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Chapter 181 - 190

I sat still in front of the dresser fidgeting with uncertainty. Claire had told me earlier when she happened to pass by my room that the guests started arriving. An hour had passed since then and more guests arrived and they will continue to increase until the party starts. It was the thought of facing different faces tonight which fills me with dread and discomfort.

A soft sigh escaped from my lips. If only Ace was here, I wouldn't be so pressured because I have someone to lean on. I pushed the thoughts as fast as it arrived before it could ruin my mood. Dwelling over something impossible wouldn't help overcome my anxiety.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

The knob turned then it opened.. Claire entered my room, she was already dressed in a halter top gown made of fine silk. The color of the gown perfectly matched the color of her lively sapphire eyes. She was holding her Masquerade mask in her right hand.

"You're nervous." She stated, her gaze sweeping over my face.

I turned my attention in the mirror to check my reflection. The woman staring back at me looked stunning. Who would have thought that her fingers were freezing cold and her legs were trembling underneath her gown. But Claire

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was able to tell how I actually feel. It must be instinct or she wouldn't be able to know.

There's no way I could deny it so I turned to her and said the truth, "I am."

She laid her left hand on my shoulders. "You don't need to be nervous, I'm here. Chin up. You looked perfect tonight."

Her words were soft and calming like a mother's feminine touch. Claire knows exactly how to make me feel better.

Slowly, the stress nagging me for an hour eased and I found myself able to relax.

"This is your moment, the night is yours. Enjoy while it lasts. Something you've been asking for a long time would be yours tonight."

But I only wanted Ace. I almost told her. Thankfully I was able to keep my thoughts to myself.

I concealed the sudden surge of sadness with a smile on my lips. If Claire sensed the sudden shift in my mood she didn't react, instead she changed the topic.

Her dainty fingers touched my curly hair and smiled admiringly at my reflection on the mirror. "Curly hair, looks good on you darling."

"I think so too." I replied shyly. Admiring the curls framing my face. The style gave me an air of mystery that suited the scarlet gown I wore tonight.

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"Your father is eagerly waiting downstairs. He couldn't wait to introduce you to the guests."

I abandoned the soft cushioned seat. But before leaving, I took a last lingering glance at the full length to practice the smile I needed to show everyone. When I was quite satisfied that my smile didn't look forced, I made my way towards the door beside Claire with my masquerade mask in my hand.

When we were almost near the stairs, I put my masquerade mask on and took a deep calming breath before walking towards the stairs.

Father climbed up the stairs and I hooked my hand around his arms when he reached my side. He grinned behind his mask and leaned closer so I could hear his words amid the sound of laughter and voices in the background. "You looked like a princess, my unija hija." He said and instantly a smile curled on my lips.

"Thank you papa. You looked amazing too. Claire couldn't take her eyes off you." I teased and I was rewarded with a chuckle.

"And you Mi Amor, you looked like a queen." He said, turning to Claire.

He took Claire's gloved finger and kissed her palms like a perfect gentleman which made her cheeks turn into a bright shade of red.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here comes the birthday celebrant, Beatrix Crawford."
"

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The hustle and bustle stopped then all eyes turned to our direction as we slowly walked down the stairs. For once, I was extremely thankful for the mask covering half of my face, it helped me feel invisible against a hundred pairs of eyes.

The orchestra starts playing, soft pleasant sounds fill the whole room.

Under the bright, glittering light of the chandelier, the guests gathered dressed in their best masquerade attire, their gazes following our movement down the stairs.

At the foot of the stairs, Melissa Crawford waited, her mask lowered to her hands making the smile on her face visible.

Surrounding her were eight of my brothers, all dashing and outstanding in their respective tuxedos. Women from every corner of the room couldn't help but devour the delectable sight.

Standing beside Melissa was Elisa, who's beauty reminds me of a Greek goddess in the crème colored gown she wore. Faith was snuggled beneath her arms.

Clutching Ethan's arm was Vien. She looked adorable in her cobalt blue dress. The color of her gown was a perfect color for her smooth, porcelain skin. Her hair was curled in exactly like mine making her look like a doll.

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The whole family was there. Claire and Elisa were there. Hundreds of guests were also there. The only person missing was Ace but he wasn't coming. But I'm content to wait,?even if it takes years I'll wait for him.

Once we reached the bottom of the stairs, Claire let go of Father's hand and joined Melissa, Elisa, Vien and my brothers

The crowd parted, giving way while father led me to the dance floor where I placed my palm into his own.

For a moment, the crowd dissolved and so did my worries. I was only aware of my father swaying me on the dance floor. For the very first time since we walked downstairs a sweet smile curled on my lips. Even if my husband wasn't here at least I have my whole family with me. That's the best gift I could ever receive on my birthday.

Chapter 182

The best love is the kind
that awakens the soul;
that makes us reach for more,
that plants the fire in our hearts
and brings peace to
our minds.

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That's what I hope to give

you forever.

–The Notebook–

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My reservations flew out the window. I found myself moving to the rhythm of the orchestra, enjoying the slow movements of my feet while forgetting that everyone in the room existed.

This night is mine, this is my moment. Enjoying it is the best thing I could do. This event won't last forever so I might as well cherish this moment while it lasts.

My lips wouldn't stop smiling the entire time as if nobody matters to me except gracefully moving on the dance floor while father holds me.

This is the second time I was able to dance with him. The first time was during my birthday last year. It was a bit saddening that I wasn't able to dance with my father during my younger years and even on the day I turned eighteen. But I was still grateful that I've got to know my father and I still have the chance to dance with him on the future birthdays I will have.

"Happy birthday, mi unica Hija." He gazed at me lovingly, tenderness welled on his bright inky eyes. "A year was added into your age and so your beauty increased." He added with a smile.

"Thank you papa." I mumbled, reciprocating his smile.

"Are you happy?" He asked softly after a calculated pause.

I was surprised by the question that it took me a moment to respond, "Of course, I am happy, papa." I told him and it was the truth. Though I wasn't one hundred percent happy because Ace was not here but still I am happy at the moment.

