

## Chapter 30

Yaz leaned over her worktable, jotting down notes in her small, leather-bound notebook. The loft studio was quiet, the hum of the city outside a distant murmur. It was rare for her to leave work early on a Friday, but she'd taken the chance to check on the progress of the latest orders, making sure everything was on track before the weekend. The girls would be in early tomorrow to keep things moving, and she wanted to leave them clear instructions.

She flipped through fabric swatches, comparing textures, before scribbling another note. Just as she reached for a measuring tape, a sharp knock echoed through the studio.

She frowned. It was late, too late for deliveries, and the girls had already gone home. Confused, she wiped her hands on her skirt and headed for the door.

As she pulled it open, her breath caught.

Franny?

Standing in the dim hallway, wrapped in a dark coat, her hazel eyes fixed on Yaz with that unmistakable mix of confidence and mischief. Yaz blinked, still processing. They hadn't done this in days. Not since the madness started. Frances had been too careful, too watched.

Yaz exhaled, shaking her head in disbelief. "How the hell did you manage this?"

Frances smirked, stepping inside as Yaz closed the door behind her. "Slipped away," she said lightly. Then, with a teasing lilt, "Besides, we're partners. I'm here on business."

Yaz arched a brow. “What kind of business?”

Frances didn’t answer. Instead, she reached for Yaz’s hand, tugging her closer.

“Private one.” she murmured, voice low and full of warmth.

And before Yaz could say another word, Frances tilted her chin up and kissed her deep, slow, deliberate.

Yaz melted into it, her fingers curling into the lapels of Frances’s coat.

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The loft was bathed in the soft glow of the city lights filtering through the window, casting long shadows across the bed. Frances lay on her stomach, her golden hair tousled against the pillow, the bare curve of her back exposed to the cool air. Yaz traced a slow, lazy finger down the length of her spine, watching as Frances shivered beneath her touch.

“You do that on purpose,” Frances murmured, her voice thick with warmth.

Yaz smirked, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Frances’s shoulder.  
“Maybe.”

Frances hummed in satisfaction, then turned her head slightly, her hazel eyes catching Yaz’s in the dim light. “You know...” she started, her tone playful yet tentative, “I’d love for you to come to the premiere with me.”

Yaz stilled for a beat, then broke into a massive grin. “Yeah?”

Frances smiled, watching the excitement light up Yaz’s face. “Yeah.”

“Then I’m there,” Yaz said, her voice full of certainty.

Frances laughed softly, brushing Yaz's hand with her own before settling deeper into the mattress. "Good," she whispered, as if the idea of Yaz beside her that night made everything just a little easier.

They lay in comfortable silence for a moment before Frances shifted slightly. "I've got a meeting with Andy in the morning," she murmured, resting her cheek against the pillow. "Something about another script he wants me to look at. He thinks it could be—"

Yaz cringed before she could stop herself. It wasn't obvious—not a sharp, physical recoil, but a slow, sinking feeling curling in her stomach, tightening her chest. Andy. His name alone made her jaw clench. She'd been trying not to think about him, about the way he looked at Frances, about the way he spoke to her like he owned a part of her. Yaz forced her expression to remain neutral, but she could feel the tension creeping into her body, her fingers twitching slightly where they rested against the sheet.

Frances stopped mid-sentence.

The change was small, almost imperceptible, but Frances felt it. Yaz had gone still, her body no longer relaxed against hers.

Frances turned her head fully, frowning. "What is it?"

Yaz quickly shook her head. "Nothing."

Frances wasn't convinced. She rolled onto her side, propping herself up on one elbow, her free hand reaching for Yaz's chin. "Look at me," she said softly, but firmly.

Yaz hesitated, then turned her head slightly, though her gaze remained distant.

Frances studied her for a long moment. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Yaz swallowed, then slowly moved, sitting up. She pulled the sheet over her chest, suddenly quiet.

Frances pushed herself upright as well, concern deepening in her features. She reached out again, this time cupping Yaz's chin, tilting her face toward hers. "Talk to me," she urged, her voice gentle but insistent.

Yaz exhaled, a slow, uneasy breath. "It's nothing..." she murmured.

Frances shook her head. "No. You're hiding something." Her tone wasn't accusatory, just steady. "Please don't do that."

Yaz dropped her gaze, her fingers tightening in the fabric of the sheet. Frances could see the conflict flickering in her expression, could feel the weight of whatever she was holding back.

"Yaz," Frances prompted again, gentler this time.

Yaz's jaw clenched briefly before she finally spoke. "It's Andy."

Frances's stomach turned. Her expression hardened. "Andy?"

Yaz nodded, glancing at her warily. "I was going to tell you, but you've had so much on your mind, and I just..." She trailed off, pressing her lips together.

Frances's patience thinned. "Tell me what, darling?" she urged. "What did he do?"

Yaz took a breath, bracing herself. "He came into my office with a check. Seven thousand dollars." She hesitated, then forced the words out. "He wanted me to leave you."

Frances blinked, her body going completely still. “I you fucking kidding?”

Yaz scoffed. “Wish I was.” She looked down, picking at the edge of the sheet. “And it gets better. He told me if I didn’t take it, things could get... difficult for me.”

Frances stared at her, frozen. The words didn’t quite register at first, like she’d misheard them, like they weren’t real. But Yaz was looking at her with those wide, hesitant eyes, waiting, bracing.

And then it hit.

Frances shoved the sheets off and swung her legs over the side of the bed, her breath sharp as she grabbed the shirt and yanked it on. Her hands were shaking. She reached for the cigarette box on the nightstand, snatching one out and lighting it with quick, clipped movements.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered, pushing herself up and striding across the gallery.

Yaz watched her, dragging the sheet with her as she stood, the fabric pooling around her feet. “Franny...” she said quietly

Frances ignored her, moving to the dresser by the window, planting herself on the edge of it. She took a long, furious drag, exhaling sharply as she stared out at the city below, her fingers tapping against the wood.

Yaz hesitated for a second, then followed, the sheet trailing behind her. “This is exactly why I didn’t wanna tell you...I knew...”

Frances turned her head sharply. “No,” she snapped. “No, you should've told me. You have to tell me.”

Yaz sighed, clutching the sheet tighter around her. “I didn’t want to dump more on you. You’ve got enough pressure as it is, and I—”

“That’s not how this works,” Frances cut in, her voice softer now, but firm.

“I don’t want you sparing me from this shit. Ever. Do you understand?”

