

Chapter 22

After the catering company had finished clearing out the loft, restoring it to its usual state and ready for Yaz's beloved sewing machines and tools to return, the two women turned their attention to getting ready for Sunday lunch at Susan's. Spending the weekend together had been a welcome reprieve for Yaz, a moment of calm after the whirlwind of the past several weeks.

She was excited about the prospect of a few more hours with her parents before they had to leave for the airport. Their visit had been far too short, but her father's demanding schedule at the hospital and her mother's responsibilities at the store left little room for extended trips. It was back to the grind for everyone on Monday, and by then, the glamour and excitement of Saturday's event would feel like a distant memory.

Still, Yaz was determined to make the most of the time they had left. After the lunch, she and Frances planned to head straight to Santa Barbara to visit Lily. The visit had been long overdue, and Yaz was looking forward to seeing Frances's daughter in a more relaxed setting after the intensity of the weekend.

Their plans for a week-long holiday together were already in motion. Frances, always the planner, had taken it upon herself to coordinate the necessary arrangements with the school, ensuring everything would run smoothly. Yaz felt a flicker of anticipation at the thought of a proper break, a rare opportunity to leave behind the stress of work and obligations, if only for a little while.

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As they pulled up in front of Susan's house, the warmth of the sunny day and the gentle breeze couldn't quite soothe Frances's rising anxiety. Yaz grabbed the bag from the back seat, holding Susan's Tupperware like it was the most casual thing in the world. Frances, on the other hand, felt the weight of the moment settling heavily on her chest.

"I'm a bit nervous," Frances admitted, closing the car door. Her voice wavered slightly, betraying her unease. "Not sure I should really be here."

"Don't be silly, why not?" Yaz asked, pausing to give her a reassuring smile.

"It just seems a bit... awkward. Sitting across the table from your parents wasn't exactly on my bingo card for this year," Frances said with a nervous laugh. But the laughter didn't ease the uncomfortable knot in her stomach.

"Relax. It's just lunch," Yaz said, her tone lighthearted. "They don't bite. Besides," she added with a mischievous grin, "they have no clue."

Frances stopped in her tracks. "But I do," she muttered under her breath, her cheeks flushing as Yaz passed by her.

"Just breathe," Yaz said with a soft laugh, squeezing her arm before opening the door.

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Inside, the sound of laughter and conversation drifted from the kitchen. Yaz led the way confidently, but Frances hesitated. Each step felt heavier, as though her feet were sinking into quicksand. Her stomach churned as she followed Yaz.

The thought of sitting across from Yaz's parents, exchanging pleasantries with them while secretly knowing she was sharing a bed with their daughter, was mortifying her. And suddenly she realized she hadn't quite thought this through before she agreed to come. Frances swallowed hard, forcing herself to focus on Yaz's easy stride ahead of her.

As they entered the kitchen Yaz's parents looked up, their faces lighting up with warm smiles. Frances plastered on a polite smile of her own, praying they couldn't see through her mask.

Susan stood at the counter, arranging a platter of salads, while Yaz's parents were at the kitchen table.

"Hello, everyone!" Yaz greeted, her voice bright and cheerful as she leaned in to kiss her mother on the cheek.

"Hi," Frances said sheepishly, sticking close to Yaz. Her hands clutched a bottle of wine neatly wrapped with a ribbon. She extended it toward Susan with a small, hesitant smile. "This is for you. Thank you for hosting."

Susan's face lit up as she accepted the bottle. "Oh, Frances, thank you! That's so thoughtful." She leaned in slightly, her keen eyes picking up on Frances's nervous demeanor. With a quick wink and a warm smile, she whispered, "Relax, everything's going to be just fine. I'm glad you came."

Frances's shoulders eased slightly, and she let out a quiet, grateful laugh. "Thank you," she said softly, her nerves beginning to melt under Susan's reassurance.

"Frances!" Yaz's mother greeted cheerfully. "Lovely to see you again. Come, sit, make yourself comfortable."