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"I'm glad you are, my daughter. You've had had enough hardships in your life," He swallowed hard and sniffed. "It's time for you to finally be happy." Tears flickered on his eyes as he looked at me.

I hugged him tight. "Thank you for everything papa." I mumbled, wiping a tear from the corner of my eyes.

"I'm willing to do everything for my only daughter." He said and laid a kiss on my forehead.

When the dance was over, father led me to where Ethan was waiting. Even with his mask on, I recognize my brother. When father let go of my hand and found his place beside Claire and Grandma who looked dashing in their matching beige dress, Ethan captured my hand and pulled me into the middle of the room.

He was grinning from ear to ear as he whirled me to the dance floor. "You're the prettiest woman tonight, big sister." He whispered close to my ears so his voice wouldn't be drowned against the music.

A grin appeared on my lips. "Do I? Or was it because it's my birthday." I teased him and I was rewarded with a wide smile. His eyes were hidden behind a mask but I could imagine how his inky eyes crinkled underneath.

"You're always beautiful, big sister, but tonight you stand out among the rest." He replied softly and I felt how sincere he was.

"I believe you now." I chuckled. Mirth danced into my eyes as I placed my gloved fingers into his shoulder.

The soft music coming from the orchestra filled my ears as we moved on the dance floor. All eyes followed our movement but it didn't bother me like it did a while ago. In fact, I was enchanted by the seemingly magical moment that I didn't pay attention to the crowd.

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"Happy birthday. I wish you all the best, above all happiness. May everything you wish come true tonight."

"Thank you, Ethan. I hope it will."

"I'm guaranteed that your ultimate wish will come true." He said confidently.

Sadness swiftly flickered inside me. I only want Ace to be here tonight, said a part of me. Could it be possible?

I vanish the thought as fast as it arrived. I don't want to feel sad, just for this moment I want to be happy.

The song was fading in the background and the next song was about to play from the orchestra. We pulled into a stop and Ethan leaned closer and?landed a quick kiss on my cheeks before he let go of my hands.

Rhyle was eagerly waiting for his turn, before the next song could begin he took my hand gently into his own and led me to the center of the room. He couldn't take the grin on his face as he did so. "Happy birthday sissy." He greeted me. "My only wish on your birthday is for you to provide me with a handsome nephew who is as handsome as I look. Or if possible, a nephew who is far more good looking than me."

My head was thrown backward. A crunchy laughter erupted from my lips. Thankfully the music was so loud that my unlady-like laughter didn't reach anyone nearby, for my grandmother would go crazy if she ever heard of it.

"You're kidding right?" I asked, trying hard not to burst into another unlady-like laughter.

Rhyle smiled in response then his smile turned to laughter. "I'm not. You'd given me two lovely nieces and I want a nephew this time."

"You need to have a girlfriend first." I told him jokingly. Rhyle was the gentlest man among my brothers. He's twenty-three but never once had a girlfriend.

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"I was turned down." He said, finally after a moment of silence. He was pouting like a boy whose favorite toy was taken away from him.

Afraid that I would hurt his feelings, I suppressed the smile forming on my lips. "She must be blind for turning you down." I told him. I didn't say it out loud to console him but because it's the truth. Who would turn a good boy down? She must be blind not to see his good qualities.

"Let's not talk about my lovelife. I don't want to ruin your birthday." He said, a blush stained his cheeks.

I chuckled and fondly patted his hair like a little kid. It was one of the things I wasn't able to do when he was still a child.

"Wait for the right girl to come along. It would be all worth it."

I kissed him on the cheeks before he let go of my hand.

Chapter 183

For it was not into

my ear you whispered,

but in my heart.

It was not my lips

you kissed,

but my soul.

?????

The next dance I had was with Skye

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He took my hand into his own and swayed me into the dance floor while the soft, subtle music played from the orchestra.

The wondrous sound pleasantly filled my ears and I closed my eyes, allowing myself to get carried away.

Just this moment I wanted to enjoy and be happy so I could add this night to one of the most memorable days of my life..

"Happy Birthday, Beatrix, my dear lovely sister." he said and my eyes fluttered open.

"Thank you Skye." I replied, flashing him an appreciative smile.

I continued to listen to the sound of the playing orchestra when all of a sudden I felt the weight of a stare on my shoulder. True, everyone was looking at us on the dance floor but this feeling was different.

That moment my eyes slid to the door where I felt someone was staring at me, a man? entered the door and had his attention directed on me. His face was concealed behind the mask and it completely hid his features.

My pulse quickened and I gasped. He was tall and muscular. The black tuxedo he wore clung to his body, giving him a well-dignified stance. It was hard not to spot him in the sea of people, he was too remarkable not to be noticed.

Looking at him felt like I was looking at Ace. My heart quickened at the thought.

"Something wrong, Beatrix?" Skye asked and when he touched my arms it made me realize I wasn't dancing anymore.

"Sorry, I thought I saw someone familiar." I told him, placing my hand back to his shoulders to resume the dance.

"Are you sure?" He asked, not yet convinced.

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"Yes, of course! I'm fine." I replied cheerfully.

I wasn't sure if he believed me but I was thankful when he shrugged his shoulders and said nothing more.

The man standing on the door was gone and a part of me was surprisingly disappointed and sad at the same time. Disappointed that I haven't had a closer look at him and sad, knowing he couldn't be the man I was praying to miraculously come to my birthday and take me to dance.

A soft sigh escaped my lips. Skye stopped moving. If he didn't let go of my hand and land a kiss on my cheeks I would not realize that his turn has ended.

The next dance I shared was with Troy. He greeted me with a happy birthday and I thanked him.

I was already so distracted that I nearly missed a step as we danced. Fortunately, Troy is an expert dancer and a good partner too. He guided me well after I missed a step.

Letting go an inward sigh, I forced myself to focus and not repeatedly think about the man I had seen standing on the entrance. I understand that a part of me was quietly wishing it could be my husband despite knowing it would be impossible.

When I felt I was calm enough and my heart beat normalized, I raised my head and when I did, I saw the man again in the corner of my eyes.

