

Chapter 31

After another long day Frances had barely settled into her hotel suite for the evening, slipping off her heels and pouring herself a drink, when a loud knock rattled the door. Before she could even reach for the handle, Victor's voice rang through from the other side.

"Open up, darling, I come bearing gifts!"

Frances pulled open the door, and there he stood, draped in a dramatic black coat, holding a bottle of champagne in one hand and, in the other... a box with cake.

For a moment, she just stared at him, then she burst out laughing.

"Victor, what the hell is this?" she gasped, nearly doubling over.

He strutted inside with all the flair of a Broadway performer, setting the cake and champagne down on the bar. "A celebration, of course!" He threw his arms up. "Darling, you are finally, officially free! And what does one do when a weight as heavy as the goddamn Titanic is lifted from one's shoulders? One pops champagne and eats cake!" He flicks the lid of the box open

"A black cake?" Frances burst out laughing

"Well, black because we must, of course, keep up appearances of grief."

Frances cackled, clutching her stomach. "You absolute menace."

"I try," Victor said smugly, plucking two champagne flutes from the bar and expertly popping the bottle. "To new beginnings, Frances Louise Bennett!" He poured with theatrical precision.

Frances grabbed a flute, shaking her head with a grin. "To dearly flushed!"

Victor nearly choked on his sip. "Don't say things like that when I'm drinking!" he wheezed, pounding his chest. "Wait...oh my God. You actually flushed him?"

She smirked, taking a slow, deliberate sip. "Swirled right down the drain."

Victor let out a delighted shriek, clutching his heart as if he might faint. "Frances, I could kiss

you right now! That is the most beautiful thing I have ever heard!"

She grinned wickedly. "Well, he always was full of shit. Seemed fitting..." she raised her glass "To finally pissing him away."

Victor howled, clutching the edge of the bar for support. "STOP. I CANNOT BREATHE."

Frances took a knife and made the first cut into the cake, revealing bright, cherry-red filling. She burst out laughing again. "Oh, come on!"

Victor beamed. "Well, I figured we needed a little dramatic symbolism! Death on the outside, delicious, bloody justice on the inside."

She snorted, shaking her head. "You're fucking crazy."

"I am a vision darling," he corrected, stealing a forkful of cake popping it into her mouth. She chewed, eyes rolling with exaggerated pleasure. "Mm. Tastes like freedom."

Frances, still grinning, plopped down on the sofa, glass in hand. For the first time in years, maybe in her entire life, she felt light. No shadows creeping at the edges, no weight pressing down on her chest. Just her, Victor, cake, champagne, and a night that, for once, felt like it was truly hers.

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The hotel suite was quiet now, the champagne bottle nearly empty, the black cake reduced to a few crumbs on the plate. Frances lay stretched out on the sofa, her head resting in Victor's lap as he idly ran his fingers through her curls. It was a rare kind of comfort—one that didn't demand anything from her, just existence, just understanding.

Victor sighed, swirling the last bit of champagne in his glass. "So," he murmured, "what's next for you, Frances Louise Bennett? Now that you've finally flushed the past down the drain?"

She exhaled, staring at the ceiling. "First thing's first. I need a new agent."

Victor's brows lifted. "You're finally giving Andy the boot?"

She hesitated, her jaw tightening. Then, quietly, she said, "Andy tried to buy Yaz off. Told her to take a payout and disappear."

Victor's hand froze in her hair. "...Excuse me?"

She tilted her head to look up at him, her expression unreadable. "He said she was a liability. That if she really cared about me, she'd take his money and walk away. And if she didn't..." Frances swallowed hard. "...he made it clear he could ruin her. Ruin us."

Victor's face went slack with shock. Then, slowly, he sat up straighter, shaking his head in disbelief. "That rotten son of a bitch."

Frances closed her eyes, letting the tension in her body settle. "I should've gotten rid of him a long time ago."

Victor was silent for a moment, his fingers resuming their gentle motion in her hair. Then, finally, he said, "I might have someone for you."

She cracked one eye open. "Yeah?"

Victor smirked. "Oh, he's up my alley, talented, ruthless, doesn't take shit from anyone. He's been in the industry forever, knows every trick, every loophole. And the best part?" He leaned down conspiratorially. "He has a secret lover."

Frances blinked. "How is that relevant?"

Victor grinned. "Because, darling, that means he's got no moral high ground to stand on." He tapped her nose playfully. "Your little scandal won't shock him. Hell, he'll probably have a dozen ways to make your life easier."

Frances let that sink in. She had spent so long with people who held leverage over her, who made her feel like she was one wrong move away from losing everything. The idea of having someone on her side, someone who wouldn't see her relationship as a liability but as something to protect? That was... tempting.

"Tell me more," she murmured.

Victor's grin widened. "Oh, you're going to love him."

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The phone rang only twice before Yaz picked up, her voice instantly warm but laced with concern.

"Hey, love. How are you?"

Frances sighed, swirling the last sip of champagne in her glass. "I'm... alright. Better than I thought I'd be."

"You sure?" Yaz asked, skeptical. "Because if you tell me you've been sitting in a dark room, listening to tragic violin music, I swear to God—"

"No violins, I promise," Frances smirked. "Victor was here. He brought champagne and a cake."

"Oh, well, that's nice of him, I'm glad you had some company"

"Black cake" Frances chuckled

There was a pause. Then, Yaz gasped. "No...You are takin' the piss?"..."

"Nope. Said it needed to be 'in the spirit of things.'"

Yaz wheezed. "I bloody love that man. Please tell me you at least stabbed it dramatically with a knife."

"Even better, we ate it straight from the box."

"God, you're a woman after my own heart. So, what are you gonna do with the urn? Have you decided."

Frances took a slow sip of champagne. "Oh, I already handled that."

"Yeah? Where'd you put it?"

Frances smirked. "Down the toilet."

There was dead silence. Then, Yaz made a choking sound before completely losing it.

"No. No, you bloody didn't—"

"I did," Frances said, sipping her drink casually.

"Oh my God...YOU FLUSHED HIM?!" Yaz was gasping for breath now.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the plumbing gods...tell me the hotel pipes didn't back up."

"They didn't," Frances assured. "He went down nice and smooth."

Yaz was absolutely howling. "Here's me worried sick about you, and you're out here chuckin' your old man down the drain like yesterday's tea."

"Well, it felt right," Frances said innocently. "A lifetime of making my life a living hell? Seemed only fair I send him straight to the sewer where he belongs."

Yaz was practically wheezing now. "I can't, I swear to God, I'm actually crying. This is the best thing ever. Wish I'd been there, hell I wish you'd bloody filmed it."

"Sorry, darling. I like to keep my flushings private."

Yaz was still laughing, struggling to compose herself. "This is why I love you. Most people would just dump the ashes somewhere, no, not you. You made sure he left this world with a final swirl."

Frances grinned. "Fitting, isn't it?"

"It's poetic," Yaz gasped. "And also, probably illegal."

Frances chuckled. "Can you imagine they arrest me for improper disposal of human remains" Frances burst out laughing, feeling lighter than she had in years. "Oh, darling, I've missed you."

"Miss you too, sweetheart," Yaz said, still breathless. "Now tell me...do I need to send you a plumber's number, or are we in the clear?"

"We're clear" she laughed

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Yaz sat on the edge of the bathtub, sleeves rolled up, hands covered in suds as she gently massaged shampoo into Lily's wet blonde hair. Lily squinted, her little nose scrunching up in suspicion.

"Why does it sting?" she asked, blinking as if the shampoo was personally offending her. "Can I go blind?"

Yaz bit back a laugh. "Course not, love. Just don't go gettin' it in your eyes, yeah?"

"But Millie at school said you can go blind," Lily argued, her voice full of the serious concern only a child could have about playground wisdom.

"Well, Millie at school's talkin' rubbish," Yaz replied, rinsing the bubbles out of Lily's hair with a cup of warm water. "If people went blind from shampoo, half the world would be walking into walls."

Lily considered this, then nodded. "That makes sense."

Once her hair was washed and she was in nice warm pajamas, Yaz sat her on the bed and started blow-drying her hair. Lily, ever curious, watched Yaz in the mirror, her blue eyes thoughtful.

"How come you never put rollers in your hair like Susan?" she asked over the sound of the dryer.

Yaz smiled, pinning back a section of hair. "Because I like hairpins better. Rollers drive me mad when I'm trying to sleep."

Lily nodded sagely, as if this was the most reasonable thing in the world. Then she reached out, touching Yaz's hand, her small fingers tracing the skin on Yaz's wrist.

"How come your skin's darker?"

Yaz turned off the dryer and crouched down so they were eye level. "Because I'm Pakistani, sweetheart. My family's from a place far away where people have skin like mine."

