

## Chapter 13

Frances stirred awake, the faint morning light creeping through the curtains casting a soft glow on the bed. She blinked her eyes open and found herself face to face with Yaz, who was still sound asleep beside her. Her heart swelled as she took in every detail, Yaz's relaxed expression, the soft rise and fall of her chest, and the way her dark hair splayed out across the pillow. In moments like these, she wished she could freeze time, wishing that waking up next to Yaz could be a part of her everyday life.

She resisted the urge to reach out and touch her, not wanting to disturb her peaceful slumber, but her gaze lingered on Yaz's slightly parted lips and the way her lashes fluttered ever so slightly in her sleep. Frances sighed softly, already knowing she had to leave the warmth of the bed soon for her meeting with her assistant.

Just as she was about to carefully slip out, Yaz stirred. Without opening her eyes fully, she reached out and cheekily grabbed Frances's wrist, pulling her back into the bed. Frances let out a quiet laugh, settling back down next to her.

"Where do you think you're going?" Yaz mumbled, her voice still thick with sleep.

Frances smiled, leaning down to press a soft kiss on Yaz's forehead. "I have a meeting with Nicole, darling. I didn't want to wake you."

Yaz pulled her closer, their noses brushing as Frances planted another tender kiss, this time on her lips. They melted into each other, exchanging slow, lazy kisses that felt like a secret shared only between them in the early morning stillness. Frances gently cupped Yaz's cheek, her thumb brushing over the soft skin there as Yaz's arms wrapped around her waist.

"Mmm, just a few more minutes," Yaz murmured against her lips, tightening her grip, clearly not ready to let go.

Frances chuckled softly. "As tempting as that sounds, you look like you could use more sleep. Don't rush yourself, love."

Yaz sighed, resting her head on Frances's shoulder, her eyes closing again as Frances ran her fingers through her hair. "But I don't want you to leave," Yaz said, her voice already fading into sleepiness.

Frances kissed the top of her head, her voice soft and reassuring. "I'm not leaving" she chuckled "She's coming here silly"

Yaz hummed in agreement, her grip loosening as she drifted back into sleep. Frances carefully untangled herself, brushing a final kiss on Yaz's temple before getting out of

bed. She paused at the bathroom door, looking back at her love, her heart full. Smiling to herself, she stepped inside quietly to start her day.

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Yaz woke up to the soft light filtering through the curtains of Victor's apartment. Her body still felt the remnants of the long night they'd spent at El Morocco, but the buzz of the city outside hinted at a day already in motion. She stretched and slipped out of bed and noticed snow outside. With a warm Los Angeles climate she thought she would miss it this year so it came as pleasant surprise bringing smile to her face.

As she walked down the hallway she was drawn by the sounds of conversation and clinking dishes coming from the dining room.

As she walked in, she found Frances and Victor seated at the table, already halfway through their breakfast. Dining room table was decorated like in some fancy restaurant with a beautiful Christmas arrangement in the middle of the table. Frances, poised as always, was sipping her coffee, while Victor was flipping through a newspaper, his glasses perched on the edge of his nose.

"Good morning," Yaz said with a smile, her voice still heavy with sleep.

"Aaaaaa...Morning darling" Frances chimed with a smile getting up placing a small kiss to her cheek

"Morning love" Victor greeted her warmly. "So... How was your first night's sleep in New York?"

Yaz chuckled, as she slipped into the chair. "A little surreal, but fantastic. I still need to pinch myself. Oh, did you see, it's snowing."

"I know, isn't it great." Frances reached over and gently touched Yaz's hand. "Well, get ready for exciting day. I planned it all with Nicole."

Victor looked at Frances over his paper. "Are you going to put her through the whole New York routine?"

Frances laughed lightly. "Of course."

"I hope you brought some comfortable shoes." Victor joked

"Oh yeah...I came prepared. " Yaz giggled taking some toast

"See...she knows me" Frances bragged winking at Yaz with a smile

"I'd be worried if she didn't" Victor threw it back smiling at Yaz

"So, what's the plan?" Yaz asked excited

"Well....First we go to Victor's studio for a shoot. It shouldn't take too long, but you'll get to see how all this madness works."

"I can't wait...I've never seen one in person."

"It's fun you'll see." Frances's eyes sparkled. "After that, Nicole has arranged a little tour for us around town then we can stop for some lunch and finish it all with a little bit of good old shopping."

"Mmm...Shopping?" Yaz grinned, finally feeling the weight of the night ease off. "I can definitely handle that.... just not sure my wallet can" she chuckled

Victor laughed. "I think you bought her with shopping...Everything else is just an appetiser."