I swallowed hard and turned my head to the direction I saw him but he was gone.

Blinking my eyes several times, I asked myself if it was just my imagination. My eyes must be playing a trick on me.

The dance ended so soon or perhaps because I wasn't paying much attention to it. Troy kissed me on the cheek before joining the crowd.

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Keith stepped in front of me and offered his hand which I gladly took and I let him pull me to the center of the room where we started to waltz.

As we dance, the erratic sound of my heart continues. I couldn't quite comprehend what I felt. It's as if I'm nervous and excited over something I don't even understand.

"Happy birthday, big sister." Keith spoke, waking me up and pulling me away from my burgeoning thoughts.

"Thank you Keith." I replied.

"Something bothering you?" He asked. I was surprised that he easily noticed I was restless.

"I'm sorry, was I that obvious?" I asked. Astonished.

"It was my intuition telling me." He replied. Worried.

A smile stretched on my lips. "I'm fine, Keith." I told him. "Don't worry about me."

We continue to dance in silence. My eyes darted to the crowd in search of the mysterious masked man but he wasn't there.

"Enjoy this night, sister. I promise, this will be your most memorable birthday ever." Keith said in assurance. A mysterious glint playing in his eyes which the mask he wore wasn't able to conceal.

And before I could ask what he meant, the orchestra stopped and so the dance did. He let go of my hand and I regretfully watched him walk away. I was still so consumed with curiosity that I felt sorry for not being able to ask him what his statement was supposed to mean.

Calix arrived and offered his hand to me. I took it and we started to dance as the orchestra began to play another song.

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He didn't say anything as we danced. Calix, among my eight brothers, was the silent type, very opposite of Ethan's personality. But he was the gentlest person I've ever met. His mother died when he was a child and he'd grow up depending on no one except himself.

Calix was the youngest and didn't have much in common with the rest of his older brothers even if they are all close, and that perhaps was the reason why he was so shy and introverted.

We danced in silence while both listening to the background song, his hand on my waist while my hand was placed on his shoulders.

Once more, I felt someone's heavy stare on my back and without me even turning around to see, I knew the man I saw entering the door earlier was looking at me now.

Chapter 184

Love is just a word until
someone comes along
and gives it meaning.

—Paulo Coelho—

?????

I couldn't turn and look back to confirm my assumption but I just knew he was there. Surprisingly, the thought was making me nervous for an unknown reason.

Butterflies fluttered my stomach, my hands went cold underneath the gloves, and my heart made a somersault inside my chest.

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I told myself to focus and enjoy the dance but I just couldn't. I was too distracted that I missed a step but Calix came to my rescue and helped me recover my poise.

Calix said nothing nor did he make a remark about my lack of focus.. He was putting it mildly, assuming that the amount of guests swarming inside the room was what made me all fidgety.

The music came to an end, indicating that his turn has ended.

Calix laid a kiss on my cheeks, "Happy birthday sister," he whispered. His lips stretched into a shy smile.

"Thank you." I replied and flashed him a smile.

"Please enjoy the party." He told me.

"You should enjoy it too," I reminded him, tenderly patting his head like a little boy. "Don't just hide in the corner."

The last remark made him grin.

"I will." He promised and stepped aside.

Blithe stepped into the place Calix vacated. "Can I have this dance, my lovely sister." He bent his knees, mimicking a graceful prince and elegantly held his hand to me.

"Of course, I wouldn't be able to say no." I responded, taking his hand. A giggle escaped from my lips as he led me to the center of the room while everyone's eyes followed our movement.

He placed his hand on my waist while my hands slid to his shoulders.

"Ace would be so proud of you now. You looked ethereal—like a goddess descending straight from Mount Olympus." Blithe said in a voice thick with appreciation.

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A wave of sudden sadness hit through me. "Yes he would be." I replied, biting back the tears.

"You miss him don't you." My brother said, It was not a question but a statement.

"Of course I do." I whispered weakly, "There's not a day in my life that I didn't think of him." I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced a smile into my lips. "I would give everything I have just to have him here tonight."

Blithe hugged me tight, providing me the strength and comfort I needed. I placed my head into his shoulders. His hand caressed my back in reassurance. "Don't worry, you're going to be with Ace soon." I was so absorbed with my thoughts that I didn't realize his real meaning.

I bit my lower lip and forced myself not to cry. I don't want to burst into tears while a hundred guests watch me under the spotlight. Once I cry the pain, it would be inside the privacy of my room where no one could hear nor see my tears, except the silence.

"Everything will fall perfectly into place, Beatrix. Whatever you'd been asking for, it would be all yours soon." Blithe assured me. He wrapped me into his arms one last time, kissed me on the cheeks and whispered the words 'happy happy birthday' before he let me go and retreated to join the crowd.

I was left alone in the middle of the room. Confused.

The orchestra stopped and the room was engulfed in a total silence.

And then in the midst of my inner musings, the man that was mysteriously occupying my thoughts emerged from the crowd. He walked with the elegance of a King and he seemed to own the crowd as he walked by.

My breath hitched in my throat upon realizing he was striding into my direction. The sound of my heart drumming hard reached my ears. I was even surprised that the crowd hadn't heard of it.

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When he was a step away from me, he stopped.

The sweet musky scent of perfume permeated my nostrils, triggering the fluttering of butterflies in my stomach.

Gosh, he smelled so much like Ace!

The thought made my heart ache. His huge resemblance to him made me miss my husband even more.

I bit back the tears and swallowed the lump in my throat. It was hard not to cry when everything about the man reminded me of Ace.

He moved a step closer until the distance between us was only a ruler's part. He offered his hand to me.

I peered into his face but the mask he wore completely hid his features, giving me no clue what he looked like underneath.

My eyes landed into his hand. He had long, nice fingers and it reminded me so much of Ace. Even his towering height, his broad shoulders, and the way he carried himself with an air of dignity reminded me of Ace. But this man couldn't possibly be my husband. Ace was still in the hospital. Unconscious. The thought broke my heart.

Blinking back the tears attempting to fall down my cheeks, I reached for his hand as I set aside all my inhibitions. A single dance won't hurt, I told myself.