Lily tilted her head, running her fingers over Yaz's arm again as if testing out the truth of this. "I think it's beautiful," she declared with absolute certainty.

Yaz chuckled, touched. "Well, thank you. That's very sweet."

"Does Mummy think it's beautiful?"

Yaz grinned. "Oh, she does. She thinks I'm the most beautiful woman in the world."

Lily nodded approvingly, satisfied with this answer. She went quiet for a moment, playing with Yaz's bracelets as Yaz returned to blow-drying her hair. Then, with all the casualness in

the world, she asked,

"Would you like for the three of us to live together?"

Yaz stilled, her hands frozen in Lily's hair. Her throat tightened as she looked down at the small girl in front of her, so innocent and yet so full of understanding.

"Oh, pumpkin... I would like that very, very much."

Lily turned her big blue eyes up to her, hopeful. "Does Mummy want that?"

Yaz smiled, blinking back the sting of unexpected tears. "She does. Very much."

There was a pause, then Lily, ever the logical one, asked the obvious:

"Then why don't we?"

Yaz took a deep breath, steadying herself. She sat beside Lily, running a hand gently over her damp blonde hair. "Sweetheart... it's not that simple. Your mummy and I..." she hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Some people don't think we should be together. They think... it's wrong."

Lily's face scrunched up in confusion. "Why?"

Yaz sighed. "Because Mummy is a woman. And so am I."

Lily blinked. "So?"

A sad smile tugged at Yaz's lips. "Well, not everyone sees it that way. Remember we already talked about that love. Some people think love should only look one way. And if we all lived together, there would be people who would say terrible things about us. About your mummy. And about you."

Lily's little hands clenched into fists. "I don't care what other people think!" Her voice wavered, her blue eyes glistening with tears. "I just want us to be together!"

Yaz's heart broke at the sight of her so upset. She immediately knelt down to Lily's level, cupping her tear-streaked face and wiping her cheeks with her thumbs. "Oh, love... I know. I know. And believe me, your mummy and I are working so hard to change that. So that one day, we can be together without anyone saying a word about it."

But Lily was shaking her head, tears spilling freely now. "I don't wanna go back to school!"

Yaz inhaled sharply, caught off guard. "Lily..."

"I don't!" she insisted, her small hands gripping Yaz's wrists tightly. "I wanna stay here. With you. With Mummy."

Yaz swallowed against the lump forming in her throat. "Oh, sweetheart... I'd love nothing more than for you to stay right here with us. But don't you wanna read, like other kids? Learn things?"

Lily hesitated, her lower lip trembling. Then she gave a small nod.

Yaz brushed her fingers through her damp hair. "Well, that's why you have to go back, love."

But Lily shook her head again, desperately. "You can teach me! I can read Princess and a Frog now...And I couldn't."

Yaz opened her mouth, but no words came. What could she say to that? She wished, more than anything, that she could just say yes. That she could take Lily and run far away from all the cruel, judgmental eyes in the world. But she knew she couldn't.

Instead, she pulled Lily into a tight hug, holding her as close as she could, pressing a kiss into her hair. "Oh, my darling girl... I love you more than anything in this world."

Lily clung to her, sniffing into Yaz's shoulder.

Yaz closed her eyes, wishing she could promise her the world.

"Hey...I promise" she tapped her little nose "That we will spend as many weekends together. And we will go to holidays together...And eat burgers and chips and have milkshakes and go to Zoo."

"Promise" Lily snaffled

"Yes Pumpkin" Yaz tucked her hair behind her ear "I promise love...C'mere" she pulled her into one more tight hug hiding her own tears falling down her cheeks

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Yaz closed the fairytale book with a soft thud and glanced down at Lily. Her breathing had evened out, her little fingers curled gently around Yaz's wrist, as if she didn't want her to

leave. Yaz carefully pried them away, tucking them under the blanket before leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"Sleep tight, love," she whispered, smoothing Lily's hair one last time before standing and quietly slipping out of the room.

She felt heavy as she made her way downstairs to the kitchen, her mind clouded with everything Lily had said. The way she had clung to her. The desperation in her voice. Yaz clenched her jaw, trying to shake it off as she filled the kettle, waiting for it to boil. She needed a cup of tea, something, anything to steady herself.

When it was ready, she poured the hot water into the cup, but her hands were shaking, and before she knew it, the scalding liquid sloshed over the rim and onto her hand.

"Shit!" she hissed, dropping the kettle down with a clang and shaking her hand, the burning sensation stinging her skin.

Susan appeared in the doorway instantly, brows furrowed. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Yaz muttered, but Susan was already grabbing a wet cloth, rushing to her side. She pressed it gently against Yaz's reddening skin.

"That doesn't look like nothing," Susan said, her voice calm but full of concern.

Yaz sucked in a breath, looking away. She didn't want to talk about it. Didn't want to put it into words because then it would be real. But Susan wasn't the type to let things go.

"Yaz, honey ... what's wrong?"

And just like that, Yaz broke.

Her shoulders sagged, her face crumpling as a sob tore from her throat. "It's just....bloody hell, Susan, it's everything! It's this whole bloody world and how unfair it is, and I..." she stopped, shaking her head furiously as more tears spilled over.

Susan's grip on her wrist tightened slightly, grounding her.

Yaz let out a bitter laugh through her tears. "Lily asked me tonight if the three of us could live together. She said she doesn't care what people think. She doesn't want to go back to school. She just wants...."

Susan's face softened, but Yaz wasn't done.

"And I had to sit there and tell her that we can't. That we have to wait. That the world isn't ready. And she just looked at me like...like it didn't make any sense at all! And d'you know what? She's bloody right! It doesn't make sense! It's all just cruel and ridiculous and fucked up!" she ran a hand through her hair, her voice rising in frustration, "I'm just so fucking angry! I want to scream!"

Susan let out a sigh, pulling Yaz into a tight embrace before she could protest. "I know, love. I know."

Yaz buried her face in Susan's shoulder, clinging to her like she was the only thing keeping her from falling apart completely.

Yaz pulled away wiping at her face furiously, her breathing still uneven. "I've messed her up, Susan." Her voice was quiet, raw. "I should've kept my distance. Should've never wrapped her up in all this. What the hell was I thinking."

Susan, who had been watching Yaz with an unreadable expression, suddenly reached for the kitchen door and closed it with a firm click. Then she turned, arms crossed, eyes steady. "Right. That's enough of that nonsense. Sit down."

Yaz hesitated, but Susan was having none of it. She pulled out a chair and pointed at it.

"Sit!"

With a reluctant sigh, Yaz slumped into the chair, staring at the table, her hands twisting together.

"You listen to me now," Susan said, sitting across from her, her voice sharp but full of something deeper, something that made Yaz finally look up. "You haven't messed that child up. If anything, you've given her something she's never had before, a choice."

Yaz scoffed. "Some choice. A life where people stare, whisper, call her mother disgusting things behind her back?" She shook her head. "I should've just stayed in my own lane, let Frances handle her own life..."

"Oh, shut up," Susan snapped, shocking Yaz into silence.

Susan exhaled, rubbing her temples. "You think you've done wrong by that little girl?"

"I thought I was making her happy, but all I gave her is pain...Some shitty hope of something that can never be"

"Yaz, Lily's lived her whole life hidden from the world like she wasn't suppose to exist. Like she was some dirty secret that doesn't belong in this world. Damaged reject, a product of something shameful and disgusting.

She saw her mother twice a month for one god damn hour. And her future was in some god forsaken institution living her life forgotten from the world once Frances is dead and buried. And now, for the first time, she not only has a chance of a life....real life...but she's looking at her mother and seeing someone who's fighting. Fighting to love who she wants. Fighting for something bigger than just hiding away." Susan leaned forward, eyes blazing. "And you know what, Yaz? I never thought I'd say this, but I damn well admire it."

Yaz frowned, confused. "What do you mean?"

Susan let out a small, humorless chuckle, shaking her head. "You know, once upon a time, I thought Frances is just a spoiled starlet dragging you into her world and she's gonna leave you heartbroken and shattered into pieces like a forgotten toy. Because back then, I thought..." She paused, her voice catching for a moment before she pressed on. "I thought the safest thing was to play the game. Keep quiet. Keep your head down. And if you had asked me two years ago, I'd have told you Frances should've married some man, given Lily a normal, quiet life."

Yaz stared at her, stunned.

Susan's mouth twitched. "But then I saw you two...I've been watching you for months and then I saw Lily with you. How she looks at you. How safe and happy she feels with you. And I realized that what's really cruel... is pretending the world isn't broken just to make it easier to live in."

Yaz swallowed hard. "Susan..."

"No, let me finish," Susan interrupted, softer now. "You're angry. I know. I am too. But don't you dare think for one second that you've ruined that child. You've made her braver. Stronger. And if she's crying because she wants the world to be fairer, then good. Because maybe one day, it will be."

