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Chapter 171 - 180

Watching Ace leave was painfully beyond description. I just feel that he has taken a part of me the moment he left. My life will never be the same now that he's away.

After the private Jet left, I stayed inside my hospital room. All I wanted at that moment was to spend my time alone and have some privacy. Claire and father were considerate enough to give me that. After they helped me inside my room, they both kissed me goodnight and left.

The moment the door closed, a deep sigh escaped my lips. My chest still feels heavy and any moment from now, I feel as if I'm going to cry again. From the amount of tears I shed, I would undoubtedly suffer from dehydration from continuous crying.

But then no one could blame me for crying. The man I love was fighting for his life and it wasn't even sure if he's going to survive. I'm not trying to sound so negative but I can't help myself but think about the worst thing that could possibly happen. In case it actually happens I want to be prepared.

I reached for the remote control and turned the ceiling lights off. I then turned my attention to the lampshade which was within my reach and turned it on so it would help illuminate the room. I then leaned back to the stack of pillows behind my back.

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When I'm comfortably settled, I closed my eyes and my lips start to move to a soulful prayer. Automatically, tears slowly fall from my eyes once more while I pour all my emotions into my prayer.

All I'm praying that moment is Ace's safety. It's okay if he won't remember me as long as he's safe it's okay with me.

Tears continuously flow down my cheeks while I pray.

Perhaps I was too tired and emotionally drained that just after I finished my prayers, I immediately drifted into a deep slumber.

The next day I was discharged from the hospital. I should be happy that I was finally out of the room that made me feel like I'm trapped inside a cell but I didn't feel any better.

I still feel empty and worried inside. I'm not going to be okay unless Ace's condition becomes stable.

I look at the white exterior of the hospital one last time before climbing into the car while father assists me. A sigh of relief escaped my lips when I sat on the soft cushioned seat and stretched my slightly trembling legs.

The door on my left closed softly and the other door to my right opened. Claire slowly climbed inside and occupied the seat next to me before pulling the door closed.

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"Are you okay?" She asked, her fine features twisting with concern and her hand automatically grabbed my hands to check if it was cold.

I watched her forehead scrunched with worry. "I'm fine Claire," I replied. My other hand flew to the bandage on my forehead. "My wound just ached a bit but I'm fine." I added to reassure her. She didn't argue but her facial expression says she didn't believe me.

Father climbed into the car beside the driver's seat and closed the door of the car. "To the airport please," He said to the driver and followed his instruction without saying a word.

When the car rolled smoothly on the highway I shifted my attention outside the window to distract myself from the view. Somehow, the beautiful green scenery eased my worries a little bit. I have the view to focus my attention to and it would help me avoid worrying about Ace too much.

The trip to the nearest airport is a thirty minute drive. After a short journey we are able to reach our destination safely. I nearly applauded myself as I climbed out of the car and realized that I was able to successfully divert my attention away from any negative thoughts for a short while.

A flight attendant in blue uniform greeted us upon our arrival at the airport and led us straight into Vip area where a private plane waited for us.

The owner of the said Airport was Claire's close friend and business acquaintance. She willingly extended her help when she learned that Claire needed immediate transportation that would help her reach Cordova quickly.

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Claire was very pleased when her friend offered a private plane and she agreed immediately. So the moment I was discharged from the hospital we decided to quickly head to the airport and board on a private plane in order for us to reach our destination faster.

We are all worried about Vien and Faith that's why we are trying to return to the Crawford Mansion as quickly as possible. It's almost a week since I last saw them and I'm dying to be with them too.

We entered the private plane. The inside screamed of luxury and comfort. It was large and spacious that a hundred people could fit inside but it was specifically made to cater only a maximum of 12 persons.

I occupied the seat near the window while father and Claire occupied the seat on the other side of the aisle.

The leather seat was so soft that my body sank on the feathery softness of the cushion after I sat down. I let go a soft sigh and laid my head on the headrest and closed my eyes.

I heard footsteps approaching and my eyes snapped open and saw a flight attendant with the same blue uniform heading in our direction to inform us that the private plane was set to take off after thirty minutes.

After informing us about the departure time, she explained everything that needed to be explained like safety precautions and do's and don't while the plane is up in the air. After she finished the pre-flight briefing the flight

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attendant?headed back to the door with a warning sign STRICTLY EMPLOYEES.

I patiently waited until the announcement of the take off sounded into the speaker before I closed my eyes and listened to the music playing on my earphones.

Chapter 172

The four hours journey back to Cordova where Crawford Mansion was located seemed to take longer than usual.

I sat on my seat, listening to the songs of Taylor Swift blasting on my earphones to cheer myself up. But then I must have chosen the wrong song that I found myself? drifting in a sea of indescribable melancholy. Instead of feeling better which is my plan my chest became heavier. I decided to end the last song playing on my earphones before deciding to turn my ipod off.

A deep sigh escaped my lips and I shifted my gaze to the window, towards the breathtaking view of the exquisite sky that looked as if they were painted by an artist. Sadly, the sight was pretty but it failed to cheer me up.

There's nothing that could make me better right now except knowing Ace's life is out of danger now, I told myself as I sighed for the second time.

"Excuse me Ma'am, Breakfast is ready." A flight attendant said, startling me from my burgeoning thoughts. I didn't? realize she was there.. Perhaps I was too deep into my thoughts that I didn't even hear her approaching my way.

My gaze landed on the food trolley standing in the aisle. The enchanting aroma of food wafted to the air. I wasn't even feeling hungry but I knew I

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needed to eat so I could regain my strength and so I nodded my head signalling her that I want to have my food served.

The flight attendant flashed me a smile that could light up the whole plane by how radiant it was and gracefully began serving the food on top of the table in front of me.

When she was finished, I thanked her and flashed her a smile, even if it was forced at least I gave her one. She pulled the food trolley to the opposite of the aisle where Claire and Alexander were seated and started to serve them breakfast.