Yaz swallowed, her throat tight. “...Are you mad?”

Frances huffed a dry, humorless laugh. She took another drag, then stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray beside her before looking back at Yaz. “I’m mad I didn’t know sooner.” She reached for Yaz then, pulling her in by the waist, the sheet slipping slightly from Yaz’s grasp as Frances pressed her against herself.

“I get why you did it,” she murmured, her hands warm against Yaz’s skin. “I know your heart was in the right place. But from now on? No more of this. No more protecting me from things just because you think I’ve got too much on my plate or you think I can’t handle it.”

Yaz nodded slowly, her hands settling on Frances’s shoulders. “I just didn’t wanna stress you out...Everything was maddening and you were out of your mind and.....”

Frances pulled back slightly, looking her in the eye. “But you are my business, Yaz. We are my business. And I don’t care how hard it is...whatever it is, I want us to be honest. Completely, totally honest. No matter what. Please don’t do this again. This isn’t a pissing competition who can deal with more stress before losing our shit completely.”

Yaz let out a breath, nodding again, firmer this time. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Frances echoed, brushing her thumb across Yaz’s cheek before pressing a soft kiss to her lips. It was slow, grounding, as if to settle them both back into place.

When Frances pulled away, her expression had hardened again. "Now tell me *exactly* what he said."

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"I got a feeling Andy's been trying to pull strings I never asked him to pull." Frances said buttoning her blouse

Yaz raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

Frances sighed fastening her belt "I mean I bet this isn't the first time he's made a move like this. Not just with you. He's always had this way of talkin' like he's doin' me a favor, but maybe he's been making decisions for me that I never agreed to."

Yaz tilted her head. "You think he's done this to someone else before?"

Frances ran a hand through her hair. "I think I should've paid a hell of a lot more attention to what he's been up to."

"So, what's the plan?" Yaz asked, watching her from the bed as she tied her shoes

"First," Frances said, smoothing her hair in the mirror, "I find myself a new agent. Then, I have a conversation with my lawyer." She paused, turning to face Yaz, her expression steady, unshaken. "And after that... he and I are gonna have a real talk."

Yaz smirked getting up "Glad I won't be there for that."

Frances chuckled, pulling Yaz against her. "Smart woman."

Yaz wrapped her arms around Frances's waist, resting her forehead against hers. "Just be careful, yeah?"

Frances softened, pressing a kiss to Yaz's temple. "Always."

A quiet settled between them, warm and unspoken. Yaz's hands trailed down Frances's arms, her touch light, reverent. She let out a small sigh, a wistful smile playing on her lips. "I wish I could stay..." She chuckled, shaking her head. "But I'm a mum now."

Frances's expression softened, something unguarded flickering in her eyes. She reached up, tucking a curl behind Yaz's ear, her fingertips lingering. "Don't laugh when I say this... I know it's silly, but in some imaginary world, I wish I had her with you."

Yaz blinked, her breath catching in her throat. Then, without hesitation, she pulled Frances even closer, her arms tightening around her back. "What are you talking about?" she murmured, her voice thick with something neither of them could name. "Of course you have."

Frances closed her eyes, breathing her in, letting the words settle deep. And in that moment, wrapped up in Yaz, she allowed herself to believe it.

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The moment Yaz stepped into the hallway, she barely had time to close the door before she heard the light patter of feet against the floorboards. In an instant, Lily came rushing from the kitchen, her little arms flinging around Yaz's waist as she buried her face against her.

"Yaz!" Lily squealed. "Where were you?"

Yaz laughed, scooping her up effortlessly. "Pumpkin, you almost knocked me over!" She pressed a quick kiss to her cheek before adjusting her hold on her.

Lily pulled back just enough to peer up at her, her hazel eyes wide with



expectation.

"Where were you?" she asked again, her tone insistent, like she'd been waiting all evening to know.

"I had some things to do in my loft studio," Yaz said, carrying her toward the kitchen. "And then I met up with your mum."

Lily gasped excitedly. "You did?"

"I did. And guess what?" Yaz tapped her nose lightly. "She brought back that rouge you left behind."

Lily let out a dramatic sigh, flopping against Yaz's shoulder. "Ohhh, I forgot it!"

"You were too excited, weren't you?" Yaz teased, stepping into the warm glow of the kitchen.

Susan was already setting the table, her movements practiced and steady, the soft clatter of plates filling the air. The scent of something rich and comforting lingered, stew, maybe, or roasted vegetables.

Lily perked up again. "Me and Susan cooked! And we hung up the washing, and we played cards."

"You've been busy, then," Yaz said, setting Lily down.

Lily nodded eagerly, bouncing a little on the spot before running off to find something else to do.

"Hi honey" Susan smiled

"Hi" Yaz smiled back

For just a moment, she stood still, watching Susan place silverware beside each plate. Something about it struck her, not the task itself, but the quiet rhythm of it. The familiarity. The way she'd just moved from one world into another, like stepping through an invisible doorway.

Not long ago, she had been tangled up in Frances's sheets, fingers tracing the lines of her spine, Frances's breath warm against her skin. Now, here she was, in the middle of a different life. A life that wasn't really hers but somehow fit like a second skin.

It was temporary. Of course, it was temporary. But in some ways, it wasn't.

This was the life they had built, all of them, her, Frances, Lily, and Susan, woven together by love, necessity, and the quiet understanding of women surviving the world the only way they knew how.

Yaz shook the thought away and stepped forward, pressing a quick kiss to Susan's cheek.

"Need any help?" she asked, settling into this other life as if she'd always belonged.

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Frances had drifted into a restless sleep, the weight of the day—of everything—pulling her deeper into the quiet of the night. Her room was dark, the only light a sliver of moonlight sneaking through the drawn curtains. The sound of her breathing was steady, the quiet comfort of her bed lulling her into a sense of calm.

But then, the phone rang.

The shrill sound cut through the silence like a sharp knife, and instantly, Frances's eyes snapped open. Her first thought was always the same,

no matter the hour—Lily. But as she reached out for the phone, she saw that the call was coming from an unfamiliar number.

"Hello?" she answered, her voice groggy but alert.

"Is this Margaret Bennett?" A woman's voice asked, calm but serious.

Frances's heart skipped a beat, and she sat up in bed, pulling the blankets tighter around herself as she tried to focus.

"Yes," she replied, her voice tense now. "Who is this?"

