half-bald priest. He smiled kindly at us, taking in our embrace. “We are gathered here today—”

Killian and I turned to face each other when the priest started speaking. I could hear him but couldn’t make sense of his words over the pounding of my heart. My hands were clammy and a slight tingle ran down my spine.

My husband, without wasting another second, lifted my veil and then before I could breathe, before I could blink, his lips were on mine. Kissing me hard. Kissing me like he had been starving for me. Kissing me like he was a drowning man and needed this kiss to live, as if my lips could save him from an impending calamity. Killian swallowed my shocked gasp and kissed me harder, stealing my breath from my lungs and pouring his own down my throat.

“— the kiss is after the vows, Mr. Spencer.”

Our lips parted from each other when the priest’s voice interrupted us and my whole body flushed in embarrassment.

“I couldn’t wait,” Killian simply said, his lips still hovering over mine, so

close. “You see, I’m neither a patient nor a virtuous man.”

The old man released an exasperated sigh. “Can we go ahead with the ceremony now?”

“Wait,” my husband said. He cradled my face between his big hands and gave me a simple peck on the lips and then a hard kiss, before finally pulling away. I was left breathless and aching, and Killian was smirking. “Okay, we’re ready now.”

The priest began speaking again and I tuned him out when he started talking about the meaning of marriage – the importance of the holy bond between husband and wife.

“Do you, Killian Spencer, take Julianna–”

“I want to say my own vows,” Killian interrupted.

“Right, okay. Go ahead.”

Killian’s hands tightened around mine and he laced our fingers together. A solemn look covered his face. “I’d always regret the day I spoke those hate vows to you, wishing I could take them back because I know damn well how much those words hurt you.”

I shook my head, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. “I hurt you too,” I whispered.

Killian’s lips curled with a bittersweet smile that broke my heart. “Today, I want to take you as my wife – the way I should have the first time. With proper vows,” Killian said, his voice deep and thick with rough emotions. “I promise to love you without condition, to honor you each and every day, to wipe away your tears and to make you smile harder. To make you laugh when you’re sad, to hold you when you’re hurting and to love you even when you can’t love yourself. *I choose you, Julianna.*”

There it was. The part of our story that seriously needed a re-write. The part where I never gave him a chance to choose me. In the past, I took that choice from him. Ripped it away like a fool and a merciless lover. And now, he was choosing me. Against all odds. After everything. Leaving all the pain and lies behind – the secrets and manipulations, Killian was choosing me as his wife.

There was so much conviction in his voice when he continued to speak.

“I chose you then, and I choose you now and I choose for the rest of our lives. I choose you because you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met. You battled everything ugly and harsh, and look at you – you came out alive and fighting, you rose from the ashes and you’re the most *beautiful* woman I’ve

ever laid eyes on. I choose you because you make my heart happy. I choose you because your soul is pure. I choose you because you were made for me. I vow to put all my effort in making this marriage work and to give you the best version of me. Good days or bad days, I will give you the best of me because you don't deserve anything less, Princess. For as long as we both shall live, I will be by your side—for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer. You are my one and only today and every day. Do you? Do you... choose me? Do you take me as your husband?"

A strangled sound left my throat before I could stop myself. I nodded when I couldn't find my voice. "I do," I said quietly and then louder, more assured. "I do, Killian. I choose you."

"Would you like to say your own vows?" The priest asked me.

"Yes," I said. "I, Julianna Spencer, choose you Killian Spencer to be my husband and my partner through life and ever after. I vow to always honor you, to love you, to comfort you, to encourage you and to never give up on us. Whether we are at our best or our worst, I will be your wife and your best friend. I will share your hopes and your dreams. I vow to always put us first, to always choose *us*, when time gets hard. I will love you even when you make me mad. I will love you even we're fighting, because I know at the end of the day, we will always comfort each other. I will go to battle for you. I will fight the world for you and because marriage is both ugly and beautiful, I vow to walk through the ugly and beautiful with you. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. Do you take me, as your wife?"

I was crying by the time I was done speaking my vows and Mirai's beautiful work at my makeup was probably messed up.

"Till death do us part, I do," Killian solemnly vowed.

My heart was bursting as we exchanged our rings. I slid the black gold band over his finger, finally feeling at peace. *Truly*.

We did it.

A new chapter... as we closed the old one. But it wasn't the end.

Only the beginning.

This chapter didn't use a tedious pen or a pretty ink. But every word was spilled from our tongues, as his lips met mine and while our kisses turned into paragraphs.

His heartbeat matched mine.

And it was the perfect page within our story.

CHAPTER TWO

Julianna

Our lips parted and I was dazed, my mind reeling. He swept me up in his arms and my heart raced as he carried me away, carefully. Delicately. As if he was carrying the most precious cargo in his arms. Our guests laughed and Killian? He was *grinning*.

“I’m not waiting for our reception,” he said arrogantly. “You’re getting deliciously fucked tonight, Princess. I’ve waiting long enough.”

“You only waited for twelve hours,” I shot back, but I couldn’t deny that this was indeed long enough.

“Twelve *fucking* hours.”

I rolled my eyes and my stomach fluttered again. I cupped my stomach, caressing the tiny swell of my pregnant belly. Was it the baby?

No, it was too early for that. I was barely eleven weeks along. So that fluttering was definitely butterflies in my stomach. No, it was a whole zoo. My husband had me swooning. *Again*.

Killian carried me inside and up the stairs to our room. Once we were inside, he allowed me to my feet and I stood on shaky legs as he practically tore off his suit jacket, dropping it on the floor at our feet. His black shirt came off next, joining his suit jacket on the floor.

My gaze slid over his wide, muscular chest and rippling abs. His body was a work of art; proof of hours and hours of dedication in the gym. My throat went dry at the sight of him like this, even though I had seen his bare chest countless of times. I was well acquainted with my husband’s body but every time, I *ached* for him just as the same very first time.

“Get undressed, Julianna.” There was a warning tone in his voice, as if he was hanging on thin thread and was barely containing himself.

I lifted my chin, feeling haughty and pursed my lips at him. “Or *you* could undress me.”

If he could be so arrogantly demanding, then I could be dangerously bold.

His eyes darkened and his lips curled in a sexy smirk. He unbuckled his belt as he stalked closer to me. The way he prowled forward, with such confidence, it was almost like he was hunting me. A wild, savage animal fixating on its prey.

Except, I was very much willing.

I took a step back, because the idea of him chasing me had adrenaline pumping through my veins. Though I knew I wouldn't get far with my limp, I still tried to escape him when he reached toward me.

His chest rumbled with a harsh sound; a growl when his fingers brushed against my arms but I was already taking a few steps back. Away from him.

"Julianna," he warned slowly.

"Yes?" I responded, ever so innocently.

"Don't do this."

"Don't do what?"

He scowled. "I need you."

"Then, take me."

Killian lurched forward and I barely even got a chance to squeak before his arm curled around me and he tugged me into his body. My fingers splayed over his bare chest and a laugh bubbled from my throat. "So impatient."

"Brat," he rasped under his breath. "I told you this once, and I'll tell you again – I know how to tame a brat, Princess."

"Maybe tomorrow. You promised me that I'm getting deliciously fucked tonight."

"Tonight, I need my cock inside you. Right fucking now. Need to feel your snug pussy squeezing—"

I let out a choked sound and he chuckled, his hot breath tickling the side of my face. "You're flushed and shaking."

"Less words, more action," I whispered.

He turned me around, so my back was against his chest. My veil and tiara came off first. Then, his hand went to my side and he slowly unzipped my dress. "As you wish, *wife*."

Killian's lips grazed my bare shoulders in a soft kiss. He touched me so tenderly, it made my heart ache. I missed this.

His touch.

His kisses.

He wasn't the cruel man I married anymore, but he was the Killian I fell in love with.

His lips moved south, kissing a careful path down my shoulder blades. My dress was backless, so he had all the access to my bare skin.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Princess," my husband rasped, his voice hard and gravelly.

I wished I believed his words. My face itched, the skin feeling like it had been stretched tight over my bones. “My scars—”

“You’re beautiful even with your scars,” Killian interrupted me before I could finish my sentence. As if he could read my mind. As if he knew about all my insecurities without me even having to say them out loud. “You’re goddamn breathtaking *because* of your scars.”

“Killian,” I breathed.

I let my hands fall to my sides, where I was holding my dress to my breasts. The ivory wedding gown pooled at my feet, leaving me almost fully naked.

“Julianna,” Killian groaned against my flushed skin. “I’m so fucking in love with you that I fear it’s dangerously close to obsession.”

“The feeling is mutual, *husband*.”

“Good.” His fingers slid over my bare skin, up my hips and then my arms. I shivered at his featherlight touch.

He was teasing me and so, I begged. “Touch me.”

“Where do you want me to touch you?”

Was he serious right now? “Wherever you want,” I practically pleaded.

“That’s not the answer I’m looking for, Julianna. Where do you want me to touch you? Tell me.”

My body was so hot and aching and my core pulsed between my legs, so needy for him. I couldn’t think straight. “I – my lips. Kiss me.”

“Gladly,” he said, his voice gritty with lust.

And then he was sweeping me off my feet and into his arms. I let out a squeal when he dropped me on the bed. He knelt by the bed and tugged on my legs, drawing me closer to the edge. His fingers curled around my panties and his lips twitched, before he ripped them off.

My gasp was quickly replaced by a shaky moan when Killian wedged his wide shoulders between my thighs.

Our eyes met as he slowly lowered his head to my sex, where I was dripping and *pulsing* with need.

My heart thudded so hard I thought it’d spill out of my chest. His fingers brushed over wet folds, before spreading me open. I quivered in response. He was meticulously slow, almost like he was teasing me into *feeling* him.

When his thumb finally grazed my clit, I whimpered. I was so hypersensitive and his calloused touch was driving me utterly crazy. Desire pooled in the pit of my stomach, hot and needy – as my arousal leaked out of

me, coating my inner thighs and the bedsheets.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly. “I asked you to kiss... my lips.”

“I am,” he simply said before lowering his mouth over my sex. The moment his lips were on my flesh, my back bowed off the bed and a moan spilled from my throat.

“Holy shit!”

His chest rumbled with a low growl and I *felt* that against my pussy. Killian had gone down on me, way too many times for me count – and I was speechless every time. I didn’t know what I liked the most. His mouth or his cock.

Right now, it was his mouth.

Maybe later, I’d be begging for his–

My stomach tightened when his tongue circled around my clit and the teeth grazed that tiny bundle of nerves.

My mind went blank as Killian took his sweet time, lapping at my sex leisurely. His tongue probed my entrance but he didn’t push inside. Instead, he licked and sucked. Not leaving any part of me untouched.

“Killian,” I choked. My fingers gripped his hair, in frantic need. Fire licked through my veins and I was hanging dangerously close over the edge of the cliff, dangling at the precipice of orgasm.

He worked my hardened nub between his lips, and then his teeth – tormenting me until it got painful and I was strung tight, my muscles tightening with the various sensations running through my body.

He sucked my clit between his lips, soothing the ache that his teeth left and I almost sobbed in response. “Killian, *please.*”

My eyes fluttered close.

My husband was killing me.

And maybe it’d be a sweet, sweet death.

But God, I needed...

I needed more.