I returned my attention back to the food on top of the table and noticed that they all looked delicious and very appealing but when I lifted the spoonful of food into my mouth I couldn't savor the taste.

I continued to eat even though I couldn't taste the food well. When my gaze accidentally landed on father and Claire, they were heartily eating breakfast. I turned back my attention to the food and resumed eating to regain the nourishment my body needed.

Minutes passed by and the plates in front of me were now surprisingly empty. I ate a bit too much for someone who is not hungry. Perhaps because I haven't eaten anything for a couple of days.

Claire and father had finished eating too and the flight attendant who served our food was back to clear our table.

She first cleared Claire and Father's table before she turned to my direction, gathered the soiled plates and placed it inside the food trolley. Then she proceeded to clean my table. When she was finished, she pushed the trolley across the aisle and vanished to the door.

Since I have nothing to do, I turned the television on and found a channel with a movie playing on. The movie was great but I fell asleep halfway because I

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was exhausted. I didn't sleep well last night. When I finally opened my eyes, a different movie was already playing.

An announcement blasted on the speaker saying that the plane was about to land soon. I brushed my hair with my fingers to freshen myself up. I don't want to get off the plane looking so stressed.

I hastily grabbed the lipstick on my bag and applied some to my lips. My grandmother was waiting at the airport? together with my brothers to pick us up.

Grandma would go crazy if she sees how pale I look.

At last, the private plane safely landed at the airport. For a moment, the melancholy that occupied my inside was replaced with excitement.

Home at last, I mumbled softly. I took a subtle breath of fresh air after I was out of the plane.

The cold morning air caressed my cheeks making me momentarily close my eyes from the comforts it provides. I haven't felt this kind of peace these past few weeks and to actually feel it again makes me feel good and more alive.

As I expected, I quickly spotted Melissa in the Crowd, surrounding her were my eight brothers. Their location is not hard to spot since my brothers clearly stand out in the crowd while they hold a banner with the sign, 'welcome back Phoenix' which was written in bold capital letters.

They waved at me cheerfully. I waived back as I made my way towards their direction. To see my family again and to feel the warmth of their love and comfort makes me feel a lot better.

When I was a few meters away from them I crossed the distance that stood between us by running. Grandmother hugged me tightly when I reached her side. When she let go, she cupped my face and intently looked at me with tears upon her exquisite eyes that spoke how much she missed me.

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"I'm so glad you're safe." She whispered fondly with her eyes glowing with relief.

Tears blinded my gaze that I lost track who was in front of me as they hugged me one by one.

Having them all with me feels indescribably good.

The sweet warmth of their embrace gave me new found strength.

I hugged them back with equal ardor. That way I could express how much I appreciate their presence.

"We're attracting too much attention." Father said to capture our attention. When my gaze shifted to his direction, he was laughing.

"Why do we hop in the car so we would be on our way. Vien and Faith are waiting for us at home." Grandmother said and by the mention of my children my heart swelled with tenderness.

After we all agreed we headed to the car. Minutes after, five cars were safely traversing the highway under a clear blue sky.

I can't wait to meet my children.

Chapter 173

My brother Ethan drove the car while the rest of the cars trailed behind him. Beside him, father sat with his gaze straight ahead on the road.

In the backseat of the car, I sat comfortably. My gaze directed to the scene passing right through the partially opened window of the car.

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On the opposite side of the car, Claire gracefully sat while she conversed with grandma who was sitting in between us.

The two women maintained a light conversation as our journey went on while I on the other hand preferred to silently listen to them.

Time passed by and soon enough, the gigantic Crawford Mansion came to view. My heart started to pump wild inside my chest and excitement began to bubble from inside me.

The colossal iron gates automatically opened and the car entered inside. Impatiently, I waited until the car Ethan was driving pulled into a stop right in front of the mansion..

The moment the car stopped, the door of the mansion flung open. A woman with short black hair, wearing a beautiful floral pink dress emerged from the door. When she turned in the direction where the car had stopped I had finally had a glimpse of her face. I realized it was Elisa, my best friend. She cut her hair shorter and it made her long even more stunning.

Fondness sprung at my now teary eyes as I looked at her. Cradled underneath her breast was my daughter Faith while on her other hand she was clutching Vien's hand.

I hasten out of the car almost immediately without waiting for Ethan to pull the door open for me. Then I was running towards Elisa's direction with tears abundantly flowing through my now flushed cheeks.

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Vien started crying as she met me halfway. My daughter looked adorable in her sky blue dress and matching blue sandals. Her long hair was neatly pinned on her head with a ribbon with a color similar to her clothes.

I wrapped her tight into my arms as if I never want to let go. The weeks I had been away felt like extremely long months to me. I thought I would never be able to hold her into my arms.

Now that I'm holding her it gives me a heavenly feeling and I never want this moment to end in fear that it would turn out to be only a dream.

"I-I m-miss y-you mama," Vien said after a short moment. I gave her a sweet smile and landed a kiss on her rosy cheeks. I noticed that her speech improved a bit. It's not as slow as before. Thanks to her therapy, she could now actually speak clearly even if she stammers.

"I miss you too, Vien," I replied as I wiped the tears at the corner of her eyes. "Mama will never leave you again," I promised without taking my eyes off her. Whatever happens, I'm not going to leave my children again.

Elisa was full of smiles when I turned in her direction. Her eyes were wide and glowing with tears while she looked at me.

My observant eyes wandered through her radiant face. She looked so breathtakingly beautiful and she appeared more radiant than the sun shining from the clear blue sky. I didn't need to ask any more questions to know that something good happened while I'm away. She clearly looked so in love.

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I took Vien's hand and led her in Elisa's direction. I temporarily let go of Vien's hand when we reached her spot.

"I'm glad you're finally here." She whispered as she handed me Faith who looked at me with wide innocent eyes while she wiggled in excitement. "We all missed you. " She added and gave me a quick hug.