Yaz looked down, blinking back fresh tears. "But what if it never changes?" she whispered.

Susan reached across the table, squeezing Yaz's hand. "Then you and Frances will just have to keep kicking down doors until it does."

Yaz sat there, stunned, her mouth slightly open. She had never heard Susan speak like this. Never.

Susan wasn't finished. She leaned forward, her grip tightening on Yaz's hand. "You listen to me, love. You've come this far. You don't give up now. You find a way. You and Frances, you'll figure it out. You always do."

Yaz swallowed hard, shaking her head. "I just don't see how, Susan. The world's too bloody cruel, and it..."

"Then change it."

Yaz blinked.

"Change it," Susan repeated, her voice fierce. "Bit by bit. Day by day. People die and bleed in this country just to earn their right to walk into a fucking dinner, to exist.... And they don't give up...So you fight too...And if you can't change the world, then you fight to carve out a place in it where the three of you can be safe."

Yaz looked away, her throat burning. "And what if that place doesn't exist?"

Susan exhaled sharply, shaking her head. "Then you damn well build it yourself."

Yaz let out a shaky breath, overwhelmed, but then Susan said something that completely shattered her.

"You know... I used to think that losing my husband and my daughter was the worst thing that ever happened to me," Susan murmured, her voice softer now, pained but steady. "I still think about them every day. And I still wonder why." She swallowed. "But then I look at you, and Frances, and Lily... and I think maybe, just maybe, if losing them was God's way of putting this family together, then I'll take it. And I'll fight for it until the last breath in my lungs."

"Susan...." Yaz gasped. Her whole body tensed as those words sank in. Her vision blurred, her chest tightening, and suddenly she was crumbling. She barely had time to let out a broken breath before Susan was up and pulling her into a tight hug.

"It's gonna be fine, honey," Susan whispered, holding Yaz close as her shoulders shook. "I swear to you, it's gonna be fine."

Yaz clung to her, burying her face into Susan's shoulder, the weight of everything pouring

out of her. For the first time in what felt like forever, she let herself cry with her whole heart.

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Jimmy and Frances sat across from her lawyer in the dimly lit office, the weight of the conversation pressing on them. The lawyer, a middle-aged man with thin-rimmed glasses and a voice as dry as parchment, adjusted the paperwork in front of him.

“So, to summarize,” he said, clearing his throat, “your father owned the apartment in Brooklyn, which you both grew up in. And recently, he also purchased the store beneath it. Since there was no will, under New York state law, the inheritance will be split equally between you both.”

Frances, who had been leaning back in her chair, arms crossed, suddenly straightened. “Excuse me. Could we have a minute please?”

The lawyer hesitated but then nodded. “Of course. I’ll step outside.”

As soon as the door shut behind him, Frances turned to Jimmy. “I don’t want any of it.”

Jimmy sighed, already shaking his head. “Maggie....”

“No, listen to me,” she said firmly. “I have more than enough. I don’t need an apartment in Brooklyn, and I sure as hell don’t need a store.”

Jimmy rubbed his face. “It’s not about needing it, Maggie. It’s yours. You have every right—”

“I don’t *want* it. It’s making me feel ill Jimmy. I don’t want anything of his.” She leaned forward, her voice softer now. “Sell the apartment. Take my half and put it away for Billy. For his education, his future.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, emotion flickering behind his eyes. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I *want* to do that.” She reached for his hand, squeezing it. “And keep the store. Just hire someone to run it. Let it make money for you, Sofia, Billy. Give him something better. Something stable. Make something *good* out of all the bad.”

Jimmy swallowed hard, his jaw tightening as he looked down. His shoulders tensed, trying to hold back the emotion rising in his chest. But Frances knew him too well.

“Oh, come here, you idiot,” she said, standing up and pulling him into a tight hug.

For a moment, Jimmy stood still, stiff as if resisting. Then, he exhaled shakily and hugged

her back. "You always were the stubborn one," he muttered against her shoulder.

"Yeah, well," Frances smirked, squeezing him a little tighter, "it runs in the family."

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It was a typical Friday evening at Susan's house. Yaz had come home early from work for once, her latest project had just wrapped, giving her a rare moment to breathe.

Rich scent of garlic and onions filled the kitchen as Yaz stirred the sauce. Susan chopped fresh tomatoes for the salad beside her. It was an easy rhythm, the kind that came with familiarity and the comfort of shared space.

Then the doorbell rang.

Susan paused, knife hovering above the chopping board. She frowned slightly, wiping her hands on her apron. "Who could that be?" she muttered, glancing at the clock.

Yaz shrugged, still focused on stirring. "Dunno. You expecting anyone?"

Susan shook her head. "No idea"

As she walked to the door, Yaz heard the soft creak of the hinges, then a sharp inhale, followed by a delighted, "Well, you're the last person I expected."

"Surprise"

The voice, warm and unmistakable, drifted into the kitchen like a breeze, freezing Yaz in place.

Then—

"Mummy!"

Lily's wooden spoon clattered onto the worktop as she spun around, her eyes going wide with joy. Before Yaz could even process it, the little girl was off like a shot, feet pounding against the floor as she bolted down the hallway.

"Lily, slow" Yaz started, but it was pointless.

A moment later, a loud *oof* echoed through the house as Lily crashed full-speed into Frances, nearly knocking her over. Frances let out a breathless laugh, lifting her daughter into her arms with ease, holding her tight.

"Hey peanut," Frances murmured, pressing kisses into Lily's hair, her voice thick with emotion. "I missed you so much."

Lily clung tightly to Frances, her small hands gripping the fabric of her coat as if letting go might make her vanish. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "You're really here?"

Frances pressed a kiss to her temple, her embrace tightening. "I'm really here, sweetheart," she murmured. "Landed two hours ago." She glanced at Susan with a sheepish smile. "Just dumped my bags in the hallway."

Susan chuckled, "Well, then, you're staying for dinner. No arguments."

Frances smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Yaz stepped into the hallway just then, her expression softening as her eyes met Frances's. A warmth flickered between them, unspoken, but felt. Over Lily's shoulder, Frances smiled, a quiet, knowing smile that didn't escape Susan's notice.

"Come on, honey. Help me finish up in the kitchen and let Mummy and Yaz have a moment, yeah?"

Lily pouted, clearly reluctant, but with a dramatic sigh, she let Frances set her down. She fixed her mother with a serious look, wagging a tiny finger. "Don't go anywhere."

Frances grinned. "Not a chance."

As Susan led Lily away, the house settled into quiet again, leaving just the two of them standing there.

For a moment, neither spoke. They didn't need to.

Yaz took a slow step forward, her breath catching as Frances reached for her hand, their fingers lacing together like it was the most natural thing in the world. The warmth, the familiarity, it was almost overwhelming.

"God, I missed you all so much," Frances whispered.

"Missed you too" Yaz smiled playing with their fingers gently

She barely had time to respond before Frances gently tugged her closer, her other hand sliding up to cradle the side of Yaz's neck. There was no hesitation, just need and longing. Their lips met in a kiss that was soft at first, then deeper, more desperate, filled with all the longing of their time apart.

Yaz melted into it, her hand sliding up to nape of Frances's neck, fingers curling into the soft curls not wanting to let go.

When they finally broke apart, Yaz exhaled a shaky laugh. "You could've given us a bit of warning, you know."

Frances smirked. "And miss that reaction? Not a chance."

Yaz shook her head, grinning. "Cheeky."

Frances kissed her again, smiling against her lips. "And you love me for it."

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The warm glow of the kitchen lights cast a soft, golden hue over the dinner table. The clinking of cutlery filled the comfortable silence as Yaz carefully cut Lily's meat into smaller bites, her hands working with effortless care. Frances watched, her heart swelling at the sight at the ease with which Yaz had stepped into this role, the role of a mother to a child that wasn't hers by blood but in every way that mattered. It was second nature to her, as if she had always been meant to be there. Frances's throat tightened.

In just a week, Lily would have to go back. The thought gnawed at Frances, carving an ache so deep she could barely contain it. How was she supposed to let her go again?

Susan's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "So, what's happening with your father's apartment?"

Frances exhaled, setting down her fork. "I don't want any of it," she said simply. "Jimmy's going to sell the apartment and use my half for Billy's education. And the store...he's keeping it, hiring someone to run it. It'll give them a better life."

Susan nodded approvingly. "That's very nice of you. I'm glad you two turned a new page."

"Me too" Frances nodded as she took another bite. She swallowed and rinsed it down with a sip of drink then smiled towards Yaz "Mmm...I was actually thinking...we could get away for a bit...go to the beach house until Sunday....If you want?"

Yaz's face lit up instantly, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement. "Really?"