Frances nodded, her mouth dry, as Yaz set the bag on the counter and turned to give her a small, knowing smile. Despite Yaz's calm demeanor, Frances couldn't shake the weight of her own guilt. *Breathe*, she reminded herself. *It's just lunch.*

Meanwhile, Yaz had already begun unloading the Tupperware she'd brought back. "The catering company cleared everything out this morning," she said, glancing at Susan with an exaggerated sigh of relief. "I can't wait to have my attic back the way it was. It felt so empty without my equipment."

Susan chuckled. "Well, it certainly looked beautiful last night."

"It did...but now I want my machines back...I just hope to god they haven't damaged anything"

"I'm sure they haven't"

"You must've come home really late last night?" Maya asked Frances casually, her tone warm but curious as she passed a dish across the table.

Frances felt her chest tighten, but she quickly forced a polite smile. "Oh... um... yes, quite late," she replied, her voice steady despite the slight heat creeping up her neck.

Yaz, sensing Frances's discomfort, chimed in smoothly. "We were wrapping up a few things after everyone left." she said, flashing her mother with a bright smile as she reached for the breadbasket.

Her mother nodded approvingly. "That's wonderful to hear. It's always good to have an extra pair of hands after such a big event."

Frances relaxed slightly, grateful for Yaz's quick interjection, and took a sip of water to steady herself.

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The women gathered the food to take to the dining room, leaving Frances momentarily alone with Yaz's father.

"So, Frances," he began, his tone friendly but curious. "What sort of movies do you make?"

Frances hesitated for a moment, not entirely sure how to condense her Hollywood career into a simple explanation. "Oh, a bit of everything," she said lightly. "Some drama, some comedy... it depends on a project."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. "I'll admit, I don't keep up much with films. Too busy, I suppose."

Before she could respond, Susan returned, grabbing a bowl of potatoes from the counter. "Frances, would you mind taking these into the dining room?"

“Of course,” Frances replied quickly, seizing the opportunity to excuse herself

She smiled at Yaz’s father and followed Susan into the dining room, where the table was already set with plates and glasses glinting in the midday light.

As she placed the bowl on the table, Frances took a deep breath, her nerves beginning to ease as the lively atmosphere enveloped her.

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The lunch was well underway, the table filled with the comforting hum of chatter and the occasional clink of cutlery against plates. Yaz’s parents were particularly animated, asking questions about her work at the studio and the progress of her latest projects. It was clear they were eager to catch up, bridging the gaps that letters and brief phone calls left behind.

“What’s next for you at the studio, Yasmin?” her father asked, leaning forward with genuine curiosity.

Yaz smiled, a faint blush on her cheeks. “We’re finalizing the costumes for a massive historic drama and I’m also working on one musical. A lot of late nights ahead, but it’s exciting.”

Her mother nodded approvingly, her eyes filled with pride. “I wish I could see your workspace one day.”

“Well, you need to come for longer, then I can give you a tour around the studio... It’s amazing”

“And you Frances? What are you working on?”

“A comedy at the moment. Should be wrapping up next week.”

“Must be exciting.” Maja smiled “So what made you become an actress?”

“Oh, I always loved the theatre and dreamed of becoming an actress.” She smiled “I wanted to be a singer, but I sound like someone’s torturing a bunch of cats”

The table erupted into laughter. Frances’s nerves easing off a bit more.

“I assume you went to drama school?” Yaz’s mum asked inquisitive

“Actually no, I didn’t. I started auditioning for the theatre and went to classes whilst I was already working.”

“That’s very ambitious” Yaz’s father added

"It was intense, but worth it."

The conversation gradually shifted to the past. Yaz's father mentioned something about the old days, prompting a chat about their student days.

"... So as I understand, you two met at the university?" Frances asked

"Yes" Susan nodded "We met at Bath College of Domestic Science. It offered programs in domestic subjects, including textiles and culinary arts"

"So, you went to study in England?" Frances asked

Susan nodded, smiling as memories poured "I always dreamed about going to England. So, I managed to persuade my parents to let me go and study there..."