"I missed you all too," I replied without tearing my gaze to the angel in my arms who continued to flail her hands in joy as if she sensed her mother was back after a long time of absence.

Tenderness swells inside me while I hold my baby into my arms. The night Vince tried to kill both me and Ace was the day I thought I would never have the second chance to hold her again. I even thought I would never have the chance to see them again. Thankfully, God is so good that he did not allow evil to win.

Angela was killed. Ace's father was poisoned. Samantha committed suicide. Vince was shot in the heart and he died instantly. They proved that evil never wins. Fate gave them the karma they deserved.

Now that the people who kept me miserable all these years are all dead, I could now live with my children in peace.

I landed a kiss on Faith's temples that sent her giggling. A wide smile stretches on my lips while I look at her seraphic face.

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My thoughts were cut short when Ethan cleared his throat. When I lifted my gaze to him, my eyes widened after seeing him stand next to Elisa with his arms protectively wrapped around her narrow waist.

A gigantic smile spread on his face and a blush crept on his cheeks when his eyes met mine. His inky eyes were glowing. He has the exact appearance of a man who was in love.

"Phoenix, Elisa, and I were married." He announced, the blush on his cheeks deepened. "The truth is.... We actually eloped."

My eyes popped open from what he revealed. I was so happy for the two of them. I'm elated to hear that they reconciled.

"I'm so happy for you, Ethan," I said and crumpled his hair like an older sister would. "I'm glad that the two of you end up together." My eyes narrowed and I changed my tone into a strict sister. "Just don't break her heart again or I will break your bones," I added which Ethan replied with a boyish grin.

"I won't." He promised sincerely and hearing him say that I finally believe he will fulfill his words. "I won't do anything to hurt her and our baby boy." He said to my surprise and when my gaze shifted to Elisa, she gave me a smile confirming what her husband said.

They are having a child. A baby boy.

Chapter 174

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"This calls for a celebration." Father said from behind me. He then slowly walked towards Ethan and placed an arm on his eldest son's shoulders with a wide smile plastered on his face. "After a long wait, I will finally have my first male grandson." He exclaimed, brimming with pride.

Ethan lovingly beamed towards his wife whose hands he was holding. Elisa's cheeks turned red as tomatoes against his affectionate glance. She squeezed his hands and flashed him a tender and heart-melting smile.

The simple gesture brought a beautiful smile into Ethan's face. He leaned closer to land a kiss on Elisa's forehead but she evaded him with a scolding look as if to warn him that they're not alone. In which he responded, "Don't worry, they won't mind," then stole a kiss from her cheeks in her utter embarrassment. He was rewarded with a gentle poke on the ribs with her elbow.

"I agree with you, Alexander." Melissa said as she stepped in and came to Elisa's rescue. She then cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. "I will have our servants prepare a simple dinner party for all of us. We need to celebrate an upcoming family member and also Ethan's marriage." She said in which we all agreed.

"Mama." Vien said suddenly taking all our eyes. Her dainty fingers tugging at the hem of my blouse in order to capture my attention. She was hiding behind my legs as if she was shy to be seen while the adults talked.

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I smiled at Vien reassuringly and ruffled her soft hair which was the same exact shade of Ace's hair. "It's okay." I said softly while staring at the depths of her beautiful blue eyes which reminds me so much of her father.

Father's gaze shifted to Vien who buried her cute little face behind my back as if she was embarrassed. When she peeked at him he smiled fondly at her.

"Don't be shy Vien." He said as he slowly walked towards her direction and ruffled her hair, "You will always be grandpa's first and favorite grandchild." He added which made the child smile.

"Come here," He said, taking the child's hands. "Grandpa will give you a slice of your favorite Dulce De Leche." By the mention of her favorite dessert, Vien's face lit up and her wide innocent eyes popped open. She held her grandfather's hand firmly. Without another word, she pulled him to the door leaving us smiling behind him as he entered the house.

"You need to rest now." Melissa said when father vanished inside the open door of the mansion."

By the mention of rest, I suddenly remembered how exhausted I was throughout the trip. I realized that my feet ached by standing for too long. "I think I badly needed one right now." I replied, letting out a sigh.

Grandma ushered me to the door and the rest of my brothers including Elisa followed. "Yeah, you should. Even if you're trying so hard to show you're fine but deep down I know you're not." She said which made me wonder if she

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was able to read my mind or if I'm just being transparent and could be easily read.

My face fell and it didn't slip her observant gaze. Reassuringly she tapped my shoulder in comfort. She pulled into a stop at the foot of the staircase.

"Everything is going to be alright, my sweet little Phoenix. " She assured me and it was enough consolation for me. I slowly relaxed.

"Thank you Grandmama." I whispered. Kissing her on her temples before climbing the staircase and heading to my room while Faith was still in my arms.

Back to my room, I place Vien on the top of the Queen size bed. The familiar scent of the air freshener—a whiff of lavender—permeated my nostrils and all the stress I feel today slowly ebbed away.

"Home sweet home." I mumbled, sitting beside Faith on the fluffy softness of the bed. For the first time since that day I let go a genuine smile. I'm safely home at last.

Faith's deep blue eyes landed on my face

and her wiggling intensified. She excitedly wiggled her arms in the air as if telling me to pick her up. When I didn't pick her up she began to make a babbling sound. She then said something and I didn't understand clearly but it sounded like 'mama.'

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I touched her soft little hand with my fingers. She seemed amazed with my hand and her hand tightened around my fingers and she giggled.

"Mama missed you and your sister." I told her. The smile on her lips widened and she adoringly winked her eyes at me.

"I'm sure that your papa misses you and your sister too. Unfortunately, he can't go home yet but I believe he will come soon. Even if takes so long we will wait, aren't we?"

As if Faith understood what I meant reached for my face and said something like "Ma-ma."