Almost immediately, the moment the warmth of his hand touched mine, my pulse jittered. A soft gasp escaped my lips. Even the feel of his hand against mine feels so perfectly familiar to me. It would be impossible to dance with him and not think of the man I love.

His hand tightened around my hand and for a fleeting moment I closed my eyes to savor the sensation our joined hands created.

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He raised his other hand into the air. As if on cue, a well-dressed woman climbed onto the stage, a microphone in her hand.

Then the curtain beside the stage parted open, exposing a large screen.

As the instrumental of my favorite song began to play in the background, my wedding pictures began to play on the screen one by one.

The soft nostalgic tune of 'There You'll Be' filling the room, triggered nostalgic memories to flash.

Chapter 185

True love isn't

Romeo and Juliet.

It's Grandma and

Grandpa who grew

old together.

?????

His hands captured my own and he placed it around his neck where it should be. Then his arms slid around my waist and pulled me close to his chest until no air could pass between us. The soothing warmth of his body made my eyes flutter close.

He doesn't only smell like my Ace and looks like him physically. His touch felt like Ace too. The thought made a tear drop from my eyes..

When I think back on these times

And the dreams we left behind

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I'll be glad 'cause I was blessed to get to have you in my life

When I look back on these days

I look and see your face

You were right there for me

The singer start to sing. I listened intently to the song' s lyrics with my eyes still closed while very slowly we moved to the rhythm of the song. It was Ace's favorite song and so was mine. Hearing it play only intensified my yearning for him.

If only he was here then I have nothing to ask for more. My birthday would be beyond perfect. My whole family is here and so are my children. What more could I ask for? This night would be so magical and the joy I would feel would be beyond words.

In my dreams, I'll always see you soar above the sky

In my heart, there'll always be a place for you for all my life

I'll keep a part of you with me

And everywhere I am, there you'll be

And everywhere I am, there you'll be

The lyrics simply hit straight to my heart making me so emotional. The emotions I'd been trying to contain broke loose and a tear fell from my eyes... then another... and another until I was quietly weeping. The mask I wore proved to be a useful disguise to hide my tears.

Well, you showed me how it feels

To feel the sky within my reach

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And I always will remember all the strength you gave to me

Your love made me make it through

Oh, I owe so much to you

You were right there for me

I thought I was brave enough to hide a lonely part of myself tonight but I was mistaken. It took a single song and a mysterious man to push me into tears.

The man's hold tightened around my waist in response as if he felt my inner battle. He pulled me closer into the warmth of his body, providing me with all the comfort he could give.

I let my head drop into his chest. The musky scent of him fill my nose, helping the turmoil inside me calm down a bit. My ear is pressed close to his chest and I could hear the erratic beating of his heart. Was he nervous? Why would he be? I asked myself with my heart in the same condition as his.

The song went on and we continued to dance. A hundred pairs of eyes were watching us but I felt as if we were alone inside the hall. I couldn't hear anything except the song and I couldn't see anything except him.

It's as if the universe paused and the world stopped spinning. The only thing that seems to matter was the dance.

Very slowly, his fingers went to my hair. Then he caressed the mask that covered my face.

He was tall, and I looked up to him in order to see his face and know what he felt but the mask he wore completely hid his expression. The mystery surrounding him thickened but my curiosity to know him more only deepened.

When he lifted my mask off my face, I didn't protest. Instead, I allow him to take it off as if I was baring my very soul to him. His fingers gently wiped the

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tears from my cheeks until it was completely dry. He was so tender that my heart wanted to weep.

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In my heart, there'll always be a place for you for all my life

I'll keep a part of you with me

And everywhere I am, there you'll be

And everywhere I am, there you'll be

There you'll be

The last part of the song ended but the instrumental continued to play in the background, making the scene even more emotional than it already was.

"Happy happy birthday, Phoenix." He whispered.

My lips parted open in shock. Was the fates playing a practical joke on me? Why did he sound exactly like my husband?

I opened my mouth to speak but no words emerged from my lips. Instead, a warm stream of tears flowed freely down my cheeks.

He caressed the wetness of my cheeks with his fingers. "Hush, stop crying my love. I'm here..."

The words were spoken so softly, like a subtle wind brushing against my heart. But instead of refraining from crying my tears flowed more abundantly as realization hit me.

He took off his mask, exposing his handsome face to me.

"Ace..." A sob erupted from my lips. My vision turned hazy by the amount of tears I'm shedding.

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I lifted my hand to reach for his face only to stopped halfway. "Are you even real?" The question just slipped from my lips." My hand limply fell to my side.

He allowed the mask to fall on the floor. His hands captured my own and brought them to his face to feel the warmth of his cheeks. "I'm here now... I will never leave you alone again, love." He murmured, his eyes wet with unshed tears.

When he pulled me into his arms, everything melted away, including my doubts. My hand clung to his neck and his arms encircled my waist.

Ace was hugging me. I couldn't believe it!

The thing I'd been asking for came true. I have nothing more to ask, everything I ever needed was already in front of me.

Chapter 186

There is no pretending,

I love you,

and I will love you

until the day I die.

And if there's life

after that,

I love you then.

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"I missed you, love..." Ace murmured close to my ears, his fingers rubbing my spine up and down. "There's not a day after I wake up from coma that I didn't think of you. I nearly gone crazy waiting for the day I will meet you again."

I shut my eyes tightly until a star bursts into my eyes. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up and realize he is gone. We'd been apart for too long and it would shatter me inside if I were to discover he's an illusion created by my mind to cope up with loneliness.

"I thought I would go crazy too when you were brought to America for your operation. I was so afraid that I would never see you again." The words burst out of my lips as the memories of that fateful night flashed back on my thoughts. The fear, anxiety, and forlorn returned, reminding me of the sleepless nights I spent wondering if I will ever be with him again.

"Hush, love." He murmured tenderly, lifting my chin up so I could look deep into his eyes. "It's over now... let bygones be bygones... I'm here. I will never leave you again. Never. I love you Phoenix. I never loved anyone the way I love you. I will continue to love you until our hair turns grey and until we can't walk anymore."