Susan chuckled. "Great idea...You two need a break. Some peace and quiet will do you good." She gave Yaz a look. "So don't argue...just pack after dinner and go."

"Oh believe me, you don't need to tell me twice" Yaz laughed then turned to Frances. "What about your stuff?"

Frances's lips curled into a mischievous smile. "My bag's already in the car."

Yaz let out a laugh, shaking her head. "Schemer."

Frances just grinned, reaching for her wineglass. "Always."

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As the evening air settled in, the house was warm with the familiar sounds of the soft chatter and the clink of dishes being cleared away. Frances and Yaz worked side by side, moving around the room with an easy familiarity, preparing for the weekend getaway. Yaz was quietly folding clothes into her suitcase, the rhythmic motion almost calming, while

Frances was crouched by Lily's small suitcase, carefully folding her little dresses and packing her favorite teddy bear.

With a burst of energy Lily charged into the room, her little face bright with excitement. "Where are we going?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Frances looked up with a smile, her heart swelling at Lily's enthusiasm. "To the beach house, sweetheart,"

Lily's eyes widened with delight. "The beach house?" she exclaimed, as if the very idea was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard. "So there's a beach there?"

"Well yes love" Yaz laughed "...that's why it's called the beach house"

Frances was holding off her laugh shaking her head.

Lily immediately ran around the bed fetching her little pink suitcase from underneath and began grabbing her dolls and throwing them in, her tiny hands moving faster than her excitement could keep up with.

Frances and Yaz couldn't help but laugh at the whirlwind of energy that was Lily. She dashed around the room, stuffing toys in, running back and forth picking up her hairpins, ribbons and the rest of little trinkets scattered across Yaz's room, her legs barely able to keep up with her speed. Yaz watched her with affection, a soft chuckle escaping her lips.

"Oi..." Yaz called her out "...we're not going for a month you know," Yaz said with a smile, shaking her head in amusement as she continued her own packing.

"Just in case we are" Frances laughed

Before either of them could say anything more, Lily bolted out of the room. "Wait!" Frances called after her, "Where are you going?"

From the hallway, Lily's voice floated back, full of determination. "I need my book and crayons!" she yelled, as though it was the most important thing in the world.

Frances and Yaz exchanged amused glances, both of them laughing their heads off.

....

The ocean air was crisp as Frances turned the key in the lock, the familiar weight of the beach house door pressing open beneath her touch. The soft crash of waves in the distance, the scent of salt and sand lingering in the air, it was all the same, yet everything had changed.

Behind her, Yaz stepped carefully inside, cradling Lily against her chest. The little girl had fallen asleep in the car, her tiny face nestled into Yaz's shoulder, her soft breaths warm against her skin. Frances glanced over, her heart clenching at the sight. Almost a year ago,

they had arrived here just the two of them, uncertain of where this would all lead. And now... now they stood in the doorway of a place that held their most intimate memories, carrying a sleeping child between them, feeling like some odd little family that didn't quite belong to this world.

Frances let out a slow breath, flicking on the lights. The house welcomed them just as it always had, unchanged by time. The soft, oversized sofa still sat in the center of the living space, inviting and warm. The stone fireplace stood sturdy as ever, the scent of aged wood lingering faintly in the air. Around the corner, the wooden bed with its white linen canopy remained just as she remembered, where they had once laid side by side, tangled in whispered confessions and hesitant touches, discovering each other in the quiet of the night.

She swallowed thickly at the memory, her fingers brushing along the wooden frame of the door as she stepped further inside. Yaz, balancing Lily carefully, cast her a glance, she too was remembering. There was something unspoken between them in that moment, something deeper than words.

Frances cleared her throat, trying to shake the weight of nostalgia. "I'll get the bed ready for her," she said softly, moving toward the bedroom.

Yaz nodded, adjusting Lily in her arms as she carried her toward the bed. The little girl barely stirred, her tiny hand gripping Yaz's sweater even in sleep. Gently, Yaz laid her down on the cool sheets, brushing a stray curl from Lily's face as she murmured something inaudible. Frances pulled the blanket over her, smoothing it down with quiet reverence.

For a long moment, they both just stood there, watching her sleep.

Then, as if drawn by the same pull, their eyes met. Yaz exhaled a soft, knowing smile. "Feels different this time," she murmured.

Frances nodded. "Yeah," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But in a good way."

A silence settled over them, comfortable yet thick with the weight of everything unsaid. Frances reached for Yaz's hand, lacing their fingers together, grounding herself in the warmth of her touch.

"Come on," Frances whispered, gently tugging her toward the living room. "Let's sit for a bit. I'm gonna have to wake her up in an hour for meds"

"It would be good to change her in pajamas as well" Yaz giggled

She followed, and as they sank into the cushions, Frances let her head rest against Yaz's shoulder, closing her eyes for just a moment. The waves outside continued their steady rhythm, the night wrapping around them like a quiet promise.

They were here. Together. And that was all that mattered.

.....

While Frances was putting Lily to bed, Yaz took her time to relax. Already in her pajamas and barefoot she lit up few candles. The soft glow flickered across the room, casting warm shadows against the walls. Going through small selection of records she picked something low and soothing, blending with the distant hush of waves outside. Then tapped her way to the sofa.

Frances emerged from Lily's room.

"She asleep?" Yaz asked, her voice soft as she was pouring some wine

Frances nodded, exhaling a quiet breath. "Out like a light," she said, walking over. "I told her where our room is, in case she wakes up at night."

Yaz passed her a glass of wine, and Frances took it gratefully, sinking onto the cushions beside her. She leaned into Yaz, letting her body relax completely against her warmth. Yaz's free hand trailed lazily over the length of her, tracing absent-minded patterns across her stomach then up higher, the motion grounding her.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The silence between them was easy, filled with nothing but the sounds of the night, the slow melody from the gramophone, and the occasional clink of a wine glass being set down.

Then Yaz tilted her head slightly, brushing her lips against Frances's temple. "You alright?"

Frances hesitated, swirling the wine in her glass as she considered the question. "Yeah," she murmured. "I am. It just... it still feels like a daze you know. Like my brain hasn't caught up yet." She let out a quiet laugh, but there was something fragile in it. "No more phone calls. No more threats. No more waking up with a hole in my stomach." She shook her head. "It's gonna take time to really believe it's over."

Yaz tightened her arm around her, pulling her closer. "You will," she said, pressing a lingering kiss to Frances's temple. "You will."

Frances sighed, sinking deeper into Yaz's embrace, letting her fingers toy absently with the hem of Yaz's sleeve. "Victor suggested a new agent."

Yaz's fingers paused, then resumed their gentle tracing. "Oh? That was quick...Who?"

Frances nodded, taking another sip of wine. "Someone who actually understands what I'm up against. He's... like us." She glanced up, meeting Yaz's gaze. "He gets it."

Yaz studied her for a moment, then nodded. "That would be pleasant change from being offered a bribe.... But is he a good agent?"

"I think so.... Victor praises him a lot. I guess I'll see for myself when we meet. He arranged a meeting next week."

"It's gonna be a busy week" Yaz murmured against her hair

"Mmmm...And premiere on Saturday" Frances looked up at Yaz with a smile

"Yeah" Yaz grinned

Frances rested her head against Yaz's shoulder, letting the weight of the past few weeks slowly slip away. For the first time in what felt like forever she felt truly peaceful. Just the steady rhythm of Yaz's breathing and the warmth of her touch.

Yaz shifted slightly, adjusting so Frances could rest more comfortably against her. She ran her fingers gently through Frances's hair, the way she knew soothed her. The music played on, low and steady, wrapping them in a cocoon of warmth and quiet intimacy.

After a moment, Yaz spoke just above a whisper. "Lily asked me something the other day," she said softly.

Frances lifted her head slightly, turning to look at her.

"She asked if we were ever going to live together. The three of us."

Frances let out a soft laugh, but there was something deeply tender in her expression. "That sounds like Lily... And what did you tell her?"

Yaz's lips twitched "I said we're working on it...But can't right now...She burst out in tears bless her."

"Oh nooo"

"She's been obviously thinking about it, more so now when she's there in a house." Yaz continued. "And to be honest... so have I."

Frances sat up a little, her wineglass resting against her knee. "You have?"

Yaz nodded, her fingers trailing absentmindedly over Frances's arm. "Susan said something too...Something that made me think it's time."

Frances frowned slightly. "Time for what?"

"For us to start making a life together," Yaz said gently.

Frances exhaled, setting her wineglass aside. Her fingers found Yaz's, lacing them together. "I..." she started, then paused, as if she needed to gather her thoughts. "I've thought about it too. But I didn't want to push you."