Frances winked at Yaz. "And then maybe, if you're not completely exhausted by the end of the day, we can have a nice dinner together."

Yaz looked between them, "Shopping and eating...love it. I need to send a card to mum and dad and I have to buy a little present for Susan"

"Right...then we got a plan" Frances smiled satisfied

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They arrived at Victor's studio just as the late morning light cast soft shadows through the tall windows. The building itself had that typical mid-century industrial charm, high ceilings, large factory-style windows, and walls lined with the tools of Victor's trade. Canvases, props, lights, and tripods crowded the periphery of the room, giving it an energetic but ordered chaos.

The studio smelled faintly of fresh paint, film chemicals, and the cedar from the makeshift holiday set they had built for Frances's shoot. A beautifully decorated Christmas tree stood proudly in one corner, the centerpiece of the shoot. Its branches were adorned with large glass baubles, tinsel glistening in the light, and heavy metallic garland. Underneath the tree sat neatly wrapped presents in colorful, shiny paper with big satin bows, and in the corner of the scene was a faux fireplace, crafted to resemble a brick mantle, with stockings hanging from it. The fireplace glowed with a small mechanical device that created the illusion of flickering flames, casting a warm light on the scene.

Yaz's eyes lit up the moment she saw the set. "Wow, this is amazing!" she exclaimed, turning to Victor, who smiled at her enthusiasm.

"It's like something out of a Christmas postcard," Yaz continued, almost bouncing with excitement. "Did you design all of this? How long did it take to put together? Where did you find those baubles?" She couldn't help the stream of questions, her curiosity getting the better of her as she wandered around, examining every detail.

Victor chuckled, clearly pleased with her excitement. "It took about a week. And yes, we sourced most of the decorations from local shops. The baubles are actually imported...glad you like them."

"Hey Franny...look it's not real fire" she pointed mesmerized like a little kid.

"I know, it looks beautiful. Admit it...you want it?"

"I dooo" she grinned haply

Meanwhile, Frances was across the studio, sitting in a makeup chair, her face relaxed as a stylist delicately worked on her hair. She watched Yaz and Victor with a smile, charmed by Yaz's childlike joy. Seeing Yaz so at ease in this environment warmed her heart.

The stylist was pinning her hair up in soft waves, perfectly complementing the gown she would wear for the shoot. As the makeup artist finished adding a soft red to her lips, Frances glanced over to Victor. "You know," she said, "it's been a while since I've seen someone this excited to be on a set."

Victor nodded, laughing lightly. "Her energy is contagious...I might have to borrow her more often."

Yaz finally made her way over to Frances, her eyes still gleaming with excitement. "This place is incredible. I can't believe you get to do this for work!"

Frances smiled softly, taking Yaz's hand. "It has its perks. I'm glad you're enjoying it."

Yaz squeezed her hand gently, still marveling at the details around them. "I feel like a kid in a toy store. This whole thing is like magic."

Yaz's fascination with the studio grew as she began inspecting the camera equipment Victor was setting up for the test shots. She pointed to the large, boxy camera sitting on a heavy-duty tripod, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"So, how does this all work?" she asked, stepping closer as Victor finished adjusting the lighting.

Victor grinned, appreciating her interest. "This is a 4x5 Speed Graphic," he explained, gesturing to the large format camera in front of him. "It's the same kind most press

photographers use it's also used for magazine work or high-end portraiture. You see, everything is manual. You adjust the focus, the aperture, the shutter speed, it's a bit of an art form."

Yaz leaned in, inspecting the camera closely as Victor continued to explain "The glass plate on the back is used for composing and focusing the image."

"And what about this part?" Yaz asked, pointing to the side where the flash was attached.

"That's a flashbulb," Victor said. "It's used for lighting, especially indoors. This one here gets really bright, but you only get one shot before you have to replace it."

He unscrewed one of the bulbs, showing her how fragile and delicate it was. "This camera is great for getting sharp, high-quality images, but it's a lot of work to get just the right shot. I've been using it for years, though, so it's second nature to me now. There are some new models now, more modern and not so bulky, but I prefer this one. Wanna try?"

"Really?" Yaz asked eagerly

Victor chuckled. "Sure, but it's a little heavy. Here, let me show you how to hold it."

He guided her hands to the camera's side, showing her where to grip the body and how to gently turn the focus knob. Yaz's excitement was palpable as she adjusted the camera under Victor's supervision, carefully peering through the viewfinder.

"Go ahead, take a look," Victor encouraged as he stepped back.

Yaz peered into the viewfinder, her eyes bright with concentration. "Oh my god...It's all upside-down' she giggled

"It takes time to get used to it"

"I can't believe how clear it looks," she said in awe, her voice barely above a whisper. The ground-glass screen displaying the world upside down didn't seem to bother her too much and Vitor was impressed.

