

Chapter 25

The waves rolled gently onto the shore, their rhythmic hush blending with the crackle of the small bonfire. The night air was crisp, but Frances and Lily were bundled up warmly, wrapped in thick blankets as they sat in wooden chairs facing the flickering flames. Each held a long stick with a marshmallow at the end, carefully roasting it over the fire.

“And so,” Frances continued, her voice low and mysterious, “the pirates of Cannon Beach buried their treasure right here, in the sand opposite that rock, but they didn’t count on the mermaids.”

Lily’s eyes were wide as she turned her marshmallow slowly. “What did the mermaids do?”

“Well,” Frances leaned in, her voice full of intrigue, “they weren’t too happy about all these pirates stomping around their beach. So, when the captain and his crew tried to come back for their treasure, the mermaids called upon the sea, and a giant wave rose up and swallowed the pirates whole.”

Lily gasped. “All of them?”

Frances nodded solemnly. “Every last one. And now, on nights just like this, when the waves are quiet and the wind is still, if you listen really closely...” She paused for dramatic effect, tilting her head.

Lily followed her lead, holding her breath as she strained to hear.

Frances whispered, “You can hear them still searching for their treasure.”

Just as Lily was about to respond, Yaz appeared, carrying a wooden tray with three mugs. She set it down on the sand with a grin. “Alright, what’s all this whispering about?”

“Pirates!” Lily announced excitedly. “And mermaids! And treasure! And ghosts!”

Yaz raised an eyebrow as she handed Lily her hot chocolate. “And where exactly is this treasure?”

Frances smirked, taking the mug of mulled wine Yaz handed her. “Ah, well... that remains a mystery.”

Lily took a careful sip of her drink, then turned to Frances with a serious expression. “If we find it, can we keep it?”

Frances chuckled, ruffling her daughter's hair. "Of course... but only if we share some with the mermaids."

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The flames had burned lower, their golden glow casting soft flickers against the darkened beach. The waves rolled in gentle, steady whispers, and above them, the night sky stretched vast and endless, pinpricked with stars.

Lily, wrapped snugly in her blanket, had finished the last of her hot chocolate and toasted marshmallows before finally succumbing to exhaustion. Her little head rested against the back of the wooden chair, her mouth slightly parted in sleep, cheeks still rosy from the warmth of the fire.

Frances reached over, adjusting the blanket over her daughter's shoulder with a quiet tenderness. Yaz, nestled in her own chair beside them, watched with a soft smile before turning her gaze upward.

"You know," Frances murmured, following her line of sight, "the stars are clearer here than back home."

Yaz hummed in agreement. "You can actually see them properly, not just a few specks. Looks amazing, doesn't it?"

Frances pointed to a cluster of stars twinkling above them. "That one there is Orion. See the three bright stars in a row? That's his belt."

Yaz tilted her head, studying the sky. "Oh yeah, I see it. And the rest?"

Frances's finger traced the constellations as she named them, her voice soft and steady. "That's Taurus, just beside Orion. And over there, that's Cassiopeia...she's supposed to be a queen sitting on her throne. And if you follow the two end stars of the Big Dipper upwards, they lead you to the North Star."

Yaz glanced at her with curiosity. "How do you know all this?"

Frances smiled faintly, her gaze still on the stars. "I read a book about it once... a long time ago. Jimmy and I used to sit by the bedroom window at night, staring up at the sky, trying to find the constellations.

Yaz turned her head slightly at the mention of Jimmy, sensing the shift in Frances's tone.

Frances let out a quiet breath, her lips curling at the memory. "We didn't have much, but we had that. It was our little escape. No matter what was happening inside that house, no matter how bad things got, the stars stayed the same. We'd make up stories about

them...about warriors and queens and great battles in the sky. I think we just liked pretending we were somewhere else.”

Yaz reached over, slipping her hand into Frances’s and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“We were a good team” Frances’s smile turned wistful. “For a while...”

A comfortable silence settled between them, broken only by the distant rush of waves. Yaz looked back up at the sky, tracing the patterns Frances had pointed out.

“So, which one do you think we belong to?” she asked playfully. “Do we get to be warriors or queens?”

Frances chuckled, lacing her fingers with Yaz’s. “Both.”

Yaz smirked, glancing over at Frances “Good. I was hoping you’d say that.”

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The small beach cabin was quiet, save for the rhythmic sound of the waves in the distance. Frances and Yaz lay tangled in sleep, their bodies relaxed against the soft sheets, lulled by the ocean breeze filtering through the slightly open window. The air smelled of salt and the remnants of the bonfire they had enjoyed earlier.

Then, suddenly, the storm rolled in. A deep rumble of thunder vibrated through the cabin, followed by a bright flash of lightning that momentarily illuminated the room. The rain came down in heavy sheets, drumming against the roof. Yaz woke and padded lazily out of bed to close the window then quickly slipping back under the covers. Frances stirred, shifting in her sleep, then instinctively rolled closer to Yaz, tucking herself against her warmth.

Another crack of thunder tore through the sky. Frances, barely conscious, sighed and snuggled in even more. Just as she was about to drift back to sleep, a faint knock at their bedroom door made her eyes snap open. She froze, listening. Then, a small voice, barely audible over the storm.

"Mummy?"

"Lily?" Frances immediately sat up, her heart racing. "Come in darling" She shook. "Yaz, wake up" she whispered urgently.

Yaz let out a sleepy groan, blinking in confusion, first looking at Frances, then toward the door just as it creaked open. A small figure stood there in the dim light.

"Hey sweetheart, what's up?" Frances asked concerned

"I'm scared," Lily said, her voice trembling slightly.

"Of thunder?" Frances asked and Lily nodded silently

"Oh baby.... C'mere..." She stretched out her arm, and Lily wasted no time, hurrying across the floor and clambering onto the bed.

"Hey, pumpkin," Yaz murmured sleepily. "What's going on?"

"I don't wanna sleep alone," Lily said as she crawled across the bed on all fours, squeezing herself between them.

"It's alright, baby, you don't have to," Frances reassured her, kissing the top of her head and lifting the duvet so Lily could burrow underneath. She glanced over her shoulder at Yaz, who gave a small, knowing smile.

Lily wiggled herself into a comfortable spot, pushing her bum firmly against Frances as much as possible. Frances draped an arm around her, kissing her cheek. "Better?"

Lily nodded happily, settling in "Yes"

The storm rumbled on, another deep, growling thunder rolling overhead making Lily twitch.

"Don't worry about it," Yaz whispered. "It's just God farting."

Lily giggled instantly, and Frances burst out laughing, muffling her laughter against Lily's shoulder.

Another loud clap of thunder echoed through the cabin.

"See?" Yaz added mischievously. "He's sitting on the toilet. He's having a real rough night."

That did it. Lily erupted into a fit of giggles, completely relaxed now, while Frances couldn't hold back her own laughter.

The storm outside raged on, but in the warmth of the bed, wrapped in shared laughter and comfort, none of them minded. And when they just about settled for sleep the next thunder came and all three of them burst out laughing together.

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As the morning came a faint tickle on Frances's nose made her stir in her sleep. Half-conscious, she lazily swatted at the invisible irritation with her hand and turned her head slightly. Silence followed, and she began to drift off again.

Then, the tickling came back, light and teasing, brushing against her skin. She frowned, still groggy, her eyes fluttering open.

Lily sat beside her, a mischievous grin stretched across her face, holding a strand of Frances's own hair between her fingers and using it to tickle her nose.

Frances narrowed her eyes in playful suspicion. "Oh, you think you're funny, huh?"

Lily giggled.

With a swift move, Frances grabbed her, rolling her onto her back and launching a full tickle attack. Lily shrieked with laughter, her tiny legs kicking as she squirmed beneath Frances's relentless fingers.