His fingers trailed on my cheeks, slowly and tenderly. The soft caress on my skin made my heart swell with emotions.

After pulling a box from inside the pocket of his tuxedo, he pulled a ring inside, knelt in front of me, and whispered the words "Will you marry me... again?"

Disbelief made me speechless. For longer than intended, I stood there with my mouth wide open and my eyes stretched wide. I expected some beautiful things to happen tonight but this unexpected marriage proposal wasn't in the list.

Tears welled my eyes. The moment was so amazing that it took me a bit long to respond. I cleared my throat. My eyes met his exquisite blue eyes and I replied, "Yes, I will marry you."

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I wiped the tears off my cheeks with the back of my palms and extended my hand to him. He slid the ring into my ring finger, it fit perfectly like a well-made glove. The diamond solitaire glowed beautifully against the magnificent light of the chandelier.

Ace got up almost immediately after he put the ring into my finger and wrapped me into his arms, his face buried into the crown of my head.

My arms wrapped around his waist and my head leaned on the hard muscles of his chest. Holding him this close feels like heaven to me.

I raised my head up to him, our gazes met, hunger and yearning for each other took over. His lips descended on mine, it almost took an eternity before the warmth of his lips touched my own.

The kiss was soft and slow, melting my knees into jell-o. My eyes fluttered close as automatically my hands clung to his neck for support.

His arms tightened around my waist, pulling me closer to the hard muscles of his body. Even air couldn't pass in between us by how close he was holding me.

For a moment it was only the kiss that matters. The crowd disappeared, the noises dissolved into the distance and everyone else stopped to exist.

His lips moved to mine coaxing me into response and despite my shyness I kissed him back with the same eagerness. The kiss lasted until we're both breathless. If it weren't for the sound of cheers and the loud round of applause, the kiss would last longer.

Ace groaned when he set my lips free. "I missed your love and I can't get enough of the kiss but we still have guests to entertain. Let's save it for later." He whispered and winked at me.

A blush crept into my cheeks in response.

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He placed his arms protectively around my waist and led me in front of the stage where my whole family was waiting.

We are greeted with cheers and congratulations not only from my family but from the sea of guests. Ace couldn't stop grinning, showing everyone how proud he is that I said yes.

I on the other hand couldn't stop smiling like crazy. The feeling of having him on my birthday was so surreal that I feel as if I'm floating in the air.

I lost count of how many hands I touched and how much kiss I received on my cheeks. I was even sure that none of the guests would linger on my memory when it was finally over.

When the crowd that gathered around us finally dissolved, Lucas Nicholas, Ace's best friend strode in our direction. He was wearing a black suit and tie that looked good on him. A bunch of girls at every corner kept eyeing him.

He had discarded his mask and it was in his hands now. The mask was truly annoying and speaking of it, I wonder where we left ours. It was probably lying somewhere on the floor.

"Congratulations Ace, ." Lucas Nicholas said, pulling into a halt. For the first time, I saw Ace's best friend smile. The muscles on his face stretch a bit, giving him a boyish look. He then turned to me, the smile on his lips widened, "Congratulations, Phoenix." He added.

"You will be the Bestman man at our wedding. " Ace informed him.

"I gladly accept the privilege." Lucas replied. "So when is the wedding? I need to prepare the gift in advance."

"Well, as soon as possible before Phoenix could change her mind." Ace said and Lucas chuckled.

I couldn't help but smile from his silly joke.

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As if I would dare to change my mind, said a part of my head.

Chapter 187

The first true love every

girl has is her father.

No one will ever replace

him as the love of her

life.

????★????

At the corner of my eyes I spotted Claire heading in our direction. She was wrapped in an off shoulder beige gown that gave emphasis to her tall and elegant frame. Her beautiful curls loosely hung on her shoulders and it framed her face. She looked good tonight, good is even an understatement. She looked stunning. She'd always been a beautiful woman but tonight she looked ethereal. Who would have guessed that she's Ace's mother and also the grandmother of two lovely children..

Regally standing beside Claire was Alexander. His right arm protectively draped around her elegant shoulders. Father looked equally good in his black tuxedo, a couple of eyes followed him as he walked past the guests. The two looked good together, almost like a perfect couple. Though Father and Claire haven't announced their status yet, obviously they were smitten with each other. First love never dies after all.

Lucas and Ace suddenly fell silent. Turning my gaze to them, I saw them looking at the approaching couple. But it was not Father and Claire Ace was looking at. It was Vien who was shyly hiding behind his mother where his gaze was nailed at. My lips parted in surprise. I didn't see her at first and it took me a moment to realize that she's even there.

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"Vien..." The word trailed out of Ace's lips. His eyes were all wide and misty. He stepped forward but stopped as if he suddenly changed mind. He was breathing heavily as he waited for the three to reach us.

My hands reach to his arm, trying to give him comfort with the soft caress of my fingers against his skin. His gaze remained locked on Vien. His deep blue eyes flickered with tears. I could see with clarity as various emotions swirl around them.

My heart swelled inside my chest. The scene made me want to weep too. Watching the reunion between Ace and Vien touched my heart. It's been a long three years—or was it four—since the last time Ace saw her. Seeing her now still shocked him. That's how exactly I felt the first time I laid my eyes on my daughter.

When I thought it's going to take forever, Claire and Father reached our spot. Vien remained hidden behind Ace's mother but her wide, unblinking eyes remained glued to Ace as if she's trying to figure out if he was indeed her father.

"Come here, Vien." Ace spoke, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. Vien stood still in her place, her exquisite blue eyes— a perfect replica of her father—flickered with tears. "Papa is here baby." He added. This time a tear fell down his cheeks.

"Papa." Vien said, the words sounded more of a question than a statement. For a split second she remained silent as if contemplating the words. I held my breath as I waited how she would respond.

The room fell into a deafening silence. Even the orchestra stopped playing.

Vien took a step closer and closer. When she was a couple of steps away from Ace, she pulled into a stop and looked up to him. Her eyes stretched wide as it wander to his face.