"How did you meet?" Yaz asked

Maya chuckled, her eyes sparkling with the memory. "It was on a lunch break."

"I just started...Didn't know anyone...I think I looked lost so she took pity on me" Susan chuckled

"Noo..." Maya shook her head "It was the glasses"

"Oh my god...do not remind me...I don't know what the hell I was thinking" Susan laughed "And that was it," she said warmly. "From that day on, we were friends. I think we spent more time in that cafeteria than on a lecture" she chuckled

"Then she moved back to US, we both married" Maja smiled "But always stayed in touch"

"That's so beautiful" Frances smiled

There was a moment of silence as everyone enjoyed their meal, before Yaz's father asked, "Are you married, Frances?"

Frances froze for a second, her hand pausing mid-air before setting her glass down. She smiled nervously, her gaze shifting slightly toward Yaz before she answered. "Am... no," she said, her voice light but her heart suddenly pounding.

"How come? I'm sure someone as accomplished as you would have had many suitors." He raised an eyebrow playfully, though there was no malice in his tone.

Yaz's voice broke through before she could respond, sharp and protective. "Abba, please."

"I'm just asking," he replied, sounding far too innocent, yet his words hung in the air,

weighty, pressing against her chest.

Yaz's mother added, almost nonchalantly, "I'm sure Yaz has plenty of suitors," her tone bright, as if to reassure herself more than anyone.

"No, I don't..." Yaz muttered, rolling her eyes. She had always been dismissive of these conversations, but there was an underlying discomfort to her voice now, one that Frances couldn't ignore.

Her mother persisted, not hearing the quiet plea in Yaz's voice. "I'm sure there are plenty of nice young men who would be happy to marry you, Yasmin."

"Maaa... please, can we not talk about this?" Yaz's voice was a little more strained now, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Susan, sensing the building tension, shot Frances a quick, knowing glance. She shifted in her seat, but the conversation seemed to take on a life of its own.

Frances felt her throat tighten, her hands suddenly cold against the table.

"Oh, here we go... Every time I mention the subject," her mother muttered, shaking her head and casting a glance toward Susan for support.

"That's because you keep mentioning it," Yaz shot back, her voice now tinged with frustration

"Of course I do... It's time you started thinking about it. You can't be alone for the rest of your life," Yaz's mother continued, her voice now more serious.

"Why not?" Yaz responded, her voice firm but laced with a trace of defiance.

"Oh, don't be silly..." her mother sighed. "You need to get married, have a nice family..."

"I don't wanna get married Maa... I'm perfectly happy on my own." Yaz said quietly, her voice soft but resolute, as if repeating the words was the only way to make herself heard. "I have a life and a career...."

"But you can have both," her mother insisted, a smile that wasn't entirely convincing tugging at her lips. "I work, and I still got married, had you. She loved coming to my store when she was little." she turned to Susan as though asking for conformation

Suddenly, Yaz's voice raised, speaking in a language Frances couldn't follow. Her mother responded with an equally sharp tone, their heated discussion unfolding in rapid Punjabi.

"Bas!" Yaz's father slammed his fist on the table interjecting abruptly, his voice commanding

and final, cutting through the rising tension. "Enough with this nonsense! ...We spoke about this before. I've always given you freedom... And I'm proud of your success... But you have an obligation to your family... It's time for you to think about your future properly. I don't know who filled your head with these ideas, but you will get married like any other respectable young lady. I will have none of this in my house, Yasmin."

Frances felt a cold chill running down her spine, her stomach knotting as the weight of the moment pressed heavily on her.

There it was. The weight of cultural expectation, the invisible lines drawn between freedom and duty, family and career. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but this wasn't it.

Her heart sank, and she felt as though the blood was draining from her face. She looked at Yaz, whose expression had gone tight, her jaw clenched as if she were holding back something she couldn't say.