The woman on the other end paused before answering, as though gathering the right words.

"My name is Elsie Wilkes ma'am, I'm a nurse from Brooklyn Memorial Hospital," the woman said. "I'm so sorry to be the one to call, but we've found your phone number on records."

Frances's stomach tightened. Her mind raced. "I don't understand?"

"I'm afraid your father has had a stroke. He's been admitted to the hospital here. I'm sorry, but we need you to come as soon as possible."

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Frances sat on the edge of her bed, the dim light from the bedside lamp casting soft shadows across her face. The phone cord twisted between her fingers as she listened to the steady ring on the other end. Her heart was still pounding from the conversation with the hospital.

Then, finally, the call connected.

"Yeah?" Jimmy's voice was gruff, tired.

Frances exhaled. "It's me."

"I figured." A pause. "I already know. The police just left."

She blinked, caught off guard. "The police?"

Jimmy sighed. "Yeah. Some thugs trashed his store. Smashed up the windows, wrecked the place. Took some cash, too."

Frances let out a sharp breath. "Jesus." Then, after a beat, she added, "Can't say I'm sad about it."

Jimmy let out a dry chuckle. "Yeah. Me neither."

There was a moment of silence between them, one that carried years of unspoken words.

"The hospital called me," Frances finally said. "Said had a stroke and he's in pretty bad shape..."

"Yeah. I know."

She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't want to go. I don't want to see him."

"You don't have to," Jimmy said easily. "But listen, considering the whole situation...who you are, the press crawling all over you...maybe think about at least flying over. This could backfire in your face if you don't."

Frances clenched her jaw, hating that he was right.

Jimmy continued, his voice calm but firm. "I don't give a shit either. But the last thing we need is another headline splattered all over the damn papers. 'Hollywood Starlet Abandons Dying Father'—or some crap like that."

Frances exhaled slowly, rubbing at her temple. "God, I hate this."

"I know."

Silence stretched between them again before she finally muttered, "Fine. I'll fly over."

"You want me to pick you up from the airport?"

"No, but thank you. The studio will arrange everything."

Jimmy made a low sound of understanding. "Alright. But we should go to the hospital together."

She hesitated, then nodded, even though he couldn't see it. "I'll call you when I land. We'll figure it out then."

"Alright." His voice was softer now. "Safe flight, Maggie."

She closed her eyes. "Thanks..."

For once, it felt warm between them. No anger, no old wounds bleeding between words, just two siblings, tangled up in the same mess, surviving the only way they knew how.

"See you soon," she murmured, before hanging up.

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The shrill ringing of the phone cut through the quiet house, the sound carrying from the kitchen and echoing up the hallway. Susan stirred awake, blinking against the darkness before pushing herself out of bed. She hurried barefoot across the floor, wrapping her robe tighter around her as she reached the kitchen and lifted the receiver.

“Hello?” she asked, her voice hushed but alert.

“It’s me,” came Frances’s voice on the other end. “Sorry to wake you.”

Susan immediately straightened. “What’s wrong?”

“The hospital from New York called,” Frances said, her voice unreadable. “My father had a stroke.”

Susan was silent for a moment, taken aback. “Oh,” she said carefully. Then, after a beat, “How do you feel about that?”

“Like throwing a damn party,” Frances replied dryly.

Susan huffed a soft laugh, shaking her head. Before she could say anything more, a shuffling sound came from the doorway.

Yaz stood there, wrapped in a blanket, her hair a tangle, her eyes half-lidded with sleep. “What’s goin’ on?” she mumbled, rubbing at her face.

Susan wordlessly passed her the phone, and Yaz frowned but took it. “Hello?”

“It’s me darling,” Frances said again. “Dad had a stroke. Some thugs broke into his shop, trashed the whole place”

Yaz blinked, her sleepy brain processing that before she snorted. “Well,” she murmured, “sounds like they were doin’ God’s work.”

Frances barked a laugh on the other end. “Jesus, Yaz.”

Yaz smirked, but her voice softened. “So, what happens now?”

“I have to go to New York,” Frances sighed. “The hospital, the press, all that shit. Jimmy says if I don’t show my face, it’ll just turn into a bigger

mess.”

Yaz leaned against the kitchen top, still half-asleep. “While you’re there, trip over his oxygen for me, will you?”

Frances let out another laugh, but there was something warm in it. “You’re terrible.”

“I know.”

There was a brief pause before Frances’s voice softened. “I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll have to give a statement for the press, blah blah, the usual crap.”

Yaz sighed. “Sounds exhausting.”

“It will be.” Then, suddenly, Frances asked, “How’s Lily?”

Yaz’s face softened as she glanced back toward the dark hallway leading to their room. “Fast asleep. Snoring like a little piglet.”

Frances chuckled. “Give her a massive kiss and a hug for me.”

“I will.”

“And when all this is over, we’re sneaking out of the city for the weekend. Just us.”

Yaz smiled at that, a real, genuine smile despite the hour. “That sounds perfect.”

“It will be. Alright darling...go back to sleep. I love you both so damn much.”

“We love you more.”

As Yaz hung up the phone, she exhaled softly, running a hand through her hair. Susan, still standing by the kitchen table, gave her a questioning look.

“What happened?” she asked, her voice low but curious.

Yaz leaned against the counter, arms folding across her chest. “Some thugs trashed his store.”

Susan sighed, rubbing at her temple. “Good Lord... I hope this doesn’t mean he’s gonna become a burden for Frances now.”

Yaz scoffed. “He won’t. There’s gotta be some free shithole she can shove him into if it comes to that.”

Susan let out a surprised laugh, shaking her head. “You’re absolutely brutal.”

Yaz smirked. “Just practical.”

Susan chuckled, stepping forward and pressing a light kiss to Yaz’s cheek. “Goodnight, love.”

“Night”

With that, Yaz padded back down the hall. She slipped beneath the covers, wrapping an arm around Lily, pressing a gentle kiss to the back of her hair. The little girl stirred only slightly, shuffling closer in her sleep.

Yaz closed her eyes, her heart full, and let sleep take her once more.

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The moment Frances stepped out of the car at the airport, the press swarmed like vultures. Flashbulbs exploded in rapid succession, voices



overlapping in a relentless storm of questions.

“Frances! Frances! Are you close to your father?”

“Frances, is your daughter joining you on this trip?”

“How is your father doing? Is it true his store was vandalised? Was he attacked ”

“Frances, over here! Are you planning to stay in New York long?”