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"Papa." She spoke again but this time it wasn't a question anymore. It was a word spoken without a tinge of doubt. She crossed the distance between them and jumped into Ace's arms. Sobbing.

I lose control of my emotion and a sob bursts into my lips. Only a statue would feel nothing while watching the scene. I dried my tears with the back of my fingers but the tears won't stop falling. I gave up wiping them and continue to look at them with a wonderful feeling in my heart.

Ace hugged Vien so tight with his eyes firmly close. Tears fell down the smoothness of his cheeks. The emotions swirling inside me made my chest so tight that I could barely breath.

Ace and I waited for so long for this moment to come. When we thought Vien died on that night on the car accident, we'd given up hope meeting her again. But god is good, he let my daughter live so we could have her with us and be a whole family again. And now the most awaiting reunion between Ace and Vien slowly takes place, I almost couldn't believe it myself.

If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up. I would rather die than realize that everything had been only a dream.

I sniffed and wiped my eyes with the back of my palms to clear my hazy vision. And when my eyes finally moved to the crowd, it took me a moment to realize everyone was crying too. My whole family and so the guests were wiping a tear in their eyes. Everything that happened to us was in the news and every soul inside the room knew the hardships we've been through because of Ace's family. Our story touched their hearts and now they're happy to share this wonderful moment with us.

Ace wiped the tears on Vien's face with his hands. He looked deep into her eyes and began caressing her face. "Papa will never allow anyone to take you away from us again." He vowed and landed a soft kiss on her forehead.

Finally I crossed the small distance that separates us and joined them. Ace pull me into his arms and hugged the two of us. I momentarily freed myself out

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of Ace's hold when I spotted Elisa in the crowd. She was holding Faith in her arms. I went up to her and took my baby into my arms. Faith was asleep. The party must have exhausted her.

When I return back to Ace, he laid a soft kiss on Faith's temples and wrapped me back into his arms. The room erupted into a round of applause. Camera's start to flash in our direction.

At last, after all the hardships and struggles we are finally reunited.

Today, on my birthday, everything I ever needed was given to me; Ace, my daughters, and my whole family. I have nothing more to ask. Everything I ever needed to survive was right here with in my reach.

????★????

To my wonderful readers,

MR CEO'S PREGNANT EX-WIFE is finally coming to an end. A few more chapters and the story would be finished soon. First, I want to thank you all for your patience for waiting for each update. To those who are not aware, the reason I wasn't able to update for so long is because I'm still under treatment during those times. Taking five tablets daily drains my strength and makes me feel dizzy all the time. I was depressed too that I couldn't write a single chapter. Now that my treatment was over I'm planning to return to writing again and continue my unfinished works.

Thank you all for supporting me on my writing journey! I love you all....

To those who is interested in Lucas (Ace's best friend) I will be writing his story soon (after I finish MCPEW) The title of the story is?THE DUKE'S VILLAINESS WIFE IS AN IMPOSTOR. I'm hoping you will like it too.

????★????

SYNOPSIS

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Bright and Intelligent Arabella Angelstone is the secret twin sister of a socialite heiress. Her existence could ruin her sister's reputation so she was hidden from the real world. Life was sweet and simple for her. However, a single decision changed her life forever. By Alexandria's evil manipulation, she was sent to Britannia to meet her twin's fiancé and pretend to be her.

The moment Bella laid her eyes on the dashing Duke of St. Alexander, she instantly fell head over heels for him. In his arms she found solace and love. At last she had a place where she truly belonged. Just when everything fell perfectly into place, Alexandria returned and reclaimed her place as Lucas's future wife.

The day of Lucas and Alexandria's wedding, Bella was killed by a gun man.

She survives after six months of coma but the baby she wasn't aware she's carrying didn't make it. She left the country and tried to rebuild her life despite everything. Three years later, at the privacy of her home she was abducted. While trying to flee from her abductor, the car she was driving was wrecked into a fatal collision.

When she woke up, she was no longer Bella Rose, the meek beauty with a solitary life but Alexandria St. Alexander, the socialite heiress hated by everyone including Lucas Nicholas Alexander.... her husband.

Gone with her identity was her memory of the past, will she be able to live the life opposite her own?

Chapter 188

The radiant moon stood beautifully upon a wonderful star-studded sky. The soft subtle wind from the garden caressed my skin but I didn't feel the cold at all. The warmth of an arm wrapped around my waist provided the warmth I needed.

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The garden looked magnificent under the pale glow of the moonlight. It looked like a scene straight out of a painting. Aside from the occasional sound of nocturnal insects and the sound of hush voices from afar, the garden was peaceful.

After an endless round of Congratulations from the jovial guest, Ace and I managed to sneak out of the garden unnoticed for an alone time together.

"Are you cold, love?" He murmured against my ears, my thoughts fled. The warmth of his lips against my skin sent a ticklish sensation all over my body.

"I'm not cold, love." I replied and turned to face him. My arms as if they have a mind of their own encircled his neck. In return, his arms encircled my waist and pulled me closer into his body until my body was pressed to his own that even air couldn't pass between us.

He smiled. It was a sweet, seductive smile that instantly melted my knees and turned them to jell-o. "I miss you.... Words are not enough to express how bad I'd been wanting to be with you." He'd spoken the words with so much love and tenderness that I found my chest swelling with joy.

The pools of his exquisite blue eyes were glowing. He looked like a demigod at the moment as the pale moonlight illuminated his face giving him a mysterious yet alluring look.

For a moment, my eyes fluttered close. Savoring the peaceful night sky while he holds me close. I imagined this same exact scene inside my mind over and over again. Never did it cross my thoughts that it would happen now. And now it's taking place, my heart keeps beating erratically inside my chest. I love him so much that it shattered me when I thought I lost him. But now that he's here with me, my anxiety and fears vanished as if they didn't even exist.