Frances opened her mouth to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. She could feel the air thickening, the cultural chasm between the two worlds becoming impossible to bridge. The weight of the unspoken was unbearable.

She glanced toward Yaz's mother, her face still warm, still hopeful, but their words now felt suffocating. Yaz, on the other hand, seemed distant, like a piece of herself had withdrawn, trying to make herself small in the face of this pressure. Her fingers fiddled absently with her bracelet, a small, nervous tic she'd seen only a few times before. Yaz's silence was louder than any protest she could have made

The room was silent for a beat, then her father shifted in his seat, speaking to no one in particular, but the weight of his words was impossible to miss.

"This is how it has always been," he said firmly, his tone brokering no further discussion.

Yaz's eyes glistened with unshed tears filled with struggle, the quiet rebellion that she could never fully voice when faced with the expectations of her parents. She glanced at Frances nodding her head as though signaling not to get involved.

Susan's hand sneaked underneath the table grabbing Yaz's, squeezing it tight.

The room was quiet now, the weight of the moment pressing in on all of them. The walls felt too close, the room too small. Every word, every glance seemed laden with the complexity of the cultural expectations Yaz was trying to navigate, and Frances, who was trying to understand, but her brain got muffled.

The silence stretched on, until finally, Susan cleared her throat, breaking the stillness with an abruptness that startled them all. "Right, I think it's time for dessert," she said, her voice bright and forced, as if trying to redirect the conversation before it spiraled any further.

Yaz gave her a small, grateful smile, her hand squeezing back in silent acknowledgment, though her eyes remained clouded with a storm of emotions.

"If you'll excuse me!" Frances suddenly got up. Her eyes locked with Yaz's but she just nodded refusing to follow.

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As Susan and Frances entered the kitchen, the tension from the dining room seemed to follow them like a heavy fog. Susan's frustration was palpable. She dropped the tray of leftover food onto the counter with a sharp *tud*, the sound echoing in the small space. The clatter of cutlery followed, as she threw it into the sink in a fit of barely contained irritation. Her movements were quick and sharp, a clear sign that the conversation had rattled her more than she let on.

Frances, too, was unraveling. She frantically dug through her bag, her fingers trembling as she fumbled for a packet of cigarettes. Her hands shook as she tried to light one, the lighter flickering and dying several times before she lost her patience entirely and threw it against the wall with a frustrated hiss.

Susan paused, taking in the scene for a moment, before she bent down to retrieve it. She stood up slowly, her calm demeanor in stark contrast to the chaos Frances was feeling. She walked over, gently wrapping her arms around Frances. The hug was soft, almost maternal, and for a brief moment, it offered some comfort amid the storm of emotions swirling in the room.

"I'm sorry," Frances whispered, her voice breaking slightly as she tried to steady herself.

Susan pulled back slightly but kept her hands on Frances's shoulders, looking her in the eye. "No need to apologize," she said softly, her voice calm but heavy with understanding. "I wanna smash something myself." She stepped away for a moment and then handed her the lighter before pulling out a cigarette for herself.

Frances's hands shook as she lit it. "I didn't know you..."

"I haven't for years," Susan replied with a small, tired smile. "Might start again, though." The words were casual, but there was a heaviness beneath them, something unspoken that both women knew, a shared understanding of the pressure they both felt.

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The rest of the lunch continued on as though nothing had happened, though the tension was palpable.

Frances forced herself to smile, nodding along with the conversations, but her mind kept

replaying the earlier moments. Susan, too, seemed to be on edge, her movements more abrupt than usual, her forced cheerfulness a thin veil over her own discomfort. They tried to carry on as if everything was normal, exchanging polite pleasantries, but there was a quiet distance between them now, an invisible wall that hadn't been there before.

But what struck Frances the most was Yaz's remarkable ease. She carried on with the conversation as though none of the earlier tension had ever occurred. The heaviness that had once clouded her eyes seemed to have vanished, replaced by laughter as she shared stories from the studio and chatted about New York. It left Frances adrift in a fog of emotions, confusion, disbelief, and a creeping sense of horror. She couldn't reconcile Yaz's composure with the turmoil they had just endured, and she didn't know what to think, let alone how to feel.