My back arched off the bed when he shoved a finger inside me. My core pulsed and I clenched around him, instinctively. My thighs tightened around his head when he pushed a second thick digit inside me. I clamped around his fingers, desperate to keep him where he was. Desperate for him to move. For him to grant me release.

“Killian. Killian!”

My whimpers rang like desperate pleas as his tongue and fingers worked together, in simultaneously agreement at tormenting me.

I *throbbled*.

It hurt. It was a good hurt though.

I bit back on my lips as I grew closer to my release, feeling it in the way my body quivered. There was a sharp sting on my clit; my eyes snapped open and my lips parted with a silent scream.

I bucked against his mouth and fingers, my orgasm washing over me like a hurricane.

His tongue ravaged me, lapping at my wetness.

He groaned in response.

Killian worshipped me on his knees and I was utterly spent.

“Holy shit,” I gasped.

He lifted his head from between my thighs and our eyes met – his dark and hungry. “There’s nothing *holy* about this, Princess.”

“I – you,” I cleared my throat and swallowed down my whimper. “I said lips. To kiss my lips.”

His lips, wet and glistening from my release, twitched. “You didn’t specify.”

“You’re an impossible man.”

I released his hair and curled my hands around his shoulders, pulling him forward so that he was hovering over me. Killian settled his hips between my thighs and I wrapped my ankles around the back of his thighs.

He brushed his lips over mine and then shoved his tongue into my mouth. My eyes closed and I chose to feel him. To feel this kiss. I could taste my own release on his tongue as he kissed me. Hard. Unrelenting. *All-consuming*.

This.

All of this.

I loathed all the time we lost because of my cruel mistakes, but when he kissed me like this, I didn’t care. Because we finally found our way back together. Nothing else mattered.

I felt his hand between our bodies and then his thick member was pressing against my core. He rubbed his length up and down my folds, coating himself with my juices.

The tip of him pressed against my clit and I sucked in a shuddering breath. Killian thrust inside, slowly, filling me completely. My core clenched

around the hard intrusion and my walls stretched around the thickness of his length, to accommodate him.

He pulled out fully before shoving back inside. When my back arched off the bed, he lowered his body over mine, pressing me back into the mattress.

“Killian,” I breathed. I *throbbed* between my legs, pulsing with insistent need.

My husband found his pace, each thrust dragging a desperate moan from my throat. His grunts were deep and primal, feeding to the insatiable wanton need inside me.

My hands slid to his back, my nails digging into his skin. I clawed at his back and for a moment, I didn’t even care if I was leaving any marks.

Thrust. “You’re killing me,” he groaned. *Thrust.* “Do you hear how wet you are, Princess?” *Thrust.* “Your cunt is made for me. Made for my cock.” *Thrust.* “So fucking beautiful.”

With each hard stroke, his pelvis brushed against my clit and I writhed under him.

“Mine,” he grunted.

My breathing turned shallow. “*Killian.*”

He pumped inside me, once and twice. “Come. Fuck, baby. I need you with me.”

My body tightened and my lips slammed against his. I kissed him. I took this kiss, because it was *mine* to take.

This time, I wasn’t stealing a kiss in the dark, while he was unconscious and dreaming of my ghost. No, this time I took it because it was rightfully mine.

When I pulled back, my lips felt raw and my heart ached. But it was a good ache. I met his dark eyes, seeing the same love reflecting in the depth of his gaze.

His muscles corded; his body growing taut and I could feel that fluttering in my stomach again. Killian pulled out fully before shoving back inside, with one hard and brutal thrust.

We found our release together, our bodies entwined, our heartbeats matching to the same rhythm. He came with a low grunt, filling me to the brim. Spent, he laid his forehead against me. We caught our breaths, as he remained buried inside me.

“Fuck,” Killian rasped, when his breathing was finally normal again. “The baby—”

“– is fine.”

“Goddamn it. You kill me, Julianna. You fucking kill me.”

My lips curled with a smile, because how could I not?

CHAPTER THREE

Killian

I dropped my jacket over my wife's shoulders as she knelt beside her sister's grave before taking a step back and giving her privacy. This was the first time we had been off the island since Simon kidnapped Julianna and she got shot. The moment she was discharged from the hospital, I swept her away, to where she would be safer.

On the island; our home.

I didn't fucking trust anyone else near my wife, except the people I personally knew and even then, I still didn't let her out of my sight.

I just can't.

I didn't trust anyone but myself to keep Julianna and our baby safe.

She spoke to the grave, quiet enough that I couldn't make out her words. She had been asking me for months to bring her here, to where her sister was buried. I refused more times that I could count, but after *pleading* with me, my resolve weakened.

Not when I saw how miserable she was every time I refused.

Not when she begged me.

Not when I saw the sorrow in her pretty grey eyes.

I was so fucking pussy whipped for Julianna and I didn't even care.

Bishop Romano might be gone now, but I didn't trust how far and wide his influence was. Just because he was dead and six feet under the cold ground, it didn't mean all his operations ended. And because *I* put him there, his enmity toward me was far too great.

And my goddamn weakness?

My wife and our unborn baby.

Julianna might still be in danger...

My blood was cold in my veins as I suspiciously eyed our surroundings. I had enlisted a whole security team to follow us and to protect Julianna the moment we stepped off the island. The team was here, a few feet away from us. Watchful. Protective. And always on guard.

But still, I couldn't stay *calm*. Couldn't be at ease.

Not when my wife was wide open to possible harm. Maybe Julianna was right; I was getting too paranoid or maybe I was just couldn't risk losing her

again.

Fuck no.

Not now, not ever.

She let out a choked sob and my back went ramrod hard. But she wasn't in any danger. Julianna sniffled as she ran her fingers over the cold tombstone. Over her sister's name. "I'll bring your favorite flowers next time and then I'll tell you if I'm having a boy or a girl."

She said her goodbyes to Gracelynn and then stood up, wobbling a bit before I wrapped my arm around her waist to steady her. The wind blew through her platinum blonde hair, a few stubborn strands escaping her ponytail. The red hair ribbon caught my eyes and my heart swelled in my chest.

It was the ribbon I gave her, all those years ago, as her fourth courting gift.

I'd have to fill her drawers with new hair ribbons. Of all colors and fabrics. My wife couldn't have too many hair ribbons. Nope, she'd never run out of them.

Julianna gave me the most breathtaking smile, her grey eyes glassy with unshed tears. Wide and innocent. There was heartbreak in her eyes. But her smile...

Her fucking smile told me that she was ready to move on.

She put her hand in mine, tugging me away from the grave but I dug my feet into the dirt. Julianna scrunched her nose in confusion and I shook my head. "I want some time alone with Gracelynn."

"Why?" she questioned.

I squeezed her fingers. "I have some things I need to say to her."

I had unfinished business left to take care of and this needed to be done in private.

Julianna gave me a suspicious look but nodded anyway. I watched as she limped away from the grave. Now that she was heavily pregnant, I've noticed that she moved slower and her limp was somewhat more pronounced. This was why I carry her everywhere. She complained a lot until she realized that there was no point.

Once Julianna had disappeared inside the car, I settled on the ground. Next to Gracelynn's grave. I was silent for a long moment before I cleared my throat.

"I fucked up," I said to the ghost of Julianna's sister.

There was a sudden cold breeze and a shudder rolled down my spine. It

was almost like she – Gracelynn – was here. Listening to me. Probably judging me. Most likely angry at me. For hurting her sister. For breaking Julianna.

“You left this world, probably thinking that I would be here for Julianna. You loved her and were fiercely protective of your sister, that I know. You thought I would protect her but I left Julianna to the wolves,” I confessed, my voice cracking. “They destroyed her and I hurt her. I hurt her in ways I can’t take back. It’s my deepest regret and I’m not sure I’ll ever forgive myself for that.”

Another cold breeze whizzed past me and this time, I was sure Gracelynn’s ghost was here. Probably passing her judgement on me and finding me lacking to be her sister’s husband. But I was here to remedy that.

“Julianna and I took our vows again; this time – it was a real wedding with a proper vow. I lifted her veil, kissed her and carried her away from the altar,” I explained to the grave, as if I was speaking to a real person. “I tried to fix what I messed up. And I’m *trying* to be the husband that Julianna deserves. I’m not perfect but I can vow one thing. Your sister – my wife – will always be my first choice. My *only* choice,” I promised with utter conviction. “She spent three years being scared that if I knew the truth of her deception, I wouldn’t choose her. So, I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure that she knows I will *always* choose her.”

Running my fingers over Gracelynn’s name, engraved over the tombstone, I allowed myself to finally smile. “Thank you. I like to think that you were protecting her all along while I couldn’t. But it’s okay. You can let go; I’m here to protect her now.”

With those as my final words to Gracelynn – I hoped that her soul could rest in peace now – I walked away from her grave and toward my wife.

The moment I got in the car, I wrapped my arm around Julianna and she curled into me. I let out a staggering breath, in relief. That it was over. She was safe in my arms. We were going back home.

She buried her face into my neck, her cold lips against my skin. “What did you talk about with Grace?”

“That’s between me and her, Princess.”

Her blunt teeth sank into my flesh and I hissed in response. Julianna pulled away and scowled at me, her stormy grey eyes meeting mine. “Why can’t you tell me? I’m just curious.”

I flicked her nose. “I made amends; that’s all.”

My wife pouted and crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever.”

I rolled my eyes at the petulance in her voice and cupped her round pregnant belly. Our son kicked in response, strong and he got quite an aim.

“Your mommy is pouting. How shall I fix that, huh?”

I leaned forward and licked her cheek. She gasped, lurching away from me. “Ew! Killian!”

I licked her again, just because. And this time, when Julianna tried to escape, I tugged her back into my embrace and kissed her pout. “Stop pouting, wife.”

“Stop licking me, husband.”

I chuckled and then licked her lips. She pushed against my chest with her tiny fists, though she wasn’t even trying too hard. “You’re so weird.”

“Weird because I licked your cheek? But it’s okay when I lick your cunt?”

“Killian!” she squeaked, her wide eyes going to the driver before coming back to me. Surprise played across her face, her jaw slack. “I can’t believe you just said that out loud!”

“What? That you like it when—”

She slapped a hand over my mouth, muffling the rest of my sentence. “Stop, just shut up and go back to licking my cheek.”

“Sure,” I said into her palm. Her nose twitched and then her lips curled with a barely contained smile.

And that was when I *really* kissed her.

Time stopped in a collision of senses when my lips met hers.

The kiss wasn’t just any kiss.

It was the cure.

The beginning and the end.

The epiphany – that while our fairy tale was severely flawed, it was perfect in the most imperfect way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Julianna

Four and a half years later.

Ragna let out a wet huff as I brushed her white coat. She was a little grumpy today and I was sure it had something to do with Cerberus. It appeared he wasn't giving my sassy mare enough attention. I couldn't believe that I was witnessing a lover's quarrel between horses.

Except, it wasn't all that surprising.

I thought horses were monogamous animals, but Ragna and Cerberus had been inseparable over the last few years. There was long courtship and of course, my mare played hard to get before finally giving in.

While Cerberus was arrogant and a bit wild, I got to see his emotional side a few months ago when Ragna was sick. She was taken away from Cerberus while her health was monitored closely. That was the first time I had seen a depressed stallion.

"She's beautiful," a deep voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked over my shoulders to see Gabriel striding toward me, a full smirk on his face. He came to stand beside and laid a hand over Ragna's forehead, giving my girl a little pat.