It was that moment I was deeply preoccupied with my thoughts when the door flung open and Elisa hurriedly barge in with the telephone in her hand.

I looked at her with wide, curious eyes, wondering why she's in a rush. Following beside her was Vien who still have a chocolate stain on the corner of her mouth. It seemed she follow behind Elisa without the latter realizing it.

I didn't have the chance to ask her who's calling when she shove the phone to me. I straightened on the bed upon hearing her say it was Lucas Nicholas on the phone.

By the mention of Lucas who was with Ace in the hospital in the US made my heart beat like crazy. The color was quickly drained from my face in fear that something bad happened to Ace.

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I was so scared at the moment that it made me momentarily frozen while staring at the phone. Summoning all the courage I could muster, I sucked in a deep breath and grabbed the phone in Elisa's fingers.

"Hello?"

"It's Lucas," said the voice I recognize which was Ace's best friend."

"What happened?" I asked with voice trembling.

There was a long, scary pause on the other line.

Chapter 175

My heart beat uncontrollably, my pulse jittered, and beads of sweat form on my temples while listening to the disconcerting silence from the other line. I was so tense that I could feel my legs shaking.

Negative ideas raced through my thoughts, feeding the growing fear inside me. I'd never been so scared in my entire life the way I am now. No words will ever be able to describe the fear bubbling inside me as I waited for what Lucas has to say.

My grip tightened on the telephone.

Noticing how color was drained off my face, Elisa hovered over me with a worried look on her face. The length of her arm is laid on Vien's shoulder. Vien on the other hand stood motionless. Her eyes wide and unblinking trying to grasp the quick turn of events.

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Vien's eyes spoke of both intelligence and curiosity.. Even if we haven't said a thing about her father but Vien knew it was him we are talking about now. She's intelligent and very observant and it's no surprise why she ran after Elisa when the phone rang. She must be listening when the phone was answered.

"Lucas?" I said impatiently wishing he would drop the news right away or else I would die from suspense.

"My apology," He said as he drew in a breath. "The nurse entered just now to check on Ace." He explained and I heard the sound of footsteps in the background then the sound of the door closing followed.

"What happened?" I asked with my voice loud and shaking. My foot impatiently tapping against the floor.

"I just want to tell you that the operation is successful. Any time soon, he would wake up." Lucas said after an extremely long silence.

Slowly, I sat down on the bed and blinked my eyes several times until the words sunk into my brain. Ace's is safe, I repeated the words inside my head over and over again

Without me knowing tears raced down my flushed cheeks and relief washed over me. A heavy burden was lifted off my chest.

I'd been waiting to hear those words. Now that it finally happened I was lost for words. The relief surging inside me was indescribable.

"Ace is now in good condition so you don't need to worry about him. He's a hell of a fighter, he would be fine." He assured with great confidence and I believe him.

Without a doubt in my mind, I know Ace would wake up soon. He would survive this ordeal because he promised me he would return and I trust him so much that I would be willing to wait even if it takes a long time.

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"Yes he is a fighter. He would survive." I agreed tearfully. My chest wanting to burst from emotions swirling inside me.

When the call was over, I lowered the telephone into the bed and fell into a trance.

"What did Lucas say?" Elisa asked tensely. Her beautiful face marred with worry as she hastily sat beside me on the bed, Vien followed beside her.

When I didn't reply right away, she touched my arm gently in order to take my attention.

"A-ace is fine." I whispered after a moment of silence. "The operation was successful." I replied. Grateful tears keep flowing from my eyes like an endless waterfall. I was so happy that I couldn't even stop the tears clouding my vision.

Faith's babble came to my attention and I snapped out of my trance. Almost immediately, I picked her from the bed and cradled her into my arms.

"Thank goodness." Elisa exclaimed. The worry in her face dissolved and her expression brightened with relief. She stood up from the bed in order to face me. She laid a comforting hand into my shoulders. "I believe Ace would be okay. One of this days he would come back home and you will be a family again."

I look up to her and reciprocated the radiant smile on her lips. "Yes, I strongly believe what you said will come true."

"Mama." Vien said to steal my attention. She came trushing to me with a jovial smile upon her pinkish lips and wrapped her dainty arms around my neck.

"I-I'm h-happy p-papa is f-fine." She said intently and brought her fingers to my cheeks and dried my tears with her palms.

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I looked at her fondly and pulled her closer to my arms, using my vacant hand. "Mama is happy too. When your father recovers, he will return home and we will be together again." I told her.

We were still in that position when suddenly the door of my room flung open and Claire burst inside the room with her face pale with anxiety. Her sapphire eyes immediately darted to my direction. "W-what did Lucas say?" She fearfully asked and I swear I'd never seen her this troubled and anguished before.

Within seconds, she was already in front of me. I haven't spoken yet and here she is crying with uncontrolled tears. "What happened to Ace?" She asked louder this time. Fear glimmered in her wide- stretched eyes.

"Ace's fine now." I told her.

Relief flooded her face. She lifted her fingers to her face and wiped the wetness on her cheeks. "I was so scared.... I thought I would lose the only son I have." She clasped her fingers tightly and muttered a quick prayer of gratitude. She then turned to me, this time her face was clear and her eyes shone with hope.

"Lucas Nicholas told me that the operation was successful and anytime soon Ace would wake up." I explained and Claire listened intently, her eyes focused and unblinking as she look at me.

"I'm beyond relieved that he passed the most critical part of the operation. Let's just pray that he would immediately wake up." She said with admiring optimism.

I nod my head in agreement. I was hoping the same way too. Now that Ace's operation was successful I'm praying that he would wake up soon.

Chapter 176

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The dinner held in the spacious hall of Crawford Mansion was simple but very intimate. It was held in celebration of Elisa and Ethan's wedding and for their upcoming first son. Also, Ace's successful operation was included in the celebration.

The long rectangular table draped with pristine white cloth stood at the center of the hall. Huge selection of mouth-watering food was spread on top of it.