"I miss you too, Ace..." I murmured, slowly opening my eyes. "I too couldn't put into words how much I missed you. The months we've been away from each other feels like years to me. When you left, you took a part of me with you and I'd never felt complete since then. But tonight when I saw your face,

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all the hollows and emptiness nagging inside me was filled with warmth. And for a long time, I feel whole again." My hand went into his face and cupped his jaw into my hands. "Please... don't leave again. It would break my heart if I saw you walk away." Tears clouded my vision and when I blinked my eyes it fell on my cheeks.

"Hush... don't cry my love. It breaks my heart to see you in tears. I gave you my word, I will never leave you again. Never. Even if someone would aim a shotgun at my head, I'll still remain by your side even if it means death." He took a deep agonizing breath and wiped the wetness of my cheeks with his fingers. "I lost you a couple of times before but now that our lives are finally at peace, I will never lose you again. I love you, love. I love you so much that if I were to choose between loving you and breathing, I would use my last breath to say I love you."

He wrapped me into his arms more tightly. The warmth of his body pressed against mine gave me the comfort and sense of inner peace. For a moment the world stopped moving. Everyone around us faded into a different dimension. There's only the two of us.

When his lips claimed mine, the emotions I'd been trying hard to suppress broke loose. A groan escaped my lips. My hands clung around his neck for support. My knees felt like noodles, if I wasn't holding onto him I already slumped on the cemented pavement with my butt first.

I moved my lips into the rhythm of his own. He was moving slowly but it feels like I'd been running miles and miles by how my heart was beating fast inside my chest. His heart beat, I could almost hear it too and it was beating erratically like mine.

The more we kissed the more thirsty and greedy I became. I just can't get enough of the kiss I'd been deprived of for months. When he finally let me go, I was breathless and so was he. Even if I was trying to chase after my breath, I'm perfectly fulfilled inside.

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I laid my head into his chest with a contented sigh. I could spend the night with him like this and not feel tired at all. Just having him with me feels like heaven to me.

"Love?" He called after a moment of silence.

"Yes?" I mumbled sleepily against his chest. The sweet scent of perfume clinging to his cloth permeated my nostrils and it was making me sleepy.

"When you blow out your candle, what did you wish?" He asked, caressing my hair with his palms.

The question instantly made my lips stretch into a smile. I look up to him with eyes twinkling with mirth. "What did you think I wished for?" I shot him back the same question he asked me.

"A successful career?"

I shook my head.

"The safety and abundance of the family?"

"That's only my secondary wish."

He sighed. "I gave up.... So tell me what did you wish for?"

"I wished for a son." I told him.

His eyes went huge. A wide smile broke into his lips. There was a glint of tears at the corner of his eyes. "I want a son too." He whispered, consumed with joy.

He wrapped me into his arms and buried his face into my hair, inhaling the scent of my favorite shampoo. "Let's make a son tonight, love." He offered.

"I would love to." I replied.

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Ace broked into laughter.

Chapter 189

The best feeling

in the whole world

is watching things

finally fall into place

after watching them

fall apart for so long.

???????

"Good morning sleepy head. It's time to wake up."

A soothing voice whispered against my ear, rousing me from a peaceful slumber. Groaning, I turned away from where the voice was coming from and buried my head on the pillow.

"Mama, wake up..." Another sweet voice whispered in my other ear. "We're going to look for your wedding gown today."

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Another groan escaped my lips. My eyes slightly opened but the sudden blinding light permeating through the open venetian blinds made me close them again.

"Later honey...?give mama another twenty minutes please. I promise to get up and prepare for our appointment." I mumbled sleepily, hoping they would leave.

There was a long pause. Relief flooded through me when there was no sound of protests coming from them. Sighing with contentment, I buried my face into the pillow to recover the sleep I lost last night.

It was Ace's fault why up to now I wasn't up yet. We spent the night sprawled on bed, making love, and trying to make up for moments we've lost. It was already dawn when we fell asleep. He couldn't blame me now for waking up late.

"Wake up love...." Ace whispered to my earlobe. His hot breath tickled my ears.

"Five minutes." I murmured.

He chuckled and buried his nose on my neck. "If you don't wake up, I'll find other ways to get you up." He teased me and without a warning his fingers tickled my armpits. My eyes snapped open. A scream erupted from my lips.

"Aaace!"

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Vien giggled as she watched me get up from the bed, grabbed a pillow and threw it towards Ace. His shoulders shook uncontrollably with laughter as he looked at me. He caught the pillow in time before it could hit him in the head and he put it aside where I couldn't reach it.

"You overslept, love" He said as he gestured to the wall clock. My eyes followed his hand and saw the time. It's past ten already. My eyes went wide as realization hit me. I overslept too much.

I hastened out of the bed and scrambled at my feet. The last ember of sleepiness faded. For a split second I was fully awake.

"Oh, jeez." I mumbled as I grabbed a fresh towel from the cabinet. "I'll prepare in ten minutes." I told them and hurriedly entered the bathroom and took a quick bath.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, Ace, Vien, and Faith had gone downstairs. I wore the first things my fingers grabbed inside the closet and put it on. It was a maroon knitted dress. I paired it with a black flat sandals.

Since I was in a hurry, I didn't bother to tie my hair. After brushing my hair into submission, I let it fall freely behind my back like a cape and went downstairs.

There on the Kitchen table Ace was waiting.

"Faith was in the Garden. Elisa brought her out for a walk. Vien was with her too." He explained as I took the seat beside him.

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"Did Vien eat breakfast?" I asked. Eyebrows furrowed.

"I let her eat first before allowing her to go to the garden."

My concern faded. It was then replaced with a smile. "I'm starving." I said. My gaze surveyed the dishes spread on top of the long table. The pleasant scent of food permeated my nostrils. My hunger intensified.

"And so do I." He replied.

Together we ate in silence. Just having him with me in the kitchen while we ate together was heaven to me. It's one of my simple pleasures in life.

"That knitted dress looks good on you." He remarked just after finishing his breakfast.

Warmth spread on my cheeks. "Thank you." I said shyly, "It was the first thing I grabbed inside the closet. I'm in a hurry and I decided to wear it without bothering to think about how I look."

He laughed and when he did his eyes crinkled in the corner. "I bet you look good in whatever you decide to wear." He said.

