

Chapter 27

The car pulling to stop outside Frances's house purred softly. Inside, Frances, who had been setting the table, immediately perked up at the sound. Without a second thought, she placed the plate down and rushed to the door.

By the time Yaz stepped onto the porch, the door was already swinging open. Frances stood there, slightly breathless, dressed in a pair of high-waisted trousers, a crisp blouse, and pink apron.

Yaz let out a warm chuckle, her eyes flicking over Frances's outfit with amusement. "Look at you," she teased, stepping closer. "A proper little housewife."

Frances rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress her smile. "Don't get used to it," she said, stepping aside to let Yaz in.

The moment Yaz crossed the threshold, warmth enveloped her, not just from the cozy scent of something cooking in the kitchen, but from Frances herself, her presence filling the space in a way that made Yaz's whole body relax.

"I figured you'd be hungry," Frances said lightly, leading the way inside. "So, I'm throwing something together, but" she glanced over her shoulder with a small, playful smirk, "don't have huge expectations."

Yaz set her bag down near the door before turning back to her, that signature soft, teasing smile curving her lips. "I'm always having huge expectations when it comes to you," she murmured.

Frances's expression softened, her heart giving a little flutter at the words. Without hesitation, she stepped forward, draping her arms over Yaz's shoulders, melting into her like it was the most natural thing in the world. "I hope to deliver," she whispered.

Yaz's hands found Frances's waist, pulling her in closer, their bodies molding together in that familiar, effortless way. "Always," she murmured back.

Then, finally—finally—their lips met.

Slow, unhurried, deepening with a quiet longing they had both carried all day. There was no rush, no urgency, just warmth, just them. Yaz sighed softly against Frances's lips, as if shaking off the weight of the world, and Frances responded in kind, pressing closer, savoring the way Yaz held her like she was something precious.

Neither of them spoke when they finally parted, foreheads resting together, breath mingling. There was no need. Everything they wanted to say had already passed between them in that kiss.

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Frances laced her fingers through Yaz's and gently pulled her toward the kitchen, her grip warm and familiar. Yaz let herself be led, a small smile playing on her lips as Frances shot her a slightly sheepish look.

"I hope Susan isn't upset with me for stealing you away again," Frances mused. "You just got back from the trip, and here I am, dragging you over."

Yaz chuckled. "She's fine," she assured her. "She's having a girly card night with her friends. Trust me, she won't be missing me."

Frances huffed a little laugh, seeming relieved. As they entered the kitchen, the scent of something hearty filled the air, making Yaz's stomach grumble faintly. Her gaze flicked to the oven, curiosity piqued.

"What's cooking?" she asked, peering in.

Frances crossed her arms over her chest, her lips quirking up with a hint of pride. "Meatloaf...Possibly."

Yaz raised an eyebrow at her. "Possibly?"

"I followed the recipe," Frances said defensively, tilting her chin up. "It's from my mum's cookbook."

That caught Yaz's interest. She turned toward the table, where a tattered old notebook lay open, the pages worn and slightly yellowed from time. She reached out, running her fingers over the edges.

"I didn't know you had this," she murmured, glancing at Frances.

Frances leaned against the counter, crossing one ankle over the other. "Before I left my house of horrors," she said, her voice softer now, "I took some of my mother's jewelry, a few photos, and this." She gestured toward the book. "Didn't have much time, but I grabbed what I could."

Yaz carefully turned a page, admiring the delicate, sloping script. "She had beautiful handwriting," she remarked.

Frances smiled wistfully, nodding. "She did." Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she perked up. "Wait here."

Before Yaz could respond, Frances had already zoomed out of the kitchen, her socked feet barely making a sound on the hardwood floor. Yaz smirked to herself, shaking her head fondly as she returned her attention to the old notebook, carefully studying the faded ink and little handwritten notes scribbled in the margins.

A minute later, Frances returned, carrying a small box. She set it on the table and, with careful hands, lifted the lid. Yaz leaned in as Frances pulled out a small stack of aged photographs.

“This is my mum,” Frances said, holding up a black-and-white photo of a striking woman with soft curls and kind eyes. Then, she pulled out another, this time, of herself as a child, no older than five, with her mother kneeling beside her.

Yaz took the picture gently, her eyes widening as she studied the little girl’s face. “Franny,” she breathed, glancing between the photo and Frances. “You look just like Lily.”

Frances let out a quiet chuckle. “Yeah,” she said, running a finger over the edge of the picture. “When Lily was born, I couldn’t believe how much she looked like my mother. But the older she got, the more I saw myself in her too.”

Yaz turned her gaze back to the photo, her heart swelling. “It’s like looking at her.” she said softly, glancing at Frances with a warm smile.

Frances’s breath hitched just slightly, and then she let out a small, almost bashful laugh. “I think she got the best of both of us.”

Frances glanced at the oven timer and then turned back to Yaz with a small smile. “If you want to take a quick shower, now’s the time,” she said. “Dinner’s going to be ready in about twenty minutes.”

Yaz exhaled, rolling her shoulders as if only now realizing just how heavy the day had been on her. “That actually sounds perfect,” she admitted. “I’m exhausted.”

Frances stepped closer, her fingers brushing lightly over Yaz’s forearm in a small, affectionate gesture. “I put some things out for you on the bed,” she said. “A towel, some fresh clothes. Thought you might want to get comfortable.”