"Her mane is so long," he admired, his gaze flicking between Ragna and me. "And her white coat is shiny. You keep her well groomed."

"Thank you," I said, delightfully pleased with his praises. "How many new horses did you bring this time?"

"Two stallions. They are wild and too stubborn," he responded with his thick British accent. Gabriel had been Killian's business partner and a close friend for almost a decade. They were close, and that basically made Gabriel family. He had a habit of rescuing horses and bringing them to Killian for training.

I dropped the brush over a stack of hay and gave Ragna a pat. "Aren't they always?"

"Nah, these two are really difficult. I think Killian's going to have a hard time with them."

"He's a horse whisperer, Gabriel," I defended my husband haughtily. "There's never been a horse that he can't handle. And you're lucky he even

found the time to train them.”

But then again, Killian would never say *no* to horses.

“He’s that busy, huh?”

Killian being busy was an understatement. Now that he was officially running for President, my husband had more important things to take care of. His country.

From attending debates, to rallies and fundraisers where he gathered his supporters, Killian was dedicated through and through. I loved that about his. Loved how strong and stubborn he was. Loved how passionate he was about his job and his love for this country.

But I missed him.

Except, that didn’t matter at the moment. I was his wife and right now, our country came before my needs. Some days, I was selfish and tried to keep his bed but I blamed that on my pregnancy.

I cupped my round stomach at the thought of that. This morning Killian left bed before I woke up. I knew he did that because he thought I needed the rest, but I wished he had wakened me up.

Gabriel snapped his finger in front of my face, bringing me out of my thoughts. “I lost you there. What’s up?”

I shook my head and gave him a shaky smile, before glancing at Ragna with longing. “Oh yeah, I meant to say Killian is quite busy these days. Of course, you know that already.”

Gabriel was silent for a moment while I petted Ragna. She was quiet as she moved closer to me, bumping her head against my hand. She could *feel* my emotions and I tried not to let my misery bleed into her.

“You’re looking at your horse with such sad eyes, Jules,” Gabriel said, ever the observant one. “Why don’t you ride her?”

I itched to get on my mare but I knew I couldn’t. Not when I was pregnant and Killian made me promise that I wouldn’t ride Ragna alone. I thought he’d lose his protective instincts over the years but I was very wrong.

Killian was still the same overprotective and overbearing man I knew.

Especially now... that I was pregnant after two years of fertility issues.

A year after the birth of Cameron, I started experiencing irregularities with my menstrual cycle. It was nothing alarming at first until I went eight months with my periods and that was when I finally went for a check-up, only to find out that I had developed Polycystic ovary syndrome – which eventually made it hard for us to conceive.

We were happy with Cameron being our only child, until I got greedy. I always wanted a big family and so did Killian. And so it began. The painful process of trying for another child while struggling with infertility.

Two years of uncertainties.

Two years of IVF shots and praying for successful retrievals.

Two years of hoping for fertilized eggs only to realize the embryos would not make it through the transfer process.

Two years of hopelessness and not feeling *good enough*.

One successful transfer ended up in a miscarriage.

And that was when I finally broke down.

It was tormenting. Being so hopeful, thinking you were finally getting what you wanted the most, only for it to be ripped away from you – so cruelly.

Killian and I eventually decided to stop trying. The pain of losing our baby *killed* us and he wasn't willing to put *me* through that again.

I agreed. Until six months ago, when I had a dream.

Of a little baby girl calling me mommy. It was so *real* and till now, I could still hear her sweet voice calling out to me. It was a dream, but I swore, that was our future.

So, I convinced my husband for us to try again.

I caressed my eighteen weeks baby bump. We didn't know the gender yet, but I *knew* it was a little girl. She was so real in my dreams, with her dark hair like her father's and my grey eyes. Her soft, round cheeks and her pouty lips.

"Killian doesn't let me ride her," I finally told Gabriel. "At least not alone. And since he's always busy, I haven't had a chance to get on Ragna for a long time."

He'd actually blow up a blood vessel if he saw me on a horse, alone. My husband liked to that he was invincible and that he was my shield.

Except he can't protect me from everything.

Gabriel scoffed. "Well, you're not alone now. I'm here, so why don't you get on Ragna?"

"Oh no, please—"

"What? You think I'm not strong enough to *protect* you?" he asked arrogantly before flexing his big muscles over his tight black shirt, as if to show me just how "strong" he was. "Anyway, Ragna is your mare. She's pretty docile, isn't she?"

I rolled my eyes but I was very... tempted to take him up on his offer. If

Gabriel was with me, I wouldn't be alone so it wasn't like I was going against what Killian wanted.

Gabriel grabbed one of the helmets off the hook and presented it to me, waiting patiently for me to make up my mind. I glanced at Ragna's pretty face and my heart swelled. God, how could I say no to such tempting offer?

I put on the helmet and then Gabriel hoisted me onto Ragna's back. The moment I settled on the saddle, my fingers curled around her pretty mane. My chest tightened and I practically choked on my emotions.

Maybe it was the pregnancy...

"My beautiful girl," I whispered to her. Ragna neighed in response, as if she understood me.

Gabriel chuckled and I glanced at down to find him grinning at me. "Now, that's a smile I like to see."

"I missed her," I confessed out loud.

Gabriel grabbed the reins and I pressed my heels into Ragna's sides, urging her forward. "Let's go for a walk, sweet girl."

We walked out around in circles in the open field, keeping a steady pace that Gabriel could follow on foot. He stayed by my side, fingers around the rein and I felt safe enough.

"You've got a breathtaking smile that would make any man weak to their knees," he said after a few moments of silence, touching my calf to grab my attention.

My scars itched at the unexpected praise. "You're just being sweet."

Gabriel patted his chest. "I'm an honest man."

I opened my mouth to respond when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. My husband was stalking toward us and when he was close enough, I noticed the look of pure *rage* on his face.

"Gabriel," he snapped.

My eyes widened at his tone but his friend wasn't fazed at all. "How are the horses looking? Do you think you can handle them?"

Killian snatched the rein from Gabriel. "Leave," he ordered coldly.

"What—

He glowered at Gabriel and the poor man didn't even have a chance to say anything before Killian was leading Ragna back to the stables. Once we were inside, he pulled me off my mare and settled me on a stack of hay. This place was smaller than the one we had on the island.

But with Killian running for President, we had to leave Isle Rosa-Maria

behind. So, we had officially moved to Spencer Manor in Washington D.C, bringing our horses with us.

Killian locked Ragna in her stall before finally facing me. My husband was positively livid and I internally winced. He stood to his full height, shoulders rigid and his fists clenched to his side.

“What is this all about?” I slowly asked.

His eyes flared darker. “He was flirting with you.”

“He wasn’t!” I hissed, getting to my feet. “He’s your friend. God, what is wrong with you?”

“What is wrong with me is that you deliberately went against what I told you when all I wanted was to *protect* you and our baby,” he said in a deceptively low voice. Killian didn’t raise his voice at me; he never did – and I couldn’t remember the last time he was angry at *me*.

“You’re overexaggerating!” I couldn’t even hide the indignation in my voice. “I was completely comfortable and safe with Ragna and Gabriel. I was in no imminent danger. You’re speaking as if I am new to horses. I’m not. You taught me everything I need to know about horses. Are you saying you’re not confident about your own teachings?”

“I’m not here to tempt fate, Julianna,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Neither am I!”

“The risk of you injuring yourself–”

“So what? Am I going to spend the rest of life confined–”

“Hey, is everything okay?” Gabriel interrupted, slowly walking back into the stables. His gaze flickered between Killian and I. “Is there a problem?”

Killian tensed. “I’m speaking to my *wife*,” he practically snarled at his friend.

“It’s fine,” I said, giving Gabriel a practiced smile. “We’re just talking.”

“Right. Um, okay.” He backtracked quickly.

Once he disappeared from our view, I rounded on Killian. “I know you’re worried but you need to calm down for a second.”

He took a staggering breath. His eyes were still dark and furious but I could see the moment he started to calm down. The corded muscles in his neck unclenched and his jaw was not longer tight.

I moved forward, pressing my body against his. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just missed taking Ragna on a run.”

He swallowed hard before his arms curled around me. Protectively. *Finally*. “I didn’t like how close he was to you,” he rasped.

“Killian,” I started, fighting back a smile. “Are you jealous?”

He scowled. “I’m not jealous.” His voice dropped to a low growl. “You’re mine and I’m territorial. Big difference, Princess.”

It was basically the same thing but I wasn’t going to argue with him now.

“Fuck,” he swore under his breath, shaking his head. “I saw you up on Ragna and my heart fucking stopped, Julianna. I forgot how to breathe. A hundred different scenarios of you being hurt played in my head.”

I pressed my face into his chest, listening to his heartbeat. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* “You’re right. I should be careful and I was. Ragna is safe and I wasn’t alone. Don’t be mad, please.”

His arms tightened around me. “I’m not mad.”

“You are.”

“I am,” he finally responded.

I stroke his chest. “How can I pacify you?”

Killian’s finger dug in to my hips. “You don’t want me to answer that.”

My eyes flickered up to his face, taking in his harsh and raw gaze. Hungry and possessive. “Tell me,” I breathed.

His hips bucked against mine, in a silent answer. “Here? Now?”

“Here,” he rasped. “Now.”

When I didn’t refuse, he walked me back to the stack of hay. Killian unbuckled his pants and my throat went dry as I stumbled back and planted my ass on the hay. I stared up at my husband’s brutally handsome and my sex clenched.

He wrapped his hand around his semi-erected cock and jerked it. His eyes darkened when I licked my lips, suddenly craving the taste of him.

Keeping our gazes locked together, I slowly got on my knees in front of him. I was now eye-level to his groin. A better position for what I had in mind. I knew Gabriel was somewhere close and he could probably hear us and I bet that was the reason Killian wanted to fuck me – here and now.

“What are you doing, Princess?”

Holding his throbbing member in my palm, I gave him a tentative squeeze. “Making it up to you, for going against what you told me when all you wanted was to protect me.”

I watched as his length thicken and felt it pulse. While making sure he was looking at me, in my eyes, I slowly descended downward on his dick. He watched me as I took him into my mouth and licked up and down his shaft.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “*Julianna.*”

I hummed in response, before closing my lips around him, *sucking*. My cheeks hollowed and his hips bucked upward, forcing him deeper into my mouth. I felt him at the back of my throat, hitting the spot that almost made me gag.

His groans and the naughty sounds of me sucking him could be heard around the stables but that didn't stop me. "Goddamn it. Your fucking mouth – oh shit."

My head bobbed up and down, before I pulled him from my wet mouth. My tongue then licked the head of his shaft. I circled the little slit dripping with his seed with the tip of my tongue. I tasted him, his manly and bit of salty essence of him. I teased him, like he'd do to me. Slowly licking and tracing the veins along his length. Feeling each pulse before slowly slipping him back into my wet mouth.

I noticed the muscles of his thighs tightening as each thrust of his hips grew jerky. His heavy panting filled my ears. He was close...so freaking close.

I doubled my effort, wanting to drive him crazily over the edge. Killian fisted my hair, pulling me hard down his cock, deeper...harder... forcing my throat to swallow him.

Without warning, he pulled out of my mouth and grasped me by the arms. I squealed as he pushed me back into the stay of hay and flipped me onto my stomach. "Hands and knees," he ordered in a thick and barely constrained voice.