Her security team moved efficiently, shielding her from the crush of bodies as she walked with brisk determination toward the private gate. She kept her expression neutral, her sunglasses a shield against both the glare of the camera flashes and the emotion she refused to let show.

“No comment,” she said firmly, voice steady despite the chaos.

More questions fired at her, but she ignored them. The security detail closed ranks as they reached the entrance, and a moment later, she was through the doors, the noise fading as they shut behind her.

She exhaled, rolling her shoulders back as she strode toward the private lounge. The flight to New York couldn't come soon enough.

Inside the private lounge, Frances sank into a chair, slipping off her sunglasses as her assistant, Nicole, approached, a folder in hand.

“Hey hun, Everything’s arranged,” Nicole said, setting it down on the table in front of her. “You’ll be staying at The Plaza. Your suite is ready, and security will be in place when you arrive. The studio’s car will meet you at the airport. I also confirmed your meeting with your lawyer tomorrow afternoon. If you need anything changed, just say the word.”

Frances nodded, glancing over the itinerary but barely taking it in.

"Good. Thank you. And Jimmy?"

"I let him know when you're landing. He'll meet you at the hospital whenever you're ready. Do you want us to send the driver for him?"

Frances sighed, rubbing her temple. "Yes please, and some security, I don't want him to be ripped apart by the reporters."

"Consider it done"

"And can they please be discreet. I really don't want anyone knowing where he lives."

"Absolutely"

"Anything else?"

Nicole hesitated. "The press is going to be waiting for a statement. I can hold them off for now, but—"

"Please I would appreciate it. I'll deal with them when I have to," Frances cut in. "I'm not making this a bigger spectacle than it already is."

Nicole nodded, understanding. "Understood. Your flight's ready for boarding."

Frances reached put for her hand giving it a light squeeze "Thank you so much. I really don't know what I'd do without you."

"Any time sweetie."

Frances exhaled, standing. "Let's get this over with."

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The hum of the plane filled the cabin as Frances stared out of the

window. She had little to no sleep, exhaustion now creeping up on her. Somewhere over the Midwest, the night sky had stretched endlessly, dark and silent, but now, as the plane descended, the first hints of morning light touched the skyline of New York.

The city was sprawled beneath her, a shimmering grid of streets and buildings, so familiar yet distant. Even from up here, she could feel it, the weight of the past, of old ghosts lurking in every shadow.

She clenched her jaw. This wasn't a homecoming. It never would be.

The plane dipped lower, the East River gleaming in the early light. Soon, the wheels touched down with a jolt, and the past wasn't just beneath her anymore. It was waiting.

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The suite was grand, with tall windows overlooking Fifth Avenue, but Frances barely spared it a glance as she stepped inside. The bellhop set her bags down neatly by the door before slipping out, leaving her alone with Nicole.

Nicole smoothed a hand down her skirt. "I can unpack for you."

Frances waved a dismissive hand as she poured them both a drink "Knock yourself out."

Nicole gave her a knowing look taking a glass. "You should rest before we go to the hospital. You didn't sleep on the plane, did you?"

Frances arched a brow as she dug through her handbag for her cigarettes. "Oh, I slept like a baby," she deadpanned, before adding, "You fuss worse than Yaz." she smiled lighting up a cigarette

Nicole ignored the jab. "Just take an hour. I'll wake you if you oversleep."

Frances sighed, exhaling smoke as she leaned back against the plush chair. "I suppose I should."

Nicole hesitated before sitting down. "Were you... close to your dad?"

Frances let out a dry laugh. "Haven't seen him in eleven years."

Nicole winced. "That bad?"

"Yep."

A pause. Then Nicole murmured, "I haven't spoken to mine in five. Last I saw him, he was passed out on the sofa, completely out of it."

Frances took another drag of her cigarette, the smoke curling lazily toward the ceiling. "Aren't we lucky?"

Nicole smirked. "Hey, at least I don't have to suffer through awkward Thanksgiving dinners."

Frances chuckled, shaking her head. "That's one way of looking at it, I suppose."

Nicole glanced at Frances, then at the cigarette dangling loosely between her fingers. "Alright, that's enough brooding. Go to bed before you fall asleep with that thing in your hand and burn the whole damn place down."

Frances huffed a laugh, shaking her head as she stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray. "You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?"

Nicole grinned. "And yet, here I am, still employed."

Frances smirked as she pushed herself up from the chair. "For now."

Nicole rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Now go sleep before you start snoring mid-sentence."

Frances laughed softly, "Fine, fine. Wake me in two hours."

Nicole gave her a mock salute. "Aye, aye, boss."

Shaking her head, Frances made her way toward the luggage pulling a silk nightgown from her suitcase. "Fine." She stepped closer, pressing a quick kiss to Nicole's cheek. "And I'm taking you to lunch tomorrow."

Nicole's face lit up. "I'll hold you to that."

Frances smirked, then disappeared into the bedroom, already shrugging off her coat. The moment the door of the bathroom shut, she exhaled slowly, bracing herself against the sink. Just a few hours here, and she already felt the city sinking its claws into her.

She turned on the tap, splashing cool water over her face, watching her reflection drip in the mirror.

Just get through this. Then get the hell out.

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The morning sun filtered through the curtains, casting a golden glow over the breakfast table as Yaz set the phone down with a small sigh. She ran a hand through her hair before settling into her chair.

Susan, already pouring tea, studied her for a moment. "How's she doing?"

Yaz picked up her spoon, absentmindedly stirring her porridge. "She's getting ready to go to the hospital. She's nervous...doesn't want to see her father."

Susan hummed knowingly as she buttered a slice of toast. "Can't blame her for that."

Across the table, Lily swung her legs under her chair, her fork clinking against her plate as she looked up. "Who's father?"

Yaz blinked before glancing at Susan, then back at Lily. "A friend's."

Lily frowned. "What friend?"

Yaz hesitated for half a second before blurting out, "Uh... Mary."

Satisfied, Lily turned her attention back to her breakfast. Yaz let out a quiet breath, passing Lily a piece of toast before meeting Susan's knowing gaze.

Susan sipped her tea. "Lily's tutor is coming today. I'll go over everything with her.... She still needs to study whilst she's here"

Yaz nodded, but as Susan reached for the jam, Yaz leaned slightly closer, her voice low enough that Lily wouldn't hear. "I don't want her to leave."