Yaz squeezed Frances's hand, her thumb tracing slow, reassuring circles against her skin. "You wouldn't be pushing me," she said softly. "Franny, I want this. I love you. I love Lily. I

love us.” She hesitated, exhaling before continuing, her voice quieter now, more vulnerable.

“The truth is...I think I already feel like I belong to you both.” She glanced down for a second, gathering her thoughts, then met Frances’s gaze again. “It’s just that when you kept bringing up the idea of us eloping, getting married...I kept brushing it off. Not because I didn’t want it. God, I do. But...I didn’t wanna give you false hope when I wasn’t sure it could ever be possible. At least not in the way we want it to be.”

Her fingers tightened slightly around Frances’s, steadying herself. “But I’ve been thinking about it a lot. About *us*. And maybe it won’t be easy, but nothing about loving you has ever felt wrong. It just feels like...home.”

Frances’s eyes shimmered in the candlelight, and for a moment, she didn’t say anything. She just looked at Yaz, taking in every word, every unspoken promise between them. Then, with a quiet breath, Frances lifted their joined hands to her lips, pressing a soft kiss to Yaz’s fingers. “We’ll figure it out,” she whispered. “Together.”

Yaz smiled, tilting her forehead against Frances’s. “Together.”

Yaz cupped Frances’s face, brushing her thumb over her cheek as their lips met in a slow, tender kiss. It was soft at first, lingering, full of quiet devotion. Frances sighed against her mouth, her fingers tangling in Yaz’s hair, deepening the kiss as she shifted, turning until she was lying fully atop Yaz.

Yaz’s hands traced down her back, pulling her closer, feeling the warmth of her body through the thin fabric of her nightgown. Frances kissed her again, this time with more urgency, more need. Their breaths mingled, hearts beating in sync as Frances pressed herself against Yaz, her hands slipping under her shirt, fingers skimming over warm skin.

Between kisses, Frances whispered against her lips, “Take me to bed.”

Yaz smirked, her hands settling on Frances’s hips. “We’ll have to lock the door,” she murmured playfully.

Frances let out a breathless laugh. “And keep our clothes close by,” she added, her lips grazing Yaz’s jaw, “just in case Lily knocks.”

They both giggled softly, the sound mingling with the low hum of music still playing in the background. Then Yaz rolled them over, pinning Frances beneath her as she kissed her again, deeper, hungrier before finally pulling them both to their feet, hands still roaming, lips never straying far, as they made their way to the bedroom.

As they stumbled into the bedroom, Yaz barely had time to kick the door shut before Frances pulled her back into a kiss, laughing breathlessly against her lips. The dim porch light cast shadows across the white canopy bed, the sea breeze drifting in through slightly open window, carrying the scent of salt and jasmine.

“You’re impatient,” Yaz teased, her hands settling on Frances’s waist as she slowly walked

her backward toward the bed.

Frances smirked, her fingers tugging at the hem of Yaz's shirt. "You're slow."

Yaz let out a low chuckle. "I'm savoring the moment."

Frances rolled her eyes playfully, but Yaz caught the flicker of something deeper in them, love, devotion, longing. It made her heart clench in the best way.

"Well," Frances murmured, fingers slipping under Yaz's shirt, tracing the warm skin of her stomach, "savor a little faster."

Yaz grinned. "Bossy."

Frances gasped as Yaz suddenly spun them around and tossed her onto the bed. She landed with a soft bounce, laughter bubbling from her lips as Yaz crawled over her, pinning her wrists to the mattress.

"Oh," Frances breathed, her hazel eyes flickering between Yaz's dark, teasing gaze and her lips. "I see how it is."

Yaz leaned in, her mouth hovering just above Frances's. "You were saying?"

Frances arched up, capturing her lips in a deep, slow kiss, her fingers slipping free to tangle in Yaz's hair. Their kisses grew more urgent, hands exploring, bodies pressing together, heat building between them.

Then Frances pulled back just enough to whisper against Yaz's lips, her voice breathy, "Did you lock the door?"

Yaz groaned, dropping her head to Frances's shoulder. "You're killing me."

Frances giggled, rolling them over so she was on top now, pinning Yaz beneath her. "Go lock it."

Yaz huffed but couldn't stop the smile tugging at her lips. "You're really making me get up right now?"

Frances kissed her jaw, then her collarbone, lips trailing lower. "Mm-hmm."

"You're on top...why aren't you doing it?" Yaz whispered

Frances let out a dramatic sigh getting up, but was already reaching blindly for the door handle. With a quick flick of the wrist, the lock clicked into place. "There. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." Yaz said grabbing her wrist pulling her back into bed.

Frances grinned against Yaz's lips, her fingers dancing over the hem of Yaz's shirt again,

teasing. "Now that we have privacy..." she murmured, her voice low and full of mischief as she unburdened it with urgency.

Yaz smirked, tilting her head back against the pillow. "Privacy, huh? You mean besides the fact that a certain little someone might come knocking?"

Frances giggled, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to Yaz's neck. "That's why we're keeping our clothes close."

Yaz let out a breathy laugh, her hands sliding down Frances's back. "You're impossible."

"And you love it," Frances grinned before capturing Yaz's lips again, this time slower, deeper.

Yaz hummed against her, hands wandering, fingers tracing the curve of Frances's waist and over her hips pulling her closer.

"Take it off" Frances said breathless

Yaz pulled Frances's shirt off in one smooth move

But then—

Thud.

Frances gasped and whipped her head around. "What was that?"

Yaz blinked, trying to catch her breath. "I think...I think it was the radio falling off the dresser."

Silence. Then they both burst into giggles, Frances collapsing onto Yaz, her forehead pressing into her shoulder.

"This is so us," Yaz muttered between laughs, brushing Frances's tousled hair from her face.

Frances sighed dramatically. "It's like the universe refuses to let us have a perfect moment."

Yaz smirked, flipping them over in one smooth motion so she was now on top, her dark eyes gleaming. "Oh, I don't know. I'd say this is pretty perfect."

Frances arched a brow, fingers trailing up Yaz's arm. "Mm, convince me."

Yaz kissed her deeply, slow and teasing at first, then more insistent, hands exploring, pulling Frances closer. The heat between them built again, their laughter fading into something more breathless, more urgent.

And this time, nothing interrupted them.

....

The smell of morning coffee and warm toast filled the beach house as soft music played from the radio, blending with the distant crash of waves. Frances hummed along as she set the table, her mood light, her movements easy. She placed Lily's tablets on a small plate beside her breakfast, a routine so ingrained now that she barely thought about it. Outside, through the open doors leading to the beach, Lily ran across the patio, her tiny kite fluttering in the breeze, her laughter carried on the morning air.

Yaz stirred, her body stretching lazily beneath the soft sheets before she blinked her eyes open. The bed beside her was empty, but the warmth lingering on Frances's pillow told her she hadn't been gone long.

A slow, satisfied smile spread across her face as she rolled onto her back, stretching her arms above her head, feeling the pleasant ache in her muscles from the night before. With a contented sigh, she finally sat up, reaching for her dressing gown draped over the chair. As she slipped it on, the scent of salt air drifted in through the open window, mingling with something warm and buttery.

The smell of breakfast.

Her stomach gave an eager grumble, and she chuckled to herself as she padded toward the door.

She shuffled into the kitchen, still heavy with sleep, her dark hair mussed, her eyes half-lidded. "Morning," she murmured, voice thick and drowsy.

Frances smiled as Yaz slipped her arms around her from behind, pressing a slow, lazy kiss to the curve of her neck.

"Morning," Frances murmured back, leaning into the warmth of her. "Did you sleep well?"

Yaz kissed her shoulder next. "Slept like a baby," she mumbled, before breaking away and heading toward the fridge. "Where's Lily?"

Frances glanced up, half-focused as she adjusted a plate. "She's right h—" The words died on her tongue.

Her body went still.

Yaz, pulling out the milk, barely noticed at first. "Fran?"

Frances didn't answer. She was staring past Yaz, her hazel eyes locked on something beyond the open doors.

Yaz turned just in time to see it, Lily, outside on the beach, her small kite now forgotten at her side. A man knelt next to her, speaking to her.

Frances's heart slammed into her ribs.

"Yaz," she breathed, voice tight with fear.

Yaz dropped the milk, her blood ran cold.

Frances was already moving before she could even think, bolting through the door across the sand, her breath ragged, her bare feet kicking up grains of gold. Yaz wasn't far behind, sprinting toward Lily, her heart hammering, a single thought screaming in her mind.

Get to her.

The man saw them coming. He stood up, lifting his arms in the air, the camera clutched in one hand. "Wait..."

Yaz reached Lily, scooping her up from the ground and clutching her to her chest. Lily, startled and wide-eyed, clung to her like a lifeline. "It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you," Yaz murmured, stroking her back.