My heart thudded in my chest as I quickly got on my hands and knees. Killian crowded into my back, pressing his body against mine. He flipped my yellow dress over my hips and I felt the cold breeze on my bare skin. He pushed my panties to the side and I was already so wet for him; dripping and *aching*.

"This is going to be fast and hard, Princess."

It sounded like a threat and that was the only warning I got before he shoved inside me. I gasped at the hard invasion and then whimpered as I clenched around him.

He pulled out half-way through before sinking into me again. "Julianna," Killian grunted. "You feel so goddamn good."

This was just a quick rut in the stables. A rough fucking to get the anger out of his system. It was downright filthy. This was carnage. Desperate and passionate.

Killian pumped into me, wedging his cock deep inside with each brutal thrust. My walls clamped around his shaft every time he pulled out and I cried out every time he pounded back in. My fingers curled around the hay and I bit on my lips until I tasted blood.

“Don’t ever scare me like that,” he growled. *Thrust.*

“Yes,” I gasped.

Thrust. “You’re mine.”

A needy sound left my throat. “Yours.”

My breasts felt heavy and swollen. My nipples ached. My sex throbbed. It felt so good. It hurt so good. And I. Needed. To. Come.

His fingers brushed against my folds as if he knew what I was thinking, what I needed. He flicked my clit and my body tightened.

Killian found his release in a powerful rush and then my orgasm hit me so hard, my eyes rolled back into my head.

I collapsed onto the straw and Killian settled on top of me a second as he caught his breath, before he pulled out of my tight sheath and rolled over. I felt a warm gush between my thighs, his seed spilling out of me.

“I made you dirty,” Killian rasped in a low voice.

His fingers brushed against the inside of my thigh, before pushing his cum back into me. My sex was so hypersensitive and my sore muscles clamped down at the intrusion.

He pressed his lips against my temple. “Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh. Perfect,” I replied deliriously. “I think you just fucked me into a coma.”

Killian chuckled and while I laid limply onto the stack of hay, he rearranged my dress for me so that I was decent again. Then, he swept me into his arms and carried me out of the stables. I buried my face into his throat, inhaling his unique scent.

Drowsily, I heard him speaking to Gabriel but I couldn’t make out their conversation. His steps lulled me into a sleep and I didn’t fight against it.

I was safe in Killian’s arms and I’d wouldn’t choose to sleep anywhere else, except right here.

“And how are you feeling, Mrs. Spencer?” Doctor Jennings asked me as I laid down on the examination table. My previous Gynecologist, Doctor Johnson, went on her own maternity leave, so Pearl was my new doctor.

“I feel completely fine and healthy,” I responded as Killian laced his fingers through mine.

Pearl kindly smiled at us. “Well, let’s take a look.”

She placed a cold gel on my stomach and then pressed the transducer to my swollen abdomen, moving it around while looking at her screen. “Heartbeat is strong,” she observed and then her expression changed.

Worried gnawed at me and Killian leaned forward. “What’s wrong?” he asked urgently. “Is there something wrong with my wife? The baby?”

“Nothing.” Pearl was quick to assure us, but there was just something strange about her expression. I couldn’t tell if it was bad or good. “I checked your reports and Doctor Johnson said you’re having twins, right?”

Killian was silent for moment before he barked, “What?”

Pearl’s gaze flickered between my husband and me. “You didn’t know?” she asked in confusion.

I flinched but my husband didn’t notice because he was staring our doctor as if she had grown two heads. I knew we were having twins...

Killian didn’t.

It was an innocent lie; a secret because I wasn’t ready to tell him yet.

I could see that my husband was still reeling from the news because he was shaking his head. “No, that can’t be right.”

“You’re right,” Pearl agreed. “It’s not correct, because there are three heartbeats here.”

Shock coursed through my body. “Three?” I choked.

“Yes. You’re not having twins. You’re having triplets.”

“Oh. My. God. Triplets...” My voice trailed off because now *I* was in shock.

Pearl moved the transducer around my stomach again and she stared intently at her screen before breaking into a smile. “Yup, triplets and all girls. You’re having three daughters. Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer.”

Three daughters...

Oh God.

I was shaking and Killian still hadn’t said a word. He was frozen in the spot; too still for my liking. His expression was completely blank and dread filled my chest. Killian stared at the screen, watching the three tiny bleeps.

“Killian,” I said nervously, while my heart swelled with excitement. Three babies!

When he didn’t react, I called out his name again. This time, he blinked

slowly.

“Triplets,” he whispered, so quietly I almost missed it. I clenched his hand in mine and then he did the most unexpected thing ever.

His eyes rolled back into this bed and my strong, arrogant husband *collapsed*.

I blinked. And then blinked again.

“Oh dear,” Pearl gasped.

Did Killian... just pass out?

Alarmed, I sat up and stared at his limp body on the floor. The doctor checked his pulse and then coughed, but she was probably holding back her laugh. “He hit his head on the corner of the table when he passed out. Won’t need stitches but that spot is probably going to be sore.”

“Um, o-okay,” I stuttered.

I wiped away the gel from my stomach before kneeling down at Killian’s side. I patted his cheek, once and twice and then harder. He groaned and then his eyes fluttered open, giving me a dazed look.

“Triplets,” he said, in awe.

I nodded and then giggled. “You passed out!”

Killian rubbed his temple, where he was quickly bruising and then winced. “I didn’t pass out. I was merely resting my eyes,” he announced begrudgingly. “It’s good to... rest your eyes, every once in a while. So yeah, I was doing that. My eyes. Resting. Didn’t pass out.”

This time, I threw my head back and *laughed*.

I had never seen Killian like this. He was always so composed and right now, he was absolutely not. He swore under his breath and then our gazes locked. “Three babies,” he said, his voice thick with emotions. “Three daughters.”

And then he was taking me in his arms, kissing my lips like he had been dying to taste me all along. “I fucking love you, Princess.”

Yeah, I loved him too.

More than I could ever put to words.

And that was why I lied. For now.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killian

Two months later

“Daddy,” Cameron whined sleepily when I closed the children’s book. “Another story, please. The last one.”

I tucked his bedsheets snugly around his little shoulders. “You said that for the other two stories,” I drawled, quirking up an eyebrow. Putting Cameron to bed was my job; this was our father-son time and my boy knew exactly what my weakness was.

I could never say no to him.

There was a knowing look on his face and then my son gave me the sad eyes and pouty lips. “This is the last one. I promise.”

“Last story,” I agreed, before opening another book. *Giraffe’s Can’t Dance*. This was his favorite bedtime story and I knew he was waiting on this one. Cameron sighed happily when I started reading about the timid Giraffe, who had probably fitting in before he found the confidence in himself to do what he wanted.

By the time I finished the story, he was fast-asleep and I grinned, while I looked at his peaceful face. Cameron was basically my carbon copy. Same hair. Same strong nose and full eyebrows. He looked a lot like me when I was his age. The only difference was his eyes. They were his mother’s. The prettiest grey.

I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Sweet dreams.”

He sleepily smiled in response and I knew he was somewhere far away, in a dreamland of horses and giraffes. Instead of leaving, I stayed there, sitting next to him on his little bed, watching my son sleep.

It was crazy how in a few weeks, we were going to go from a family of three to a family of six. Cameron was going to be a big brother to his three sisters. I didn’t doubt for a second that he was going to be a loving and protective brother. He had been anxiously waiting for his younger siblings. Yesterday, he put his head to Julianna’s swollen belly and told his sisters all about his day. He was already bonding with them and they weren’t even here yet.

Shit, it still felt surreal every time I thought about the triplets. Julianna

struggled with her infertility and I knew how badly it affected her that we couldn't have another child. That despondent look on her face. The dejected slump of her shoulders. The sobs she tried to hide from me while she was in the bathroom.

My wife felt like she was robbing me of the big family I had wanted. That something was *wrong* with her.

Julianna told me so, one night – when she thought I was sleeping.

That was when I decided that we'd stop trying; to end the IVF treatments. Because I didn't care that we couldn't have any more kids. Sure, I wanted a big family but not at the cost of my wife's mental health. Julianna and our son were enough for me. We were *happy* and that was all that mattered.

But then it happened.

One dream turned into three little miracles.

It was absolutely batshit crazy and I was here for all of it.

Eventually, I left Cameron to sleep and went back to my own bedroom. Where my wife was peacefully sleeping. Naked under the bedsheets. She didn't even twitch when I got in bed.

Julianna was on her side, facing me, with her blonde hair on her face. I tucked the stubborn strands behind her ear and her nose twitched with a breathy snore.

I settled back into my pillows, not at all sleepy. So, I did something else, like stalk my wife online. I grabbed my phone and searched up *Julianna Spencer* on google. There were multiples new articles that had gone up in the last two days. My chest tightened because I knew what to expect when if I opened any of those articles but I *had* to know. I had to see what they were saying about her.

I scrolled through my phone, reading the comments on a newest article I found about Julianna.

My blood boiled as my stomach churned. The comments had only gotten uglier and more hateful since the last time Julianna and I were photographed together. That was two days ago.

The media had been vile to Julianna for years now, since Bishop's truth came out to the world. She was the daughter of a criminal and when I announced that I was running for President, the personal attacks began.

They tried to degrade her as a woman.

They vilified her, and painted her as the daughter of the country's enemy and not as Julianna Spencer, my wife. Though she had tons of support online,

the public's hate for her was unrestrained and exceeded the support that she got.

Her innocence had been proven many times, but they didn't care. We thought we'd be able to clean her image and goddamn it, we fucking tried – but nothing worked. The people had made up their minds about my Julianna and it *killed* me.

The hate surrounding Julianna had somewhat affected my presidential run but my opponent was a piece of shit and I was the next best candidate for the country and our citizens knew that. So, I still had a chance at winning – especially after back-to-back successful campaigns.

My gaze flickered to a sleeping Julianna for a moment and then I went back to the comments.

Actually, I always thought Gracelynn was a better match for Killian Spencer.

My fists clenched as I read the next comment. ***I'm not falling for her innocent act and sob story. There's just something about her that doesn't sit right with me. Like, it's just a feeling and my feelings are never wrong.***

Fuck this.

I always found it weird that she survived the accident. Do you think she planned it, so she could get with her sister's fiancé?

There was a reply to that comment. ***OMG, I thought the same too! I always wondered if she liked Killian while he was engaged to Gracelynn. We all saw photos of the crash. It should have been impossible for her to survive that accident, yet she did and now poor Gracelynn is dead. What if? She's hella shady so I won't be surprised. Time for conspiracy theories. Who wants to join me?***

With a curse, I turned my phone off and dropped it on the nightstand. Beside me, Julianna rolled over and pressed closer into my body, as if seeking for my warmth. I wrapped my arms around her, my throat swelling with emotions.

She buried her face into my neck and a pained groan spilled from her throat. My body tensed and I thought she was in physical pain, but then I heard it. The unmistakable sound of Gracelynn's name on her lips.

"Grace," she whimpered again. "No, please. *No.*"

I squeezed my eyes shut. Just when Julianna was finally letting go of Gracelynn's ghost, finally moving on without any remaining guilt at the fact that she survived the accident when her sister didn't – the media had to ruin it

all.

I wasn't stupid; I knew she read those articles and comments online even when she'd lie and say she didn't. I *knew* because her nightmares were back again, after years of them being silent.