As Yaz turned the focus knob gently, Victor prepared to do some test shots, handing her the cable release. "Here, press this when you're ready," he said, showing her the small, button-like device connected to the camera by a wire.

Yaz smiled, her finger hovering over the release as she lined up the shot. With a small click, the shutter opened and closed, capturing the moment.

Frances, still getting her hair and makeup finished, watched Yaz with a quiet smile. Seeing her so immersed in something new, asking questions, and lighting up with every answer made her heart swell. She loved this about Yaz, the way she approached the world with an openness and curiosity that Frances couldn't help but admire.

Yaz handed the release back to Victor, grinning ear to ear. "That was incredible! Thank you so much."

Victor laughed. "You're welcome...I'll develop the film later and see how you did. Let's finish setting up. Shame you don't live here. I would teach you more."

She smiled softly. It was exciting and she wished she would get a chance to learn more. But for now, she was enjoying in this rare moment.

The Christmas set gleamed in the corner, the tree sparkling under the studio lights. The scene was ready, the lights perfectly angled, and Frances was nearly done with her transformation. But for now, Yaz was soaking in every second of this experience, her eyes still darting from the camera to the set, asking Victor more questions about lighting, film, and the technical side of the craft.

As Victor answered each one, it was clear that this wasn't just a casual curiosity for Yaz, she was genuinely captivated by the whole process, and Frances couldn't have been happier to see her partner enjoying herself so much.

In the background, the click of the camera as Victor did more test shots filled the room, blending with the soft chatter and energy of a day on set.

Frances stepped out of the dressing room, transformed by the elegant red mermaid shaped gown that hugged her curves and shimmered as it caught the studio lights. The color was bold, deep and rich like a glass of wine, and complemented her skin, giving her an almost ethereal quality. Her hair, styled in soft curls, while her makeup was classic, red lips to match the gown and softly defined eyes with an eyeliner. As she walked toward the set, her heels clicked lightly on the studio floor, and she paused by Victor, who was adjusting his camera.

Victor glanced up, a smile spreading across his face as he took in the sight of Frances. "You look incredible darling."

"Thank you" she smiled softly

"Waaaw...you look like a present" Yaz giggled

"Thank you darling. Beautiful dress, isn't it?"

"It's stunning"

"Right, let's start" Victor said "I want you by the Christmas tree to start with. Fiddle with decorations, pretend you're opening some presents, you know the drill"

"Gotcha..." she walked over to the tree and discussed few more details with Victor then the shooting began.

Yaz stood on a side soaking in every moment. She admired how them two worked together in a perfectly synchronized team. Frances knew exactly what Victor wanted before he even said it and there was not much conversation going on between them. One shot after another Frances changed poses and facial expressions with very little guidance from Victor. It was clear this was something she's done million times before.

"Chin down" Victor instructed "Look right...that's it darling...Give me a smile...Perfect."

As the session wound down and the final shots of Frances were taken, Victor lowered his camera to change the film sheet, giving her an appreciative nod. "I think we're done. But before we wrap up," he added with a mischievous grin, "how about we take a few of you and Yaz? It would be a shame not to, with both of you here."

"What?" Yaz's face lit up, her earlier excitement returning. "Really? Oh, I would love that!" she said, practically bouncing over to Frances.

Frances chuckled, reaching out for Yaz's hand. "You sure you're up for it?" she teased lightly, but her eyes sparkled with affection. She was already guiding Yaz toward the set.

Victor adjusted the lights as they both stood before the tree, the festive scene now the backdrop to their moment. "Just be yourselves," he said, looking through the viewfinder again. "No need for anything formal."

Yaz, still buzzing with excitement, instinctively leaned into Frances, who responded by wrapping her arm around Yaz's waist. They exchanged a quiet laugh, and in that moment, Victor began snapping photos, capturing the effortless intimacy between them. In some shots, Frances playfully pressed a kiss to Yaz's cheek, while in others, Victor encouraged them to wrap their arms around each other, gazing into one another's eyes as if the rest of the world had faded away. He aimed to immortalize this special bond, a moment that would serve as a cherished memory, one they might not normally have the chance to capture together.

"You look beautiful together." Victor remarked.

After a few more frames, he lowered the camera. "Alright, Yaz, how about a solo shot? I'm sure your family would love to see a photo of you here in New York."

Yaz blinked, surprised. "Oh... really? Me, by myself?"

"Absolutely," Victor replied, smiling warmly. "Come on, take a seat by the fireplace. Let's give you a proper portrait."