The commotion made Yaz stir beside them. She shifted under the covers, letting out a sleepy murmur. Both Frances and Lily froze, their giggles barely suppressed, watching Yaz for any sign of waking.

Yaz sighed and turned onto her side, still deep in sleep.

That was all it took, another giggle slipped out, then another, until they were both grinning again. Frances pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh," she whispered conspiratorially as Yaz stirred again..

Lily clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes sparkling with excitement.

Frances leaned in, keeping her voice low. "Wanna get up and make pancakes for Yaz?"

Lily nodded eagerly, her whole face lighting up.

"Come on," Frances whispered, nodding toward the door. With that, she threw off the covers. "Race you to the bathroom!"

She sprang from the bed, darting for the door.

Lily scrambled after her, a burst of delighted laughter escaping as she raced to catch up.

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The kitchen was filled with the warmth of the morning sun as Frances and Lily busily worked on breakfast. Lily, kneeling on a chair beside Frances helping with the pancakes. She was a bit clumsy but full of enthusiasm, her small hands eager to be part of the process.

Frances handed her an egg, letting Lily crack it open. Lily took the egg carefully in her hands and, with all the focus of a serious chef, tried to tap it on the edge of the bowl. But instead of the satisfying crack she expected, the egg slipped from her fingers and landed on the counter with a soft splat.

Frances laughed softly "It's okay, honey, just take the other one,"

But Lily, with a gleam in her eye, wasted no time scooping up the egg from the counter with her bare hands and, without hesitation, popped it into the bowl, her small fingers squishing it slightly.

Frances blinked, her jaw dropping in mock horror. "Did you just scoop that up from the counter?" she asked, her voice dripping with exaggerated disbelief.

Lily's face lit up with a mischievous giggle as she nodded enthusiastically. "Yes!" she said proudly.

Frances raised an eyebrow, leaning closer. "Excuse me... What's the giggle for? Did you not hear of cross-contamination?" She put her hands on her hips, trying to hold back a smile.

Lily giggled even harder, her fingers still covered in egg. She stuffed her finger in her mouth and licked the drip.

Frances's eyes widened in mock shock. "Did you just lick that?" she asked, her voice a mix of horror and amusement.

Lily burst into uncontrollable laughter, shaking her head. "No!" she managed to say through her giggles, though she was clearly having way too much fun.

Frances grinned, playing along. "What do you mean 'no'? I just saw you, missy... That's it! You lost your cooking license! And you've earned yourself a fine for not following health and safety regulations,"

Lily's eyes widened, and she tried to stifle her laughter. "No, I didn't!" she protested, but she couldn't help it. She was having the time of her life.

Frances smirked. "I see how it is... you're also cheeky, aren't you?" She grabbed a little notebook and pen from the counter and began writing imaginary 'penalty sheet.' "Now, let's see what your penalty is. For the egg incident... that's a four-tickle fine! Cross contamination...Huh...That's a serious one...ten-tickle fine...."

Lily's eyes grew even bigger, and she quickly slid off the chair, trying to escape. "No! No, please, don't!" she squealed, giggling uncontrollably as she darted toward the back door, eager to escape.

"Great, now I got a runner!" Frances threw the pen and paper and darted after her calling out, "You're not getting away from your penalty, missy!"

Lily's feet pounded on the floor as she reached the porch, but Frances, with a triumphant grin, scooped her up around the waist. "Gotcha!" she said, as Lily erupted into a fit of giggles, wriggling and laughing as she tried in vain to wiggle free.

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The morning sun hung low in the sky, casting a soft golden glow over the vast, empty shoreline. The waves rolled in with a rhythmic crash, retreating just as quickly, leaving behind damp sand and tiny white bubbles that popped under the weak February sun. The air was crisp, carrying the unmistakable bite of winter, but the three of them were wrapped up warmly, coats buttoned, scarves tucked in, gloved hands.

Lily ran ahead, her small boots kicking up sand as she darted along the shore, a pompon on top of her little red French hat flapping in the wind as she was stopping every so often to pick up tiny seashells, inspecting each one as if it held some ancient secret. Every now and then, she turned to show her treasures to Frances and Yaz before tucking them into the pockets of her coat blue coat.

Yaz smiled, watching her before glancing at her side. Frances walked close, so close that their arms brushed with every slow step. Yaz reached for her hand, threading their fingers together, her grip firm and steady. Frances sighed softly, leaning in until her head rested against Yaz's shoulder, her curls tickling Yaz's cheek.

"God, it's beautiful," Frances murmured, her voice just barely audible over the rolling waves.

"It is," Yaz agreed, giving Frances's fingers a squeeze.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. They just walked, the only sounds coming from the sea and Lily's excited little exclamations whenever she found something particularly interesting.

Then, Frances broke the silence. "Do you remember that conversation we had a long time ago?"

Yaz hummed. "Which one?"

"About this." Frances gestured faintly with her free hand, then nestled in closer, seeking more warmth. "A house on the beach. Just like this one. Where you have a little studio, and I said I'd finally sit down and finish that book I keep talking about."

Yaz smiled at the memory. "Yeah, I remember."

Frances sighed, her breath warm against Yaz's coat. "It's funny," she murmured. "For the first time in so long, life feels simple. Just us. No cameras, no hiding.... I could stay here forever."

Yaz didn't respond, she just squeezed her hand tighter. All the unspoken longing in her heart pressing down on her.

Frances's eyes followed Lily, watching her moving freely along the sand, a pocket full of seashells, a heart full of wonder.

Then, in a voice quieter than before, she admitted, "I don't know how to let her go."

Yaz felt Frances's grip on her hand tighten. She stopped walking, turning to face her.

"Frances..." Yaz whispered

Frances shook her head, her expression distant. "I know she needs to go back. I know it's what's best for her for now. But Yaz, I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to wake up in the morning and not hear her voice in the house or not tuck her in at night. It's like..." Her breath hitched, and she looked away, blinking against the ocean breeze. "It's like life doesn't make sense anymore."

Yaz's heart ached. She reached up, brushing a strand of hair from Frances's face before cupping her cheek, her thumb stroking gently. "You're her mum, love. Of course it doesn't make sense without her."

"Then why does a word expect it to?" Frances closed her eyes at Yaz's touch, drawing in a shaky breath. "I don't know what to do Yaz," she whispered. "I want this. You, me, Lily. I want this life so badly it hurts." Her fingers curled around Yaz's wrist, as if grounding herself. "I feel so controlled it's suffocating. Like I'm choking in my own success."

Yaz stayed quiet, listening, letting Frances pour out the thoughts she so often kept locked inside. They both did.

"I never thought this would be possible," Frances continued, her voice unsteady. "To have someone like you. And now I have it everything's changed." She exhaled deeply "Is it wrong? Is it selfish to want it so badly, when I'm already blessed beyond belief? People dream of the career I have, Yaz. They fight for it, sacrifice everything for it. And I'd give it all up in a heartbeat if it meant keeping this."

The wind picked up, sending strands of Frances's hair flying across her face. Gently, Yaz reached up and tucked them behind her ear, her touch lingering. She leaned in, voice soft but sure. "Then I guess we're selfish together."

Frances tilted her head, blinking up at Yaz as her hazel eyes filled with tears. A small, almost disbelieving smile ghosted her lips before she cupped Yaz's cheek, pulling her in. Their lips met in a kiss that was slow, tender, liberating. A kiss that defied the rules, the expectations, the suffocating weight of the world pressing down on them. Here, on this empty beach, they were just two women in love. Nothing else mattered.

The moment shattered with the sound of tiny, excited footsteps crunching over the sand.

"Look, look what I found!" Lily's voice rang out as she ran toward them, her pockets bulging with treasures, her cheeks bright red from chill in the air. She skidded to a stop between them, holding out her hands, a mismatched collection of stones, shells, and bits of driftwood nestled in her palms.