My wife whimpered in her sleep and my heart broke at the pained sound. A lonely tear slid down her cheek as I brushed my fingers over her forehead, trying to smooth out the tension lines.

"It's okay," I whispered as her body did a full twitch. She cried out softly. "I got you, Princess."

She eventually settled back to sleep and I kept her body anchored against mine. Cupping her pregnant belly, I smoothed a hand over the heavy mound, tracing the uneven streaks and lines over the stretched skin. I expected one of the babies to kick in response, but it appeared they were all napping. Good, Julianna needed some sleep.

"Daddy?" A little voice called out from outside the door. Cameron must have woken up from his sleep. "Mommy?"

"Yeah, Buddy. I'll be there in a second." I untangled myself from Julianna's side and got off the bed. When I opened the door, Cameron was there with his little giraffe plushie under his arm and his thumb in his mouth.

I instantly knew something was wrong. He only put his thumb in his mouth when he was scared or worried. "What's wrong, Cameron?"

"I had a bad dream and then woke up." He sniffled, his little face scrunching up as if he was about to cry. "I can't s-sleep."

I hoisted my shaking son up in my arms and he pushed his head into the crook of my neck, sniffling some more. "It's okay, daddy got you. Everything is alright," I crooned in his ears.

I walked back and forth in the hallway, still holding him in my arms while he calmed down. When he was half-asleep, we went back to his room only to find that he had wet the bed. Well, shit. There was no option, other than putting him in my bed, next to his mother. I watched as he cuddled up next to Julianna and my heart swelled.

My wife and babies were here and all together, safe and comfortable in my bed.

I might have done a lot of things in my life that I was proud of, but this right here – this perfect scene was my real pride. *My family.*

I did forgo sleep for cleaning up Cameron's bed so Julianna didn't have to do it in the morning. It was when I took out the clean bedsheets from his

drawers that something else caught my eye.

A wrinkled paper under all that stuff.

Why was Julianna's medical document in Cameron's drawers?

I scanned the paper, feeling my heart drop in the pit of my stomach as I read along the words that didn't really make sense to me, but I somehow knew what they meant. What the *risks* were.

Julianna

I woke up with a start, my eyes flying open but I didn't know what woke me up. My heart thudded in my chest and I wondered if it was another nightmare that I couldn't remember.

I look at my left and while Killian was missing, Cameron was in his place. I smoothed a hand over his head, admiring his cute sleeping self before I got out of bed to find my husband. A quick glance at the clock told me that it was almost three in the morning.

The Spencer Manor was quiet and dark as I made my way to his office on the opposite end of the hallway. The door was half-opened and I peeked inside to find him standing on the balcony of his office, shirtless and staring into the night.

My brows furrowed in confusion as I walked up to him, when something else caught my eyes. A wrinkled paper on the floor, as if it had been carelessly thrown to the ground.

My heart dropped in the pit of my stomach when I noticed what it actually was and my palms started sweating. My medical documents. How did he find them? *Oh God.*

I took a shaky step onto the balcony, wringing my hands in front of me.

"Killian—"

"Why?" he questioned, his voice deceptively soft. Too calm.

I swallowed hard. "Why what?"

He pivoted around so fast that I stumbled back, my eyes widening. His face – the raw and wretched look on his face – it *hurt* to see that tormented expression on his handsome face and knowing that I somewhat had a hand in putting it there.

His eyes darkened with rage and I let out shuddering breath. "Why didn't you tell me? I thought there would be no more lies and secrets between us,"

Killian accused sharply. I was taken aback by his cold and detached tone.

“I’m perfectly healthy,” I started to explain but he cursed under his breath and stalked forward until he was close enough for me to reach out and touch him, but I didn’t dare to.

His body was tensed and I didn’t think my touch would be welcomed right now. So, I curled my arms around myself instead.

I suddenly felt so... *cold* and *alone*.

“*Stop* lying, for fuck’s sake!” Killian snarled. “All you do is lie to my face, Julianna. We started this marriage with deception and you vowed you’d never do it again.”

“I was going to tell you,” I stuttered.

He let out a mocking laugh at my response and unshed tears blurred my vision. Killian paced back and forth in front of me, running his fingers through his hair before pulling on them. “How do I *trust* you? Goddamn it!” He paused and his gaze flickered to me angrily. “When did you find out?”

I flinched at his outburst and hiccupped back a sob. “Early on. When I was around fourteen weeks pregnant,” I confessed quietly. “Doctor Jennings told me about some of the complications that might come with this pregnancy. Gestational hypertension is common for women with multiple fetuses but with my history of seizures and high blood pressure, I was at risk of having eclampsia. Which could also lead to placental abruption.”

Killian nodded. “I called Doctor Jennings,” he said coldly. “She explained all the risks and complications that came with you being pregnant with triplets. Your placental abruption could lead to postpartum hemorrhage.”

“But that’s only the worst possibly outcome,” I was quick to say, as if to defend myself. “I’m perfectly healthy and my body is strong enough to carry our babies. The risks are there but—”

“And you didn’t think that I need to know that? That I should be aware of my wife’s health or the complications that might occur?”

My chest tightened as I sucked in a shaky breath. It pained me to breathe. It hurt me that Killian was hurting. And my husband’s coldness; his rage decimated me.

I slowly advanced toward him. “What would you have done if you knew? Tell me, Killian. If you knew that this pregnancy was risky for me... What. Would. You. Have. Done?”

The corner of his eyes twitched, his neck cording with tensed muscles as if he was trying so hard to keep his fury in check. His dark eyes flared. His

expression turned into disbelief and then understanding when he realized what I was trying to tell him.

“I know the answer to that,” I whispered. “You would have asked me to terminate this pregnancy.”

That made him still and then his chest shuddered with a harsh exhale.

Saying those words out loud made me nauseous. My stomach churned with a sick feeling and I could taste the acidic bile on my tongue. When I tried to swallow, I found myself gagging on it.

“And I *can't*. I won't do that,” I choked out. “But if you had asked me, I wouldn't have been able to say no to you. If you knew about the risks, you would have treated me as if I was on my death bed and I can't see you hurting. I wouldn't have survive watching you watch me with those tortured eyes as I grew bigger with our babies. It would have killed me.”

The wind picked up and a loud thunder rolled through the dark sky. The drizzle started next and I flinched at the coldness seeping through my nightgown.

My husband was unfazed to the change of weather. His fists were still clenched at his sides, his body still tensed and unwelcoming.

“That wasn't your choice to make, if I deserved to know or not.” Killian shook his head with a cold, humorless laugh. “I'm your husband and this marriage is supposed to be based on trust but you keep lying to me about such important things in our lives?”

I looked down at my feet, ashamed because he was right. “Tell me the truth, Killian. Would you have wanted me to terminate this pregnancy if you knew of the risks?”

“Yes,” he deadpanned.

I flinched at his quick because he didn't even pause to *think*. “And there's your answer as to why I didn't tell you.”

The triplets were my miracle babies and I couldn't bear to lose them, not like this. Not when I knew I was strong enough to give birth to them. And especially not when my last pregnancy ended with a miscarriage.

“You're a maddening woman!” Killian barked. His arm snaked out sharply and he gripped my bicep, shaking me. My gaze snapped to his and he was glaring down at me. “Listen to me carefully because I'm only going to say this once. Yes, I would have rather you terminate the pregnancy because I don't want to risk losing *you*. But if you wanted to have our babies, I would have *never* forced to have an abortion.”

I started to speak but he cut me off. “Where is the trust in this marriage, Julianna? Don’t you trust *me*?”

“I trust you,” I whispered.

He released my arm, but curled his hand behind my neck instead. “Liar,” he hissed.

I let out a cry. “*I’m sorry.*” I pressed my body closer to him, seeking out his warmth and he didn’t push me away. I stroke my hand over his chest and he shuddered under my touch. “I was scared.”

He squeezed his eyes at my choice of words. “And that’s the exact reason why you should have told me. You wouldn’t have to carry this burden alone.”

Another thunder rolled through the sky, this one roaring with a promise of rain.

“I swear I was going to tell you.”

His gaze landed on mine again and his brow furrowed. “When?”

“Soon. Next week, at our doctor’s appointment.”

When he didn’t respond to that, my heart dropped. “Don’t hate me,” I pleaded with Killian.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The sky opened up and the rain come down hard on, drenching both of us. But neither of us moved.

His eyes darkened, thunderous and pained. His fingers tightened in my hair before wrapping my ponytail around his fist, tugging my head back. I let out a choked sob when I realized that I was hurting us again. The rain washed away my tears.

Killian lowered his head and his lips brushed against mine, tenderly. “I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t,” I promised into the kiss. He stole my breath from my lungs, kissing me *hard* before pulling away.

“Doctor Pearl have been monitoring me closely,” I explained, breathlessly. “I’m healthy. The babies are healthy. I haven’t had a single seizure during my pregnancy. My blood pressure is somewhat stable and I’ve practically put myself on bed rest.”

“I wish you had told me,” he rasped, his voice raw and harsh.

I sniffled. “Me too. Are you still mad?”

“Yes.”

“Do you hate me now?”

Killian dropped his forehead against mine. There was tenderness in his

gaze now and my heart swelled in relief. “I can’t ever hate you, Princess. No matter how angry you make me.”

He swept me up in his arms and carried us back inside, away from the thunder and safe from the rain. “Don’t lie to me again, Julianna. No more secrets. And I’m serious this time. You have to trust me with your worst news and I have to trust you to tell me when things are not good.”

“No more secrets,” I breathed.

CHAPTER SIX

Julianna

One week later

The world tilted suddenly. It happened so fast and then I heard her fearful scream. My heart stopped for a second and then it was all agony, before I sunk into a very dark place.

I couldn't hear anything. Couldn't see; couldn't feel.

I tried to make a sound, but it felt like my lips were stitched together. I couldn't breathe...

Couldn't breathe... help me. Please. Help.

"Julianna.

I heard my name but I couldn't make out who was calling out to me. It was too dark for me to see.

"Julianna."

Yes, I tried to respond. But I was voiceless.

"It hurts," the voice echoed.

The taste of coppery blood filled my mouth and I gagged.

"Julianna. Julianna. Julianna."

My name was called out, again and again. Until my ears bled from the ominous voice.

"I'm scared."

I was too.

And I finally remembered...

Her screams.

The sound of my bones breaking.

My cries.

The sound of crushing glass.

Her stuttering breath.

And I remembered the silence.

I blinked and the darkness disappeared, replaced by a bloody Gracelynn. Her dead eyes cold and wide. Her mangled face.

I heard her voice, even though her body was too still. She wasn't breathing.

"Julianna."

“Gracelynn,” I cried.

The pungent scent of death filled my nose and I gagged again, fighting back the urge to retch.

“Why did you leave me?” the quiet voice accused.

“I didn’t!”

“Why didn’t you save me?”

Agony flicked through my veins. The pressure on my chest was unbearable. “I couldn’t.”

“My baby...”

Choking back on my cries, I tried to reach for her. “I’m s-s-sorry... Please, I’m sorry. Please. PLEASE!”

She faded away.

My body seized and everything went black.

My body startled awake and I stared at the ceiling, sucking in desperate breaths. My chest hurt and my face was wet with tears. My lips trembled with the effort to hold back my cries but I couldn’t, so I started choking on my heavy sobs.