The chairs surrounding the long table were fully occupied. For the first time after more than a month of separation, I was able to share dinner with my whole family again. I missed this kind of bonding and I revelled at the sight of seeing my whole family together as they talked happily on their seats.

There was only one person missing for me—it was Ace. But knowing that he's out of danger eased my worries a lot and I contentedly began to eat while listening to the comforting sound of voices in the background.

A soft hand landed on my cheeks.. I looked to my side and smiled encouragingly at Vien as she pointed to a food which was out of her reach. I took it for her and served her plate. I was rewarded with a vibrant smile from her cute, little lips. "T-thank you mama," She mumbled and poured her attention to the food in front of her.

I glanced at my side, to the nearby crib

where Faith was lying and saw her peacefully asleep. At least she hasn't been awakened by the sound of voices. I returned my attention to my plate and resumed eating.

After everyone had eaten the plates had been cleared from the table, all of us adults shared a bottle of vintage wine?from Father's favorite selections he kept in the cellar for rare occasions like this.

I only sipped a little wine so I need not worry when I need to breastfeed with Faith tonight.

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Vien was given a fresh fruit shake and she was happily sipping through the straw when I looked at her. I reached for a slice of dark forest cake and served her plate.

"T-thank you mama." I heard her say again as I was munching the cakes. I was glad that her speech has improved a lot. She doesn't stutter so much. The therapy helped her greatly.

My fingers brushed her soft honey hair and watched her eat with my eyes glowing with fondness.

Vien is such an adorable child and she looked so much like Ace.

Later that night, I found myself staring at the high ceiling of my room while I was lying on my bed. I couldn't sleep even though I tried.

Vien was already fast asleep in her pink pajamas. She's even snoring softly as she lay next to me.

I eased myself from the bed until I was leaning on the headboard and reached for the strands of hair that was covering her face and tucked it behind her ears.

A sigh escaped my lips. Vien really looked like a female version of her father so it was difficult for me not to think of Ace when I look at her.

The soft cries coming from the crib quickly took my attention. I carefully get off the bed and hasten to the crib where Faith lay. The instant I lifted her into my arms, she stopped crying. I rocked her into my arms and hummed a song until she was fast asleep. Afterwards, I carefully laid her on the crib and sat on the edge of the bed.

It was nearly twelve but my system couldn't feel the slightest sign indicating I'm sleepy. Even my eyes, they are still wide open.

Sighing, I gave up forcing myself to sleep and abandoned the bed to pull a sealed box from under the table. I padded to the walls to adjust the ceiling

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light on—not too bright as not to wake up my children—just enough for the lights to illuminate the room.

I took a small chair and a cutter and sliced through the tape that sealed the box until it was opened. Setting the cutter aside, my attention was now to the box in front of me.

The delivery had arrived around three pm in the afternoon. I was surprised that it arrived because no one informed me about the package. And then I realized the package was from Lucas since his name was written on the sender.

When the courier was gone, I immediately called him and asked what the box was all about. He apologised and told me it slipped off his mind to inform me about the package. He said that it was Ace's few remaining belongings and it was his best friend's request for the items to be sent back home to me.

I returned my attention back to the present and pulled the first thing my hands came in contact with. A picture frame. When I turned the picture so I could have a look, a sudden wave of nostalgia hit me when I saw our wedding photograph.

It took me an incredible amount of self control not to burst into tears.

The date of our wedding was printed below. I was surprised that Ace was able to keep this important memorabilia.

In the photo, I was garbed in a stunning white gown, decorated with bright Swarovski beads. My extremely long hair that time was fashioned into a chignon at the bottom of my nape while on top of my head, a tiara with colorful gemstones stood.

A wide smile was plastered on my red lips as I stood beside my groom.

Ace stood beside me, arms possessively wrapped around my thin waist. He was wearing a white tuxedo. His sleek brown hair was neatly brushed to the

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back. His exquisitely blue eyes looked overly bright and he stared at the camera with a golden smile on his lips.

I sniffed.

My fingers slowly went to my cheeks and discovered it was damp. I didn't realize I was crying.

Chapter 177

Damm, I missed him so much, I realize as I gaze at the photograph in my hand.

I pulled myself together and gently lowered the fragile object on the top of the carpet and wiped the tears on my cheeks with the back of my palms.

'Stop crying now. Ace would not want to see that tears in your eyes.' Said a part of my brain and instantly I stopped crying.

Taking a deep breath, I resumed rummaging inside the box in search of other valuables until I came across with a thick sketchbook.

With eyes wide, I eyed the sketchbook with growing curiosity as I settled it on top of my lap. After flipping the cover, the first drawing that came to my view was a colored drawing of me.

A gasp of surprise tear on my lips.

It was the night of the party I was introduced as Beatrix Crawford to the public.

I didn't almost recognize myself at first but after a long, intent look it dawned on me that I was the woman descending down the staircase in a stunning gown in the color of fiery flame. My chin was slightly tilted forward in a defiant manner while my eyes shone bright as if the stars and the moon shone in it.

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Ace was able to capture the emotion dancing on my face making the drawing realistic. It requires a remarkable memory and keen eyes to make the drawing so breathtakingly detailed as if it was real.

Below the drawing a quote was scribbled and it reads:

'And one day she discovered that she was fierce and strong and full of fire. And not even she could hold herself back. Because her passion burned brighter than her fears.'

The quote was beautiful and I revelled in it. My fingers traced the fine strokes of his handwriting, it almost looked as if it belonged to a woman based on its neatness. Not only could he paint but he could write well too.

I turned to the next page and instantly I was filled with amazement seeing myself in my favorite off shoulder dress with floral prints with the garden as my background.

Cradled into my arms was Faith while soft morning sunshine caressed my face.

The painting was able to capture the tender look upon my eyes while I gaze at my daughter. Ace was very good when it comes to portraying emotions in his work.