Yaz’s lips curved in gratitude. “You’re a saint.”

Frances smirked. “I try.”

Yaz leaned in, pressing a quick, grateful kiss to Frances’s cheek before turning toward the hallway. “Alright, I’ll be back soon. Don’t burn the meatloaf,” she teased over her shoulder.

Frances scoffed, hands on her hips. “I make no promises.”

Yaz chuckled, disappearing down the hall, the quiet comfort of Frances's home already working to unwind the tension from her body.

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After dinner, it was Frances who now took a shower, leaving Yaz to settle in. She wandered over to the record collection, an eclectic mix of albums scattered across the shelf. Her fingers brushed along the covers, finally selecting a vinyl that seemed to suit the mood. As the warm, crackling notes filled the air, Yaz moved to the side table, where a book had been left marked with a folded corner. She picked it up, curious.

"Actors on Acting," by Toby Cole & Helen Krich Chinoy.

Flipping through the pages, she settled herself on the plush sofa, intrigued by the insight into the craft of acting. The writing was dense but fascinating, offering practical advice and reflections on the emotional landscape an actor had to navigate. She made herself comfortable, legs tucked beneath her, enjoying the rare quiet.

The soft click of the door interrupted her moment of peace, and she turned just as Frances walked in, freshly showered and wearing her pajamas, the soft cotton fabric of her dressing gown flowing around her. A glass of wine in one hand, she took a casual sip as she walked slowly toward the sofa, her every movement relaxed, unhurried.

Yaz smiled as Frances set the wine glass on the coffee table and then settled next to her, snuggling into her side with a sigh of contentment. "I haven't seen this book around before," Yaz commented softly, eyes still on the pages.

Frances tilted her head slightly, smiling fondly. "It's a gift from a friend. I met her during one of my earlier years. She knew I was struggling with the whole acting thing and gave me this book to help me with it. I guess it stuck with me."

Yaz nodded, a soft smile tugging at her lips as she looked down at the pages. "It seems like it's had an impact."

Frances nodded, her fingers idly tracing patterns on the edge of Yaz's arm as she spoke. "It's not a book about tricks or techniques. It's more about understanding what it takes to be someone else, how deeply you have to connect to that other person, and how much of yourself you have to give up." She paused for a moment, considering. "It sounds heavy, doesn't it?"

Yaz smiled, appreciating the way Frances had explained it. "It sounds like something you'd love. And that makes sense."

The two of them lay in comfortable silence for a while, the music filling the spaces between

their words. The stillness was calming, but it wasn't long before Yaz could feel the weight of the unspoken conversation hanging between them.

Yaz shifted slightly, her fingers tracing idle patterns over Francese's arm. Her voice was quiet, hesitant.

"Franny... we should talk about the letter."

Frances stiffened. Her gaze flickered toward the glass of wine on the table, as if debating whether to reach for it.

"I know..." she admitted, her voice soft but weighed with exhaustion. "I was putting it off. Just wanted to enjoy a little bit of peace." She let out a breath, shaking her head. "But I know I can't keep avoiding it."

Yaz turned slightly, watching her carefully. "I don't wanna talk about it either. But we have to."

Frances nodded, curling her fingers lightly around Yaz's wrist, grounding herself in the warmth of her touch. "I know. But every time I think about him... it's like I'm back there again. He has a way of making everything feel like it's my fault."

Yaz's chest ached. She reached up, brushing her thumb gently over Frances's cheek, trying to will away even the smallest piece of that pain. "It's not your fault. None of it is."

"I do know that. With one part of my brain, at least." Frances's lips curved slightly, but there was no humor in it, only sadness. "I thought I left all that behind when I left New York. But he's relentless. He won't stop."

Yaz exhaled, the weight of it all settling heavily between them. "No, honey, he won't stop. Which is why we need to find another way. This can't go on, darling. You know that, don't you?"

Frances leaned into her, pressing her face against Yaz's shoulder. "I know," she murmured. "I know. But I have to be smart about this, Yaz. I don't think you understand what kind of man he really is."

"Deranged."

"It's not that simple, love."

Yaz gently tilted Frances's chin up, guiding her gaze to meet hers. "Then explain it to me."

Frances hesitated, a deep sigh escaping her lips. "Most people, when they think of men like my father, they picture monsters. The kind of men you'd cross the street to avoid. The ones who make your skin crawl just by looking at them. But..." She trailed off, her fingers

tightening slightly around Yaz's. "That's not who he is."

Yaz frowned. "What do you mean?"

Frances searched her face, something unreadable in her eyes. "What if I told you that, if you didn't know any of this, you'd probably like him?"

Yaz blinked. "What?"

Frances huffed a bitter laugh, shaking her head. "You're surprised. But that's the thing, love. He isn't some shadowy figure lurking in dark alleys. He's charming, respected and admired. The perfect father, the devoted husband. People adore him. They have no idea. He's got two sides... like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

She sank into Yaz's embrace, drawing strength from her warmth. "When I was little, I adored him. I was his princess. He built me a dollhouse, took me to dance lessons. And for years, I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world." Her fingers curled against Yaz's sleeve. "Until I wasn't."

Yaz sat still, barely breathing.

Trigger Warning ⚠️:

The following paragraph contains discussions of sexual assault (SA). These sections are marked in bold, so readers who wish to avoid this content can skip ahead. Please take care while reading.