Susan stilled for a second, then reached out and gave Yaz's hand a gentle squeeze. "I know, love."

There was a quiet moment between them before Susan exhaled and patted Yaz's hand one last time. Then, with a smile that softened the weight in the room, she stood.

"Alright," she announced, heading toward the counter. "Who wants some cherry pie?"

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The hospital lobby was quiet, but outside, Frances could see the press gathered beyond the entrance, cameras flashing despite the early hour. Fortunately, security kept them at bay, and with her own guards surrounding her, she walked inside unnoticed.

As she stepped into the private waiting area, she spotted Jimmy immediately. He stood near the window, hands in his pockets, looking tired but composed. When he saw her, he crossed the room in a few strides, pulling her into a firm hug. Frances held on for a second longer than she meant to before pulling back.

“Can we be alone for a minute?” she asked, glancing at the security detail.

Jimmy nodded, and with a brief look between them, her guards stepped back, giving them space.

She exhaled, her hands fidgeting at her sides. “I don’t want to see him,” she admitted, voice low but firm.

Jimmy studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded. “You don’t have to.”

A flicker of relief passed through her, but before she could respond, the door opened, and a doctor entered, clipboard in hand. He was older, professional, and carried himself with the kind of calm authority that immediately set the tone.

“Miss Bennett, Mr. Bennett,” he greeted, giving them both a courteous nod.

They returned the greeting, their voices subdued.

The doctor didn’t waste time. “Your father’s condition is critical,” he began. “He suffered a massive brain hemorrhage and has fallen into a coma. Given the severity of the damage, I’m afraid there is nothing we can do. It is only a matter of time.”

Frances stood very still, absorbing the words. She had expected this, or something close to it, but hearing it spoken aloud made her stomach twist.

The doctor continued, "I understand this is difficult. If you'd like, you may go in to see him now."

She turned her head sharply toward Jimmy, panic flickering in her hazel eyes.

She didn't want to.

Jimmy seemed to understand immediately. He reached for her hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "This is... quite upsetting for her," he said smoothly, looking at the doctor with a carefully measured tone.

The doctor hesitated, then offered a small, polite nod. "I understand. This is, of course, your choice. However, I would strongly encourage you to say your last goodbye."

Frances felt her breath catch. She didn't want to do this. But at the same time, she could already feel the weight of expectation pressing in on her. The hospital staff had been nothing but professional and considerate, too considerate. If she refused outright, it would make things awkward. Worse, it would make her look heartless.

She swallowed hard. "Alright," she said quietly.

Jimmy didn't let go of her hand as they walked toward the door. She clung to him, fingers tight around his, as if letting go would send her spiraling.

As they approached the room, Frances kept her eyes locked forward, her heart hammering in her chest.

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The room was dimly lit, the overhead fluorescent lights muted by a dull yellow glow from the bedside lamp. The air smelled of antiseptic, with a faint undertone of something stale, as if the walls had absorbed decades



of quiet suffering. The hospital bed, a standard issue with metal railings, was positioned in the center of the room, surrounded by medical equipment, an IV drip hooked to a glass bottle, a heart monitor emitting a slow, rhythmic beep, and a respirator that hissed softly with each artificial breath.

Her father lay motionless beneath the thin, institutional blanket. His face, once imposing and severe, was now slack, his skin sallow under the harsh hospital lighting. His hair, streaked with more gray than she remembered.

Frances felt her throat tighten, a deep unease settling in her stomach. She couldn't look at him.

Turning her back to the bed, she exhaled slowly, pressing her hands against the cool surface of the door. "I can't do this," she muttered under her breath, staring at the pale blue walls.

Jimmy, standing a few feet away, watched her carefully but said nothing. The only sounds in the room were the slow beeping of the monitor and the steady whir of the respirator. It was strange—after all the years of avoiding him, of imagining what it would be like to finally see him broken and powerless, she had thought she would feel something. Vindication, maybe. Relief. But all she felt was the suffocating weight of being here, in this room, with him.

Jimmy stepped closer, his hands firm but gentle on her shoulders. His voice was quiet, steady. "Maggie...he can't hurt you anymore. Not ever again." He squeezed her shoulders lightly, grounding her. "This is your moment. Say whatever you need to. Let it go Maggie."

She turned slowly, her eyes meeting Jimmy's for a brief second before flickering past him to the bed. The sight of their father's lifeless body, the slow, mechanical rise and fall of his chest, made her stomach churn. She felt everything all at once—fear, rage, resentment. It was too much.

Her knees buckled. Jimmy caught her before she could fall, his arm wrapping securely around her waist. "I've got you," he murmured, holding her up.

Frances squeezed her eyes shut, trying to steady herself, but the shaking in her hands spread through her body, her pulse pounding in her ears. When she finally opened her eyes again, tears blurred her vision. She was trembling, her breath hitching, but she nodded. "Okay," she said hoarsely. "Okay."

Jimmy let go, stepping aside, but staying close. She took a shaky step forward. The man in the bed looked like a stranger, weak, helpless. She stood at the edge of the bed, her legs unsteady but her resolve hardening with every passing second.

She could feel Jimmy's presence behind her, an unspoken support, but it didn't make the moment any easier. This was hers. She had to face him—once and for all

Frances swallowed hard, her voice barely above a whisper at first, as though the words had been trapped inside her for so long she didn't know how to speak them.

"Can you hear me? I... I hope you can... Do you feel helpless? I hope you do..." Her voice cracked, faltering. "I hope you're trying to escape, but you can't. Scary, right?" The words came slowly, each one dragging her through the pain. "I hope you're terrified... like I was. Like I spent my whole childhood, just trying to survive you... trying to outlast the sickness that was your... love." She took a shaky breath, her chest tightening. "You twisted everything. You made me believe I was the broken one. That I deserved every... every horrible thing you did to me."

Her chest heaved, her hands trembling as she struggled to find the words. But as the pain began to spill out, her voice started to steady. "You made me think I was nothing but a thing. A tool for your sick, twisted desires. You made me think I couldn't have love, couldn't have joy, couldn't have peace."

She straightened, her body pulling tight with the release of each word, finally growing stronger with each breath. "But you know what? I am loved. I am happy. And you will never, ever take that away from me."

The hesitation was gone now, replaced by a steady, resolute voice. Frances stood taller, her words flowing, her body unwavering. Her gaze

turned back to her father's lifeless form, and she spoke with finality.

"And you know what else...The worst part of you, the darkest, most twisted part of you gave me something that is the best part of me."