Looking at the drawing made nostalgic memories come flashing back at me.

I flipped the pages again and again. I was surprised to know that all of the drawings were of me and it was taken inside the Crawford Mansion during the first few weeks he arrived and became father's personal gardener.

Ace must have been sneaking and secretly making his drawing without me even noticing it. He must have drawn them when I wasn't looking at him. I wonder how he was able to do that.

There was a drawing of me strolling on the lawn alone, the subtle wind brushing to my flushed cheeks as it danced to the length of my hip length hair.

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There was a mysterious glint upon my eyes as I looked at the sun, slowly descending from the horizon.

I couldn't recall that day nor could I understand the expression playing on my face at that moment. I wonder if it was longing or loneliness. I don't know.

Shrugging my shoulders, I flipped to the next page and the next until I reached the very end. Another wave of surprise hit through me when my gaze landed on our first ever family picture.

On a single white Victoria Sofa, I sat primly, cradling Faith in my arms who was wrapped in a light pink cloth. My inky black hair cascaded down my back like a waterfall. My chin was set into a defiant manner, my eyes shone with determination as I looked straight ahead.

Standing beside me was Vien. A sweet smile could be seen on her angelic face. She was wearing a lavender dress with a ribbon tied on her tiny waist matched with beaded shoes with the same color as her dress. Standing on her back, with his left hand holding Vien's small shoulders and his right arm draped protectively on my shoulder was Ace.

He looked so simple and yet so gorgeous with his casual jeans and white shirt. Few loose hairs strands playfully cover his forehead giving him a boyish appeal.

Ace?longed for a complete family and that time the only way to make it possible is to create a memory through painting.

Once more tears welled my eyes and blurred my vision. I told myself to be strong but it sometimes gets difficult when I think of him lying on the hospital bed with various apparatus attached to his helpless body while I wonder when he will wake up.

What if he never wake up again? Asked a part of my brain that made my heart bear like crazy inside my chest.

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No! Ace would wake up! A part of my brain argued and I believe it. I dried my tears using the back of my palms and forced myself to return back to work. Negative thoughts will never take me anywhere, a logical part of my brain told me.

I closed the canvass and placed it on top of the table so I could look at it later.

Sighing, I turned my attention to the box and peered inside. I saw nothing except some of Ace's clothes and bottom wears.

Slowly, I emptied the box and place the contents on top of the carpet.

The scent of his favorite cologne still lingered on his clothes. I momentarily closed my eyes as I carried his favorite t-shirt close to my nose and inhaled its sweet scent until it comforted me.

When I finally lowered the t-shirt and peered inside the box to make sure it was empty, a sealed envelope caught my attention. I picked it up and looked at it closely and noticed that it was dated a year ago.

My fingers hastily tear the envelope then pulled the document inside. I spread the the paper and my gaze read through the words written.

It can't be! It's impossible!

My fingers gripped to the glass table for support. It's a good thing I was sitting on a chair or I would have collapsed to the floor.

What I learned tonight was enough to shook me.

Ace and I was still married.

Chapter 178

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Days passed by so quickly, like a subtle wind passing by that I lost track of the days only to be surprised after discovering that it's been two weeks weeks since Ace's successful operation. It's been two weeks since discovering that Ace and I weren't divorce which basically means I'm legally his wife and he.... My husband.

There wasn't a day in my life I didn't think of him. He was like a shadow following me wherever I went. Even when I closed my eyes at night he was there telling me to wait until he came back. I believe he would come because I feel he would and I trust him so much that he wouldn't give up knowing his family was waiting for him.

Life wasn't easy without Ace. But with every passing day, my new found strength taught me to move forward and patiently wait until he comes back home. That's the only wish I have for my birthday which I didn't realize would be four days from now.

"Phoenix? Are you awake?"

The soft knock on the door shattered my wandering thoughts.. A soft stream of sunlight permeating through the partially opened blinds I forgot to close last night told me it's about past seven in the morning, this time everyone was already up and I'm the only one who's still in bed.

I didn't sleep well last night. Faith's tantrums keep me awake all night. It was around three in the morning when she finally slept peacefully and so I did.

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The soft knock continued, urging me to open the door. With a soft groan, I rolled out of the bed, careful not to wake up Vien beside me who was peacefully sleeping and padded to the door.

"Good morning!" Claire greeted cheerfully, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Did I wake you up?" She added apologetically. Her gaze wandered past me until it reached the bed and an instant fondness sprung to her eyes after seeing that her grandchildren were still asleep.

"You didn't. I was already awake when you knocked." I replied, mirroring the smile she gave me.

"I know there's many things bothering you now. Just in case it slips from your thoughts, I just remind you that we're going to a boutique today for the gown you will wear this Friday, on your birthday."

I made an inward groan, wondering why I forgot something so crucial. Perhaps Claire was right, there's too many things going through my thoughts that I forgot today's important appointment.

A sigh broke to my lips, "Thanks for reminding me, I honestly forgot about it." I replied apologetically. She gave me an understanding smile and patted my shoulders reassuringly with motherly affection.

"It would be around ten.... Don't worry about Faith and Vien, Elisa and Ethan would take good care of them while we are in the boutique."

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When Claire was gone, I slowly closed the door and padded back to the bed. I didn't lie down, just sat on the edge of the bed wondering if I could tell both Papa and Claire that I'm not looking forward to the party. I only wanted to spend it alone with the family without visitors. A simple lunch party exclusive for the family would suit my taste more but I was afraid father wouldn't agree to that idea and he would shrug it off by telling me that he haven't been on my birthday since I was a little girl and he wanted to make up with the time we'd lost by throwing a grandiose birthday celebration.

It was around 8:30 when I walked downstairs for breakfast.

Everyone was already seated across the long table and the only vacant seat was mine and Vien's. I pulled the seat for my daughter and allowed her to sit first before greeting everyone good morning. While everyone ate, father talked about the business and then mentioned Hotel De Amore which was still under construction. He talked about different topics until the conversation drifted to my birthday.