"It started small," Frances whispered. "Just slight touches. A hand lingering too long. Brushing past me in a way that made my skin crawl, but I told myself I was imagining it. I was ashamed for even thinking that way about my own father. Then, one night, he came to my room, and the man who walked through that door wasn't the man I loved." Her voice cracked. "It was someone else."

"Jesus," Yaz murmured, voice raw.

Frances swallowed hard, staring past the room, past Yaz, lost in memories she wished she could erase. "And the next morning? He acted like nothing had happened. He brought me a gift, like some kind of apology. He told me I was his special girl. And that night, it happened again."

"Her laugh was sharp, bitter. "I tried to get away. I started sneaking into my brother's room, hoping he'd protect me. But my father caught on. The next morning, he

grabbed my face so hard I thought he'd break my jaw. Told me not to play games with him." She exhaled shakily. "Then, at breakfast, he smiled at me and said the pancakes were perfect."

A heavy silence filled the room. Yaz's arms tightened around her. Her jaw clenched, her stomach churned with a sickening mix of fury and heartbreak.

Frances let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Now do you understand? This isn't just about money. I fight back too much, he takes it as a challenge," Frances murmured. "It's why I've been so reluctant to take any action, because I know what he's capable of. He's not the kind of man you back into a corner. He doesn't break. He breaks other people."

Yaz's fingers brushed gently through her hair, voice quiet but steady. "Then we don't back him into a corner."

Frances pulled away just enough to look at her. "What do you mean?"

Yaz met her gaze, something unreadable flickering in her eyes. "I mean... we fight him on different ground."

Frances frowned slightly, confusion knitting her brow. "Yaz..."

Yaz pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Do you trust me, love?"
"Always" Frances smiled

"I have an idea"

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The bedroom was dark, the only light spilling in from the garden lamp. Beneath the heavy covers, they lay curled together, bodies warm, breaths slow and steady. The silence stretched between them, not heavy, but full.

"Thank you" she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Frances shifted slightly, her fingers idly tracing patterns along Yaz's arm. "For what darling?"

"For trusting me," Yaz said, her hand resting lightly against Frances's back. "For sharing all that with me, something so deeply painful. I know it wasn't easy."

Frances let out a quiet breath, her hand sliding up to cup Yaz's cheek. "I don't wanna keep anything from you," she said, her voice gentle but sure. "No walls, no pretending. I want you

to see me. All of me...Even the parts that are hard to look at."

Yaz exhaled, her fingers grazing Frances's cheek. "You're the strongest woman I've ever known," she whispered. "And I love you. More than I can even put into words."

Frances's breath hitched, and Yaz reached up, stroking her cheek, tracing the delicate curve of her face. Frances turned into her touch, pressing a kiss to Yaz's palm before tilting forward and capturing her lips in a slow, tender kiss.

Yaz melted into it, her fingers tangling in soft blonde curls, but then Frances shifted, guiding her onto her back. Yaz let out a small breath, her heart skipping as Frances hovered over her, their noses brushing.

"I love you too," Frances whispered against her lips before kissing her again, deeper this time, with all the tenderness in the world.

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It was Friday evening. The suitcase lay open on the bed, half-packed, with neatly folded clothes stacked inside. Yaz moved around the room with quiet efficiency, gathering the last of her things, her scarf, a small notebook, a pair of gloves, before tucking them carefully into the case.

Susan sat on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped in her lap, watching. Her expression was thoughtful, a crease forming between her brows. "Why is Frances flying all the way to New York? Couldn't she just call her brother?"

Yaz paused, pressing down on the clothes to make space before glancing at Susan. "She could," she admitted. "But after all these years, considering everything... she feels she owes him this. If they're ever going to have a relationship, this is one conversation they need to have in person."

Susan exhaled slowly, nodding. "I suppose that makes sense." But then her gaze sharpened slightly, her voice lowering. "I just don't know about this plan of yours. Have you really thought it through? Are you sure this is the right move? That it won't make things worse for Frances?"

Yaz's jaw tightened as she fastened the suitcase shut. "I don't think it can get any worse to be honest," she said firmly. "What's the alternative? Let him keep pushing, keep controlling her life from a distance? She might as well hand him her bank details and be done with it."

Susan flinched slightly at Yaz's bluntness, then looked away, shaking her head.

Yaz turned in a fluster, muttering under her breath. "Where did I put the cream?" She glanced around, rifling through the dresser, then the nightstand.

Susan reached over and plucked the small jar from beside the suitcase. "Here."

"Thanks"

She packed it away, pressing down on the case before snapping it shut. Just as she was about to move the suitcase, Susan caught her hand and gave a gentle tug.

"C'mere," she murmured, guiding Yaz to sit beside her. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind Yaz's ear, her touch warm but her eyes filled with worry.

Yaz swallowed. "Don't worry."

Susan let out a soft breath, shaking her head. "I will always worry." She hesitated, then added, "I just hope this doesn't backfire on both of you."

Yaz held her gaze for a moment before looking away. "It won't."

Susan sighed, then tried again. "Tell her about Andy, Yaz."

"No." Yaz's answer was immediate, firm.

Susan's lips pressed into a thin line. "If she knew..."

"She'd fire him on the spot," Yaz cut in. "And we need him right now." She shifted slightly, lowering her voice. "Besides, she's got enough on her plate without that."