But Frances wasn't calm. Not even close. She launched herself at the man, shoving him hard.

"What the hell did you say to her?" she screamed, her voice raw and shaking with fury.

The man staggered back, his eyes darting between them. "I swear, I didn't touch her! I just...I just took a few pictures!"

Frances saw red. She smacked him across the face, her palm cracking against his cheek. "What. Did. You. Do?" she demanded, striking him again.

"Nothing!" he yelped, stumbling, trying to shield himself. "Just photos! I followed you...I work for The Chronicle.." he reached for his card

"You followed us?" Frances shrieked, her voice sharp with fury. Before he could even finish his sentence, she smacked the press card out of his hand, sending it flying onto the sand.

"YOU FOLLOWED US?" Her voice rose, shaking with rage. "You miserable piece of shit!"

Without thinking, she struck him again, her palm landing hard against his chest. "How dare you, you son of a bitch?" she seethed, her breath coming fast, hands trembling with barely restrained fury.

Yaz, still holding Lily, turned her body to shield the little girl from the chaos, murmuring soft reassurances. But Lily had started to cry, her little fingers gripping Yaz's shirt in trembling fists.

The man, breathless and desperate, raised his arms to shield himself from Frances's

relentless blows.

"Look, I'm sorry! I just..." he sputtered, ducking as she swung at him again, her fury unrelenting.

Frances didn't let him finish. She struck him again, then wrenched the camera from his hands, her fingers shaking as she tore the film free. With a sharp crack, she hurled the camera onto the sand.

"This it?" she shouted, holding up the ruined film.

"Yes... yes, that's it!" the man stammered, hands raised.

"Empty your pockets."

"What?"

"NOW! Empty your fucking pockets!"

Frantic, he turned them inside out, showing nothing but a few crumpled receipts and lint. "See? Nothing! I just took two pictures, that's all... I swear!"

"Get the fuck out of here!" she screamed, her voice cutting through the crash of the waves. "Get the fuck out of here before I call the police!"

"Okay...I'm sorry..."

"You ever come near my daughter again I swear to fucking God, I'll kill you myself!" She jabbed a finger at him, her entire body trembling as she screamed.

The man hesitated only for a second, then grabbed the camera and ran, kicking up sand in his haste to get away.

Frances stood there, chest heaving, hands shaking. She didn't even realize Yaz and Lily had already started back toward the house until she heard the sound of Lily's muffled sobs.

That snapped her back to reality.

Turning, she followed them, her rage still pulsing under her skin, but now, it was drowning under something even heavier.

Guilt. Fear. And the overwhelming urge to never let Lily out of her sight again.

....

Frances stepped inside, her breath still uneven, her pulse pounding in her ears. But the moment she saw them, Yaz curled on the sofa, rocking Lily gently, pressing soft kisses to her forehead, everything inside her eased, just a little.

Lily was still crying, her small body trembling with hiccups, but the worst of it had passed. Yaz held her securely, humming a quiet melody, her fingers stroking through Lily's curls with infinite patience and care.

Frances swallowed hard, forcing down the lingering fury, the adrenaline still burning in her veins, the sick knot of fear that refused to fully loosen.

She moved toward them, slower now, the fight draining from her limbs. The second Lily spotted her, she reached out, her hands shaking. Frances didn't hesitate, she scooped her up, settling her into her lap, holding her close.

"It's okay, baby," she murmured, smoothing her hair, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "It's alright darling."

Lily sniffled, curling into her, her tiny fingers twisting into Frances's blouse. "Did he hurt you?" she asked, her voice small and raw.

Frances's arms tightened around her. "No, sweetheart, no he didn't hurt me" she whispered. "I hurt him."

Lily pulled back slightly, her wide eyes searching Frances's face. "Why?"

Frances took a steadying breath, brushing damp curls from Lily's forehead. "Because he had no right to talk to you. No right to take pictures of you darling," she said evenly, keeping her voice calm despite the fire still smoldering in her chest.

Lily's lower lip quivered. "He just asked my name," she mumbled. "And where my mummy was."

Yaz tensed beside her.

Frances cupped Lily's face gently, her thumbs wiping away the last traces of tears. "Listen to me, sweetheart. You must never, ever talk to strangers when you're alone. Do you understand?"

Lily hesitated, then gave a small nod.

"And if anyone ever tries to talk to you like that again," Frances continued, her tone firm but warm, "you scream as loud as you can. For me or Yaz. No matter what. You don't go with them, you don't take anything from them...do you understand baby?"

Lily's little fingers clutched at hers. "I promise," she whispered.

Frances hugged her close, her lips pressing against her temple. "And, dar3... you can't run off like that again. You have to stay with us all the time. You can't just go on your own...ever...It's really important darling."

"Okay, Mummy," Lily murmured, her voice muffled against Frances's shoulder.

Yaz reached out, resting a hand on Frances's knee, her own heart still pounding in her chest.

....

Frances stood near the window, phone pressed tightly to her ear as she watched the waves roll lazily against the sand outside. Inside the house, the tension from the morning still hung in the air like fog. Suitcases lay open on the floor, half-packed with clothes and toys in hurried disarray.

"I need your help, urgently," she said into the receiver, her voice low but firm. "Some creep showed up here, took pictures of Lily. It was... bad. He followed us. I don't feel safe staying here."

There was a pause, then Nicole's voice crackled through the line, full of concern. "Oh my God, is Lily okay?"

"She's shaken, we all are. But she's fine now, thank God," Frances replied, her voice faltering slightly. "I need another place. Somewhere private. Gated, if possible. Just until the weekend's over. I don't care if it's small, I just need it yesterday. Do you think you can find it? It's short notice I know but I just wanna get out of here."

"Alright. Give me an hour. I'll make some calls, pull a few strings. You'll have something soon, I promise."

"Thanks, Nic. We'll go out for lunch in the meantime. I just... I can't stay here another second."

"Totally understand. Call me in about an hour and I'll have something, don't worry."

"You're a lifesaver. Thank you."

"Don't mention it"

She ended the call with a sigh and let her hand fall to her side, still feeling the sick twist of anxiety in her chest. Leaving the living room, she walked into the bedroom where Yaz was crouched on the floor, efficiently packing Lily's small suitcase. Clothes, books, and crayons were being tucked inside with practiced, focused motions.

"What did Nicole say?" Yaz asked, not even looking up as she zipped one of the pockets.

"She's working on it," Frances replied, stepping further into the room. "Said she needs a little time to make a few calls."

Yaz gave a small nod and zipped up the side of the case.

“We’ll go out for lunch in the meantime. I just... don’t feel safe here anymore.”

That made Yaz pause. She looked up then, her face softening when she saw the tension still clinging to Frances’s frame. She stood up and reached out without hesitation.

Frances moved into her arms and Yaz wrapped her close, her hands brushing gently down Frances’s arms before cupping her face. She leaned in and kissed her tender and reassuring, then pulled her into a warm, grounding hug.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Yaz murmured.

Frances closed her eyes and held on tightly.

“I hope so,” she whispered into Yaz’s shoulder.

"Of course it will" Yaz squeezed her a bit tighter

....

The Blue Lantern Café was quiet for a Saturday, tucked between two cypress trees just off the winding coastal road. The sea breeze drifted through the open windows, mixing with the scent of salt and fried fish. A jukebox hummed softly from the corner, old jazz tunes filling the gaps between clinks of cutlery and murmured conversations.

Frances sat across from Yaz, her hand loosely wrapped around a glass of lemonade, eyes flickering between the door and the small figure beside her. Lily was hunched over her paper placemat, drawing listlessly with a stubby red crayon. Her grilled cheese sandwich sat untouched, the edges curling, while her fries had gone cold.

Frances leaned over slightly, brushing a hand over Lily’s curls. “You okay, sweetheart?”

Lily didn’t look up. Just gave a half-shrug and kept drawing.

Frances sighed and caught the eye of the passing waitress. “Excuse me, would it be alright if we changed her order? She’s not too keen on the sandwich.”

The waitress, a young woman with a tired smile and a pencil behind her ear, nodded easily. “Of course, ma’am. What would she prefer?”

Frances glanced at Yaz, then looked back. “Could she have the pancakes instead? With strawberries? And a vanilla milkshake?”

“Coming right up.”

As the waitress walked away, Lily paused her drawing, her head lifting just slightly. “Milkshake?” she asked quietly.

Frances smiled. “Vanilla. With a cherry on top if they have it.”

That earned her a small, fleeting smile from Lily and it made Frances's heart ache a little less.

But as the warmth faded, Frances leaned back, staring out at the stretch of ocean through the window. "This whole thing's just...tinted the weekend," she said, her voice low, more to herself than to Yaz.