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Finally, the meal came to a close, and Yaz stood in a hallway to say goodbye to her parents. Her voice was warm as she spoke to them in rapid Punjabi, although unable to follow, Frances could hear the love in Yaz's tone, the quiet affection she shared with her family.

Frances stood by the door, smiling but feeling strangely distant. As Yaz's father embraced her tightly and her mother kissed her cheek. Frances felt like a stranger in the room. She managed a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. The politeness of the goodbyes was like a mask that only served to remind her how far removed she was from their reality.

Once they left, Yaz and Frances shared a brief moment of goodbye with Susan. The day had already stretched too late, and they had to hurry to Santa Barbara. But as Susan cupped Yaz's face and kissed her cheek, Frances felt a pang of something, fear, maybe.

"I'm fine, really. Nothing to worry about." Yaz tried to reassure with a smile,

But Susan didn't seem convinced. She lingered, her eyes searching Yaz's face for something, maybe reassurance, maybe something deeper.

As they finally walked toward the car, an uneasy silence hung between them, the weight of unspoken words pressing down like a storm cloud. Frances couldn't find the words to articulate what she felt, it was a suffocating blend of heaviness and unease. The entire afternoon had unsettled her, leaving her soul restless and searching for clarity she couldn't grasp.

As the car sped onto the highway, Frances's hand instinctively reached for Yaz's, her fingers threading tightly through hers in a quiet plea for steadiness.

"I love you," she said softly, her voice trembling as she lifted Yaz's hand to her lips, pressing a tender kiss to her knuckles.

"Love you too," Yaz replied in a whisper, offering a small, reassuring smile. "I'm fine, really."

Frances nodded, swallowing hard as the sting of tears gathered in her eyes. She gave Yaz's hand one last, firm squeeze before returning both hands to the wheel, her grip steady, though her heart was anything but.

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The car sped down the highway, the sound of the tires humming against the asphalt the only thing breaking the silence. They were halfway to Santa Barbara, but neither had spoken a word.

Frances's driving was erratic, a far cry from her usual fluid control behind the wheel. Her knuckles blanched as she gripped the wheel, the tension radiating from her body. The air between them was heavy, thick with everything left unsaid. Every sharp turn and sudden acceleration seemed to punctuate the storm brewing inside her.

"You haven't said anything since we left," Yaz said softly, breaking the silence. Her voice was calm, but her eyes darted toward Frances with concern. "Are you alright?"

"Of course not," Frances snapped, her voice trembling. She glanced at Yaz briefly before returning her gaze to the road. "Are you?"

"I'm fine," Yaz replied, her tone gentle but firm. She placed a reassuring hand on Frances's knee. "I told you, stop worrying. Is this about what my parents said?"

Frances's jaw tightened as she glanced at Yaz again, her brows furrowed in disbelief. "What?"

"Are you upset over what happened back there?"

Frances let out a sharp, incredulous laugh, shaking her head. "No, Yaz. I'm upset about my grass not being cut. Of course I'm upset about that! What else could it be? I'm shaking, I can't—" Her voice cracked as she nervously brushed a stray curl from her face. "I'll be fine... I just need to calm down."

She checked the rearview mirror and moved to overtake the large truck in front of them. But just as she pulled into the next lane, an oncoming car appeared out of nowhere, speeding toward them.

Yaz screamed as Frances swerved back into their lane, narrowly avoiding a collision.

"What the hell!" Yaz yelled, her heart pounding.

Frances abruptly veered off the road and slammed the brakes, the car jolting to a stop.

Yaz's hands flew to the dashboard to brace herself.

"What the hell are you doing?" Yaz shouted, her voice shaking with both anger and fear.

"I need to get my shit together," Frances muttered before throwing open the car door and stepping out, her movements frantic.