Yaz hesitated for a moment, but then sat gracefully by the fake fireplace, warm light from the Christmas tree casting a soft glow on her. Victor took a few steps back and clicked the shutter, capturing her in a moment of quiet beauty. Yaz, not used to it, felt the unfamiliar weight of being in front of the camera. Yet as Victor worked, he managed to capture her in a natural, unguarded way.

Frances smiled proudly giving her instructions "Turn you head a little bit darlin, and smile...that's it, you look gorgeous" she encouraged, her voice full of love

"Well, that's it..." Victor put his camera down "I will develop them by the time you leave"

"That's fantastic" Frances said "Thank you for this."

"Thank you so much...I can't wait to see them" Yaz beamed with happiness

"My pleasure girls"

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After fun morning shoot, the two women found themselves stepping out of Victor's studio into the bustling city. A sleek black car was waiting for them downstairs, and soon they were whisked away through the streets of New York.

Frances leaned back in her seat, watching the city fly by. They drove to few familiar sites but as the snow got heavier, unfortunately it didn't give them a chance to walk around. In spite of the small inconvenience, Yaz still enjoyed in every second of the tour.

"You're going to love 21 Club. It has beautiful charm. And loads of history" Frances said

Yaz smiled and looked out the window, watching the towering buildings and lively snow covered streets.

They arrived at the 21 Club, the restaurant's famous jockey statues lining the entrance, each one more colorful than the next. Inside, the atmosphere was just as Frances described, charming, elegant, and steeped in the past. They were shown to a private table in the back, tucked away from the crowd, allowing them to enjoy some quiet time together.

As they browsed the menu, Frances leaned in with a mischievous grin. "So, what do you think? Quite the spot, isn't it?"



Yaz glanced around, taking in the elegant ambiance. "It's perfect. I love it," she replied, flashing a teasing smile. "You always have these glamorous little places tucked away."

Frances chuckled softly. "Oh, darling, you haven't seen half of it. Shame the weather isn't serving us better.... But never mind...today's just about us, and I'm adamant to use every second of it."

Yaz smirked. "As long as we're not splashed all over the tabloids tomorrow 'Frances Lewis and her mystery friend'."

Frances winked. "Sharing a scandalous romantic lunch," she teased, her tone dripping with playful exaggeration.

Yaz laughed, shaking her head. "You're such a troublemaker. Honestly though, what would you do if people found out?"

Frances, completely unbothered, shrugged as she casually skimmed through the menu. "Make them feel like fools," she said confidently.

Yaz raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? And how would you pull that off?"

Frances put down the menu and looked at Yaz with a playful smirk. "Easy. You and I are business partners and close friends. Anything else is pure speculation. Simple."

Yaz burst out laughing and, grabbing one of Frances's cigarettes, she mimicked Frances's confident demeanor. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I just spend my nights at my business partner's studio. Late-night meetings, of course!"

Frances laughed so hard she had to compose herself when the waiter approached, apologizing with a grin, still trying to contain her laughter. The lighthearted energy between them was infectious, setting the perfect tone for their carefree afternoon.

They spent the next hour enjoying their meal, indulging in rich dishes and talking about all the places they would love to visit together.

After lunch, they decided to visit Museum of Modern Art. The city was alive with energy, and Yaz had a curious look on her face as they approached the museum. "Have you been in it before...The museum?"

Frances smiled warmly. "Many times... It's wonderful. It's full of all kinds of art, modern, classics. I think you'll enjoy it. There's actually a very special exhibition on now "Modern Masterprints of Europe," so we will see works of Picasso, Matisse."

"Oh waaw...I've seen some of Picasso and Matisse in London. They're awesome."

"We can just wander around at our own pace. No rush."

Inside, the museum was a blend of modern art and abstract pieces, some familiar and others less so. They moved from room to room, sometimes talking about the art, other times falling into companionable silence as they admired the works around them.

Frances stopped in front of a Van Gogh piece, tilting her head slightly as she took it in. "This one... always gets me. Something about the way he captures emotion."

Yaz stood beside her, nodding. "The Starry Night! It's beautiful," she murmured. "I think what I love about museums is how they make you pause, make you think about things in a way you wouldn't otherwise."

"You know what.... I never thought about it that way, you're so right" Frances smiled

Yaz paused by some modern statue, Frances noticed how captivated she was "You like that?"

"Yeah...it's beautiful...like water, the way it flows"

"I must admit, not my cup of tea" Frances admitted

"Mmmm...I love it" she smiled

They lingered for a while longer, wandering through the different exhibits. Yaz was fascinated by some of the more avant-garde pieces, while Frances found herself more drawn to the classics. Still, they enjoyed discovering each other's tastes and sharing their impressions.