Susan frowned. "I don't like this."

Yaz's jaw tightened. "I can handle Andy myself."

Susan didn't look convinced. But after a long moment, she sighed and squeezed Yaz's hand before letting go.

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The low hum of an approaching engine broke the quiet of the morning. Susan folded her arms against the chill, watching as the sleek black car rolled up to the front of the house. The tires crunched against the gravel, and for a moment, she wished it wouldn't stop. That it would keep going, that this whole thing could be avoided.

Yaz hoisted her small suitcase off the ground, but Susan caught her in one last embrace. She held on tightly, her arms wrapped firm around Yaz's back, as if she could anchor her here just a little longer.

"Be careful," Susan murmured.

Yaz squeezed her back. "We will."

Susan pulled away just as the driver stepped out. He gave a polite nod before taking Yaz's suitcase and placing it in the boot. The moment felt heavier than it should, heavier than just a simple trip.

Yaz turned, flashing Susan one last reassuring smile, though Susan could see past it, see the weight behind her eyes. Then Yaz slid into the backseat, and the driver shut the door with a solid, final click.

Susan stood there, arms wrapped around herself, as the car pulled away. She watched until it disappeared down the road, her heart twisting with unease. She worried for what lay ahead, for the weight of what Yaz had taken upon herself.

With a deep sigh, she turned back toward the house, but the unease didn't leave her. It settled deep, an ache in her chest that refused to be ignored.

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The cab slowed to a smooth stop in front of *The Plaza Hotel*, its grand façade towering above them in elegant Beaux-Arts splendor. Even in the crisp winter morning, the gold-trimmed doors gleamed under the soft glow of the entrance lights. A uniformed doorman, standing tall beneath the opulent awning, stepped forward the moment Frances's foot touched the pavement.

Yaz climbed out after her, blinking up at the sheer scale of it all. She had never seen a building so grand in her life, let alone stayed in one. The intricate stonework, the polished brass revolving doors, the sheer presence of the place, it was overwhelming.

Inside, the lobby stretched high and wide, every inch dripping with luxury. A grand chandelier cast a warm golden glow over the marble floors, its countless crystals glittering like stars. The scent of fresh flowers filled the air, mingling with the rich aroma of polished wood and expensive perfume. Staff in pristine uniforms moved about swiftly, attending to the city's elite with a quiet efficiency that spoke of years of practice.

Frances moved with familiarity, her heels clicking softly against the marble as she approached the reception desk. Yaz, on the other hand, could barely keep her eyes in one place. Everything was so immaculate, so unlike anywhere she had ever been. The grand columns, the velvet-upholstered chairs, the way the guests carried themselves with effortless sophistication, it was another world entirely.

The receptionist, a poised woman in a crisp navy uniform, greeted Frances with a practiced smile. "Miss Louise, welcome back to The Plaza. Your suite is ready for you."

Yaz swallowed, gripping the handle of her small suitcase a little tighter. *A suite?*

A bellboy stepped forward, bowing slightly as he reached for their luggage. "If you'll follow me, ladies."

They were led across the vast lobby, past gilded mirrors and lavish floral arrangements, toward the private elevators. Yaz felt the weight of it all, the elegance, the quiet opulence, the unshakable sense that she didn't quite belong.

As the elevator doors slid open and they stepped inside, Frances glanced over at her with a knowing smile. She reached for Yaz's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"It's just a hotel, darling," she murmured, amusement dancing in her hazel eyes.

Yaz exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking her head as the doors closed. "Maybe to you."

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The suite was nothing short of breathtaking. Tall windows framed the New York skyline, their heavy drapes pulled back to reveal the city stretching endlessly beyond. The sitting area was adorned with plush velvet chairs and a gleaming coffee table, its surface set with a crystal vase of fresh flowers. An ornate chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a soft glow over the room's opulent furnishings.

Frances tipped the bellboy with an easy grace, murmuring a quiet *thank you* as he took his leave. Their suitcases rested neatly against the wall, but Yaz hardly noticed them. She was too busy taking everything in.

It was overwhelming. Not in the way it had been when she first stepped into Frances's world, when every moment left her breathless with disbelief, but in a quieter way now. She was used to being overwhelmed by the effortless luxury that surrounded her.

And yet, there were times when she forgot. When Frances was just her Franny, the woman who curled into her side at night, who stole food from her plate like a kid, who bickered about breakfast and laughed at her own terrible jokes. But then moments like this came, moments where Yaz was reminded of exactly who she shared her bed with.

Frances threw her coat over the sofa with a flourish before turning to Yaz with a smirk, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Not bad, hmm?"

Yaz huffed a laugh, raising an eyebrow. "Neah... not bad. I was practically raised in hotels like this."

Frances grinned, her tone light. "That's what I thought." She moved behind Yaz, her hands sliding around her waist, pulling her a little closer. "Not even a little dazzled?"

Yaz rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at her lips. "Oh, I am. But I've learned to contain myself."

Frances leaned in then, her lips brushing lightly against Yaz's neck, "I much prefer when you don't." she murmured against her skin,

Yaz let out a surprised laugh, glancing back over her shoulder. "Are we still talking about hotels?"

"Maybe," Frances hummed, her breath warm against her skin.