The absolute terror of my nightmare paralyzed me and all I could do was stare at the ceiling. I thought I was moving on, finally putting Gracelynn’s death behind me. But the memories still haunted me.

I knew I shouldn’t have read those comments online. They were my trigger and now I was trapped in a never-ending cycle of nightmares once again. How unfair was life...

That I thought I had finally found my happily ever after.

Only for my past to come back to haunt me; surrounding me like evil cloak.

“I didn’t kill her,” I whispered, as if to remind myself. “It wasn’t my fault. The accident wasn’t my fault.”

My face and neck felt like they had been scratched raw. My scars itched badly and I had to fight the urge to dig my fingers into my face; to claw at my burned flesh.

No matter what those comments said online, no matter how much they tried to paint me as the villain – I wasn’t evil. I didn’t kill my sister.

I brushed away my tears, taking in shuddering breaths as I tried to calm my racing heart. Once I wasn’t shaking anymore, I forced myself out of bed. It was only supposed to be a nap...

How did my nap turn into such a horrid nightmare?

My phone rang, snapping me out of my thoughts. A quick peek at the caller ID told me that it was Mirai and I answered the call. “Hey.”

“Tell me how much you miss me,” she said in her usual cheery voice. Mirai was almost twenty years old now, but she was still the same old Mirai I met six years ago. I didn’t know if she had a sixth sense, but she almost always called when I needed some cheering up.

“Tell me how much *you* miss *me*.”

“A whole lot. I can’t wait to see Cameron again. I miss his sweet, chubby face. I should be back before the triplets are here!”

I hoped she would. I was going to need all the moral support with three newborns. “How’s Europe?” I asked eagerly.

“It’s so beautiful!” she practically squealed in my ears. “And everything I dreamed of. While I was in France, I was honestly contemplating finding myself a nice Parisian man and settling there. But after two months traveling around Europe, I realized that I miss home. Oh, how did that fundraiser event go yesterday? Better than the last one I hope?”

“It was fine,” I simply responded. I *wasn’t* fine.

Actually, it was an absolutely disaster. I was given dirty looks all night long. Some people were very much supportive of me and the cause – our mission was to raise awareness about victims and survivors of sex trafficking.

While others showed clear distaste for me on their faces.

I heard the horrible whispers...

“Her father was the biggest human trafficker of the country. What is she hoping to achieve with this event? Another sob story of hers?”

“She’s trying too hard that she seems fake.”

“I get shady vibes from her.”

“Her poor sister, though.”

“Was it really an accident?”

The whispers were not any different from the offensive comments I saw online this morning. Vile and sickening. Evil and revolting.

“It’s disgusting how she married her dead sister’s fiancé.”

“She should probably go back to wearing that veil. Her scars literally gave my toddler a nightmare.”

“Why can’t she just do plastic surgery?”

“Probably using her scars for sympathy.”

“No offense to anyone, but it’s kinda ew.”

“I bet they fuck in the dark so he doesn’t have to look at the she-version of Freddy Krueger.”

“How does he kiss her when she looks like THAT?”

Mirai sighed. “It doesn’t sound fine. I saw some of the posts on Facebook. Twitter is an absolute nightmare. These people are just cruel.”

My throat closed and when I swallowed, I almost choked on my saliva. “Um, yeah. Look I have to—”

My phone vibrated with another incoming call and I pulled it away from my ear. Killian was calling. “Hey, Mirai. I’ll call you back later. Killian is calling.”

“Okay, see you!” I hang up her call and answered Killian’s.

“Hey, did you have a good nap?” he greeted me tiredly. His warm, rich voice send a shiver down my body. A good shiver. The kind that made me feel fuzzy.

“Not really,” I answered truthfully, because I had vowed not to lie anymore. No more secrets. “What are you doing?”

“Preparing for next week’s debate. Working on some notes.” There was some rustling in the background before he continued. “Which is why I’m calling. I forgot one of my files at home. Samuel is coming to pick it up, I just wanted to let you know in advance.”

I sat forward, a better idea playing in my head. “It’s okay, I’ll bring you the files.”

“You don’t have to. Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“I want to see you.” He left this morning when I was still sleeping and I expected that he’d be home late tonight, way after Cameron and I had fallen asleep.

“Is everything okay, Princess?” Killian asked, his voice deepening with concern.

“Yes, I just... miss you.” I needed his arms around me, where I felt the safest.

Away from the whispers and rumors.

“Okay, see you then. I love you.”

That made me smile. “I love you too.”

We hang up and after I got dressed, I grabbed the file from his office and went to find my son. I found Cameron sitting on the couch, watching *The Boss Baby* for the umpteenth time while chewing on carrots.

“Little man didn’t want to nap today,” Selene said from beside him. He

obviously had her wrapped around his little finger.

“I don’t know where he gets all that energy.” My gaze flickered between him and the TV. “Do you mind watching him for a little longer? I just have to drop this file at Killian’s office.”

Selene shooed me away. “Go on. Little man and I will be fine.”

The moment I stepped out of the house, I was surrounded by my small team of bodyguards. Four of them. I thought it was a bit too much, but there was no arguing with Killian when it came to my protection.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Spencer. Your husband called and let us know that you’re leaving for his office. Will you be making any stops in between?”

Jackson asked. He was the one in charge and he also happened to be Samuel’s oldest brother.

Killian had trouble trusting people around me, so my bodyguards were all men he had personally known for years and trusted to keep me safe.

“Nope. Just straight to Killian’s office, please.”

The ride to his office was twenty minutes and I used the time to speak with Mirai. She told me all about her time in Europe, gushing about the places she visited and how much she wanted to hook up with one of the handsome locals. Mirai was spontaneous and I wouldn’t be surprised if she had *already* hooked up with said locals.

When the car slowed to a stop in front of a familiar building, I hang up. “We’re here, Mrs. Spencer.”

Jackson opened the door for me and I stepped out of the car, holding the file under my arm and my purse in my other hand.

It happened too quickly for me to realize what was actually happening before it was too late. The moment I stepped out of the car, I was suddenly surrounded by people. Crowding into me, trying to push past my bodyguards. My heart stammered and I looked around, panicked.

What was happening?

Where did these people come from? The sidewalk was empty a second ago.

The ground swayed under my feet as anxiety filled my cold veins. Panic turned into horror as I noticed the microphones and cameras blazing at me. They were in my face, behind me, all talking at the same time.

Horror turned into dread when I realized what was happening.

I was basically being attacked by the press.

They were too close; their voices too loud; their bodies pressing into me.

Almost aggressively. My bodyguards surrounded me, trying to hold them back as my lungs grew tight and my heart stuttered.

My vision blurred as I stumbled away, trying to get inside the Spencer Building. I brought the file up, hiding my face behind it as I tried to shield my eyes against all the bright flashes.

There was nowhere to go.

I was trapped.

Someone bumped into me. I didn't know who it was – the person trying to protect me or the ones who are on the verge of assaulting me. An unknown pair of sweaty hands tried to grab me and I stumbled away.

My breathing stuttered as I tried to find my footing, but my feet slipped from under me. The world swayed as my body tilted toward the road, onto the incoming traffic.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

I collapsed under my weight and I hit the asphalt, hard.

And then all I saw was darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Killian

A knock at the door pulled me away from my stack of papers. “Come in.”

I thought it was Julianna but to my surprise, Gideon strode in. “Oh, hey. This is an unexpected visit,” I drawled at my father-in-law. “Julianna will be glad to see you. She’s coming in a bit.”

He was silent for a moment and my brow furrowed. I eyed him closely and saw that he was tensed, as if he was getting ready for a battle. “Is everything okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is okay,” he finally spoke. “How can *you* think it is?”

I scowled. “I can’t read your mind, Gideon. What are you talking about?”

He made a harsh sound in the back of his throat before withdrawing something from the inside pocket of his jacket. A small stack of... pictures?

I cocked my head to the side, confused as I waited for him to continue. He flipped the first photo and my heart seized. “*This*,” he hissed. “I’m talking about this.”

Gideon carelessly threw the stack on my desk. The pictures flopped onto my lap and my jaw tightened. I fought against the urge to flinch, because fuck, it hurt. Seeing my wife’s photos scattered across my desk and on my lap; her scars were the main focus. Photoshopped in such a way that they appeared worse than they actually were. It was a painful reminder of how cruel people could be.

Julianna was so goddamn beautiful. She was my wife and the mother of my kids. But that wasn’t how she was portrayed in the media.

Her scars were made fun of.

Her character was vilified.

Every word she said was twisted against her.

Every action was scrutinized in such a way that painted her into a villain, instead of a victim.

The media *loathed* my wife.

And no matter how many times I tried to fix it; the hate has only gotten worst.

“Julianna says she’s okay with it. That she doesn’t care,” Gideon gritted out, slamming his fists onto the desk. “That it doesn’t matter what the people

say as long as she has you by her side. But is it really fucking okay?"

I squeezed my eyes shut because I knew he was right. He was absolutely correct.

It *wasn't* okay.

"Is it really fair for her to go through this because *you* are a public figure?" he accused sharply. "Because trust me, if Jules was a normal citizen as everyone else, no one would have given a shit about her past and she sure as hell wouldn't have been made into a mockery."

Gideon took a deep breath, shaking his head solemnly. "This is your life but it's not hers. She doesn't belong here, Killian."

"She is my wife." My fists clenched. His words were true, but I still felt defensive. "She belongs where I am."

He smoothed a hand over his face tiredly. "I'm not trying to separate you two. And I'm not asking you to make a choice either. I know how important this campaign is to you. Your late father would be proud of how far you've come along... and the man you've become. But you need to think this through with a clear mind." He paused and then sighed. "I'm just a worried father."

"Gideon—"

My door slammed open without a knock. Gideon swiveled around in surprise and I sat up straight, frowning at my assistant. She was clearly panicked and shaking. "What's wrong?"

She gasped dramatically and I worried if she was hyperventilating. Meera was otherwise mellow, so what could have her so shaken up?

"Um... J-Julianna," she wheezed. I blinked before my stomach dropped. "She's downstairs. There is an... e-emergency."

I was already sprinting out of the room before she could finish her sentence, Gideon closed at my heels. I slammed the buttons to the elevator and it was the longest fucking ride of my life as my whole body shook. Gideon was silent and even if I wanted, I couldn't speak.

My heart raced as I thought of all crazy, possible scenarios.

How badly she was hurt? What happened? Did she faint...? Maybe it wasn't anything serious.

Goddamn it, I fucking prayed it wasn't anything serious.

The elevator pinged and the doors opened. I ran out into the crowded lobby where everyone looked *panicky* and that was my first indication that something was wrong. People spared me sympathetic glances and fear slide

through my veins, beating strongly in my chest.

Julianna had to be okay. She had to be because I *couldn't* accept any other possible outcome.

The moment I stepped outside, onto the busy sidewalk – my whole world came to sudden halt. Time slowed; the ground swayed underneath my feet and there was an insistent ringing in my ears.

I forgot how to breathe.

A painful burning sensation slithered into my chest and it felt like my lungs were about to collapse.

My wife was on the ground, curled on her left side with her four bodyguards surrounding her. There were a few more strangers around her and I realized they were all trying to create a protective circle around Julianna. Hiding her from the press and the other curious people taking photos on their phones.

I broke through the protective barrier and sank to my knees next to her unconscious and limp body. Her head was on Jackson's lap and he was rubbing her hand between his.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice coming out choked.