Frances and Yaz exchanged a knowing smile before kneeling down, giving each little trinket the admiration Lily expected. "You've got quite the collection there," Frances said, brushing tears from her face before her daughter sees it. "That's beautiful darling"

"Pirate treasure!" Lily declared seriously.

"Then we better keep it safe," Yaz said, helping Lily tuck the items back into her coat pocket. "We need to get a proper pirate chest for that"

Frances stood, extending her hand. "Come on, you little pirate. I think you need hot chocolate."

Lily beamed as Yaz took one of her hands and Frances took the other. As they strolled down the beach, they lifted her up between them, swinging her playfully with each step, her delighted giggles carried away by the ocean breeze.

For the first time in a long time, Frances felt like she could breathe.

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The warmth of the cabin wrapped around them like a protective cocoon, the fire crackling softly. Frances lay on the sofa, snuggled beneath a thick blanket with Lily nestled in her arms. The little girl's spelling book rested against Frances's lap, its well-worn pages open as they practiced reading together.

Lily's small finger traced the words, her brows furrowed in concentration. "The... c-cat... is... s-sitting on the... r-ro..." She hesitated, her lips shaping the next word, but no sound

came. She tried again, voice trembling, but the letters tangled together in her mind.

"R-o-o-f," Frances said gently, giving her a little nudge of encouragement.

"Roof," Lily whispered.

"That's it, sweetheart. You almost had it," Frances assured her.

But Lily wasn't convinced. She frowned, her little hands curling into fists. When she stumbled over the next word, the frustration boiled over. Tears brimming in her eyes before spilling over.

Frances felt her heart squeeze as Lily swiped a hand over her face, her cheeks blotchy with frustration.

Frances tilted the girl's chin up gently, searching her watery eyes. "What's the tears for, peanut?"

Lily sniffled, her bottom lip trembling. "I'm stupid."

Frances's chest tightened. She set the book aside, cupping Lily's face with both hands, her thumbs brushing away the fresh tears. "Don't you ever say that love." Her voice was soft, but firm, steady as a rock beneath the little girl's storm of self-doubt.

Lily kept her gaze downcast, still crying, but Frances wouldn't let her retreat into that sadness. She lifted Lily's chin again until their eyes met.

"Do you know what I see when I look at you?" Frances whispered. "I see the most incredible little girl in the whole wide world. Someone who's kind and brave and full of magic. And I see someone who tries, even when it's hard. That's what matters, my darling. You don't have to get every word right the first time."

Lily sniffed again, blinking up at her. "But... I can't read like the other kids."

"Not yet," Frances corrected, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "But you will, I promise. It'll just take a little bit more time, that's all...And that's okay baby." She said tucking her daughter's hair behind her ear "You take all the time you need, and I'll be right here, not going anywhere."

Lily didn't say anything for a moment, just let herself sink into Frances's arms. Then, hesitantly, she whispered, "Promise?"

Frances smiled, holding her close, her chin resting atop Lily's head. "I promise, baby." She whispered placing a long kiss on her hair.

Yaz came over carefully carrying a tray, steam rising from the mugs filled to the brim with

rich hot chocolate, swirls of whipped cream piled on top.

Lily's eyes lit up instantly, her earlier frustration momentarily forgotten. "Hot chocolate!" she gasped, sitting up slightly.

Yaz grinned as she set the tray down on the small wooden table beside the sofa. "Here you go Miss. Freshly made, extra whipped cream, just how you like it."

"Thank you" Lily eagerly reached for a mug, her small hands wrapping around the warmth, and took a careful sip. A bit of cream clung to her upper lip, making her look like a tiny cat with a milk mustache.

As Lily savored her drink, Yaz settled down beside them on the couch, her dark eyes flickering between Frances and the little girl. "You know," she said casually, "spelling might not be your favorite thing, but I've seen your drawings, and they're amazing. Not everyone is the best at everything, and I bet all those friends who can spell better than you can't draw like you."

Lily lowered her mug, glancing up at Yaz curiously.

"You should see your mum trying to sing and dance" Yaz teased, shooting Frances a playful smirk. "It's a right disaster."

"It's true...." Frances winked "...also, I'm totally useless in arithmetic...Hate the thing."

"Me and chemistry ...total nightmare" Yaz said dramatically "Once I almost blew up the whole class. ...I'm lucky I didn't get expelled"

Lily giggled snuggling closer to her mother.

"You have your own special talents pumpkin," Yaz smiled. "You'll get the hang of reading I know you will. But don't ever forget how brilliant you already are."

Lily's cheeks turned pink, not from the warmth of the fire, but from the comfort of Yaz's words.

Frances shifted slightly, making more space on a sofa "C'mere," she murmured, inviting Yaz to settle beside them properly.

Yaz didn't hesitate, letting herself sink into the warmth. The three of them curled together, wrapped in the quiet glow of the fire, the soft crackle filling the space between them.

For a moment, it was just warmth and closeness, until Lily wriggled a little, reaching across Yaz for the book Frances had set aside earlier. She plucked it up and placed it back in Frances's hands.

"Can we read it again?" she asked quietly, looking up at Frances with hopeful eyes.

Frances glanced at Yaz, who smiled and nodded. Then she turned her gaze back to Lily, brushing a few strands of hair from her face. "Sure we can peanut," Frances whispered, opening the book.

Lily nestled between them, sipping her hot chocolate as Frances's voice filled the cabin, gentle and steady, reading each word with care.

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The midday sun filtered through the cabin windows, casting long streaks of golden light across the wooden floor. Frances stood by the open fridge, one hand on her hip, the other absently drumming against the door as she surveyed the shelves. It was the end of the week and they were running out of groceries.

"Looks like we're out of a few things," she muttered, eyeing the near-empty milk carton and the last of the eggs.

"I can pop to the store if you want," Yaz offered.

Frances turned, arching a brow. "It's too far to walk."

Yaz smirked. "It's fifteen minutes, not a trek across the Arctic."

Lily, who had been sprawled on the living room floor drawing, perked up immediately. "Can I go too?" she asked, her blue eyes bright with excitement.

Frances hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Oh, alright then"

Lily's face lit up. "Can we go to the beach too?"

Frances waved a hand dismissively. "Go ahead, but don't be too long. I'll start on lunch."

Yaz ruffled Lily's hair. "Come on, kiddo, let's get moving before your mum changes her mind."

Lily squealed and scrambled to her feet, practically bouncing with excitement as she threw on her coat. Within moments, they were out the door, the crisp February air nipping at their cheeks as they set off down the narrow coastal path toward the little village store.

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The path to the village stretched ahead, the cool February breeze tousling their hair as they walked. Lily clutched Yaz's hand, swinging their arms as she hopped along the gravel path,

her breath coming out in little puffs in the crisp air.

"Yaz?" Lily piped up, looking up at her with wide eyes.

"Hmm?" Yaz glanced down, amused by the expectant expression on her face.

"You know my friend Tommy?"

Yaz nodded. "I do. He's the one who likes to line up his toy cars in perfect rows, right?"

Lily giggled. "Yeah! But he doesn't do that anymore"

Yaz smirked. "Sounds like a breakthrough moment."

Lily nodded seriously. "Now he lines his crayons..." She shrugged, as if that explained everything.

Yaz chuckled. "Well, balance is important in life."

Lily nodded again, her mind already jumping to another topic. "Anyway, one of the nurses at school had a bump!"

Yaz frowned for a second. "A bump?"

"Yeah! Right here." Lily patted her stomach over her coat. "And everyone was saying there's a baby in there." She paused, wrinkling her nose. "But how did it get in there?"

Yaz coughed, caught slightly off guard. "Uh..well..."

Lily continued, oblivious to Yaz's hesitation. "Tommy said she ate it."

Yaz let out a snort. "I don't think that's the case?"