She was in a surprisingly good mood, cheerful, teasing, all over Yaz in a way that felt almost playful. It was unexpected, considering the reason they were here. But Yaz found it comforting. In the midst of all the weight pressing down on them, in the middle of a trip that could change everything, they still found a way to laugh.

Yaz shook her head, her lips curling into a smile as she turned draping her arms around Frances's shoulders. "How come you're in such a good mood?"

Frances hummed, a soft, wistful sound. "Well, I thought since I might lose everything soon, we might as well enjoy ourselves while it lasts."

Yaz's brows furrowed, her expression softening. "You're not gonna lose everything."

"No..." Frances gave her a fleeting, bittersweet smile, squeezing her gently. "Not everything... I'll still have you and Lily."

"Always." Yaz whispered, her voice steady as she looked into Frances's eyes.

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The heavy rain fell relentlessly on New York, a soft but constant percussion against the car windows as it made its way toward Brooklyn. Inside, the two women sat in quiet companionship, their fingers intertwined on the seat between them. The rhythmic hum of the engine and the patter of the rain were the only sounds, leaving the space between them filled with unspoken thoughts.

Frances gazed out the window, her eyes unfocused as the city blurred by. Her mind drifted back in time, to moments from life long ago, when the world seemed simpler, happier. She could almost feel the warmth of her mother's kitchen, the smell of fresh bread wafting through the air, mingling with the laughter of a younger her and her brother. They had run through the halls of their childhood home, chasing each other, carefree and full of life.

But the images were fading, like old photographs left out in the sun, their edges curling. She

couldn't remember the sound of her mother's voice anymore, nor the smell of her skin, those small details that once defined her presence. All she had left were the eyes, her mother's eyes, full of love, full of life, and always smiling when she looked at her. The rest seemed to be slipping through her fingers, like sand, too elusive to grasp.

The car slowed, and the sound of rain against the roof grew louder, pulling Frances from her memories. It came to a halt in front of an old building, and she blinked, trying to clear the fog of nostalgia from her mind. She turned to Yaz, offering a faint smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Would you mind if you waited, darling?" she asked, her voice soft but firm.

Yaz looked at her, concern flickering across her features. "Are you sure?"

Frances gave a small nod, squeezing her hand. "I think I need to do this bit alone."

Yaz nodded in agreement, her expression understanding, though tinged with worry. She squeezed Frances's hand back before letting go, offering a comforting smile as Frances turned back toward the driver.

"Wait here please," Frances instructed him quietly. The driver gave a quick nod, and the car remained still in the rain-soaked streets of Brooklyn.

As she opened the door and stepped out into the storm, she felt a strange sense of finality settle over her, as if this moment was years in the making. But, for the first time in a long time, she felt ready to face what lay ahead.

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Frances stood in front of the weathered apartment door, the cold rain beating down against the sidewalk behind her. Her finger hovered over the doorbell, poised for just a moment longer than necessary, as if she were measuring the weight of the next step. A flutter of nerves stirred in her chest, a sensation so foreign to her in moments like these. The tension in her limbs pressing in with each passing second.

Finally, with a deep breath, she pressed the doorbell, the soft chime echoing through the hallway. The click of footsteps followed, and then the door swung open.

Standing there was Jimmy. His features lined with time, but there was something about him, something she hadn't realized she missed until now.

Frances took him in with a steady gaze, just standing for short moment before she spoke "Jimmy" she said softly, a warm, tentative smile spreading across her lips. She leaned forward slightly, kissing him on the cheek. It was an unexpected gesture, perhaps, but it felt right. She pulled back, eyes meeting his, searching for the same connection they once had.

"Thank you for seeing me at such short notice. ...I appreciate it," she said, her voice catching a little in the moment.

Jimmy returned her smile, though it was a little strained, like he, too, was unsure of where to begin. "It's good to see you, Maggie," he replied, his tone more sincere than she remembered.

Her heart squeezed for a moment.

Jimmy moved to the side and gestured to the living room. "Would you like a drink?" he asked, his tone light, trying to ease the tension in the air.

She nodded, grateful for the gesture as she stepped inside. Despite the elegance, there was a simplicity in her look that felt intentional, as though she wanted to remind him of who she used to be, who they used to be, before everything changed. The fitted gray dress, refined yet unpretentious, skimmed just below her knees paired with a black coat.

Her gaze flickered over the small apartment as she took off her gloves and a coat. It hadn't changed much since she was here the last time. The toys were still scattered on the floor, framed photos of his family on the chest of drawers. She noticed a new one of his son. The signs of a life so normal and peaceful felt almost foreign to her. They had both come to such different places in life.

"By the way, thank you for the birthday present," he said. "He loves it. You really didn't have to, but I'm glad you did."

Frances felt a small pang in her chest, a soft ache "I'm glad he liked it," she replied quietly as she sat on the sofa.

"I never expected you to write," Jimmy continued, setting the glass on the table in front of her. "But I'm glad you do. It's nice to hear from you."

Frances gave him a soft smile, the words settling between them like a fragile truce. She looked at him, really looked at him for the first time in years, and saw the man he had become, someone who had a life, a family, and yet, perhaps still, a part of him that was tied to her, to their shared history.

"I've thought about you a lot," she murmured, her voice quiet but full of meaning. She wasn't sure what else to say, what words could bridge the years, the pain, the silence that had separated them. All she could offer was the truth. And maybe that was enough for now.