As they left MoMA, Frances turned to Yaz with a grin. "How about some shopping? We can hit up Fifth Avenue, there are some places I know you'll love. And I want you to get something nice for yourself."

Yaz laughed softly. "You're spoiling me, you know that?"

Frances winked. "Always" she smiled looping her arm into hers

It wasn't snowing as heavily anymore so the afternoon was full of laughter and playful banter as Frances and Yaz explored store after store, indulging in window shopping and trying on clothes for fun. She got few awkward looks along the way as they stepped into some up scale boutiques, but she wouldn't let it stop her having fun. At Bergdorf Goodman, Frances stopped abruptly in front of a display, her eyes lighting up at the sight of a sleek royal blue evening gown. She turned to Yaz with a teasing grin.

"Now that would look absolutely stunning on you, darling," Frances said, her voice dripping with playful mischief. "You haven't picked anything for your opening night yet."

Yaz glanced at the price tag, her eyes widening. "Sure...I'll just ask them if they accept body parts as collateral.... Besides, I can always make something for myself. I've got plenty of time."

Frances, not one to be deterred, leaned in close, her breath tickling Yaz's ear as she whispered, "I was planning to get you a Christmas present, you know."

Yaz immediately shook her head, backing away pointing a finger at her. "Oh no, no, no... absolutely not! You've already done waaaay more than enough, missy. A pair of gloves would be more than enough."

Frances stepped forward with a cheeky smile, keeping Yaz from putting the dress back. "You know, I have a pretty irresistible urge to spoil you rotten" she whispered

"I knooooow, and you need to stop"

"I could always beg you in front of everyone... Pleeeeease, my lo..."

Before she could finish, Yaz's hand shot up, covering Frances's mouth, her face turning bright red. "Are you crazy?!" she whispered, glancing around at the other shoppers, who were starting to stare.

But Frances wasn't done. She flashed Yaz a mischievous smile and, in a louder voice, said, "What's a little scandal, right? I mean, imagine the headlines..."

Yaz tugged on Frances's wrist, trying desperately to stifle her laughter. "Frances, stop it! People are looking at us"

Just then, a well-dressed shop assistant approached, her expression warm and professional. "Excuse me, ladies, is there anything I can assist you with?"

Yaz looked like she wanted the ground to swallow her whole, but Frances, ever the confident, smiled and stepped in. "Yes, actually! I've been trying to convince my very dear friend here" she glanced at Yaz with a wink "to try on this absolutely gorgeous gown. It's perfect for the opening of her boutique, don't you think? Maybe you can help me persuade her."

The shop assistant looked at Yaz with a practiced eye, then smiled. "Oh, I absolutely agree. It would look lovely on you, miss. And trust me, it's a perfect fit for such an important occasion."

Yaz opened her mouth to protest, but before she knew it, the assistant had whisked her away to the fitting room. Frances stood back, a satisfied grin on her face and gave her a little cheeky wave. Yaz mouthed "I'll kill you" as she was being dragged away.

A few minutes later, Yaz emerged, the beautiful off shoulder gown fitting her perfectly, hugging her curves in all the right places. She looked at herself in the mirror, turning slightly, unable to believe how stunning she looked.

Frances clapped her hands, beaming with delight. "I knew it! You're an absolute knockout. Imagine the jaws dropping when you walk into that room."

Yaz hesitated, still overwhelmed by the extravagance of it all. "Franny, this is... I can't believe this. I've never worn anything like it."

Frances moved closer, standing behind her and catching Yaz's gaze in the mirror. "And that's exactly why I want you to have it. I want you to shine at your opening, darling. To make sure everyone sees what I see every day. You're a star."

Yaz blushed, her protests melting away as she gazed at herself. "Franny..."

"Just say yes...Pleeeeeease"

She exhaled deeply looking at Frances in the mirror "Okay, fine," she finally said, laughing. "You win, Frances Louise. I love it."

Frances grinned triumphantly, "I always win."

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After some playful back-and-forth through the stores, Yaz found a few pieces that caught her eye, including a beautiful pair of gloves for Susan.

As Frances and Yaz exited the shop, their laughter echoed down the street, carefree and light. Suddenly, the moment shattered as a man appeared from nowhere, pushing his way through Frances's security with surprising force.

"Margaret!" the man shouted, desperation in his voice as he lunged toward her. The bodyguards reacted instantly, restraining him before he could get any closer. He struggled against their grip, shouting, "Maggie, please, I just want to talk!"