"Uh-huh! But then Grace said no, it grows in there like a seed, and I asked if babies are like apples, but she said no, and then nobody knew where they came from, so we asked Miss Harper, but she turned red and told us to ask our mums."

Yaz bit back a laugh. "Smart woman, Miss Harper."

Lily huffed. "She didn't answer the question!"

Yaz grinned. "Maybe she thought it was a question for another time."

Lily looked thoughtful for a second, then nodded. "Maybe. Do you think they grow like apples?"

Yaz burst out laughing. "You could say that, yes."

Yaz squeezed her hand hoping there would be no more questions she didn't know how to answer "Let's hurry up to this shop before your mum sends a search party."

Lily nodded eagerly. "Can we get chocolate biscuits?"

Yaz sighed in mock defeat. "Sure. But only if you promise not to tell your mum I caved so easily."

Lily's face lit up. "Deal!"

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Inside the little village store, the air was warm and filled with the scent of fresh bread and coffee. The place had a cozy, rustic feel, shelves packed with locally made jams, biscuits, and fresh produce. Lily stuck close to Yaz, her curious eyes darting around as she took everything in.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to a jar filled with something beige.

"Peanut butter," Yaz answered.

Lily scrunched up her nose. "What's it for?"

"Some people spread it on toast."

Lily eyed it suspiciously. "Do you spread it on toast?"

Yaz hesitated. "Erm... not exactly. It's one of those things you either love or hate."

Lily nodded solemnly. "Then I think I hate it."

Yaz chuckled. "Good decision."

They moved on, Lily stopping every few seconds to pick up random items. "Ooooh, what's this?" She held up a tin.

"Sardines."

Lily's nose wrinkled. "Fish in a can? That's disgusting."

Yaz smirked. "And yet your mum loves them."

Lily gasped. "Nooooo!"

"Oh yes. She eats them straight from the tin."

Lily stared at the can in horror, then carefully placed it back on the shelf as if it might explode. "That's not normal."

Yaz laughed, ruffling her hair. "You can take that up with her later."

They finally reached the till, placing their items down, a loaf of bread, some eggs, milk, and of course, chocolate biscuits. Lily's eyes landed on a display near the register, where brightly colored lollies were stacked in a jar.

"Yaz! Can I have one please?" she asked eagerly, bouncing on her heels.

Yaz sighed, knowing full well she was a lost cause. "Go on then."

"Thank you" Lily beamed, grabbing a red one and placing it on the counter with their other shopping.

The elderly shop assistant, a sweet-looking woman with silver hair and round glasses, smiled at them as she put the items through the till. "Oh, isn't she a lovely little thing. Such nice manners," the woman remarked. "You can always tell when a child has a good British nanny."

Yaz barely had time to process the question before Lily piped up brightly "She's not my nanny! She's my mum's girlfriend!"

Yaz felt her soul leave her body.

The woman's hand paused on the till. She blinked once. Then twice.

Yaz, on the other hand, was already mentally digging her own grave six feet deep. "Friend...I'm her mum's friend" she stumbled over her words

Lily, oblivious to the sheer chaos she had just unleashed grabbed her lolly.

The shop assistant, bless her, recovered quickly, simply smiling as she handed over the change. Yaz, still burning with embarrassment, mumbled a quick thank you, grabbed the bag of groceries, and practically dragged Lily out of the store.

As soon as they stepped outside, Yaz let out a groan, rubbing her fingers over her temple, choosing her words carefully. She crouched slightly to be at Lily's level. "Honey... you remember when your mummy talked about kissing?"

Lily frowned in thought, nodding. "Mmm?"

Yaz sighed. "We don't say things like 'girlfriend' either, sweetheart."

Lily's face fell as realization dawned, her small shoulders tensing. "Oh... I'm sorry."

"It's alright, pumpkin, I'm not upset with you," Yaz reassured her gently. "We just have to be careful, okay? As far as everyone else is concerned, your mummy and I are just friends."

Lily's brows knitted together. "But you're not."

Yaz couldn't help the small, fond smile that tugged at her lips despite the situation. "No, we're not," she admitted. "But we need other people to think that. Do you understand?"

Lily hesitated for a moment, then gave a small nod. "Yeah."

Feeling awful for having to correct her, Yaz pulled her into a warm hug. "It's alright, darling," she murmured, "I know it's a bit confusing, but we'll get there, okay? And if you're not sure just ask me or mummy, okay?"

"Yes" Lily relaxed in her arms, then, as quickly as the moment had come, she brightened again. Popping her lolly back into her mouth, she reached for Yaz's hand, her eyes twinkling. "Are we going to the beach now?"

Yaz smiled, giving her hand a squeeze. "Yep. Let's go."

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The door clicked shut softly as Yaz stepped inside, shaking the last bits of sand from her shoes. Lily was a few steps in front of her, her cheeks flushed from the salty sea air, her arms laden with a small collection of colorful stones she had picked up from the shore. The house was warm after the sharp ocean breeze, and the faint scent of saltwater clung to their clothes.

They had spent the last hour on the beach, walking along the water's edge, with Lily gathering her pirate treasures while Yaz kept a careful eye on her. There had been laughter, the simple joy of a child exploring the world, and a sense of peace that lingered in the air, mingling with the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.

Now, as they stepped into the house, the warmth of the interior wrapped around them, the fire crackling softly in the living room. But something felt... off. The air was too still, the usual hum of the house absent. Half-chopped vegetables sat abandoned on the countertop, and a pot of something simmered but unfinished on the stove.

As Yaz helped Lily out of her coat, her eyes landed on Frances, sitting motionless on the sofa, staring ahead with a distant expression. A whiskey glass rested untouched in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

Frowning, Yaz hung up her coat and stepped closer, an uneasy weight settling in her chest. "Hey... everything alright?"

Frances barely glanced up, her voice little more than a whisper. "Hi." She stubbed out her cigarette, but before Yaz could ask anything else, Lily darted toward her mother, blissfully unaware.

"Look what I found!" she chirped, pulling a handful of stones and trinkets from her pockets.

Frances managed a smile, stroking her daughter's hair. "That's beautiful, darling." But Yaz could see it in her smile, it didn't quite reach her eyes.

As she drew closer, Yaz noticed the faint shine of tears in Frances's gaze. Without a word, she placed a gentle hand on Lily's shoulder, leaning in. "Hey, pumpkin, Mummy's got a bit of a headache. Why don't you go get changed and put your treasures away?"

Lily's face filled with concern. "Does it hurt a lot?"

Frances forced another small smile, bringing her daughter's fingers to her lips. "I'll be fine in a minute, darling. You go ahead."

Once Lily was gone, Yaz sat down on the edge of the sofa, her hand rubbing Frances's knee. "Franny... what's going on? What happened?"

Frances didn't answer right away. She exhaled slowly, fingers tightening around the glass. For a long moment, Yaz thought she wouldn't respond at all, then, finally, Frances turned to her, voice barely above a whisper.

"I just got a phone call. Someone I really cared about died."

Yaz's breath hitched. "Oh, my God. Who?"

"His name was Irving Roth." Frances's voice was steady, but there was a weight in her eyes Yaz hadn't expected. "He was a very good friend...I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for him."

Yaz swallowed, gently prying the glass from Frances's fingers and setting it aside. She didn't know who he was, but it was clear he had meant a lot to Frances.

The silence between them was thick, grief lingering in the air like a heavy fog.

Yaz reached for Frances's hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm so sorry, love," she whispered, unsure what else to say.

Frances's lips trembled, and after a moment, she let out a shaky breath. "I should have

done more.”

Yaz frowned. "I don't understand, darling. What do you mean?"

Frances didn't move, her gaze still locked on some unseen point in the distance. Her jaw clenched.

"He had a stroke two years ago," she murmured. "Stopped taking calls. Stopped seeing people. I tried, God, I tried... but he wouldn't have it. Said he didn't want anyone to remember him like that." A bitter laugh escaped her. "I should have..." Her voice cracked.