Yaz, sipping from her coffee, set the cup down and shook her head. "We got here last night, Franny. It didn't tint anything. And if we keep dwelling on it, then *we'll* be the ones doing the tinting."

Frances glanced at her. "I can't just move on like that," she said. "I'm shitting myself. Honestly. I didn't even let her out of my sight in the bathroom."

Yaz reached across the table and took Frances's hand, her thumb brushing over her knuckles. "I get it," she said softly. "But if you carry on like that, you're gonna make *her* paranoid. And that doesn't help anyone."

Frances exhaled through her nose, eyes dropping to their joined hands. "Maybe. I just..." She didn't finish.

"This is our reality now," Yaz said. "We can't change that. But being paranoid won't fix it. All we can do is be more careful. Be more aware. We deal with it—but we don't let it control us."

Frances nodded slowly, the tension in her shoulders easing just a little.

The waitress returned a few minutes later with Lily's pancakes and milkshake. The girl's eyes lit up, her earlier stillness softening into something more like herself. Yaz smiled, watching her, and gave Frances's hand a squeeze.

They weren't quite okay yet.

But they were still here. Together. And that had to count for something.

....

By early afternoon, the sun hung high over the Pacific, casting long amber streaks across the sky as Frances's car turned off the coastal road and approached the new property. This wasn't a grand getaway house, it didn't need to be. What it lacked in glamour, it made up for in peace of mind.

The gravel driveway led to a private, gated entrance with tall hedges on either side, thick enough to block the view from the road entirely. They stopped in front of solid iron gate. Yaz came out to unlock it using the key they picked up from the local store.

Yaz leaned through the window. "Now this feels more like a place no one can sneak into."

"Is it nice?" Frances asked

"It's really nice, you'll see" Yaz smiled and stepped back a bit from the car letting Frances through.

Frances nodded, easing the car forward just enough so Yaz can close the gates.

"Nicole said it's one of three houses owned by a retired producer." Frances said when Yaz came back into the car "He keeps them under private lease and doesn't list them publicly the store owner is his sister. There's a groundskeeper who lives out back and walks the perimeter at night."

"Three houses...Blimey" Yaz huffed "I could do with just one"

Frances giggled glancing at her "You never know...you might have two"

"Keep dreaming" Yaz smirked

The house came into view, a low-slung, modern beach cottage with white stucco walls and wide wooden eaves, set behind a second wooden fence that bordered the edge of the beach. The windows were small and fitted with sturdy wooden shutters.

Yaz gave a satisfied nod as they pulled in. "It's like a little bunker disguised as a beach cottage."

Frances smirked. "Exactly the vibe we're going for."

The back patio faced the ocean but was shielded by tall dunes and a locked wooden gate.

Frances helped Lily out of the car, glancing around with a wary eye before relaxing slightly. "This feels better already."

Yaz joined her, rolling one of the suitcases up the path. "Definitely better. Quiet, tucked away, no nosy neighbors."

Frances glanced up at the low roofline and wide front porch. "It's not glamorous," she said softly, "but it feels... safer."

"You sound like we're in witness protection program" Yaz laughed

"That's exactly how I'm treating it" she smirked pulling the other suitcase out of the car.

"Mummy, why are we moving to another house?" Lily asked pulling her pink suitcase out of

the car

"Because some people don't understand the concept of minding their own business, and I prefer my breakfast without a side of creeps hiding in the bushes."

Lily frowned confused following her "What's a creep?"

As Frances turned the key and pushed open the front door, a soft creak echoed into the stillness. The air inside was cool and slightly musty, carrying the scent of salt, wood polish, and a hint of lavender from the linens. Yaz stepped in behind her, setting a suitcase down and immediately unlatching one of the heavy wooden shutters. She pushed it open, letting a flood of warm, golden sunlight pour into the front room.

Frances followed suit, moving from window to window, swinging open the shutters and pulling back the thick curtains. Slowly, the house came alive in the glow of late afternoon.

The front room was cozy, its walls painted a pale seafoam blue that caught the light gently. A large, deep-set sofa sat beneath the front window, upholstered in a gentle blue floral print, its cushions soft and a little squishy from use. Opposite it stood a wooden console table with a modest radio and a few weathered books stacked neatly beside a vase of dried wildflowers. A low coffee table made of driftwood sat on a white woven rug, and in the corner, an armchair with curved wooden arms and a crocheted throw over the back looked like the perfect place to curl up with a book.

To the left, the stone fireplace stretched up to the beamed ceiling, its hearth swept clean, a bundle of kindling tucked into a wicker basket nearby.

The kitchen was open to the main room, separated by a wide archway. Simple white cabinetry, a pale blue icebox, and a polished enamel stove gleamed beneath the now sunlit windows. A bowl of lemons sat on the small breakfast table, and a set of enamelware dishes was neatly stacked on the open shelves above the sink.

Yaz gave a low whistle. "It's like something out of a magazine."

Frances nodded, her fingers trailing along the back of the sofa. "Feels like someone actually lived here. Not just a rental. I like it...it's cozy."

They moved down the hallway toward the bedrooms. There were two, one smaller, with a twin bed dressed in crisp white linens, a soft patchwork quilt folded at the foot. A single doll sat waiting on the windowsill, left behind by another child, perhaps. A little writing desk stood beneath the window, and a small wardrobe held spare blankets and a few coat hangers.

"This one's perfect for Lily," Yaz said, already pulling the curtains open and letting the sunlight brighten the cheerful space.

"It's perfect" Frances smiled

"Look...a doll!" Lily ran straight to it.

"You can borrow it while we're here" Frances stroke her hair gently

The second bedroom was slightly larger, with a double bed at its center. The headboard was carved pine, the mattress topped with a thick white coverlet and four soft-looking pillows. A vintage vanity with a round mirror stood in the corner, next to a small wardrobe with shuttered doors. A framed painting of a stormy sea hung above the bed.

Frances stepped inside, taking it all in. "It's not the Roosevelt," she murmured, "but I really like it."

Yaz smiled as she opened the shutters in that room too, letting the warm light spill across the polished floor. "It's peaceful. And I'd take that over marble floors any day."

"You and me both" Frances said closing the wardrobe "Nice and clean, that's all I'm asking for"

The sun filtered in now through every window, casting soft shadows and warming the wooden floors. The house, once closed up and quiet, now felt lived in, safe, sunlit, and waiting.

Frances turned back toward Yaz, her expression softer. "It'll do."

Yaz walked over and kissed her cheek. "It'll do just fine."

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Once unpacked and settled Yaz stepped into the bathroom to freshen up. Coming back she stepped quietly into the bedroom, her eyes finding Frances standing near the open window. She was staring out toward the beach, her arms folded, her shoulders rigid despite the soft sea breeze brushing in. Her silhouette was calm, but Yaz had been with her long enough now to see past the surface.

Without a word, she came up behind her, slipping her arms gently around her waist.

Frances leaned back like she'd been waiting for her.

"Do you feel a bit better now?" she asked resting her chin lightly on Frances's shoulder, her voice low and soft.

Frances gave a slow nod. "Mm-hmm."

But then a single tear slipped down her cheek, carving a silent path.

"This happened on my watch," she whispered, her voice cracking. "I should've been more careful."

Yaz turned her gently, her hands cupping her face. "Franny... it could've happened on my watch."

"But it didn't," Frances said quickly, meeting her eyes. "It happened on mine."

Yaz's thumb brushed the tear away. "You just let your guard down for a moment. That's all."

"But that's all it takes...a moment" she closed her fingers around Yaz's wrist

"It won't happen again."

Frances's lips trembled. "What if... what if he'd taken her?" Her breath hitched. "What if I turned around and she was gone? You don't understand what some men...what they do to little girls like her, but I..."

Yaz gently pressed her fingertips to Frances's lips, stopping her. "I do understand," she said softly. "But we can't go down that road. We'll lose ourselves there. We have to let it go now... learn from it, be better, be careful. But let it go."

Frances stared at her, eyes glistening. Yaz stroked her cheek once more, then leaned in and kissed her, softly, slowly, anchoring her back in the moment.

Just then, a burst of footsteps interrupted them, and Lily's excited voice rang out, "I can see the ocean from my window!"

She bounded into the room, beaming, her earlier silence forgotten. Frances let out a breath of laughter and scooped her up into her arms, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"Can you, sweetheart?" she asked, her voice warm again.

“Uh-huh! It’s so pretty!”

Frances held her between them, and Yaz slipped an arm around Frances’s waist and pressed a soft kiss to Lily’s cheek. For a long second, the three of them just stayed like that, wrapped in each other.

Frances smiled. “How about we take a blanket down and have a picnic on the beach? We’ll make some sandwiches and fly that kite you picked out.”

Lily gasped. “Can we really?”

“Absolutely.”