She took a step closer, her gaze unwavering, her voice now powerful, each word landing like a strike.

"But she's not yours, never was and never will be" she said firmly. "She is mine. She is pure and beautiful and love and life. And she is everything you could never be. She's the one thing you cannot touch. Cannot ruin. No matter how hard you tried. And I will spend the rest of my fucking life protecting her from everything you were... from everything you stood for."

Her voice dropped, fierce and cold, her words like steel.

"And you? You rot in fucking hell, you miserable son of a bitch."

Frances stood there, her chest rising and falling with steady breath. She'd said it all...everything she'd carried for so long. She turned to Jimmy, her expression hard but the faintest trace of relief in her eyes. This was her reckoning. She had taken her power back, and she would never look back.

.....

Frances stepped out of the hospital room, her mind still spinning, her heart heavy with the weight of everything that had just happened.

Jimmy, stepped toward her. Without a word, he wrapped her in a tight, familiar hug, his arms closing around her like a safe haven.

For a moment, she just stood there, letting the comfort of his presence wash over her. His touch was grounding, and it was the first time all day that she felt something other than the sharp pang of grief and anger.

"How are you holding up?" Jimmy asked, pulling back just slightly to look at her.

Frances wiped her eyes quickly, but the effort of staying composed was wearing thin. "I don't know. It's... a lot."

"I get it." He gave her a small, understanding smile. "Listen, wanna come for lunch? I'd like you to meet my wife. And you haven't met Billy yet"

The mention of his son tugged at something inside her. She nodded slowly. "I'd like that... I just need to go back to the hotel to change first. I smell like the hospital."

Jimmy laughed softly, a light sound that felt almost foreign given everything they'd just faced. "Yeah, I'm sure that's not the best. Take your time. We'll be waiting."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Frances murmured, her voice quiet but sincere.

He gave her another brief hug before they turned back to the exit. She was exhausted, emotionally drained, but there was a flicker of something like peace settling in, something that had been missing for far too long.

....

Frances stepped into Jimmy's apartment, the warmth of the space immediately embracing her. The air smelled faintly of garlic and fresh herbs, the heart of a home. She followed Sofia into the kitchen, where the woman was bustling around, chopping vegetables and humming a tune.

Sofia was a striking woman, full of life with dark, expressive eyes and a smile that seemed to light up the whole room. She moved with purpose, but her movements had a certain flow to them, as if she was always dancing through life, even in the mundane moments.

"Billy, basta! No more running around with that plane! You're going to knock something over!" Sofia's voice rang out, half playful and half scolding. Billy, who was no more than four years old, darted past her with his toy plane, giggling as he ran in circles around the kitchen. Sofia chased after him, her hands on her hips, but there was no real threat in her voice, just a maternal affection that shone through every word.

Billy looked at her over his shoulder, eyes wide with mischief. "I'm a pilot, mama!"

"Well, I'm the air traffic controller, and I say land it now!" Sofia shot back, raising her hand like she was directing him to land.

Frances couldn't help but smile at the sight. Sofia was the embodiment of a warm, caring Italian mama. Her enthusiasm, her passion for life, was contagious, and for the first time today, Frances felt like she could breathe.

Sofia turned to her with a bright, welcoming smile. "So, tell me about your Lily. Jimmy has told me little things, but I want to hear it from you. She sounds like a doll."

Frances leaned against the kitchen counter, feeling at ease. "She's beautiful, really. And she'd love Billy, I think. She's eleven, but more like six, loves drawing .... She's got so much energy. Maybe they can meet sometime soon."

Sofia clapped her hands together, delighted. "Oh, I would love that! Kids are always so full of life, no? They're the best."

As the sound of Billy's playful yelling filled the room again, Jimmy came back from the store, carrying a few bottles of drinks. He walked into the kitchen and kissed Sofia on the cheek, his eyes lighting up as he greeted her.

"I think I got everything."

"Did you get the butter?"

"Shit...Sorry...I'll go and get it"

"No... I'll go tomorrow"

Frances couldn't help but notice the way they interacted with the easy affection, the kind glances. It was clear they were deeply in love, and it warmed her heart in a way she hadn't expected.

Jimmy looked at her with a smirk, as he set the drinks on the counter. "I'm useless with shopping. Sofia on the other hand has the guy behind the counter wrapped around her finger. If he doesn't have what she needs, you can bet your ass it will be there tomorrow"

Sofia rolled her eyes but grinned. "A little charm never hurt anyone," she said with a wink, before turning to Frances. "So, tell me...do you have someone special in your life?"

Frances hesitated for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I do."

Sofia's eyes brightened, her curiosity piqued. "And what's his name? Tell me, I'm dying to know!"

Frances got caught up not knowing how to answer. But Jimmy chimed in, a playful smirk on his face. "Oh, no, Sofia. You know the movie star will never tell us private stuff like that."

He winked at Frances, and for a moment, the two shared an amused look, the tension of earlier in the day lifting with the playful exchange.

Sofia gave a dramatic sigh, throwing her hands in the air. "I swear, you two are impossible! But, okay, I'll let it go. Just don't leave me in suspense forever, huh?"

The conversation flowed easily from there, the warmth of the kitchen and the lively chatter filling the space, a stark contrast to the heavy atmosphere that had hung over the morning. The love between Jimmy and Sofia was palpable, and Frances, for a moment, felt like she could just be a part of something simple and real. Something untouched by the chaos of the outside world.

....

The small dining table was filled with the rich scent of home-cooked pasta with fresh basil, a crisp salad, and warm bread straight from the oven. Frances hadn't realized how hungry she was until she took her first bite. The flavors were vibrant, comforting, and filled with the kind of warmth only a home-cooked meal could bring.

Little Billy, however, was far less interested in his plate. He pushed his fork through the pasta, mashing it down instead of eating it.

“Billy, come on... mangia!” Sofia scolded, waving her hands. “You don’t eat, you don’t grow. You wanna be short forever, huh?”

Billy shook his head stubbornly. “I don’t wanna eat pasta. I want ice cream.”

Sofia gasped, clutching her chest like he’d insulted her family’s entire ancestry. “Mamma mia! Ice cream?! This is my best pasta! You know how many people would be grateful for this food? You break my heart, Billy.”

Jimmy chuckled, watching his wife’s dramatic performance. “You’re really laying it on thick, huh?”