Yaz brushed her fingers against Frances's wrist, grounding her. "You don't have to talk about it..." she said softly.

Frances closed her eyes, steadying herself. When she finally looked at Yaz, her hazel eyes were glossy with grief. "No," she whispered. "I want to."

Yaz nodded, saying nothing, just letting Frances take her time.

Frances began. "I met him when I was still nobody. I'd done a few nothings back then, background work, one-line roles, but I was going nowhere. Remember when I told you I was auditioning for anything and Victor was trying to push me to meet the right people?"

"Yeah...back in New York, right?"

"Yes...He took me to this party, said there was a guy I had to meet. It was Irving Roth....He was already a relic by then ...68, old enough to be my grandfather, one of the old Hollywood royalties from back in a day of silent films. He was one of the co-founders of the studio. He took one look at me and told me I had the look but looks weren't enough. Said he'd seen a thousand girls like me come and go.... *'Can you act, or are you just another pretty face?'*" he said " Frances chuckled at the memory

Yaz gave a small smile. "And what did you say?"

Frances let out a soft breath. "I said, *'Give me a part and I'll show you.'*" A faint smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "I was so cocky...And he just nodded. *'Alright then, kid. Let's find out.'*"

She shook her head as if she still couldn't believe it. "The next week, he had me reading for a small role in a mid-budget drama. Nothing glamorous, but it was my first real part...I was over the moon.... He was always there, watching. Never interfering much but making damn sure I didn't get chewed up and spit out by the system."

She reached for something on the side table, a small gold cigarette case, worn from years of handling. She turned it over in her hands.

“Sounds like he really believed in you.”

Frances nodded, swallowing hard. “He did.” she paused, then said more quietly, “And had my back...boy did he have my back.”

Yaz didn’t rush her. She knew Frances would talk when she was ready.

Finally, Frances let out a slow breath. “You know... I used to think I could handle anything after what I've been through...” Her voice was quiet, almost distant. “That no one could push me into something I didn’t want. Boy was I wrong.”

Yaz frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

A humorless smile tugged at Frances’s lips. “I mean, I was naive darling.” She exhaled, shaking her head.

Yaz didn’t say anything, just tightened her hold on Frances’s hand, encouraging her to go on.

Frances exhaled. “So I moved to LA and few months later I had my first real chance at a leading role. Not a starring role, but enough to put me on the map. And the man who could make it happen was Charles Madsen. Big-time producer. Rich. Powerful. The kind of man who could make or break you with a snap of his fingers.”

She exhaled reaching for a drink, took a sip and continued “He invited me to a meeting to ‘discuss my future.’ That’s what they always say.” Her mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “I knew what it meant, but I convinced myself it wasn’t that. I thought maybe, just maybe he saw something in me. If not, I’ll just walk out...Dumb ass.”

Yaz’s stomach tightened. “But it was that, wasn’t it?”

Frances gave a slow nod. “He set up a meeting in his office instead of a restaurant. Should’ve turned around right then. But I was twenty, and I wanted that part so damn bad. So, I went upstairs...You’d think I’d knew better?”

Yaz’s grip on her hand tightened slightly, but she didn’t interrupt.

“He was charming at first. Poured me a drink. Asked me about my ambitions. Told me I reminded him of Jean Harlow, *Same fire, same danger. You could go all the way, Louis.*’ And I ate it up. I wanted to believe he meant it. But then he touched my leg.”

Frances swallowed hard. “I laughed it off, moved away, made some excuse. He didn’t like that. He got up, continued talking about where he sees my future and locked the door.”

"Shit" Yaz blinked "What did you do?"

"I freaked...got up, wanting to leave. He leaned in, real close.... said, *'Come on, sweetheart. You think I'm offering this role to just anyone? You want it, you've gotta be a big girl about it.'*"

Yaz felt her jaw clench. "Jesus."

Frances nodded. "I told him no. Tried to keep it light, act like I wasn't scared out of my mind. But he grabbed my wrist, real tight, and said, *'You walk out that door, you'll never work in this town again. You understand me? So why don't we just finish what we started.... You're gonna be a star.'* He said..." her eyes narrowed, and lips tightened "He was breathing down my neck...shoved his fucking hand under my skirt. I was so scared I stopped breathing."

Yaz inhaled sharply, her whole body tensing. "What the hell did you do?"

Frances let out a breath that was almost a laugh. "I did the only thing I could, I lied. Smiled real pretty and said, *'Let me freshen up first.'* Then I locked myself in the bathroom and climbed out the goddamn window."

Yaz blinked. "What?"

Frances gave a small, wry smile. "It wasn't that far down. To be honest I didn't give shit if I killed myself at that point. I landed in a service alley, tore my dress going down the fire escape, scraped my knee, but I ran until I couldn't breathe." She shook her head. "I thought it was over. I knew it was over...Honestly, I didn't care anymore Yaz...I didn't even want it anymore. I rather scrub toilets."

Yaz was staring at her now, her expression unreadable. "But it wasn't.... over?"

"No." Frances's fingers tightened around the cigarette case. "Because of Irving... The next morning, I got a call. It was him. 'Jesus Christ, Louise, what the hell did you do?'" Frances chuckled, shaking her head. "I told him the truth. And you know what he said? 'Well, you've got balls, kid. But now we gotta fix this.'"

Yaz listened, rapt.

"Turns out, Irving hated Madsen. Knew exactly what kind of bastard he was. The next thing I knew, Madsen was gone. Not fired, not publicly shamed, but he was out of the picture. No more deals. No more power. Just... nothing. I have no idea what Irving did, but he did something. The film was taken away from him and went to a different producer. And my part?" She gave a small, wistful smile. "That went to me."

Yaz's brow furrowed, a sense of disbelief lingering in her voice. "Just like that?"

Frances nodded, her expression more thoughtful now. "Just like that. No scandal. No drama. Nothing that would make it public. It wasn't because he was suddenly hated...it wasn't because of what he did to me...nobody cares about that stuff. No, it was more like..."

he just stopped existing in the right circles. And my career didn't suffer. It took off."

Yaz exhaled, her chest tight. "Jesus, Frances. If Irving hadn't stepped in..."

Frances nodded. "I'd have been done. Out of the game before I even got started. But Irving made sure I was protected. So, I stuck to him...only worked through him. Everyone thought he was my sponsor... it suited me... I played into it... I was off the table, men left me alone...he was too powerful, nobody dared... "

"Sponsor?" Yaz frowned

"Many girls have them darling...men old enough to be their grandfathers, financing them, pushing their careers for favors. Most come from the same shithole like I did, damaged goods... so they rather have one then being passed around."

"Oh my god"

"I was lucky.... Irving never asked anything in return...To be honest I thought her will...But not him...Not a favor, not a word of thanks. He just wanted me to get out there and succeed. I was his golden goose...his favorite child. When I landed my first proper lead, he gave me this," Frances murmured, twirling the small gold cigarette case between her fingers. A faint, wistful smile ghosted her lips. "Made me laugh," he said, *'You're a star now, Louise. Try not to be an idiot about it.'*" her chin wobbled, and she fell apart crying.

Yaz shifted, pulling Frances fully into her arms, tucking her against her chest. Silence settled between them, broken only by the quiet crackle of the fire.

"I love you," Yaz murmured, her voice soft against Frances's hair.

Frances nodded against her shoulder, exhaling a small breath. "Love you too." A slight chuckle followed. "Where's our child?"

Yaz chuckled pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Sorting out her treasures."

Frances lifted her gaze, her hazel eyes searching Yaz's. "I didn't finish lunch." Her voice was softer now, almost apologetic.

Yaz smiled, brushing a stray curl from Frances's face before pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. "We'll do it together."