Yaz stood frozen, her confusion palpable, glancing between the man and Frances, trying to make sense of the chaos unfolding. Frances remained rooted to the spot, her face pale, stunned into silence.

"It's alright," Frances finally spoke, her voice steady though her expression had hardened. "Let him go."

The lead bodyguard hesitated. "Are you sure, Miss Louise?"

"Yes," she replied, her voice firmer now, cutting through the tension.

Released from the guards' grip, the man straightened his coat, trying to regain composure as he approached Frances cautiously. "Please... I need to talk to you," he murmured, his voice quieter now, pleading as he fumbled in his pocket and extended a note toward her.

Frances said nothing, her eyes cold and distant as they locked on his. After what felt like an eternity, she took the note from his trembling hand without a word. Without looking back at him, she turned toward Yaz, her expression unreadable.

"Let's go," she said softly, looping her arm through Yaz's and steering her toward the waiting car, leaving the man standing helpless on the sidewalk. Yaz, still perplexed, followed, casting one last glance at the man before slipping into the car beside Frances.

The drive back to Victor's apartment was eerily quiet, the air thick with unspoken tension. Frances stared out the window, twisting the note in her fingers as if trying to decide what to do with it. Yaz didn't dare ask any questions yet, sensing that the right moment hadn't come.

When they arrived back at the apartment, they were greeted by Henry, Victor's butler. "Good afternoon, Miss Louise, Miss Khan," he said politely, taking Yaz's coat. "I trust you had a pleasant day?"

Yaz offered a quick smile. "We did, thank you." But her eyes lingered on Frances, who had discarded her coat carelessly onto the sofa and made a beeline for the bar.

She poured herself a generous glass of scotch, her movements deliberate. The bags from their shopping trip lay forgotten on the floor as Henry discreetly left the room. Yaz watched Frances silently, the worry growing in her chest as Frances stood by the window, drink in hand, staring out at the city with a cigarette dangling between her fingers.

"Are you alright?" Yaz finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Frances exhaled a long plume of smoke, her back still to Yaz. "No..." she admitted quietly, tapping the ash into the tray.

Yaz hesitated before stepping closer. "Who was that man?"

There was a pause, and when Frances spoke again, her voice was low, almost detached. "My brother."

Yaz blinked in surprise. “Your... brother? But you said—”

“That I was alone,” Frances interrupted, turning to face Yaz, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “The day he left, he stopped being my brother.”

Yaz frowned, taking a tentative step closer. “I don’t understand...”

Frances sighed, gripping the scotch glass tighter. “He wants to meet up today.”

“And you don’t want to see him, do you?”

Frances shook her head, looking weary. “I don’t see the point. Whatever he has to say, I’m not interested.”

Yaz bit her lip, carefully choosing her words. “Think about it, I’ll support you whatever you decide hun” she suggested softly, her tone gentle, not wanting to push.

Frances rolled her eyes, but there was less anger now, more exhaustion.

“You could’ve told him to shove it already,” she said, her voice calming. “But you didn’t.”

Frances remained silent for a moment before stubbing out her cigarette and turning to Yaz. Without a word, she reached out her hand. Yaz immediately crossed the room and enveloped her in a tight embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Frances murmured into Yaz’s shoulder. “I should’ve told you.”

“It’s alright,” Yaz whispered back, rubbing Frances’s back soothingly. “I understand why you didn’t.”

Frances pulled back slightly, just enough to meet Yaz’s gaze. She gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind Yaz’s ear, her expression softening. “Will you come with me?”

Frances asked, her voice barely audible.

Yaz hesitated. “Franny, I don’t think it’s my place to be there.”

“But it is,” Frances insisted, her eyes pleading. “You’re my family now. Please... I need you with me.”

After a moment, Yaz nodded. “Alright. I’ll go with you.”

Frances smiled, a hint of relief washing over her features as she leaned in and kissed her softly.

Later, as they were unpacking their shopping bags, Yaz asked, "Franny..."

"Yes darling?"

"Why did he call you Margaret?"

Frances smiled faintly, looking at Yaz through the mirror. "Margaret Frances Bennett," she explained. "That's my real name. I dropped it when I moved."

"But you kept Frances?"

"It was my mother's name," Frances murmured, her voice wrapped in a gentle nostalgia. She had been just eight when her mother passed, her memories of her face were faint, blurred by time. Yet, her mother's voice, soft and reassuring, still lingered in her ears. Frances paused, then offered a small smile to Yaz. "Come on, let's grab something to eat."

"I'm starving," Yaz grinned

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The cityscape of New York shifted as Frances and Yaz sat in the backseat of the car, heading to Brooklyn. The iconic skyline of Manhattan gradually faded into the distance, giving way to the industrial grit and quieter streets of the outer borough. The drive had taken them south along the East River, crossing the bridge and each passing moment seemed to tighten the knot in Frances's stomach.

