



Friends

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Grace

—3 Months Later...

It's not easy leaving your country to settle in some foreign place. That's what most people say.

But I will say that I am having the best time of my life. I go to sleep every night with the plans for the next day in my mind and wake up ready to do my best.

This feels different than going to sleep crying or wondering about the people in my life and waking up to think about what scheme I might encounter.

I no longer move in the same circle, always finding myself in the same spot. I have left that circle altogether.

Although, once in a while, I think about the past, about my loss. But it doesn't freeze me. I am beginning to accept this new life because I know I will never return to the past again. The change of place has done me good.

"What do you want?" Celine asks in her all-time chiming voice.

"The usual." I shrug, glancing out of the window in the cafe.

It's raining. The weather is starting to become cold. And after a long time, I feel myself just focusing on that. Just the cold, the beautiful view, and the present.

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Maybe, it's not just about the place. I turn my head and look in the direction of Celine.

I have never made friends before. Not really. But the day I found myself in my first lecture, Celine attached herself to my side like a parasite—a good one.

In the start, I did find it so odd to have a girl always flocking around, telling me random gossip and good places to visit as a foreigner. She is a resident and getting her masters in the same major as mine so it's pretty much us all the time, together.

On days when I don't want to do anything, she drags me out of bed and takes me to beautiful places, like this crowded cafe with a good view.

I can not say no to her, I have discovered. Her energy is contagious.

Sometimes, seeing her makes me wonder if I was ever like her. Enthusiastic, hopeful, and pumped all the time.

We are age fellows but I feel far older than her. It feels like I have lived a lifetime in a few years.

" Here is your Iced Americano. " Her chiming voice pulls me out of the daze.

I blink and watch her take her place in front of me. " Thanks. "

" Yeah, yeah! I know I am great. " She waves her hand, smiling and sipping on her usual Cappuccino.

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I sigh and pick up my drink. "I know why you have brought me out here again. That's why I need to tell you that I am not doing it."

"Are you serious?" Her eyes roll. "That's such a good opportunity, Grace. People are out there looking for jobs and you are getting one of the best spots offered. How can you pass—"

"It's a lot of work." My nose scrunches.

"It's just one project. You can do this! If you impress them, they might offer you a permanent spot. Can you imagine that? You will be the youngest architect to be a part of—"

"That's tiring. I want to enjoy life for a while." I shake my head and take a sip of my Iced Americano.

Her jaw hangs low, and her eyes round on me but she ends up huffing. "okay, if you don't want to do it, I can't force you. But it's a pity that you don't want this. Anyone would kill to be in your position right now."

I grin. "trust me. No one would want to be in my position. It's the worst position to be in."

Celine frowns and narrows her eyes. "You are doing it again."

She is all happy, yes. But then she does this.

"What?" I sigh.

"You are belittling yourself. I don't like that." Celina folds her arms across her chest and continues in a serious tone. "You are beautiful,

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talented, and so hard-working. Do you remember the first week of our University? The professor... "

And she has started ranting, reminding me of my progress. It's impressive that she can remember my achievements of the past three months like they are her own. Even I don't remember that much. I would have been irked out if she was not in her mother hen energy right now.

I sip on my drink and nod once in a while as she goes on and on and on.

A smile graces my lips. It's not just the place, for sure. People here—people who don't really know me treat me better than my family or so-called family friends ever did.

"That's why...you must never doubt yourself!" She finishes with a slamming palm on the table, attracting attention that she doesn't really care about.

"Yes, Boss." I nod quickly. I don't want her to start reminding me about my small achievements again.

"Good. Now, repeat after me." She leans closer.

Not this again. I almost roll back in my chair and land on the floor.

"I am doing great in life." She asserts.

I know she won't leave me alone if I don't listen.

"I am doing great in life." I cringe.

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"I am a good person!" She continues.

"I...am a good person?" I grimace this time. If she knew I tried to kill my ex-husband not once but twice, would she ask me to say the same about myself? I doubt that.

"You sound so unsure, but okay. It will do for now." She claps her hands and leans back before picking up her mug again.

I breathe a sigh of relief. She left me alone with two affirmations today, that's excellent. Usually, she stops at 10.

"So..." She smiles at me in a childish, predatory way. "will you reconsider taking on that offer?"

My brows shoot to my hairline. "what happened to not forcing me?"

"I am not forcing you! I am just trying to convince you to polish your talent and become a successful, badass woman!" She whines.

I roll my eyes. "Not happening, Celine."

She gives me the side eye but doesn't push me. But I know, tomorrow, she will be at it again. She won't stop until she has me on the top of the ladder.

That's just who she is, to everyone around her. Someone who hypes others, and wants everyone to succeed in life. I don't know what made her stick to me, but it feels like I have known her for ages.

The topic of our talk changes and she tells me about the latest gossip about the relationships, fights, and other stuff going around

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in the University.

After hanging out for some time, I decide to return to my small studio apartment. She bids me goodbye and goes her way.

It's strange how much friends can change your mood, and make you feel like a different person. Now, that I am alone, I sigh and take out my phone.

My fingers scroll through the latest news from my country, and I come to a slow halt in front of my apartment building.

My parents have gone bankrupt somehow. Lily is still missing.

And the new piece of news involves the Roberto family.

My heartbeat picks its pace as I click on the video in the article. It's an old video, maybe something from years ago.

The woman in the video is in a room and is the younger version of Alma Roberto. She sits on the edge of the bed as an unfamiliar man looms over her head.

A frown etches between my brows.

" You can't tell her that! " Alma yells.

" I can and will. She is my daughter. She deserves to know. " The man grabs her face and tilts it up.

I have a bad feeling about it, as I continue to watch, my hands turning cold.

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" Edward will kill her. She— "

" I will kill that bastard and protect my daughter if I have to, Alma. Why don't you understand?! I can take care of you and your boys too! Leave his abusive ass now. " He cuts off and suddenly, I find my jaw slacking.

" The world will know Ania as an illegitimate child. Do you want that for our daughter?! " Alma stands up and screams, knocking over the vase from the sidetable.

There is more to the video, but I can not watch it anymore. I come out of that tab and take a few deep breaths.

The main page for that article displays on my screen and the comments pour in.

—That's Stuart Roberto. Someone has commented.

And several have replied under that threat.

Edward Roberto's brother?

I turn off the screen, staring at the ground blankly. Edward Roberto is Tristin's father and...

I shake my head and rush inside my apartment building.

The secret.

Somehow, Lily has managed to reveal it.

Something twists inside my heart. A woman can truly destroy a

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whole family and Lily has become that woman.

And Alma...

I don't know what to think about her.

I have no right to judge her when I don't know her story but I know she cheated, and it's...horrible.

But amidst all this, her children will suffer more than anyone else.

Ania who will be labeled as the result of an affair between her mother and her uncle will...How will she spend her life?

And Tristin...

The thought of him does something to my heart. I clench my hands into fists and unlock my apartment. The moment I step inside and close the door, someone starts knocking on it.

I jump in my spot and turn around. The knocking is not aggressive. It's soft as if someone is unsure if they should even be knocking.

With a pounding heart, I open the door again and find him standing on the other side. My throat clogs as our eyes meet.