For a while, they simply lay there, Frances listening to the steady rhythm of Yaz's breathing, Yaz holding her as if she could shield her from the past just by being close.

A small voice broke the quiet.

"Mummy?"

Frances lifted her head as Lily stood hesitantly in the doorway.

"Do you still have a headache?" Lily asked, stepping closer.

Frances smiled, shaking her head. "No, sweetheart." She reached out a hand. "C'mere."

Without hesitation, Lily clambered onto the sofa, stepping over them both, making them laugh as she wedged herself between them. Frances pressed a kiss to her curls.

"I think we need a bigger sofa," Yaz chuckled

....

It was Friday night. I came faster than either of them wanted. The room was bathed in silver moonlight, the curtains swaying gently with the night breeze. Frances lay on her side, the sheet draped loosely over her bare hips, her gaze fixed on the shimmering ocean beyond the window. The waves glistened under the moon's glow, their rhythmic dance soothing, but her thoughts were restless.

Behind her, Yaz leaned on her arm, her body warm and close. Her fingers traced slow, lazy circles over Frances's waist, following the soft dips and curves of her skin. Every so often, she dipped her head, pressing gentle kisses to Frances's shoulder, light as a whisper, but enough to make Frances sigh and melt further into the touch.

"Penny for your thoughts," Yaz murmured, her breath warm against Frances's skin.

Frances smiled, turning just enough to catch her lips in a soft kiss. It was slow, lingering for only a moment, before she eased back onto the pillow, her golden curls spilling over it.

"They'd be overpriced," she teased, her voice low, lazy.

Yaz chuckled, pressing her nose against Frances's shoulder. "I'll pay anyway."

Frances exhaled, staring back out at the ocean. "Just thinking how much I hate leaving."

Yaz's fingers paused for just a second before resuming their slow tracing. "Me too."

Frances turned onto her back, her eyes meeting Yaz's in the dim light. "You know," she whispered, reaching up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Yaz's ear, "we could just not go."

Yaz smirked, leaning in, brushing their noses together. "You and your wild ideas."

Frances sighed, her hand slipping to Yaz's cheek. "Wouldn't be so wild if the world were

different."

Yaz kissed her softly in response, slow and deep, as if trying to steal time itself. When she finally pulled back, she rested her forehead against Frances's.

"If it were different," Yaz murmured, "we wouldn't have to dream like this."

Frances swallowed, closing her eyes for a moment, letting the warmth of Yaz's breath against her lips ground her.

"Then let's dream a little longer," she whispered.

Yaz nodded, pressing another kiss, this one softer, lingering. Frances lay there for a while, letting the silence settle between them, Yaz's fingers still drawing soft patterns over her skin. Then, out of nowhere, she asked, "Who was your first?"

Yaz's fingers stilled for a second before she let out a chuckle. "What?"

"Your first lover," Frances clarified, her lips curving in a small, teasing smile. "Who was she?"

Yaz scoffed, shaking her head as she propped herself up on one elbow. "That's a bit out of the blue."

Frances shrugged, her eyes glinting with curiosity. "I just realized we never talked about it."

Yaz hummed, considering for a moment. Then she smirked. "Her name was Eileen. We were at university together."

Frances raised a brow. "Eileen....Beautiful name."

Yaz nodded. "She was studying literature, had the most beautiful curls and gorgeous green eyes...." she paused, shaking her head with a grin. "Had a way with words as well." She chuckled

Frances chuckled. "Poetic type?"

"Very," Yaz mused. "Always quoting something...writing poetry. She once recited *Wuthering Heights* to me under a tree.... It was so romantic and cute"

"Awww" Frances let out a delighted laugh. "Did it work?"

Yaz smirked. "It worked."

Frances shook her head, grinning. "And here I thought you'd fall for someone practical."

"Clearly, I have a weakness for theatrics," Yaz teased, brushing her nose against Frances's in emphasis.

"So, what happened?"

Yaz sighed "War happened...Her house was destroyed in one of the bombings. They had nowhere to go, so she moved south with her family to her grandparents. We kept in touch for a while... as much as we could...then it all fizzed out I guess...With time she met someone else...I don't know much except that she's teaching." She smiled "What about you, then?"

Frances hesitated for a moment, then gave a little laugh, burying her face into the pillow. "Oh, Lord..."

Yaz nudged her. "Come on, you made me answer."

Turning her head, Frances let out a dramatic sigh. "Fine....But it was nothing as romantic as yours...Her name was Loretta."

Yaz's brows lifted. "Loretta?"

Frances nodded, laughing at Yaz's expression. "Etta...I met her at that cocktail bar I worked in... She was a dancer. "

"A dancer?" Yaz's grin widened.

Frances smirked. "Yeah... very flexible."

Yaz laughed, covering her face with her hand. "I walked right into that one."

"You did," Frances said smugly, reaching over to run her fingers through Yaz's hair. "She was beautiful...alabaster skin and hair like fire...I totally lost my mind"

Yaz peeked through her fingers, eyes twinkling. "So, was it a grand romance?"

"I wish ..." Frances whispered, twirling strand of Yaz's hair around her finger "More of a whirlwind of chaos...I was young, dumb, screwed up...take your pick...She was older, smooth...knew the game...I was more like a lost puppy thrown on street corner who was offered a warm bed for the night"

"Oh darling" Yaz murmured, brushing her lips over Frances's shoulder. "So, what happened?"

Frances let out a wistful sigh. "She went off with a pianist from New Orleans."

"What?" Yaz gasped raising her head in shock

Frances laughed "I knooow...Told you I was dumb"

Yaz grinned cheekily, "Well...not anymore...Now you're older...definitely smooth and you do know the game, I can tell you that much."

Frances giggled and rolled them over the bed, draping herself over Yaz, pinning her to the mattress with a sly smile. "And yet, here you are."

Yaz huffed, looping her arms around Frances's neck. "Here I am."

"Think you'll ever quote *Wuthering Heights* to me?" she murmured.

Yaz snorted. "Don't push your luck."

"We'll see" Frances giggled a playful hum against Yaz's lips then leaned in and kissed her slow and lingering,

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The days slipped through their fingers like sand, the golden warmth of their holiday fading into the inevitable reality that awaited them. Where once their laughter had been light and carefree, a quiet melancholy now threaded through their moments together. They still stole kisses between lazy afternoons, held hands under the table and let their touches linger a second longer than necessary. But there was an unspoken sadness beneath it all, one neither of them wanted to name.

Frances found herself watching Lily more often, caught in the spell of her daughter's uninhibited joy. She ran along the beach, her footprints vanishing with each wave, her laughter carried away by the breeze. It was hard to believe that only a year ago, it had just been the two of them, trapped in a world of secrets, blackmail, and quiet suffering. And now, for the first time, Frances saw the shape of a different life hovering just out of reach, teasing her with the possibility of something better. A home not built on loneliness or fear, but on love. On the three of them and she wanted it so badly.

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The night stretched endlessly over the ocean, a far, deep blue that swallowed the horizon. The air was thick with salt and silence, save for the rhythmic hush of the waves kissing the shore. Yaz sat on the porch steps, wrapped in a heavy blanket, but the cold still found its way in, curling around her fingers, slipping beneath her skin. Her tea had long since lost its warmth, abandoned on the wooden step beside her.

She wiped the tears falling down her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweater, frustrated by

the sting in her eyes, by the lump in her throat she couldn't quite swallow down. She wasn't the type to cry easily, but leaving this place felt like carving a piece of herself out and leaving it behind. She exhaled sharply, shaking her head at her own helplessness. She would not let Frances see her like this. She had enough weight on her shoulders, and Yaz refused to be another burden.

But she was exhausted. Tired of fighting for space, for dignity, for the right to exist as she was, without the world pressing its weight against her chest. She'd spent her whole life proving herself, working twice as hard, being twice as good, just to be seen as worthy. And now, just when she'd found something real, something that made her feel like she could finally breathe, she was being forced back into a world that wouldn't allow it..