Frances sat there, her posture stiff, as if the weight of the world were pressing down on her. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers twisting restlessly, her mind swirling with thoughts she could barely process. She hadn't quite figured out how to begin the conversation, unsure of how to say the things that needed to be said. The silence stretched between them, thick

and uncomfortable, and she couldn't shake the feeling that everything, everything was about to change.

She tried to steady her breathing, to gather the words, but the room seemed to grow smaller around her.

Jimmy watched her with growing concern. He could sense the tension radiating from her, the unease that seemed to have settled into her bones. She hadn't been this way when she first walked through the door, but now, as she sat before him, she seemed like a woman teetering on the edge of something, something deep, something painful.

Without a word, he moved towards her, sitting down next to her on the sofa. There was an unspoken understanding between them, a bond forged by years of shared history, and it wasn't lost on him. He noticed the small tremor in her hands as she picked up a glass, the way she kept looking away, her gaze distant and unfocused.

Jimmy's hand reached out and gently placed itself over hers. The touch was simple, almost instinctive, but it felt so familiar that for a moment, it was like nothing had changed between them. It was like they were children again, sitting together on the floor of their old house, sharing the quiet comfort of each other's company. But this time, the connection was different, deeper, more complicated.

Frances flinched slightly at the touch, the sudden warmth of his hand on hers pulling her from her thoughts. A wave of emotion washed over her, something she hadn't been prepared for.

Before she could stop them, tears began to fall, slowly, one by one, trailing down her cheeks. She couldn't remember the last time she had allowed herself to cry, to let down the walls she had built so high. But the moment his hand rested on hers, it was like all the weight she had been carrying for so long finally broke free.

He squeezed her hand tighter, unsure of what to do or say, but instinctively knowing that he couldn't let it go.

"What's going on?" he asked gently, his voice low, filled with an unspoken concern that only siblings could understand. His gaze never left hers, waiting for the answer, no matter how difficult it might be.

Frances opened her mouth, but the words caught in her throat. She looked up at him, her eyes raw with vulnerability, the tears still flowing freely. It felt almost impossible to speak, to tell him what was going on, what she had been keeping hidden. But somehow, with his hand on hers, she found the courage.

"I'm in trouble..." Her voice trembled, breaking as the words barely made it past her lips. She inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. "I need your help."

....

Frances stood at the door, her hands trembling. The weight of everything pressed heavily on her, exhaustion settling deep in her bones. But there was something different in her now, something lighter. The raw emotion that had been clawing at her since she arrived had eased, if only slightly.

Jimmy lifted her coat from the hook and gently draped it over her shoulders. His movements were careful, deliberate, as though he was afraid she might break apart at the slightest touch. She slipped her arms into the sleeves, pulling it close around her before tugging on her gloves then turned to face him, her voice quiet, almost hesitant.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, without a word, he stepped forward and pulled her into a hug.

Frances stiffened at first, caught off guard by the sudden embrace. But then, something in her gave way, and she melted into him, her arms tightening around his back as though she was afraid to let go.

A sharp breath hitched in her throat, and before she could stop it, the tears came again. A deep, shuddering sob escaped her, muffled against his shoulder. She clenched the fabric of his shirt in her gloved hand, holding on like she had all those years ago before everything had shattered.

Jimmy didn’t say anything, didn’t try to soothe her with empty words. He just held her, letting her cry, letting her fall apart.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes were red, her face damp with tears. She looked up at him, searching for his face as if memorizing him all over again.

His hand lifted, brushing away a stray tear from her cheek. His voice was quiet but steady when he finally spoke. “I never stopped loving you.”

Her breath caught. She shook her head, closing her eyes briefly, as if grounding herself in the moment. When she opened them again, there was no hesitation. “Neither did I.”

A small, sad smile flickered across his lips, but before he could say anything more, she straightened her coat and took a small step back. “I really need to go. Yaz is still waiting in the car.”

Jimmy nodded, but there was something in his expression that told her he didn’t want her to leave, not just yet. “Let me know.”

“Of course,” she said softly.

"I hope I see you again soon."

She nodded, wiping the last of her tears before pulling the second glove onto her hand. She turned toward the door, her fingers curling around the handle, but just as she was about to leave, she hesitated.

"Oh...I almost forgot" With a small frown, she reached into her handbag, pulling out a small, slightly worn photograph. She held it out to him.

"I found it the other day," she said. "I thought you might want to have it."

Jimmy took the photo from her fingers and looked down at it. His breath caught in his throat. It was the three of them, his sister and him with their mother. A moment from another lifetime. A moment before everything changed.

His eyes burned as he swallowed thickly, gripping the photo as though it might disappear.

Frances watched him for a long moment before lifting a hand, placing her palm gently against his cheek. She leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his face, then stepped back.

She didn't say anything else. She didn't need to.

And then, she turned and walked out the door.

....

Frances hurried down the narrow staircase. The air inside the building was thick and stale, but the moment she pushed open the front door, she was met with the crisp scent of the city after rain. The storm had passed, leaving the pavement slick and glistening under the muted afternoon light.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. The emotional weight of the morning still clung to her, but as she stepped onto the pavement, she saw Yaz waiting for her.

She stood leaning against the car, arms folded, watching her with quiet patience. She wasn't tapping her foot or checking her watch, she had simply waited, like she always did.