She gazed out the window, her thoughts distant as the streets of Brooklyn came into view. Her hands rested in her lap, the tension in her fingers betraying her calm façade. Buildings became smaller, more modest, as they moved away from the glitz of the Upper East Side. The wide avenues of Manhattan gave way to narrower streets, lined with brownstones, mom-and-pop stores, and signs of everyday life she had long left behind.

Frances caught her reflection in the car window, her heart heavy. The looming reunion with her brother brought back a flood of memories, ones she wasn't sure she wanted to confront. She closed her eyes for a moment, exhaling slowly. She hadn't seen him in years.

A gentle squeeze on her hand pulled her from her thoughts. Yaz's hand was warm, steady. She turned to look at her, finding comfort in Yaz's dark eyes. "It's alright, I'm here," Yaz whispered, her voice soft, full of understanding. There was no judgment, only love.

Frances smiled, her chest relaxing just a little as she squeezed Yaz's hand back. "Thank you," she whispered, the vulnerability in her voice clear. Yaz didn't need to say anything more. The quiet between them was enough. It was the anchor Frances needed.

As the car slowed, they pulled up to a modest apartment building, the kind with chipped paint and the wear of time but still filled with the lives of families, just like her brother's. Frances stared up at the building, taking a deep breath. The reality of the moment hit her full force as the driver got out to open their door.

Frances hesitated before stepping out, her heart pounding in her chest. Yaz was already beside her, her presence a comforting reminder that Frances wasn't alone.

With one last look at Yaz, she drew in another breath and walked toward the entrance of the building.

As Frances and Yaz stepped into the small, cozy apartment, the air between them was thick with tension. A man looking a bit worn but still hopeful, greeted them.

"Margaret, thank you for coming," he said, moving to kiss her cheek, but Frances stepped away coldly.

"Yaz, this is Jimmy...my traitor of a brother," she said flatly, walking past him without another glance.

Yaz shook Jimmy's hand with a polite nod. "Nice to meet you, Yaz," Jimmy offered, but it did little to lighten the mood.

As he moved to the small bar and began pouring drinks, Frances cut him off. "Get to the point, Jimmy." Her eyes moved over the apartment, landing on framed wedding photos and a small picture of a baby boy, barely a year old. Toys littered the floor, and the sight made her heart sink.

"Please," he handed her a glass, which she finally accepted, "that's my son, Billy," he said softly.

Frances' eyes met his for a moment before she turned away. "What do you want, Jimmy?" Each word cut like a blade. The brother she once adored now stood as a painful reminder of betrayal.

"Maggie, look, I know you're pissed..."

"You reckon?" Frances interrupted with a sharp edge to her voice.

"I don't want to fight. That's not why I wanted to see you."



"Then why? You need money?"

"No. God, Maggie, no. I just..." He paused, trying to find the right words, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Frances scoffed, her eyebrows raised, disbelief crossing her face.

Jimmy's voice softened, filled with regret. "I am. I'm sorry I left. I shouldn't have, I know that now."

"No, you shouldn't have," Frances snapped, her voice growing louder on the verge of losing control.

Jimmy swallowed hard, pushing through his guilt. "I needed to say it. I'm sorry for leaving. I just... I couldn't take it anymore."

Frances's eyes flashed with anger. "You couldn't take it?!" she shouted, disbelief thick in her voice.

"No, I couldn't," he admitted, "I couldn't stand watching him do what he..." his eyes shifting briefly toward Yaz before returning to Frances.

Frances's voice was ice cold. "She knows, Jimmy. So, go on. Say it. Or is it still too hard for you?"

Jimmy's voice cracked. "There hasn't been a day I didn't think about you. I'm sorry... I really am...I don't know what I was thinking Maggie...I..."

Frances's fury erupted. "You LEFT me! I woke up and you were gone!" she screamed, flinging a glass at the wall. Jimmy barely ducked, and Yaz flinched at the sound of the shattering glass.

"I didn't know how to help," Jimmy stammered, but Frances cut him off.

"I didn't need your help!" she cried, her voice trembling. "I needed you to be there...You were the only one who knew what was behind that perfect façade, you were the only one I could trust...I just need you to hold me!" Her anger broke, replaced by grief as tears spilled down her face. "I was thirteen, Jimmy," she cried out through her sobs, hitting him repeatedly. "Thirteen. And you left me with that monster!"

Jimmy didn't fight back, just stood there, taking it, his own eyes filling with tears. A part of Frances saw the scared boy she once knew, but most of her no longer cared.