Sofia shot him a glare before turning back to Billy. “Eat, or no cartoons later.”

Billy huffed but reluctantly scooped some pasta into his mouth, chewing as if it were the greatest struggle of his young life.

Frances smiled at the exchange before turning to Jimmy. “So, tell me, how did you two meet?”

Sofia’s face lit up, her hands already animated as she launched into the story. “Ah! Your brother, he was this big-shot pizza guy, working at my uncle’s place in Brooklyn. Real serious, always tossing the dough like he was making art.”

Jimmy groaned. “Here we go...”

Sofia ignored him. “So one day, I come in, right? And he’s back there, making the pizzas. And I say, ‘Hey, ragazzo, make me the best pizza I ever had, and maybe I’ll let you take me to dinner.’”

Frances laughed. “That’s bold.”

“Of course! Why waste time, huh?” Sofia grinned, nudging Jimmy. “But you know what this one did? He burned my damn pizza!”

Jimmy threw up his hands. “It was an accident! You distracted me!”

Sofia cackled, shaking her head. “Accident, sure. But I say, ‘Okay, now you owe me dinner to make up for it.’ And that’s how he got me.”

Frances smiled, watching them bicker with such love in their eyes. It was a kind of ease and affection she hadn’t seen much of in her life.

After lunch, as Jimmy took Billy into the living room to play, Frances stayed behind in the kitchen, rolling up her sleeves to help Sofia with the dishes.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Sofia said, handing her a plate.

“I don’t mind,” Frances replied, dipping it into the soapy water.

For a few minutes, they worked in comfortable silence, the clinking of dishes and running water the only sound. Then, out of nowhere, Sofia spoke softly, her tone more serious than before.

“You know,” she began, “this means a lot to Jimmy.”

Frances glanced at her, unsure. “What does?”

Sofia met her eyes, her expression warm but sincere. “For you to forgive him.”

Frances held the plate in her hands for a moment, her fingers gripping the ceramic. Then, after a beat, she nodded. “It means a lot to me, too.”

Sofia smiled, reaching out to squeeze Frances’s wrist gently. “Family is hard sometimes. But when you find your way back to each other...it’s worth it.”

Frances let out a small breath, nodding again. She wasn’t sure what the road ahead looked like for her and Jimmy, but she knew one thing, today felt like the first step toward something real.



....

Frances lay back against the plush pillows of her hotel bed, the receiver pressed to her ear as she listened to Yaz's voice, warm and steady on the other end of the line. The soft hum of New York traffic filtered through the hotel window, distant and unimportant compared to the connection she felt in this moment.

"I still can't believe it," Frances murmured, fingers tracing the spiral of the phone cord absentmindedly. "It's like... I've spent my whole life with him looming over me, even when I was thousands of miles away. And now, just like that, he's fading. Dying."

Yaz was quiet for a moment, then, gentle but firm, she asked, "How do you feel?"

Frances exhaled slowly, searching for the right words. "Relieved... but also...I don't know...unsettled. It's like I'm being released from a prison I didn't even realize I was still trapped in." She let out a breathy, almost disbelieving laugh. "I never thought this day would come."

"I wish I was there with you," Yaz whispered.

Frances closed her eyes. "God I wish you were too."

"I hate thinking of you going through this alone."

"I'm not alone," Frances reassured her, though the ache in her chest told her otherwise. "Jimmy... his wife. They were wonderful today. But..." She swallowed. "It's not the same."

A pause stretched between them, heavy with longing.

"I miss you," Frances admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I wish I could just fall asleep next to you right now. I swear, I'd sleep so easily."

Yaz chuckled lightly, but there was an unmistakable tenderness in her tone. "You'd be out the second your head hit my shoulder."

Frances smiled, eyes still closed, imagining it. "I would."

"When are you coming home?"

"Soon," Frances promised. "The moment I can."

"I'll be waiting."

Silence settled between them, not awkward, not painful, just full. Full of all the things they weren't saying but didn't need to.

Finally, Yaz spoke again, voice low and affectionate. "Sleep, my love. You had a hard day. You need to rest."

Frances nodded, even though Yaz couldn't see her. "Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Of course....love you"

"Love you too"

With reluctance, Frances hung up the phone, the warmth of Yaz's words still wrapped around her like a blanket. She turned off the bedside lamp, exhaled deeply hoping she might actually rest.

....

Frances groggily reached for the phone on the bedside table, the shrill ringing slicing through the quiet of the hotel room. She blinked against the darkness, her mind still heavy with sleep as she lifted the receiver to her ear.

"Hello?" Her voice was thick, groggy.

There was a pause on the other end, just the faint sound of breathing before Jimmy's voice came through, low and steady.

"He's gone."

Frances sat up instantly, the last remnants of sleep vanishing. Her fingers tightened around the receiver. She swallowed, but her throat felt dry, as if the words had sucked all the moisture from her.

"When?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

"About an hour ago," Jimmy said. "Hospital called me first."

Silence stretched between them. Frances could hear the faint hum of the city outside her window, the occasional honk of a car horn, the murmur of life continuing on as if nothing had changed.

But everything had.

She exhaled, pressing her fingers against her forehead. She should feel something, grief, anger, relief. Instead, there was just...emptiness. A quiet void where all the years of fear and pain used to live.

"Are you okay?" Jimmy asked, softer this time.

Frances closed her eyes. Was she?

"I don't know," she admitted. "It doesn't feel real."

Jimmy sighed on the other end. "Yeah... I know what you mean."

She leaned back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. It was over. Finally, truly over.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"The hospital will handle the cremation. Unless you want something else."

Frances almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. A funeral? A priest? Words of kindness over a man who had only ever brought her suffering? No.

"No service. Just... get the urn when it's ready," she said firmly.

There was another pause, then a quiet, understanding, "Okay."

She rubbed her eyes. "Jimmy?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you called.”

He hesitated for a second, then said, “Yeah... me too.”

She hung up the phone and sat in the silence, the weight of a lifetime pressing against her chest.

And yet, for the first time, she felt like she could finally breathe.

....

Frances stirred her coffee absentmindedly, watching the steam curl into the morning light filtering through the hotel window. She hadn’t slept much after Jimmy’s call. Now, in the quiet hum of the hotel room, she picked at a plate of toast and eggs, barely tasting anything.

Across from her, her publicist, Raymond, flipped through a newspaper, already aware that whispers of her father’s death would soon hit the press. He set it down and gave her a knowing look over his glasses.