"I decided to invite all my business associates and family friends. It's going to be a big party." Father said, making me groan inwardly in protest. The Crawford Mansion would be swarming with guests if he's going to invite them all.

They continued to discuss everything about my birthday and when it was over, all the details regarding the celebration were discussed. Not a single detail was left unsettled.

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The party is Masquerade themed. It would be very exciting and I would definitely look forward to it if the situation is different. Unfortunately, I wouldn't fully enjoy my own party because Ace wasn't there to share the precious moment with me.

The event will be held in the Grand Hall and since it could only cater to nearly five-hundred guests in maximum, the garden would be opened to cater for more. There would be an orchestra to spice the dance floor.

"Have you decided on the color of your gown yet?" It was Melissa, she was seated on the chair opposite me.

"I haven't chosen yet, My." I replied, shaking my head.

"Cobalt blue would compliment you, my dear." Melissa exclaimed cheerfully after lifting a glass of water to her lips.

"Vien wanted that color for her gown. I have to choose another color." By the mention of her favorite color, Vien's face lit up, and she stopped drinking her orange juice to look at us with wide, expectant eyes.

"C-can I have the c-cobalt blue dress mama?" She asked shyly, her eyes alternately darting towards Claire, Melissa and me.

"Of course Vien!" It was Claire who agreed cheerfully.

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Melissa's lips broke into a smile and she nodded her head in approval. "Yes, you can have the cobalt blue for your gown, Vien. It would suit your porcelain skin. We'll just find another attractive color for you mama's gown."

Vien smiled and resumed finishing the remaining orange juice in her glass.

In the end, it was decided that I should wear a scarlet or maroon dress. Just like what Melissa and Claire agreed upon, red would be a startling color to my skin color.

Chapter 179

The Belle Boutique was a two story building painted in an elegant combination of silver and gold. The transparent glass windows gave a glimpse of the cozy interior of the place. The automatic sliding door, the red carpeted floor, and the painted cremé colored walls scream of luxury.

Awestruck by the glamour surrounding the place, I slowly stepped inside, the heels of my stiletto sinking into the plush carpet.

"Welcome to Belle Boutique." A soft female voice said in greeting. I tore my gaze away from the floor, raised my head and saw a petite woman with bright hazel eyes and wide smiling mouth.

"Hello." I greeted warmly, waiting for Claire to follow behind me after properly parking the car in the parking area.

"How may I help you Miss?" She asked politely. The sweet smile on her lips widened.. In a curious tone she added, "You looked familiar. Did we meet before."

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Before I could even reply the sliding door flung open and Claire entered, the car key still dangling into her long, slender finger.

Automatically, my eyes darted behind my back where she stood. The woman looked at her too, her already large eyes widening in recognition.

"Claire!" The petite yet elegant woman exclaimed before hurriedly crossing the distance between separating them.

"Belle!" Claire was surprised. "I thought you're in Paris?" She asked.

"Vacation over." The woman called Belle sighed. "I would love to extend my leave and go travel but there's too many things to be done in here so I returned as quickly as possible. Damn, you looked wonderful Claire! Have you discovered the fountain of youth? You look even younger now."

Claire laughed. Her cheeks furiously blushing from the compliment. "You haven't changed Belle. "You looked great too! You looked eighteen and not twenty-eight!"

Belle beamed at her friend. "Remind me later to give you a discount."

The women laughed heartily.

"Come here, darling. I will introduce Belle, the designer of all this great work and the owner of this boutique. "Claire motioned me to come and I did. "Belle, this is Beatrix Crawford, the eldest and the only daughter of Alexander Crawford."

The designer's eyes went wide, her fingers flew to cover her parted mouth, "Oh my god, you're the splitting image of Melissa! We've met before and it's during one of the parties held in the Crawford Mansion."

I gave Belle a smile. Suddenly I recognize her now. I remember seeing her at a party. Her face is too pretty to be easily forgotten. I also read various articles and saw her face in magazines, featuring her exceptional and exceptional designs.

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"I'm Belle Heusaff." She held her hand to me and I took the privilege to shake her hands. She has nice, smooth hands.

"We came here to look for a gown she could wear for her birthday." Claire explained, as we walked to the center of the room, passing through the awe-inspiring gowns with intricate designs worn by the mannequins.

"Oh I would love to show you my best collections! Please follow me." Belle said and motioned us to follow her on the Vip area which was located on the second floor.

The moment my gaze landed on the off-shoulder lace gown, I instantly fell in love with it. The soft, sleek fabric glowed magnificently under the light of the chandelier, further enhancing the exquisite scarlet color. The off shoulder sleeve gracefully falls down the mannequin's arms in a seductive manner.

Overall the gown was simple but very elegant. It has a heart-shaped front and a plunging neckline. The diamond cut on the back exposes a bit of skin. But it didn't change the fact that it's breathing and I want it.

Very carefully, I reached for the dress the mannequins were wearing, and felt the familiar softness of the cloth beneath my fingers. While I did so, Ace lingered on my thoughts and I can't help but wish that he was here so I could listen to his soft murmurs of approval. He would surely love the dress on me.

"The color would perfectly suit your smooth, porcelain skin dear." Belle said in approval. Claire wordlessly agreed, eyeing the gown too.

I didn't try the gown since it was obviously too big loose on my slender frame. Belle ushered me into another room which was her office and took my measurements before jotting them down on her notepad.

"I would definitely be there." Belle smiled, accepting the invitation I kept in my bag.

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"I'm both honored and ecstatic for the opportunity to see a Crawford-Greyson wear one of my works."

After the boutique appointment, we didn't go home yet. The event organizer wanted to meet with Claire to discuss further details regarding the Masquerade party.

We went into a cozy, Italian restaurant which was nearby to meet with Arianne. When we entered the place, she was waiting on a table, she raised her hand and waved to attract our attention.