"Why did you leave me? How could you do that to me?" She sobbed pushing him than just stood there as tears streamed down her face, her chest heaving.

With a blank expression, she turned away, locking eyes with Yaz, who stood frozen in the middle of the room, lost in the chaos.

“We’re done here,” Frances said, her voice flat, heading for the door. Without a word, Yaz followed, both of them consumed by the storm of emotions lingering in the air.

“Maggie, please, don’t go,” Jimmy begged. His voice wavered, desperate for reconciliation.

Frances paused, her hand on the doorknob, but didn’t turn around. Yaz glanced back at the broken man, seeing both his guilt and his sorrow.

“I know I messed up,” Jimmy’s voice was almost a whisper, “just... give me a chance to make it right.”

Frances exhaled, her shoulders heavy with the weight of the past. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened the door, stepping out into the hallway, leaving Jimmy behind.

Once outside, Frances felt a strange sense of release, as if some long-carried burden had lifted from her. She took Yaz’s hand, their fingers lacing together. Yaz didn’t speak, only tugged Frances gently into an embrace, holding her close.

Frances buried her face in Yaz’s shoulder, letting the quiet comfort of her presence soothe the lingering pain.

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Yaz stood in front of the mirror, fastening her dress, her movements slow and deliberate. The evening was quiet, but the weight of the afternoon still clung to them both. Frances watched in silence, her heart heavy with guilt. She hadn’t wanted to burden Yaz with her past, especially not during this trip, and seeing the sadness in Yaz’s eyes now made her regret it even more.

Frances closed the drawer beside her and crossed the room slowly. Without saying a word, she reached for Yaz’s hand, gently lacing their fingers together. Yaz turned just enough to meet Frances’s gaze, her eyes filled with an emotion Frances never wanted to cause, an exhaustion, a heaviness that should never have touched them.

“C’mere, darling,” Frances whispered, pulling Yaz to sit on the edge of the bed. She reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind Yaz’s ear, her fingers lingering there, trying to find the right words. “I’m sorry... for putting you through that. It wasn’t fair. You haven’t said a word since... What’s going on in your mind, love? Please, talk to me.”

Yaz swallowed, her voice uncertain as she looked up at Frances. “This is it, Franny... I don’t know what to say. I don’t even think my opinion is valid.”

Frances squeezed Yaz's hand gently. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because I didn't go through it... I can't even begin to understand what you and Jimmy went through...especially you."

Frances's grip tightened a little more, her voice soft but firm. "I still want to hear it, though. Even if you disagree or don't understand, that's okay. I wouldn't want you to fully understand, darling, because that would mean you had to live through what I did. But your opinion still matters to me. I don't want you to feel like a bystander who doesn't have a right to speak. That's not how I want things to be between us... So, please, tell me what you're thinking."

Yaz hesitated, her eyes searching Frances's face, unsure of how to say what was in her heart. "All I know is... you were both just kids, Franny. Kids who had to deal with something no one should, let alone children. Jimmy was only sixteen when he left. He was just a boy himself... And I know what he did hurt you...deeply...and I understand that."

"But?" Frances asked softly, brushing her thumb along Yaz's hand as tears welled up in her eyes.

Yaz took a deep breath, her voice barely above a whisper. "But... maybe having his own little boy changed him, just like having Lily changed you. He's a grown man now, and maybe he finally understands what you went through. You were both just kids, Franny... All I'm saying is, this might be the only chance you have to see if something can be rebuilt. Just think about it."

Frances exhaled slowly, the past pressing down on her like a weight she wasn't sure she could bear. Stirring up those old ghosts felt terrifying, but she also knew that these conversations were important. Letting Yaz into this part of her life meant confronting the darkness she had long tried to lock away. But she wouldn't want it any other way.

"Thank you for being honest with me," Frances said softly. "I appreciate it, I really do. But I'm just... I'm not ready for that."

Yaz leaned in, her forehead gently touching Frances's. "I'm sorry."

Frances cupped her cheek, her thumb brushing over her skin. "Don't be sorry, darling. Don't ever say sorry....and I promise I will think about what you said."

"It doesn't have to be now, or in two months or in three...When and if you do feel ready."

"I love you...so so much"

Yaz's voice was quiet, but full of warmth. "I love you too."

Frances closed the distance between them, pressing her lips tenderly to Yaz's, their kiss a soft reminder of the love that held them together even through the hardest moments. For that brief moment, the weight of the world faded away, leaving only the quiet comfort of their love.

"Come on...let's have a nice evening...It's our last one here and I want you to have fun"

"I'd like that" Yaz nodded with a smile.

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