The moment Frances reached her, she didn't hesitate. She stepped into Yaz's arms, wrapping herself around her as though she needed to anchor herself to something solid, warm and familiar.

"How did it go?" Yaz murmured against her hair.

Frances let out a breath, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. "I need a drink."

Yaz pulled back slightly, her brows lifting in amusement, but before she could say anything, Frances shook her head with a tired smile. "I'm so sorry...it took longer..."

"Don't be daft." Yaz smiled, and Frances responded by giving her hand a squeeze.

A moment passed between them, unspoken, understood.

"I need to fix my face," she said, her voice lighter now. "And then I'm taking you for lunch somewhere nice."

Yaz grinned as she opened the car door for her. "Now that," she said, "I won't argue with."

She slid into the seat not sure about what future held, but for now, she let herself breathe.

....

The hotel suite was quiet except for the soft clink of glass against crystal as Frances poured herself a drink. The scent of her perfume lingered in the air, warm and familiar, as she moved with effortless ease, back to herself after washing away the emotions of the afternoon.

She took a slow sip, letting the smooth burn of whiskey settle in her chest, before glancing toward the bedroom, where Yaz's voice carried softly through the open door.

"...Yes, you're an angel," Yaz was saying, her tone relieved. "I'll make it up to you, I promise." A pause, then a warm chuckle. "I'll bring you something nice from New York. I promise...Alright, I'll see you soon."

She hung up and stepped into the lounge in a slow pace, her hands in pockets of her trousers. "Alright...done"

Frances tilted her head, watching her with knowing eyes. "Everything alright?"

Yaz sighed "Yeah. Mildred's a star...I've no idea what I'd do without her."

Frances smiled, setting her glass down and crossing the room in a few slow steps. "You'd manage," she murmured, slipping her arms around Yaz's waist. "But I'm still sorry for the chaos."

Yaz shook her head, resting her hands lightly on Frances's arms. "Don't start. It's our mess, remember? We're in this together." Then, with a tearful glint in her eye, she added, "And I'll be charging you in kind for all it's worth."

Frances smirked, her fingers tracing slow, lazy circles at the small of Yaz's back. "Are you now?"

“Mm-hmm.” Yaz grinned, her fingers trailing teasingly down Frances’s arm “Haven’t figured out the full price yet, but I’m sure I can come up with something suitable.”

Frances hummed in amusement, leaning in just enough for their noses to brush. “Well, whatever it is, I’m more than willing to pay.”

And with that, she closed the distance "With interest" she purred pressing her lips to Yaz’s in a deep, lingering kiss.

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The restaurant was small, tucked away on a quiet street in the heart of New York, where the hum of the city softened just enough to feel intimate. The candlelight flickered between them, casting golden shadows over the crisp white tablecloth, the delicate stemware catching the glow like tiny stars. It smelled of butter and wine, of slow-cooked meals meant to be savored, and the quiet murmur of conversation around them gave the place a kind of warmth that felt almost like home.

Frances sat back in her chair, one hand wrapped around the base of her glass, the other reaching absently for Yaz’s fingers across the table brushing against them without hesitation. It wasn’t a nervous touch, not like it had been before, not like it had to be when they first started navigating this unspoken line in public. Not like it had been at Christmas, when every glance over a shoulder carried the weight of caution.

Today, they barely cared.

Yaz didn’t hesitate either. She met Frances’s touch with her own, her fingers curling slightly around hers, holding on. It was subtle, quiet, but deliberate. If someone looked, well, let them.

This trip was different, heavier, filled with things neither of them had fully voiced yet. But here, in this fleeting moment, none of it mattered. The weight of it all, the uncertainty of what lay ahead, could wait.

“You look tired,” Yaz murmured, her thumb grazing lightly over Frances’s knuckles.

Frances let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. “I could say the same about you.”

Yaz rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched with a smile. “Just a little.”

Frances smiled, her grip tightening just a little. “Liar.”

"We could go for a walk..." Yaz murmured

"We could..." Her lips curling into a gentle smile "I didn't get to show you Central Park"

"Is that a date?"

"I thought it already is?" She smiled

And there they were. The city outside could wait. The storm ahead could wait.

Here, in the warmth of candlelight, in the gentle press of fingers that neither of them cared to hide anymore, they held on to what was theirs and what really mattered.

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Monday Morning – Los Angeles

Frances walked into the building with the kind of confidence that turned heads. Shoulders back, chin high, the rhythm of her heels against the marble floor was steady and deliberate. She didn't hesitate as she moved through the lobby, straight to the elevators. People greeted her as she passed, but she barely acknowledged them, her mind set on one thing.

The elevator doors slid open, and she stepped inside, pressing the button for the top floor. The doors closed, sealing her in with her thoughts. Her grip tightened around her bag. One deep breath in. Then out.

When the elevator reached its destination, she stepped into the hallway, her pace unwavering. The receptionist at the desk, always polite, always watching, looked up from her typewriter and gave her a knowing smile.

"Good morning, Miss Louise," she said smoothly. "He's expecting you."

Frances returned the smile, just a flicker, before pushing open the heavy wooden door to Andy's office.

Inside, Andy was already rising from his chair, his grin wide, effortless as always. He came around the desk, arms open. "There she is," he said, kissing her cheek in greeting. "What was with all the mystery on the phone? You've got me curious." He said sitting back at his desk

Frances didn't sit. She reached into her bag, pulling out a folded piece of paper and a photograph, placing them deliberately on his desk. "I need you to leak this to the press tomorrow morning."