"They crowded around us. And Julianna slipped into the incoming traffic," he explained shakily. "It happened so fast. I was able to pull her back into safety but I think she might have injured herself when she fell."

My stomach churned with nausea as I stared at her pale face.

"Has someone called 9-1-1?" Gideon demanded.

There was a chorus of yes as I carefully gathered my wife in my arms. "Julianna," I croaked. "Open your eyes for me, Princess. I need to see those pretty greys."

I waited for any signs that she heard me; maybe even a little twitch but she was *too* still. HA pasty face and cold hands; she *felt* fragile in my arms.

I held her tighter to my chest, whispering in her ears. "I got you. You're safe now."

Please, wake up.

I didn't care that I was in the middle of the sidewalk, holding my unconscious wife on my lap or that people were taking photos left and right. I just needed Julianna to be okay, for her to wake up because the uncertainty was killing me.

I heard the sirens and familiar voice around me, but nothing made sense to me. My wife was my sole focus but then paramedics surrounded us and one

of them took Julianna away from me. I watched in a daze as they put her on a stretcher and then my gaze dropped to my empty arms.

Dread filled my chest as they loaded her up into the ambulance but before they could close the doors, I lunged forward. "I'm her husband," I spoke hurriedly; frantic. "Please, I need to be with her."

"Get in," the older male paramedics demanded. The relief that encompassed me was instant but not enough, because Julianna was still unconscious and probably hurt. There was no physical injuries but what about the triplets?

"Is she okay?" I asked shakily.

The woman who was assessing Julianna's condition spared me a quick glance. Her lips were thinned in a grim line. "We're going to get her to the hospital and they're going to do everything they can for your wife and unborn baby."

"Babies," I corrected, as if that would make any difference. "We're having triplets."

The paramedics shared a look but was stayed quiet.

I felt numb by the time we got to the hospital. We got surrounded by nurses and doctors as they wheeled Julianna away from me. I didn't fight it because they were my only hope at fixing whatever was wrong with my wife.

Words hit my ears as panic coursed through my veins and fear slithered down my spine.

"Maybe a concussion."

"Could also be internal injuries."

"Paramedics said she's pregnant with triplets."

There was a curse and then more words that didn't make sense to me.

She was taken into the ER and wheeled into a room that I wasn't allowed in. I paced outside the door as Gideon and Samuel joined me. Nurses went in and out of the room and every time I tried to get inside, they blocked my path.

"Is she okay? Is my wife okay? She has to be okay, right?" I kept repeating to no one in particular. "She has to be okay. She has to be okay. She'll be okay."

Finally, after it felt like hours – a doctor walked out. I lunged forward, almost frantically. "What's going on? Why is no one telling me anything? Is she going to be okay?"

"Mrs. Spencer has had two seizures back-to-back and there's a placenta

abruption. We have to prep for a C-Section immediately,” he announced tightly. “Your wife is in extreme distress and so are the babies.”

His word filled me with terror and I don’t know if it showed on my face because he gave me a sympathetic look. “Does that mean – is Julianna, is my wife – what are the risks? She’s only twenty-nine weeks along. Isn’t that too soon?”

The doctor nodded. “The triplets will be premature and will have to be put in newborn intensive care unit. Our goal is to safely deliver all three babies without any lasting damages.”

“And my wife? What about her?” I couldn’t even hide the fear and pain in my voice.

“I can assure you, both mother and babies are our priorities.”

Then he was gone and I was left with only his words to hang on to; to *hope*.

I paced the waiting room. Gideon and Samuel were both quiet but I appreciated the fact that I wasn’t alone here. I didn’t know how much time passed. Long seconds turned into agonizing minutes. Maybe it was an hour? Maybe more?

It felt like *forever*.

I didn’t know how much longer I could last because I was going absolutely insane. I ran a shaky hand over my face and then my gaze flickered to Gideon’s. “Can you call Selene for me? She’s watching Cameron.”

My father-in-law nodded. “I already did before I got to the hospital,” he responded gravely. “She’ll take care of Cameron. *You* focus on Jules and the triplets.”

I walked to the windows, numbly staring outside. Samuel offered me coffee but I shook my head. I tried to sit down but I was antsy for that, so I went back to pacing. Back and forth; fists clenching, silently praying and with my heart in my throat.

The sound of the door creaking open had me swivelling around and the doctor stepped out, his face neutral.

“My wife,” I choked. “Is she okay? What’s happening? The babies?”

“Your wife is still unconscious, but she should be awake soon. Mrs. Spencer had lost some blood, so she’ll be weak for a few days. While the delivery was harsh on her body, she’s out of any immediate danger and is recovering.”

Relief was instant and my legs grew weak. “Oh, thank God. Thank God,” I

breathed. “Thank you. And what about the triplets?”

The doctor sighed. “Mr. Spencer, I want you to know we’ve tried our utmost best—”

My heart squeezed. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, his eyes turning glassy. “One of the girls didn’t survive the birth. She was the smallest of the triplets, weighing barely three pounds and we tried everything to bring her back but... I’m so sorry.”

I stumbled back, shaking with the force of my barely contained emotions. The pain was sharp and brutal. “You’re saying that one of my daughters... my daughter, she didn’t....”

The doctor shook his head dejectedly. My knees weakened and I stumbled down into the chair behind me. I blinked and then the shaking started; my heart racing and the blood coursing through my veins growing cold.

My chest shuddered as raw sounds of anguish tore through me and my heart *bled*.

I could hear Gideon speaking to the doctor but I wasn’t listening. Shock coursed through me and I was trying to make sense of it all.

One of the girls didn’t survive the birth.

This couldn’t be... real.

But it was. As much as it made me sick in my stomach, it was real. I swallowed down the acidic bile in my mouth before I could gag on it.

Eventually, I stopped shaking. Samuel clasped my shoulders. “They have shifted Julianna to a private room. You should be with her.”

I followed Gideon upstairs, slightly unsteady on my feet. The minute I walked into Julianna’s room, my heart seized at the sight of her. Looking so small and fragile in the hospital bed. Tears clouded my vision as I walked closer. The expression on her beautiful face was peaceful and that broke my heart because for how long?

How do I tell my wife that we lost one of our babies?

I ran a knuckle down her warm cheek. “I got you, Princess.”

I took a seat on the chair beside her bed, taking one of her hands in mine as I waited for her to wake up. It felt like forever and I leaned my forehead against our laced fingers. I waited and waited some more.

The door behind me opened and Julianna’s father stepped into the room. He walked around the bed and stood on the opposite side of her head, hovering over his daughter, watching her intently with heartbreak written all over his face.

My eyes locked with Gideon. He stared at me; there was no judgement. He was just *waiting*.

And I knew exactly what I had to do.

My dead father would probably be disappointed in me.

But I had to make a choice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julianna

I woke up feeling slightly numb and my head was all fuzzy, *confused*. My eyes darted around the hospital room and before landing on my husband who was sitting next to my bed, with my hand between his. I remembered what happened outside the Spencer's Building but everything after that was just an empty blank in my memory.

"What—" My throat was so dry, I could barely speak. I swallowed a few times before trying to speak again. "What happened?"

My whole body was sore and there was a tinge of discomfort in my lower stomach. I looked down, expecting to see my heavy pregnant belly and while my stomach was still swollen, but it was fairly smaller than I remembered.

"Killian," I gasped in alarm, trying to sit up but then I whimpered as agony laced through my body. "My babies, w-where are they?"

He lunged off the chair when I cried out and leaned over the bed, trying to get me to lay back down. "What happened?" I demanded sharply. "Killian!"

He swallowed hard, his gaze shifting around the room before coming back to me. "You were in distress and so were the triplets, so they had to do an emergency C-section," he explained slowly. "The babies are premature but they will be okay."

"Oh, thank God. Thank God," I sighed, slumping back against the pillow. "Where are they? Can I see them?"

His grief-stricken expression confused me. Killian just said that the babies were okay. Why did he look so... *heartbroken*?

"What's wrong?" I asked, my voice cracking. Panic rose inside me and fear slithered through my veins. "There's something you're not telling me. Tell me!"

My husband pressed his shaky fist to his mouth and I watched him swallow back a cry. "One of the babies... she... didn't make it. She didn't..."

My heart stammered as Killian dropped to his knees, as if he couldn't hold himself up anymore. "You—" I choked out. "W-what did you just say? No. No. NO!"

"Julianna," Killian started but I was already shaking my head.

"Bring me my baby. I want to see her. I want to see her right now, Killian.

Let me see her, please. Oh God, *please.*”

My heart thudded frantically as Killian nodded. He called for the nurse and then it was the longest minute of my life before the door opened. A nurse walked in, holding a little bundle in her arms.

My chest tightened; the pain almost indescribable. My baby girl was swaddled in a soft purple blanket and I was desperate to hold her, to look at her face and to memorize every inch of her.

I opened my arms toward the nurse. “I want to hold my baby.”

She laid my daughter in my arms and I instinctively pulled her closer to my chest, staring at her tiny face. She was so small; her whole body could easily fit in her father’s palm.

I spared the nurse a look. “Do you think I can do skin to skin with her? Will that work? Maybe she just needs my warmth, to remind her that’s she safe. She’ll be fine, right? Skin to skin care is the best way for mother and baby bond. That’s we need. I wasn’t awake when she was born but I’m here now. She’ll be fine,” I repeated, firmly believing in my words even though they sounded unreal to my own ears.

Killian made a painful sound from the back of his throat but I didn’t dare to look at him. I couldn’t watch him break down. *I couldn’t.*

The nurse winced and she gave me a helpless look. “Ma’am, she is—”

“Please,” I interrupted. “Just... let me do this. I want to hold my daughter; skin to skin.”

Her eyes were glassy but I didn’t let her let dejection sway me. She nodded and then helped me my hospital gown down. I took my daughter out of her tight swaddling and then held her against my bare chest, her cool skin against my warmth.

“Hey, baby girl. Oh, look at you,” I breathed, caressing the top of her head. She had little fuzzy black hair, like her father’s. “You’re the most beautiful and precious thing I’ve ever laid eyes on,” I whispered, choking on my tears. “You’re going to be okay. Mommy is here now.”

I just couldn’t accept that my baby was gone. So, I spoke to her. For what felt like hours, until my throat was sore from crying and talking. I told her about my dreams of us – our little family, while I silently willed her to breathe. To live.

I yearned to hear her little cry.

But she never did.

I longed to feel her warmth.

But she was too still.

I cried until it felt like my throat was bleeding from the inside. The crumbling of my soul was painful but what broke me was seeing my strong, confident and arrogant husband break down.

“Killian,” I whispered shakily, gingerly wrapping one hand around his. Our fingers entwined together and we desperately held on. He brought his head up, looking at me tearfully. His face was red and wet and his anguished cries filled my ears.

I stroke a knuckle against our daughter’s soft cheek. “God gave us a little angel.”

Agony was written all over his face; his expression wretched and dark torment in his eyes. I had never felt so hopeless before, but I had to accept that our baby girl was really gone.

I gripped his hand tighter. “Hold us, Killian.”

His chest rattled with a sharp inhale and I didn’t have to ask him twice. He sat on the edge of the bed, curling one of his arms around my shoulders. “Don’t let go,” I pleaded brokenly.

“I won’t,” he croaked, his devastation seeping out in his words. “I got you, Princess. I got us.”