Once we were seated comfortably on the seat, we didn't immediately discuss the Masquerade Party which I'm thankful of. Arriane had ordered in advance and when we arrived, the food was immediately served.

I'm starving and I almost sighed contentedly when the delicious aroma drifted to my nostrils.

We ate in silence. It was not long before the hearty lunch was finished.

The waiter return to buss out the soiled dishes and replace the plates with platters of desserts.

"The highlight of the Masquerade ball would be, the dance." Arianne began enthusiastically. "Your father and eight brothers will dance with you."

I scooped the cheese icecream using the dessert spoon and lifted it to my mouth, allowing it to melt before speaking. "That sounds so exciting." I replied, my lips slowly curling into a smile. It reminds me the of the first party I attended on the Mansion.

The conversation drifted from what type of flowers would be displayed on the center tables, the color of the table cloth, the selection of food on the buffet table, and many other concerns regarding the Masquerade Party. Claire handled everything with grace.

Chapter 180

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An hour later the conversation finally pulled into a stop and by that time everything concerning the Masquerade Party had been settled. Claire saw to it that even the tiniest detail had been discussed. She's determined to make the party a huge success and I witnessed how she's doing her best. I greatly appreciated her for that.

Claire contentedly ate her Lava cake. A mysterious glint playing upon her sapphire eyes.

"I couldn't wait to see the outcome of our plans." It was Arriane, slowly rising from her chair when we finished the superb dessert. I and Claire abandoned our seats and shook hands with her.

"Arriane and I will make sure that this year's birthday celebration will be the most memorable day of your life." Claire exclaimed, the glint upon her eyes burned brighter. I was intrigued why but I kept the questions to myself..

We walk towards the door while Claire continues to converse with Arianne. A uniformed staff opened the door for us, we thanked him and headed for the parking area to get our car.

After saying our goodbyes, Arriane climbed on the driver's seat and turned the engine on. She's in a hurry, the florists and the owner of the catering service wanted to meet up with her to finalize the details regarding the party.

We watched until her car was nowhere to be seen before making our way to the car.

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I slumped beside the driver's seat where Claire was seated. She's the one driving the car.

The engine roared to life.

When the car was smoothly running along the peaceful afternoon sky, Claire chatted about the party and how she couldn't wait to see me walk down the stairs with the enigmatic scarlet gown.

I listened to her attentively, noting the tireless enthusiasm in her tone. I couldn't help but smile fondly every time she says something funny. Having Claire with me was like having a mom and a best friend at the same time.

"You've been silent my dear. Aren't you happy?" She asked, throwing me a sideway glance before focusing her attention to the road.

The sudden question startled me. It took me a few seconds to respond, "I'm happy Claire. It's just that I missed Ace so much and I wish he was here with me so I could celebrate my birthday with him." A sigh broke from my lips.

She patted my hands reassuringly, "You'll be with my son very soon." She said, turning to my direction. Her lip was smiling. Before she turned her attention back to driving I caught a glimpse of another mysterious gleam in her eyes.

When we arrived at the Crawford Mansion

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Claire went inside the house first after I told her I'll call Lucas Nicholas and ask him how Ace was doing.

I developed a habit of calling him daily to check on Ace's just to make sure his condition is improving. Lucas Nicholas would be expecting my call.

With my phone in my hand, I turned to the garden and his number.

Lucas Nicholas sat on the chair in front of a glass window. The city glowed beautifully under an equally beautiful star-studded night in front of him.

He enjoyed the scene, it gave him peace and cleared his mind off Alexandria, his wife.

The luminescent scarlet liquid in the wine glass in his hand glowed against the light. It enchanted him that he lifted the glass in his lips and savored the sweetness of the vintage wine. He nearly closed his eyes as the warm liquid slithered on his throat.

The sound of his phone vibrating snatched his attention. He knew she would call.

He reached for his phone on top of the round table beside him and pushed the answer button.

Just like before, Phoenix asked how Ace was doing. He told her the truth.

"Ace's doing fine and his condition is getting better each day."

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She contentedly listened as he told her about Ace's progress. She was so jubilant about hearing her husband's miraculous improvement that he could almost imagine her wiping the tears in the corner of her eyes as he listened to his explanation.

"I'm happy he was fine. I'm praying that his condition will continue to improve."

"Do you love Ace?" He asked.

There was a long, startled pause.

"I do." She whispered.

"Have you told him you love him?"

There was a short pause again. "I didn't." She said in a tone laced with regret.

"I have loved him since I was eighteen and probably I will continue to love him even after death.

"Make sure you tell him that soon."

He lowered the phone on the table with a smile on his lips.

"Did you hear that Ace? She loves you." He said without looking at the man seated on the edge of the bed and quietly listening.

"I'm not deaf." Ace replied irritably. "Why am I not allowed to call my wife?"

"You will ruin the surprise everyone prepared for her if you do." He replied sternly. "Well at least you heard her voice."

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"It wasn't enough." He abandoned the bed and pulled a chair and sat beside him. Lucas grabbed the wine decanter and poured the contents into a glass then handed it to Ace. Ace had woken up in a coma almost a week ago and he was released from the hospital yesterday.

"You will be with her soon." Lucas promised. "I already booked a ticket. We will be flying back to Cordova this thursday." He added which Ace replied with a resigned sigh.

"I couldn't wait, each day without seeing her was torture." He poured the contents of wine into his mouth and gave Lucas a sullen look. "If we were not best friends I could have punched you for this."

Lucas chuckled, ignoring his remark then asked. "Have you brought a gift yet?"

"I bought a diamond solitaire for our engagement and a pair of gold bands."

"I'm looking forward to becoming the Bestman."

"Let's just hope Phoenix would say yes. She will be mad at me for scaring her."

"Goodluck to that." Lucas replied, amusement dancing on his inky black eyes.

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