A sharp gust of wind rattled the porch, the creak of the door behind her made her close her eyes briefly

She felt her before she could see her, the quiet shift of fabric, smell of her perfume carried by the wind, the soft shuffle of her steps against the wood.

Yaz turned slightly, just enough for their eyes to meet in the dim light. Words hovered between them, unspoken.

Frances stepped forward and sank down beside her, the wooden steps creaking under her weight. Yaz lifted the edge of her blanket without a word, letting Frances slip beneath it, her body warm against the chill of the night.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, Frances wrapped her arm around her, her other hand reaching out, fingers slipping between Yaz's, solid and steady. Yaz exhaled softly, her head tipping to rest against Frances's shoulder, closing her eyes as she let herself be held.

The ocean whispered. The stars flickered. And in the quiet of the early morning, they stayed like that tangled in silence, holding onto a moment they knew wouldn't last.

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Frances tucked the blanket around Lily, smoothing her hair back with gentle fingers. In the corner, Lily's little suitcase sat neatly packed, a silent reminder that their time here was over.

Frances swallowed the lump forming in her throat, leaning down to press a long, lingering kiss to her daughter's forehead. She tried to commit this moment to memory, the warmth of her skin, the scent of her hair, the quiet rise and fall of her breathing. Her heart ached so fiercely it almost stole her breath, but she held herself together.

Just as she started to stand, Lily's small fingers curled around her wrist, stopping her in place.

"Mummy?"

Frances forced a smile, pushing back the sting of tears. "Yes, darling?"

Lily hesitated, her bright eyes searching Frances's face. Then, in a quiet, hopeful voice, she asked, "Can I come and live with you and Yaz?"

Frances froze. The breath she took felt like swallowing glass. She slowly sat back down, bringing Lily's tiny hand to her lips, kissing her fingers softly as she tried to steady herself.

"Yaz doesn't live with me, darling," she said carefully. "She lives with Susan."

Lily frowned. "But can I still come and live with you?"

Frances bit the inside of her cheek, forcing down the ache in her chest. "Oh, my love..." she whispered, stroking Lily's cheek. "My life is very busy, sweetheart. I have to travel a lot, and I'm not home very much. That wouldn't be much fun for you, would it?"

Lily's brows knitted together in thought. "I wouldn't mind," she said earnestly. "I'd wait for you."

Frances smiled sadly, running a thumb over Lily's soft skin. "But you'd miss all your friends, wouldn't you? Wouldn't be much fun being alone, now would it?"

Lily was quiet for a moment, then murmured, "I guess."

Frances exhaled softly, pressing another kiss to her daughter's temple. She thought it was over, thought she had navigated the painful conversation without breaking, but then Lily whispered, "Can't you work less?"

Frances's throat tightened. "I'm working on it," she promised gently. "But for now, sweetheart, that's not possible."

Lily's fingers fidgeted against the blanket. "Will it be possible in the future?"

Frances hesitated, feeling the weight of her daughter's hope pressing down on her. She swallowed hard, then whispered, "I hope so, darling. I'd like that too."

Lily was quiet, disappointed but not entirely defeated. She stared at Frances for a long moment, then asked, "Can we still go to the beach?"

Frances smiled, brushing her nose against Lily's playfully. "Of course we can, silly goose." She poked Lily's chest gently, making her giggle. "We'll go to the beach, and we'll have burgers and fries."

Lily's giggle grew into a laugh, and Frances held onto that sound like a lifeline. She tucked

her in once more, stroking her hair until her little girl's eyes fluttered shut.

Only when Frances stepped out of the room and quietly closed the door behind her, did she allow herself to crumble. She leaned against the wood, pressing a trembling hand over her mouth, trying desperately to keep her sobs silent. Her heart felt like it was shattering into a thousand pieces.

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In the next room, Yaz stood by her open suitcase, folding a sweater with slow, deliberate movements. Her heart felt just as heavy.

Frances lingered in the doorway, watching her with quiet intensity. Her back was to her, her fingers smoothing over the neatly folded clothes. There was a stillness in her movements, but Frances could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her breath hitched as she raised a hand to brush off her cheek.

Yaz turned slightly, caught, she forced a small, dismissive smile. "Something got into my eye," she murmured, blinking rapidly.

Frances stepped closer. She wrapped her arms around Yaz from behind, pressing her face into her shoulder. "Liar," she whispered, her lips found the fabric of Yaz's shirt, then the warmth of her skin just beyond it.

Yaz exhaled, her body relaxing into Frances's embrace. They stood there for a moment, neither speaking, both feeling the weight of what was to come. Then, Frances suddenly murmured, "Let's elope."

Yaz blinked, a surprised laugh escaping her lips. "What? Another idea"

"Vegas. We'll get married. Find a tacky chapel, motel receptionist can be our witness" Frances teased, a playful gleam in her tired eyes.

Yaz chuckled turning in her arms, looping her arms around Frances's neck. "Not sure they'll have us?"

Frances smirked. "Everyone has their price."

Yaz shook her head, laughing, "Then what?"

Frances hummed, swaying them gently side to side. "We'll buy a house in the Swiss Alps. Far away from everyone. Have cows, chickens... live the quiet life."

Yaz snorted. "That won't work."

"Why not?"

"Lily needs a beach," Yaz reminded her with a grin. "She'd hate the cold."

Frances sighed dramatically. "Fine. We'll move to a tiny Italian village. Somewhere far away, where the people are too poor to own a TV, so no one will recognize me."

Yaz chuckled, her fingers tracing small patterns on Frances's back. "And what about our careers?"

Frances shrugged. "You'll sell your gowns to fancy Italian ladies."

"And you?"

Frances grinned, tucking a strand of hair behind Yaz's ear. "I'll be a housewife. Might have to take a cooking class, mind you"

Yaz frowned playfully. "I'll only accept that if you have a sexy pinny."

Frances laughed, a deep, rich sound, before pressing her lips to Yaz's. "Deal."

Yaz melted into her, fingers threading into Frances's curls as their lips moved together in slow, lingering kisses.

"I absolutely adore you," Frances whispered into her mouth.

A soft gasp escaped Yaz as they tumbled onto the bed, Frances landing on top of her, then rolling them over so she could cage Yaz, wrapping her legs around her waist.

"I think I'll just keep you like this forever," Frances murmured against Yaz's lips.

Yaz giggled, breathless. "Might be hard to make a living like this."

Frances smirked. "I'm willing to try." she murmured, her voice low as she rubbed her nose against Yaz's playfully, then closed her eyes pressing their lips together kissing her again, and again, each kiss growing deeper, more desperate, as they clung to each other, chasing every moment of freedom before reality came crashing back.

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The next morning rain came down in sheets, rolling down the car windows in shimmering rivulets, blurring the view of Cannon Beach as they drove away. The ocean was grey and restless, its waves crashing violently against the shore as if protesting their departure. The

small town, with its shingled rooftops and narrow, winding streets, faded into the mist, swallowed by the looming pines lining the road.

The farther they drove, the heavier the weight in Frances's chest became. The joy of their time here, the laughter, the easy freedom felt distant now, a dream slipping through their fingers. Yaz was quiet beside her, chin propped against her hand as she gazed out at the passing trees. She looked as though she was memorizing every detail, as if she could somehow press them into her heart and carry them back with her.

The road stretched long and winding ahead of them, leading them back to reality.

In the car, they made an effort, talking, playing music, filling the silence with familiar comforts. Yaz reached over and flicked the dial on the radio, searching for a station that wasn't drowned in static. Frances hummed absently along to a song, tapping her fingers on the wheel. Every now and then, one of them cracked a joke, and the other would laugh, but it never quite reached their eyes.