As Lily wiggled excitedly in her arms, Frances glanced at Yaz over Lily’s shoulder. Yaz smiled back at her, tender and steady.

No, things weren’t fine yet. Not entirely. But they were here. They were together. And they would be.

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The breeze was soft and salty as it rolled in from the ocean, fluttering the edge of the blanket where Frances lay stretched out, her head propped lazily on one hand, a half-full glass of wine held delicately in the other. The sunlight caught in her hair, making it shimmer like gold.

Yaz sat upright beside her, knees drawn loosely to her chest, eyes fixed on the waves that broke and hissed along the shore. A faint smile played on her lips as she watched Lily dart along the wet sand, crouching now and then to examine shells, her little bucket swinging from her arm.

“She’s on a mission,” Yaz said, amused.

Frances glanced at Lily and smiled. “She always on a mission.”

There was a moment of calm before Yaz spoke again. “You know that historical epic I told you about... turns out I got it.”

Frances’s eyes widened with delight. “What? When did that happen?”

“Two weeks ago.”

Frances sat up, her glass forgotten as she turned toward Yaz. "Two weeks? Yaz, why didn't you tell me?"

Yaz gave a small shrug, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "I meant to... but then everything happened. I forgot. Got lost in the chaos, I suppose."

Frances pressed her palm to the blanket, steadying herself. Her gaze softened. "I'm sorry."

Yaz frowned. "For what?"

Frances looked down for a moment, then back at her. "For letting everything in my life take over yours. I know it has. I feel like I've dragged you into a whirlwind... and it's been all one-way. I've been so absent, Yaz. And I hate that. I hate that you've had to carry so much—Susan, me, Lily... Andy."

Yaz opened her mouth, but Frances raised a hand.

"I never said it before," she added, voice lower, more fragile. "But I'm sorry you had to go through that alone. It must've been terrifying."

Yaz leaned closer, brushing her fingers over Frances's hand. "Don't be daft," she said gently. "Next time I have a problem, I promise I'll absolutely torture you with it."

Frances laughed softly, but Yaz's tone turned a little more serious.

"And for what it's worth... people like Andy don't scare me. They infuriate me. The whole system does. That men like him can hold so much power and women like me are meant to just be grateful to be let in the building."

Frances reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind Yaz's ear, her thumb lingering against her cheek. "You're not lucky to be there. They're lucky to have you."

Frances sat quietly, watching Yaz as the wind played with her hair. She watched her big beautiful brown eyes filled with sorrow and her heart twisted in her chest. The waves kept rolling in steady rhythm, but the calm of the ocean felt at odds with the tension that settled between them now, not sharp, not bitter, but honest and heavy.

"I am happy about it," Yaz said after a long pause. Her voice was measured, but not without warmth. "Truly. It's a big opportunity. A massive one, actually."

Frances nodded, listening.

“But,” Yaz continued, glancing down at the sand between her fingers, “I’m also aware that I’ve been given just a chance to be one of the twenty designers. I’ll probably end up doing crowd costumes, extras, servants, maybe a matron or two if I’m lucky. You know how it goes.”

She turned to Frances. “Do you know how frustrating it is knowing that no matter how hard I work, no matter how sharp my eye is or how beautiful my designs are... I will never get to dress the leading ladies? Not because I’m not good enough, but because my skin is the wrong color.”

Frances’s face darkened, but she didn’t interrupt.

“That’s what Andy really rubbed in,” Yaz went on, her voice tighter now. “It wasn’t the bloody money he offered, though that was insulting enough. It was the way he looked at me, like I was lucky to even be in the building. Like I should kiss his feet for offering me a sliver.”

She let out a bitter chuckle. “The only satisfying part was telling him to get the hell out of my office.”

Frances shifted onto her side, reaching for Yaz’s hand. “You’ll be successful, darling. You already are. You’re gonna keep climbing. You have talent, fire, taste...”

“I can only go so far Franny,” Yaz said quietly, cutting her off with a gentle squeeze of her hand. “I love you for believing in me the way you do, I do, but the truth is, I can only go so far. The ceiling’s low for people like me. Especially in this town. Especially now.”

She looked back out toward the ocean, her face still and unreadable for a moment.

“An Asian woman designing for leading ladies in Hollywood?” she said, the corners of her mouth twitching with something between sadness and irony. “That’s not just unheard of, Frances. That’s impossible. Not unless I do it while someone else takes the credit...which let’s face it, already happened several times.”

Frances’s jaw tightened. “It’s not right.”

“It isn’t,” Yaz agreed. “But that’s the world we live in. The one that calls itself modern while locking the back door for people like me. Even getting this far... it’s rare. It’s not supposed to happen.”

Frances reached out and placed her hand gently on Yaz's cheek. "Then we make it happen."

Yaz leaned into her touch, her expression softening, but her voice stayed steady. "It means a lot that you say that. But I also need you to understand the truth. Just being here, on this beach, working in that studio, is already a fight. Every day. And it shouldn't have to be."

Frances didn't argue. She just pulled Yaz's hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles, holding her gaze.

Frances stayed quiet for a long moment, her fingers gently rubbing slow, thoughtful circles on the back of Yaz's hand. The sound of the waves and Lily's laughter played softly behind them, but Frances's focus was wholly on the woman beside her, the set of her jaw, the weight in her eyes, the pain she carried with so much grace.

Then, suddenly, Frances sat up a little straighter, a spark flickering behind her eyes. "Then let's find a place where the ceiling's higher."

Yaz turned to her, surprised. "You're cute when you get all revolutionary," she said with a small, crooked smile. "But..."

"No," Frances interrupted gently, but firmly. "I'm serious."

Yaz blinked. "Frances..."

"I mean it," she said, her voice picking up a quiet intensity. "The States isn't the only market. It's not the only damn place in the world making films or staging plays or needing brilliant designers. What if...what if we just... looked somewhere else?"

Yaz chuckled softly, shaking her head. "You want me to hop on a plane and go pitch to a studio in, what...Paris? Rome?"

Frances shrugged, her eyes lit with conviction. "Why not? You're brilliant, Yaz. And if this place can't see that because they're too busy counting skin tones and not talent, then screw them. I don't want you to give up. Not because of them."

Yaz looked at her, that faint smile lingering, but her eyes were glassy now. "I'm not giving up," she whispered. "I'm just tired."

"I know," Frances said, her voice softer now. She reached over and brushed a strand of hair behind Yaz's ear. "I see how hard you fight every single day, and I hate that they don't see

what I see. But we don't have to stay under their roof. Let's go find somewhere with a skylight."

Yaz laughed then, a real one, despite the ache still tucked inside her. "A skylight?"

Frances grinned. "A big one. Maybe one with a view of the Eiffel Tower."

Yaz leaned in, resting her head on Frances's shoulder. "You're absolutely mad."

"And you love it," Frances murmured, kissing the top of her head.

"I do," Yaz said quietly, her voice almost lost in the sea breeze. "Even if you're insane."

Frances leaned in, her voice low and teasing as she murmured into Yaz's ear, "Do you think there's a reporter in the bushes?"

Yaz turned her head, scanning the wide-open beach. Lily was a little way off, crouched in the sand. The rest of the shoreline was empty.

Yaz giggled softly. "I don't think so. Why?"

Frances grinned as she moved in closer. "Because I'm about to kiss you," she whispered, and before Yaz could respond, she leaned in and pressed a slow, tender kiss to her lips.

Yaz's eyes fluttered shut as her hand slid up to Frances's jaw, fingers brushing her cheek. The kiss lingered, warm and gentle, before Frances pulled back just enough to smile and then shifted, lying down and resting her head in Yaz's lap.

They sat in a comfortable silence, the sun warming their skin and the breeze rustling gently around them. After a few quiet moments, Frances spoke up, staring at the sky.

"Dietrich's in Paris half the time, and Josephine Baker's practically royalty."

Yaz looked down at her, confused for a second before a laugh burst out of her. "What?"

"I'm just saying," Frances replied, trying to sound casual but her grin giving her away. "They've got good taste in film stars over there."

Yaz laughed harder now, her fingers threading through Frances's hair. "You're ridiculous."

"They love cakes too," Frances added, closing her eyes with a satisfied sigh. "Susan would

be an absolute hit.”

That sent Yaz into a full belly laugh. “Oh my God, she’d start a revolution with her tarts.”

Frances cracked one eye open and gave her a playful smirk. “I also heard they’ve got clubs for people like us.”

Yaz raised an eyebrow, still chuckling. “What, for the delusional?”

Frances burst out laughing so hard she had to sit up for a second, clutching Yaz’s leg for balance. Yaz wrapped an arm around her and gently stroked her hair again, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“I love your delusional little mind,” she said, shaking her head affectionately.

Frances sighed, leaning into her touch. “Well, lucky for you... it’s all yours.”

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