“We need to talk,” he said, his voice firm but not unkind.

Frances sighed, already bracing herself. “I know what you’re going to say, and I don’t wanna hear it.”

Raymond leaned forward, folding his hands on the table. “You don’t have a choice, sweetheart.”

Her jaw clenched. “No service. No statements. No dramatic displays.”

Raymond nodded as if he expected that. “I get it. I do. But listen to me, Frances. The press is going to make something out of this whether you want them to or not. If you don’t acknowledge it, they’ll paint you as cold. Heartless. You don’t have to make a spectacle, but you need to do something. A small service, something quiet, private, just family.”

Frances exhaled sharply. The idea of standing in front of an urn, pretending this was some normal loss, made her skin crawl. “I can’t stand in front of a priest and hear him say things about ‘a devoted father’

or ‘a man who will be missed.’”

“You won’t have to,” Raymond said, his tone gentler now. “No priest, no press, no bullshit. Just you, your brother, and his wife. A private moment, strictly family. Let the papers say whatever they want, but at least they’ll see you did something.”

She ran a hand through her hair, staring into her coffee. The last thing she wanted was a funeral, even a small one. But Raymond had a point. If she didn’t acknowledge it at all, the press would create their own version of the story, and she couldn’t afford that.

Her fingers tightened around the cup. “Fine,” she said, her voice quiet but resolute. “Just family.”

Raymond gave her a small, approving nod. “I’ll arrange it.”

Frances pushed her plate away, suddenly feeling like she couldn’t stomach another bite.

....

Morning light filtered through the curtains as Yaz set a cup of tea in front of Susan and took her seat at the breakfast table. Across from her, Lily was lazily kicking her feet under the table, still waking up, while Susan rustled the newspaper open, clearing her throat dramatically.

“Well, listen to this,” Susan began, peering over the rim of her glasses. “According to the morning press, *the actress* is currently in mourning following the death of her estranged father.”

Yaz nearly choked on her tea, biting her lip to stifle a laugh. “The actress?” she echoed, eyes twinkling.

Susan nodded seriously. “Oh yes. ‘The actress has asked for privacy during this difficult time and will be holding a private family service.’” She folded the paper down just enough to smirk at Yaz. “Poor thing, must be absolutely *devastated*.”

Yaz snorted, shaking her head. “Oh yes, completely inconsolable.

Probably crying into a glass of whiskey as we speak.”

Susan chuckled and took a sip of her tea, pleased with herself. Lily, oblivious to the subtext, looked up curiously. “Who’s *the actress*?”

Susan didn’t miss a beat. “Just someone in the papers, love. Nothing interesting.”

Lily hummed, already losing interest, as Yaz shot Susan a knowing look, her amusement still lingering in her smile.

....

The chapel was small, quiet, and nearly empty—just as Frances had wanted. The air smelled faintly of old wood and candle wax, the light dim despite the bright day outside. She sat in the front row beside Jimmy, Sofia at his other side, their hands intertwined. A modest urn rested on a table at the front, flanked by two simple white candles. No flowers. No music. No fanfare.

Frances kept her gaze fixed ahead, arms folded tightly, jaw set. The priest spoke in low, measured tones, offering the standard words about forgiveness and peace, but they barely registered.

Jimmy shifted beside her, glancing at her hesitantly but saying nothing. He could see the weight she carried and the quiet storm brewing behind her calm exterior.

The service went on in a blur. No one seemed to need to speak—least of all Frances. It was as though the silence of the room said everything.

She leaned slightly toward him after a while, her voice low but firm. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Jimmy squeezed her hand, offering a subtle, comforting smile. He didn’t press her. He knew there was nothing more to say.

And that was it. No tears. No nostalgia. Just the quiet relief of an ending.

....

Frances stepped back into the hotel room, the weight of the urn in her hands a solid, uncomfortable presence. The door clicked shut behind her, and for a moment, she just stood there, taking in the silence. She didn't even look at the room around her, everything felt like a blur.

Her fingers tightened around the urn. It wasn't heavy, but it might as well have been made of stone. She walked to the bar, the smooth surface gleaming under the soft light, and set the urn down with an audible thud. The click of the lid was almost deafening in the silence.

She poured herself a drink, her movements automatic, almost mechanical. The glass filled with amber liquid, the sound a low, comforting gurgle. She took a sip, the alcohol warming her throat, but it didn't quite reach her heart. It didn't fix what had been broken for so long. Lighting a cigarette, she leaned against the counter, staring at the urn.

The smoke swirled in the air, mixing with the sharp, metallic scent of the alcohol. The weight of everything, her father's death, the years of trauma, the unspoken words pressed on her chest, but the more she looked at the urn, the less it mattered. It was a symbol of a life she no longer needed to carry, a life she was finally, finally ready to let go.

The glass sat there untouched now, her fingers gently tracing the rim, her gaze fixated on the urn. She reached for it again, the weight no longer as oppressive. She lifted it, feeling the cold, smooth surface under her fingertips. For a moment, the urge to hurl it out the window—just throw it into the street, let it shatter—crossed her mind. But instead, she held it carefully, as though cradling the last vestige of something she no longer feared.

With deliberate slowness, she walked into the bathroom, the small room feeling suffocating but necessary. The toilet gleamed under the fluorescent lights. She didn't hesitate. She opened the urn, and with one smooth motion, poured its contents into the swirling water below. The ashes fell, a fine dust that caught the light for a moment before being swept away by the current. She could almost hear her father's presence being sucked into the drain, disappearing as if it had never been there at all.

The toilet flushed with a soft whoosh, and she watched the water swirl, carrying the remnants of the man who had defined her pain for so many years. For the first time in her life, she felt something close to liberation. It was a quiet, subtle freedom, like the final breath after holding it too long.

Frances didn't think twice as she flicked her cigarette into the toilet. It landed with a faint hiss, disappearing into the same oblivion. She wiped her hands on the towel, feeling lighter with each motion.

As she stepped out of the bathroom, the room seemed less oppressive. She felt less tethered, less burdened by the weight of the past. For the first time in years, she felt her chest rise and fall with ease, her breath unburdened.

Frances walked across the room, her steps light, her heart unburdened. The world outside was waiting, and she was finally free to meet it, to face whatever came next without the shadow of her past looming over her.

The finality of it all settled over her, and she allowed herself a small, quiet smile....a fleeting, tender thing that felt like a promise to herself.

For the first time, she was free.

....