I pressed my lips to my daughter’s tiny head. “*Alina*,” I said in a hushed tone. “It means light or the bright one. She’s our light. Our little Angel. Her name is Alina.”

Killian lowered his head, pressing a tender kiss to our daughter’s little feet. “Alina,” he whispered roughly. “It’s perfect.”

I held our daughter for a moment longer before finally whispering a goodbye in her ears and then handing her back to the nurse. My heart *ached* as I parted from her, knowing that it would be the last time I was holding my daughter.

I turned toward Killian, burying my face into his throat and letting out a silent cry. I didn’t know how long we sat like this, but eventually I had no more tears left to cry. My head was hurting and my body was extremely sore; while my heavy heart bore the invisible scars of today.

“I w-want to see Alina’s sisters,” I finally said.

Thirty minutes later, I was wheeled into the NICU, where my daughters were staying. They were in two different incubators, with tubes and wires attached to their little bodies.

“They are tiny.” My voice cracked as I placed a hand on the outside of the incubator. “They are okay, right? Healthy? Safe? Are there any complications?”

“Both babies are actually doing pretty good for being preemies,” the doctor announced with a kind smile. “Their respiratory systems aren’t fully developed yet, so they need help breathing. And they don’t have the ability to coordinate reflexes like sucking and swallowing, so they are going to be receiving most of the nutrition and fluids through an IV or feeding tube. Though, you should be able to breastfeed them in a few weeks. Maybe even earlier if they are progressing well. Of course, they need to gain a few more pounds before they can go home.”

He pointed to the incubator on my left. “Baby Number One weighs only three pounds and three ounces.” And then he pointed at the incubator I was closest to. “Baby Number Two weighs three pounds and five ounces.”

They were so tiny; so fragile looking in those incubators with diapers that looked too big for their small bodies.

“Can we hold them?” Killian asked, as he stared down at our daughters in both wonderment and *fear*.

“Absolutely,” the doctor chirped. “We highly recommend the kangaroo care, which is skin-to-skin. And since both mother and father are here, you can hold both babies.”

The nurses carefully took our daughters out from their respective incubators and brought one to me and the other to Killian. They helped me lower my hospital gown and then placed my baby between my bare breasts, with her tubes and all.

She let out a tiniest cry and I gently brushed a finger over her cheek. “It’s okay, little one. You’re okay,” I crooned to her. She was warm and alive, the complete opposite of Alina. As much as I was thankful for that, it still *hurt*.

My gaze flickered to Killian, who was sitting in a chair, holding our other daughter to his bare chest. She looked so tiny and vulnerable against his wide chest. But I knew without a doubt, that was where our daughter was the safest. It was almost like we were somehow connected; he looked up at the same time and our eyes locked. “She’s so perfect,” he mouthed.

I nodded tearfully. He cradled her tenderly, stroking a finger up and down her back in a soothing manner.

A tear slid down my scarred cheek as I caressed my baby’s fuzzy head. “You’re Gracelynn,” I told her. “You’re our blessing and named after the

purest soul I knew.”

“And you’re Lydia,” Killian whispered, loud enough for me to hear. He was looking down at our daughter, completely awestruck by her tiny self.

“Our beautiful, noble one.”

After a second, my husband’s eyes met mine and my heart stuttered.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you,” I breathed.

A week later

Once Cameron was sound asleep, I pressed a quick kiss to his forehead and I got off the bed. My stomach growled as I walked into the kitchen to find myself something to eat.

Killian would be coming home soon and then we’d go back to visit Gracelynn and Lydia. While I recovered in the hospital, I was able to spend most of my time in the NICU with my daughters. But when they were only six days old, I was officially deemed fully recovered and healthy, therefore I was discharged from the hospital. There was nothing more I wanted than to stay with them, but I couldn’t.

Cameron needed me. And his sisters had to stay in the NICU for almost two months before they were strong enough to come home.

Leaving our new babies at the hospital and coming home without her was a heartbreaking experience. I remembered crying all night long the first two days we got back home. I sobbed over the lost of Alina. And I cried over the fact that I couldn’t be with my babies twenty-four-seven.

Two weeks have passed and I still felt so... *helpless*. Pumping was what kept my sanity somewhat intact. It was the one thing that I could do as their mother, that was contributing to their growth and development.

I was chewing on a cold turkey sandwich as I scrolled through my messages. After I was discharged from the hospital, I deleted all my social media apps and I stopped going online. I didn’t want to know what they were saying about me anymore. I stopped caring because they would always find a reason to hate me. I had more important things to worry about now.

I was scrolling through my game apps when I accidentally clicked on the news and before I swiped it away, a headline caught my attention.

My heart stuttered and I dropped my sandwich. It splattered messily onto

the kitchen counter as I read the most recent news article. My stomach churned and with my heart in my throat, I fought against the urge to retch.

Oh God, what has Killian done?

Shock coursed through my veins and I was still staring at my phone with wide eyes when he walked through the door of our house. "I'm home," he announced wearily.

He stalked into the kitchen, carelessly tugging on his tie before dropping it on the counter. I rounded on him before he could say anything else. "What is this?" I questioned sharply, showing him the screen of my phone.

Killian barely even looked at the article. He crowded into my space, pushing me back into the counter and our eyes locked. "I did what I had to do," he said slowly, with complete confidence.

"You didn't tell me," I accused. "Why didn't tell me? This is a huge decision, Killian. You withdrew from the presidential race!"

My heart was racing but he barely even flinched at my outburst. When my husband responded ever so calmly, I wanted to smack him. "I knew you'd read it on the news and I was coming home, to tell you just that."

I shook my head before inhaling a shuddering breath. "Why?"

His lips twitched with a bittersweet smile. "I can't lead a country that hates my wife and I refuse to raise our children in such a toxic environment."

"I can't let you walk away from the one thing you've worked so hard to achieve." The tears streamed down my cheeks. "You spent two freaking decades working to get this point. To make yourself worthy of this opportunity. I won't let you give it up for me. This is your dream," I cried, pushing against his chest with my fists.

Killian's arm snaked out and he gripped my hand, tugging me to him before his lips crashed against mine. He swallowed my cries and kissed away my gasp. His tongue drove into my mouth, tasting me. "*You* are my dream," he rasped into my lips.

"Don't do this," I begged weakly. "You'll regret it and then you'll hate me."

He lowered his forehead to mine. "I love my country but if I have to choose, I'll always choose you. But you know what? I didn't even have to choose because you're my only choice, Julianna. Always and forever. Remember our vows?"

"I remember *my* vows. I said I'll support you; in your dreams, in your achievements, I will be by your side. Always."

Our hearts thudded to the same rhythm and my whole body was shaking. Killian pressed another tender kiss on my lips. “And you do support me. You always have. Our family is my dream.”

“I can’t let you sacrifice—”

“And I won’t sacrifice *us* for my own selfish ambitions.”

My fingers dug into his chest, feeling his strong heartbeat. There was utmost sincerity in his dark gaze and I searched for regret or disappointment, but found none. He was really serious about this. My shoulder slumped, the fight leaving me.

Killian curled his arms around me, holding me closer. Safe and warm in his arms. “Once Gracelynn and Lydia are discharged from the NICU, I’m taking you and our babies home, Princess.”

“I am home. With you. In your arms. I’m home, Killian.”

But I knew exactly what he meant.

We were going back to the island, away from this toxic environment and to a place where we belonged. Where we were happy and safe.

A place we could call *home*.

EPILOGUE

“Piece of crap,” I hissed at my car before kicking my flat tire. “Did you really have to give up on me today? I have an important interview!”

My car was practically a piece of junk but it wasn’t like I could afford much from a part-time babysitting job. And now I was probably going to be miss my interview.

I bent down to examine my tire more closely, only for my handbag to fly open, dumping all my contents onto the ground.

With a frustrated growl, I dropped my handbag next to the mess and then stomped to my trunk, taking out the jack and my spare tire. I could change a flat tire, except the only issue was that I wasn’t really good at it and it might take me more than ten minutes. Goddamn it, could this day get any worse?

“Excuse me, miss,” a deep voice called out from behind me. Heavy footsteps approached me and then his voice was much, much closer. “Do you need any help? It seems like you might be having a bad day. I can change the tires for you.”

“Thank you,” I responded politely without turning around. “But I can do it.”

I knelt beside the flat tire and tried to probably angle the jack but then it slipped from my hand. My eyes squeezed shut and I took in a deep breath before opening my eyes again. A quick glance at my watch told me that I was going to be very late for my interview and I couldn’t afford that.

If I got this job, I’ll finally be able to quit waitressing and babysitting. I might be able to pay my rent on time and have enough money to spare for basic necessities, like food.

I spun on my heels to face the stranger and my breath staggered at the sight of him. He was tall, like *really* tall. I was five foot seven, so not particularly short and this man towered over me. He had to be at least six foot five.

Mr. Stranger Danger crossed his thick arms over his wide chest, the muscles of his biceps bulging under the long sleeves. Was he a bodybuilder? Because damn, he was all muscles.

My gaze roved over his chiseled face, messy black hair and his blue eyes. He looked like he walked right out a romance novel, the smutty ones I like to read on my kindle.

His blue eyes raked over me just as I had done to him and his lips twitched

in a slow smirk. “The tire,” he muttered. “Do you want me to change it?”

I gestured toward my crappy car, my heart stammering. “Be my guest,” I responded, slightly breathless.

He sauntered over to my car and then squatted down, immediately getting to work. “Do you have somewhere to be? You seemed in a rush when you left the store,” he said smoothly, his voice a deep timbre that sent a tingle down my spine.

“Yeah, I have an interview.” I took a small step back, admiring his tall and masculine form. His dark jeans clung to his ass tightly and I quickly looked away. Okay, I lied. I definitely sneaked a peek at his ass.

It only took him a few minutes to change my tire and when he was done, he wiped his hands over his jeans and stood up. “There you go. All done, milady.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, a smile playing across my lips. “I really appreciate it.”

Mr. Stranger Danger extended a hand toward me and I took it, without question. Almost like it was purely instinct; an invisible string pulling me toward him. It didn’t make any sense. Why was I so taken by him? I’d dated a few men before but no one have had such effect on me during our first meeting.

“Elias,” he said, introducing himself.

“Nice to meet you.” My smile widened. “I’m Arabella.”

Elias squeezed my hand and when he spoke again, my name rolled off his tongue in seductive manner, as if he was tasting it. “*Arabella.*”

Time slowed and I exhaled a shuddering breath. I’d never met this man before yet I couldn’t explain the familiarity of his voice, his touch or his smell.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

If you want a further look in their future...

Julianna and Killian went back to Isle Rosa-Maria, so they are always surrounded by the people they love. Cameron is extremely protective of his sisters.

Ragna ends up giving birth to a foal named, Champ. Since Cameron shares the same love for horses as his father, he claimed Champ as his own. Of course, neither Julianna nor Killian refused him.

As for Arabella and Elias...

They fell in love *again*.

And this time? They lived happily ever after.

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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.

BOOKS BY LYLAH JAMES

Tainted Hearts Series

The Mafia and His Angel: Part One

The Mafia and His Angel: Part Two

The Mafia and His Angel: Part Three

Blood and Roses

The Mafia and His Obsession: Part One

The Mafia and His Obsession: Part Two

Truth and Dare Duet

DO YOU DARE? (Book one)

I DARE YOU (Book two, the conclusion)