Andy's expression shifted from playful to puzzled. He picked up the paper, unfolding it. His eyes scanned the contents once, twice. Then he went still. His fingers clenched slightly around the edges of the paper. When he finally looked up, the confusion had turned into

something sharper.

"Is this a joke?" His voice was quieter now, edged with something uncertain.

Frances held his gaze. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

The room felt heavier now. Andy glanced at the photograph, then back at the paper, rubbing a hand down his face. "Frances... this is nuclear."

"Good," she said simply, tilting her chin up. "Then it'll do exactly what I need it to."

Andy stared at her, then back at the paper, his grip tightening. His pulse pounded in his ears as the weight of what she was asking sank in.

"No," he said flatly, dropping the paper onto his desk.

Frances blinked, her expression unmoving. "Excuse me?"

"I said no," he repeated, standing up abruptly. His chair scraped against the floor as he placed his hands on the desk, leaning forward. "Have you completely lost your goddamn mind?"

Frances's jaw tightened, but she stayed calm, her voice steady. "If you won't do it, I'll find someone who will."

Andy let out a bitter laugh, running a hand through his hair. "This is suicidal, Frances. You don't come back from something like this!"

She crossed her arms. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Do you?" He pointed at the paper. "Because from where I'm standing, this looks like a career suicide. Hell, it's worse than that. Do you even know what kind of firestorm this will cause?"

She took a step closer. "I don't care."

Andy scoffed, shaking his head. "Right. Of course, you don't. Let me guess...what's her face put you up to this?"

Frances frowned, thrown off for a split second. "What? Who?"

"Never mind," he snapped, waving it off. "Why would you do this? Give me one reason that will make some fucking sense."

"Because it's my life...mine...not yours...not studio's...Mine...And I'm up to here with everyone making decisions for me."

"You're not thinking straight.

Frances squared her shoulders, her voice dropping into something cold and sharp. "I'm thinking clearer than I have in years, Andy. You're either with me, or you're not."

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, pacing behind his desk before turning back to her. "Frances, listen to me...if you do this, you'll be blacklisted. You'll lose everything."

She held his gaze, unwavering. "Then be it."

His breath hitched. For the first time since they've met, he saw it, she wasn't bluffing. There was no hesitation, no fear, just pure, unshakable resolve.

"Do it," she said, voice like steel. "Or I'm finding another agent."

Andy stared at her, his expression unreadable.

Then, without another word, she turned on her heel and walked to the door.

"Frances!" he shouted.

She didn't stop.

"You'll get fired!"

She grabbed the handle, yanking the door open.

"Then be it!" she yelled back over her shoulder.

And with that, she stormed out, slamming the door behind her with a force that rattled the walls.

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Tuesday Morning – Los Angeles

The morning air was cool, carrying the distant hum of a city beginning to stir. A young paperboy, no more than twelve, pedaled swiftly down the quiet residential street, his wool flat cap pulled low against the breeze. His well-worn trousers were a little too short, his suspenders slightly crooked, but he didn't seem to mind. The heavy canvas sack slung over his shoulder was stuffed with neatly rolled newspapers, each secured with a rubber band.

With a practiced flick of his wrist, he sent a paper sailing onto a brownstone stoop, the soft *thud* echoing in the stillness. Another landed with a sharper slap against a screen door,

the porch light above flickering as if in response. He rode on, weaving expertly between parked cars, his bike's metal fenders rattling with each bump in the road.

Meanwhile, in the heart of the city, a delivery truck rumbled to a stop in front of a newsstand. The vehicle, its exterior dusted with grime from the long night's haul, bore the faded logo. The driver, a burly man in a short-sleeved work shirt despite the chill, climbed out with a grunt, reaching for the tightly bound stacks in the back. He tossed them onto the pavement with a heavy thump, the scent of fresh ink mixing with the faint aroma of coffee from the diner next door.

The news vendor, an older man with a lined face and a cigarette tucked behind his ear, crouched down and sliced through the twine with a pocketknife. As he lifted the first stack, his brows lifted in surprise, lips parting in disbelief.

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Yaz, still in her dressing gown, made her way to the front door. The faint sound of the paperboy's bike faded, but moments later, she opened the door to find the bundle of newspapers waiting at the doorstep. She smirked as she picked them up, holding them under her arm, then walked back inside.

Her footsteps echoed through the quiet hallway as she entered the kitchen, where Susan was already sitting at the table. The older woman's expression was a mix of anticipation and curiosity, her eyes gleaming with a quiet knowingness.

Yaz grinned, the mischievous glint in her eyes betraying the thrill that had been bubbling inside her. She threw the tabloid onto the table with a satisfying thud, the front page flipping open to reveal the bold headline.

EXCLUSIVE: HOLLYWOOD STARLET SECRETLY CARING FOR ILL NIECE—A FAMILY TRAGEDY UNSPOKEN!

"The fight is on," Yaz declared, her voice laced with a touch of triumph.

Susan's lips curled into a knowing smile. She walked over to the table, her voice light. "Oh well, and until it all blows over... I guess we'll have some fun."

She leaned down, kissing the top of Lily's head. The little girl, blissfully happy and completely unaware of the storm brewing around her, smiled and continued eating her breakfast.

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