"Frances, wait!" Yaz called after her, scrambling out of the car. She caught up to Frances, who was pacing near the roadside, her hands trembling. "What's going on with you?"

"What's going on with me?" Frances turned on her, her voice raw and sharp. "What the hell is going on with you?"

"What?" Yaz blinked, caught off guard.

"Why are you so calm?" Frances's voice cracked as her emotions surged. "How... how the hell can you be so calm? You just sat there, chatting, laughing, pretending like nothing happened. Like... what the fuck was all that about? What the hell is going on? Obligation to the family?...What the fuck does that even mean? And you're just brushing it off like it's no big deal while they're planning to...what...force you ... sell you... kidnap you... What the fuck Yaz?"

Yaz's mouth opened to respond, but Frances cut her off, her voice rising. "Don't you get it...I'm losing my mind over here. It's scaring the fucking crap out of me! All I wanted to do is shove you in the car and get the fuck out of there."

Tears spilled from her eyes as she broke down completely.

"Fuck!" She kicked the tire of the car in frustration before slumping against it, her chest heaving with ragged breaths.

Yaz stood frozen, stunned by the raw vulnerability pouring out of Frances. "Hey... hey," she said softly, reaching out to her.

Frances jerked her hand away, tears streaming down her face. "Why didn't you tell me?" she cried out. "I tell you everything, Yaz. Every dirty, sick thing about my past...Why would you hide this from me? Couldn't you explain...say something, so at least I know what to expect? And I'm waiting for you to say something...anything...but you're just moooving on as if everything fine ...It's not fine!... I'm not fine! ...I'm shitting myself!" She yelled "I don't even know what to think." Her voice dropped, her chin wobbled.

"I'm sorry..." Yaz stepped closer, finally managing to wrap her arms around her. She resisted at first but then collapsed into her embrace, her hands clutching Yaz's jacket as she buried her face in her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," Yaz whispered, holding her tightly.

Frances choked out her words through sobs. "I'm scared, Yaz. I don't know what to do."

Yaz gently stroked Frances's hair, her own voice breaking. "I'm scared too," she admitted softly.

Frances pulled back slightly, her tear-streaked face searching Yaz's. "Why didn't you tell me about this? Why didn't you warn me?"

"Because I'm trying to ignore it myself," Yaz said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's why I came here," Yaz said, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"What?" Frances blinked, staring at her, her chest tightening. "What do you mean?"

Yaz exhaled deeply, her voice trembling. "They keep pushing, Franny. Keep banging on about it. You don't understand what it's like where I come from.... I needed to get away. I love my parents, I do, but very soon I'll have to choose between this and them..." She paused, her voice breaking. "...and I'll lose them when I do... because I will choose you....I'll choose my freedom," Yaz said, cradling her face in her hands, her voice resolute despite the tears streaming down her face. "But for now... I'm just trying to enjoy whatever time I have left with them."

Frances exhaled shakily, leaning her forehead against Yaz's. "Jesus Christ," she murmured, her voice raw. Her arms encircled Yaz's neck, holding her tightly as the enormity of Yaz's words settled over her.

"I can't go back Franny...As long as I'm here I'm free...."

"I'm so sorry," Frances whispered, her voice trembling as she tucked Yaz's hair gently behind her ears. Tears streaked her cheeks, her remorse etched deeply into her expression. "I'm really sorry I yelled at you. I completely lost my shit."

Yaz smiled softly, brushing her thumb along Frances's damp cheek. "Your language is quite colorful when you freak out," she teased, a light chuckle escaping her lips.

Frances let out a shaky laugh through her tears, the sound bittersweet but genuine. "Yeah, I guess it is," she admitted, her grip on Yaz easing as the tension began to dissolve.

"Come on, we'll talk about this properly, I promise...Let's just get back in a car before we both end up on tomorrow's front page." she said with a smirk.

Frances sniffled and nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "Good idea."

"Do you have any makeup on you?" Yaz chuckled "We look a right mess"

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