Lily, oblivious to the shift in mood, kept herself occupied in the backseat, her sketchpad balanced on her knees as she carefully colored in a drawing of a castle. Every so often, she'd hold up her work proudly, and both Frances and Yaz would turn, smiling, showering her with praise, but the weight lingered.

After miles of highway, they pulled into a petrol station, the sky, still heavy with rain. The hills in the distance were the same ones Frances had looked upon when they first arrived, rolling and wild, stretching out beneath the sky. But now, they looked different. They felt different.

She stood by the car, arms wrapped around herself, staring at them through the misted air. It was strange how a place could shift so much in the span of days, how something that once felt like freedom could now feel like a reminder of everything she was leaving behind.

Then, from behind her a familiar little voice broke the silence

"Mummy, look!"

Frances turned to find Yaz and Lily emerging from the petrol station shop, both grinning, both now wearing black Mickey Mouse ears perched on their heads. Yaz adjusted hers dramatically, striking a ridiculous pose, while Lily giggled and did a twirl.

Frances blinked, then burst into laughter, shaking her head. "Where the hell did you get those?"

"The shop had them," Yaz said, grinning as she wiggled her ears. "We thought they'd cheer you up."

Frances exhaled, something inside her loosening just a little. She reached out, pulling the ears playfully over Yaz's eyes, making her squawk in protest.

Lily giggled, jumping up and down. "Are we gonna wear them all the way home?"

Frances smirked. "Oh, absolutely."

And for a moment, just a moment, the weight of leaving felt a little lighter.

But that night in the little cabin of the motor court, neither of them could sleep properly. They both tossed and turned all night. Frances sat for a while at the kitchen table, smoking one cigarette after another until she felt physically ill...

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The next day, after hours on the road, they finally arrived at Lily's school. The sky was dull, washed-out grey, and the air carried the crisp bite of February.

Yaz stayed in the car, watching as Frances crouched on the steps, arms wrapped tightly around her daughter. Even from a distance, she could see the way Lily clung to her, how Frances brushed away the silent tears streaking down the little girl's face with her thumbs, murmuring reassurances Yaz couldn't hear. She stroked her hair, kissed her forehead, and hugged her one last time before gently pulling back.

Lily hesitated, looking up at her mother with wide, tearful eyes. Then, with a small nod, she turned and took the nurse's hand, heading inside.

And just like that, she was gone.

Frances remained where she was, alone on the steps, watching the door long after it had closed behind Lily. The wind lifted a strand of her hair, but she didn't move. Not until the cold finally pushed her back toward the car.

When she slid into the driver's seat, she was composed, but her hands gripped the wheel too tightly, her knuckles paling. She didn't start the engine, didn't even move, just sat there, staring out at the road ahead.

Yaz reached out, her fingertips brushing over the back of Frances's hand, the one still curled around the steering wheel. Frances exhaled shakily and turned her palm up, threading their fingers together, gripping Yaz's hand tightly as if grounding herself.

Then she turned, her hazel eyes clouded with unshed tears. She lifted her free hand, brushing her thumb over Yaz's cheek, as if searching for comfort in the warmth of her skin. Yaz said nothing, just wrapped her fingers gently around Frances's wrist, her thumb tracing soothing circles over the delicate pulse point there.

For a moment, it was just them. The quiet between them was heavy but full of

understanding.

Then, with a sharp inhale, Frances turned back to the wheel. Her fingers tightened around the gear stick, and with a firm motion, she shifted it into place.

The engine rumbled to life, and without another word, she drove away.

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The heavy iron gates creaked open as Frances drove through, lifting one hand off the wheel to wave at the security guard stationed at the entrance. He nodded in return, stepping back into his booth as the car rolled up the long driveway toward her house.

Everything looked the same. The perfectly manicured hedges, the pristine white facade, the grand front door that led into a house that recently didn't quite feel like home.

She parked, cutting the engine, and stepped out. The air was warmer here, the crisp coastal chill of Oregon already fading into Los Angeles sun. But she barely noticed. Her heels clicked sharply against the stone steps as she entered, letting the door swing shut behind her with a soft *thud*.

She landed her suitcase in the hallway, leaving it there as she walked straight to the kitchen. Betty had been here. She left everything clean as usual, including a neat pile of post stacked on the kitchen table.

Frances grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge, pouring herself a glass without hesitation. She kicked off her shoes, letting them lie where they fell, then took a slow sip then exhaled, leaning on the counter, trying to let the tension unravel.

With her free hand, she absently thumbed through the mail. Bills. Invitations. Something from her agent. She tossed them into a discard pile without a second thought, more focused on the wine sliding down her throat.

Then she saw a letter. The handwriting was unmistakable. Her fingers curled tightly around the envelope as she set her glass aside. A beat passed, her breath steady but shallow. Then she tore it open.

Her eyes flicked over the words, skimming at first. Then slowing.

Her grip on the letter tightened, her body going still. The room started spinning around her, the only thing real was the ink bleeding into the paper, each word slicing through her like a blade.

Her jaw set. Her face hardened. By the time she reached the end, her hands were trembling. But not with fear. With rage.

....

The steam from the shower curled around Frances, lingering like a thick fog as she stepped out, the towel wrapped tightly around her. Her breath was heavy, still lingering from the heat of the water. The bathroom lights were soft, the only sound was the quiet drip of water from shower head as she reached for the mirror. Her fingers slid over the fogged glass, wiping it clear. Her reflection stared back, stone cold, eyes hollow.

She picked up a brush, running it through her wet hair. Slow. Controlled. But as she pulled it through again, it snagged. Her jaw tightened.

"Fuck," she muttered, tugging again. The bristles caught, pulling harder. Her teeth clenched. The knot only tightened.

"God damn it!" she snapped, jerking the brush. Her breath hitched, but it wouldn't budge. She gritted her teeth and yanked with all her strength, pulling a piece of her hair with it.

Her chest heaved as she braced herself against the sink, neck craning. Her hands trembled. Her whole body shook. Breath caught in her throat, suffocating. Like she couldn't breathe without smashing everything around her.

"Fucking bastard!" She slammed the brush against the sink, once, twice, harder each time.

"Fucking piece of shit!" Her voice cracked, dissolving into a string of curses that spilled from her lips, raw and uncontrollable. She swung the brush against the mirror. Glass shattered. Shards rained into the sink, scattering across the floor.

"Goddamn son of a bitch!" she yelled, hurling the brush at the wall. The impact sent it clattering to the floor. Her breath came ragged. Exhaustion surged through her. She stumbled back, her legs buckling beneath her.

She slid down the wall, collapsing onto the cold bathroom floor. Crumpled. Spent.

Her body was weak, her hands pressed against her face, tears falling freely now. She cursed and sobbed, the anger draining, leaving her empty. She couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't breathe.

.....

The kitchen was empty now. The wine glass sat untouched on the counter. The discarded envelopes remained scattered across the table.

And there, next to the opened letter, lay a photograph. A picture of Frances and Lily, taken in front of her daughter's school, sometime last year.

The letter itself was simple. Short.

Cruel.

Margaret,

You should know by now that I don't waste words, so I'll keep this simple. I'm dying. Doctor says I don't have long. Maybe a year if I'm lucky.

Before you start celebrating, you should also know that I need money. A lot of it, but it shouldn't be a problem for you. I expect \$120,000 wired to the usual place by the end of the week.

I don't expect you to care. You'd probably be happy to see me die. But I don't plan to, not just yet anyway. I need this money for treatment in Switzerland. Some fancy neurosurgery they've got over there. They say it might give me a chance at life, and I plan on taking it.

You're probably thinking you don't have to listen to me anymore. Maybe you even believe you're free of me if you wait a bit longer. But you're not. And I'll remind you why.

I have something you don't want the world to see. Something the press would love.

The enclosed photo should jog your memory.

Don't make me prove my point Maggie, because I will.

One week.

No mistakes.

—Your Father

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