The compliment made my cheeks blush furiously. Before I could say a word, he vacated his seat and held his hand to me.

"Shall we go?"

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I nodded my head and took his hand. He kissed me on the cheek before we marched to the door.

????

"Moma can we go to the mall and buy some books after we finish picking your wedding gown?" It was Vien. She was seated in between me and Ace on the backseat of the car. Miller, Claire's butler, was the one driving.

After tearing my gaze to Faith who was comfortably seated in her father's arm, I shifted my attention to Vien and placed an arm around her shoulders. "Sure, my big princess. What particular books do you have in mind?"

"I want some coloring books. And reading materials for beginners. I want to learn how to read so I could teach my little sister when she grow up." She replied. Her exquisite blue eyes glowing.

Ace and I looked at each other, suppressing a smile from stretching on our lips.

He patted Vien's head affectionately. "Papa will buy everything you want, my princess." He promised.

Vien was elated. She leaned on the soft cushion behind her with a sweet smile on her lips.

Thirty minutes later, the car stopped in front of Belle Boutique. Miller got out of the driver's seat and opened the door for us. Vien excitedly clamber out of the

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car. Her curious gaze darted on the attractive gowns displayed on the glass window the moment her feet landed on the pavement.

I got out of the car and Ace followed behind me.

An instant smile lit up my face as I took Vien's hand and pull her to the upscale entrance of the building.

The last time I came here was too look for a birthday gown.. Who could have thought that I'll be returning here and this time it was to select my own wedding gown.

Chapter 190

God made you.

God made me.

Then he whispered,

'meant to be.'

?????

It's been a while since we met Ace. I'm glad to finally meet you again."

It was Belle, the owner of the wedding boutique and his mother's long time friend

who greeted us the moment we entered the upscale building. She came to me with a sweet smile on her lips and kissed me on the cheeks.

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"What lovely daughters you have. They looked like you. They are beautiful. " She said, her glance shifting from Faith who was in her father's arms and to Vien who stood beside me and holding my hand.

I responded to the compliment with a smile.

"You're looking great Belle." It was Ace. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"I'll give you a large discount." Belle said, making Ace burst into laughter. "Anyways Claire had told me in advance that you're looking for a wedding gown?" She asked, turning to my direction.

"Yes, we are."

"Do you have a particular design in mind?"

"Anything in white would do." I replied shyly. I'm not that picky and I have seen her collection of gowns before and I know whatever gown she would recommend would be commendable.

"Anything you wear would look good on you, Phoenix. " Belle said and my cheeks flushed from that compliment. "Please follow me, I'll show you my exclusive wedding gown collection."

We entered a wide, spacious room where a line up of mannequins stood, each mannequin wore Belle's latest wedding collections.

The displays were all pretty but there were three gowns that stole my attention and I couldn't decide what to choose between the three.

The three gowns were all off shoulder but it was their designs that differed them from one another. The first one is a lace gown with intricate designs, the second was decorated with swarovski, and the third one was made of satin which was embroidered with floral designs.

Belle told me to try them one by one so we could decide which gown is the best. I followed her advice and tried them.

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In the end, we chose the white lace gown. It was off shoulder with, A-line front, and it looked beautiful. It looked good on me, Ace told me, in which Belle completely agreed. I love the gown. It was simple yet chic and it was not heavy like the other two so I decided that it would be my wedding gown.

After the appointment in the boutique, by Vien's eager request we went into the mall where we ate lunch in a restaurant. When we finished, we went to the bookstore to buy books for Vien.

I was holding Faith into my arms while Ace usher Vien to the section where the children's book was located. I couldn't help but smile as I watched them walk away.

My heart feels overwhelmed by the sight of the father and daughter bond between them.

After they selected the book Vien wanted, Ace paid it on the counter when and then we decided to head back home.

????

Days passed by so fast and almost two weeks had passed since we started making preparations for the wedding and now, I couldn't believe that Ace and I managed to accomplish everything in less than two weeks when it usually takes less than a month to prepare such a grand wedding.

"Are you nervous, love? " It was Ace asking behind me as I sat on the bench outside the garden.

I looked up to him and smiled. "Of course not, love. I'm actually excited." I told him, referring to our wedding tomorrow which would be held in church. "How about you?"

Ace grinned. "I'm actually nervous." He said to my surprise. He occupied the space beside me and took my hand and wrapped them in his large ones.

"Why would you be?" I asked. Curious.

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"I'm afraid you would change your mind." He said with sincerity. I would have laughed at his remark if he wasn't serious. I bit back a laugh and cleared my throat.

"I'm not going to change my mind, love." I assure him.

"Then I'm afraid that I will wake up tomorrow and realize that all of this was only a dream."

I cupped his cheeks with both of my hands, looked deep into his eyes and whispered, "That's not going to happen. This is our reality. We've been through a lot before and I know that we're going to be happy now especially that everything has fallen perfectly into place."

Ace momentarily closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of my hand framing his cheeks. "Thank you, love. I feel better now," He said when he opened his eyes.

I laid a soft kiss on his cheeks. "After the wedding we're going to be busy again."

Upon the mention of it, Ace groaned. We only have a one week honeymoon period and after that both of us would be extremely busy again.

Ace would return as the Chief Executive Officer of Greyson Enterprises. Aside from that, he would be managing the Hotel which his father granted him sole ownership before he was killed.

I on the other hand would be occupied with the task of running the Resort Hotel which would open in two weeks. Aside from owning the Hotel which my father gave me as a birthday gift, I would be managing it as it's Hotel Manager. To add to that, I received a contract from one of the prestigious clothing lines asking me to become it's model and I'm planning to sign it too since it's only part time.

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"Just forget about it for a while. Let's savor the peace for now." He said and landed a kiss on my lips. "I love you, love." He said softly.

"I love you too, love." I whispered back, my chest overflowing with so much love.

He placed my head on his shoulders. His arms encircled my waist and in that intimate position, we watched the breathtaking pale tint of orange spread on the sky as the sun descended from the horizon.

At last, after the long winding road filled with heartaches, heartbreaks, tears, and sacrifices, we finally found our happy ending.

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