

Chapter 12

The hum of the plane's engine still seemed to linger in Yaz's ears as she and Frances stepped out of the bustling terminal into the cool, crisp air of New York City. A sleek black limousine awaited them on the curb, its polished chrome gleaming under the late afternoon sun. The chauffeur, dressed in a sharp black uniform, quickly opened the door then took their luggage. Frances, with her usual grace, slipped into the backseat, and Yaz followed, feeling a mixture of excitement and nervous energy building inside her.

As the car pulled away from the airport and into the heart of Manhattan, Yaz's eyes were glued to the world outside. The city in ever-shifting canvas of energy was a mix of sleek modern and old-world charm. Skyscrapers soared above them, their glass and steel exteriors shimmering against the fading daylight. She marveled at the sheer scale of it all, the towering buildings that loomed over narrow streets, casting long shadows, and the buzz of people hurrying on the sidewalks. Even the air felt different here, charged with an electricity she had never quite felt before.

They passed the iconic skyline of the Empire State Building, standing tall and proud among a sea of concrete. Neon signs flickered to life as dusk approached, advertising everything from Broadway shows to swanky nightclubs. Yellow cabs honked as they weaved through traffic, while stylish pedestrians, dressed in their tailored suits and elegant dresses, hurried by, seemingly immune to the chaos around them.

Frances leaned over and took Yaz's hand gently. "Are you doing alright, darling?" she asked, her voice soft and reassuring.

Yaz turned to look at her, momentarily pulled away from the city's allure. "I am. It's just so much. New York is bigger, louder than I imagined. It's amazing."

Frances smiled knowingly. "It can be overwhelming, especially the first time. But there's a magic to it, don't you think?"

"Definitely...I'm so excited" Yaz nodded, squeezing Frances's hand. She was thrilled to be here, in this city that had always seemed like a distant dream. But alongside the thrill came a creeping sense of insecurity. Everything was so grand, so fast, so foreign. She felt small, out of place, like a visitor in a world she hadn't quite been invited to.

As the limousine moved deeper into the city, they entered an opulent neighborhood in the Upper East Side. Here, the streets were quieter, lined with stately pre-war buildings, their stone facades and ornate detailing exuding wealth and history. Massive wrought-iron gates surrounded private courtyards, and elegant doormen stood at attention outside of grand apartment entrances. The air itself seemed to hold a different quality

here, calmer as if this part of the city had its own rhythm, far removed from the rush of downtown.

Yaz gazed out of the window in awe as they passed art galleries and exclusive boutiques, their large windows showcasing abstract paintings and designer fashion. Sculptures dotted the sidewalks, subtle indicators of the artistic wealth that permeated the neighborhood. It was the kind of place where rich artists, patrons of the arts, and eccentric millionaires lived, each apartment undoubtedly filled with stories, secrets, and works of art.

Frances, sensing Yaz's growing nerves, stroked her hand. "Victor's place is just up ahead," she said softly. "He's a dear friend, and he'll love you, Yaz. There's nothing to worry about."

Yaz smiled, but her heart raced. She had heard stories about Victor, Frances's longtime friend, a renowned photographer, and the son of an old-money business magnate. He was the kind of person who lived in a world Yaz could barely comprehend. Part of her was thrilled to meet him, to step into this rarefied space. But another part of her, one that had always been quieter, more insecure, felt out of her depth. What if she didn't belong here?

The limousine pulled up in front of a grand Art Deco building, towering and graceful, with a doorman already waiting to open the car door.

"We're here," Frances whispered, squeezing Yaz's hand again before stepping out.

Yaz followed, staring up at the building's sheer size. It seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky. As they entered the lavish marble lobby, with its high ceilings and gleaming chandeliers, she felt as if she had stepped into another world entirely.

Victor's apartment was on the top floor. The elevator, an elegant contraption with brass detailing, hummed softly as it whisked them upward. Yaz could feel her palms sweating as the elevator doors finally slid open, revealing a massive, open space filled with light and color. Victor's home was like nothing she had ever seen before, a blend of modern art, quirky antiques, and luxurious furnishings. Abstract paintings and his own photographs adorned the walls, and the furniture was an eclectic mix of sleek leather chairs and plush velvet sofas. Large windows offered breathtaking views of the New York skyline, the city's lights twinkling like stars in the distance.

Victor appeared from a side room, dressed in a loose-fitting silk shirt and tailored trousers, his dark hair tousled in an artfully disheveled manner. His eyes lit up when he saw Frances, and he rushed over, embracing her warmly.

"Frances, darling! It's been too long," he exclaimed, his voice rich with affection.

Frances hugged him back, laughing softly. "It has. I've missed you so much."

Yaz stood back, watching the closeness between them. There was an undeniable intimacy in the way they touched, the way their laughter mingled in the air. It wasn't just friendship, it was deeper than that, something that made her feel curious.

Victor turned his gaze to Yaz, his smile widening. "And you must be Yaz," he said, stepping forward and taking her hand. "Frances has told me so much about you. I'm thrilled you're here."

Yaz smiled, though her heart was still racing. "It's wonderful to meet you, Victor. Your home is... incredible...all the artwork...it looks like a gallery."

"Oh, it's nothing compared to some in this city " Victor waved a hand dismissively. "I'll show you around when you get settled. You must be tired..." He glanced between Yaz and Frances, his sharp eyes taking in more than was said aloud. "But I'm sure you'll make yourself right at home."

"So, darling," Victor's voice was warm as he freely took Frances's hand into his own, a playful glint in his eye. "Are you up for the party tonight?"

Frances moved with ease through the space, her familiarity evident as she strolled hand-in-hand with Victor. The two of them seemed at home in this world of luxury and artistic expression, their shared history visible in every smile and touch

She let out a soft, melodic laugh. "What, already?" She shook her head, the sound of her laughter filling the room as she gracefully sank onto the plush sofa. "We just landed."

"Well," Victor said with his characteristic dramatic flair, making his way toward the small bar in the corner, "you're only here for three days, and I simply must use my time wisely. I was thinking dinner, perhaps a little music to follow. Something simple but divine." He flashed a grin as he took the glasses out "Drinks my ladies?"

Frances reclined on the sofa, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at him. "Some wine, please."

Victor turned to Yaz, who had been quietly taking in her surroundings, her eyes roaming over the luxurious room. The weight of the opulence and the evening ahead still pressed on her, though she did her best to hide it.

"And for you, dear?" Victor asked, his tone warm and welcoming.

Yaz gave a small, polite smile. "Oh, I don't drink alcohol."

"No worries at all, darling. I'm sure we have plenty of other delightful options." With a practiced motion, he pressed a small buzzer built discreetly into the wall near the bar.

Frances watched him, clearly accustomed to this level of service, while Yaz was still taking it all in, the sense of another world wrapping around her.

Frances turned toward Yaz, sensing the hint of uncertainty lingering behind her composed exterior. Her voice softened with affection, "Are you up for it, darling? Going out for dinner?"

Yaz hesitated for only a moment, trying to push aside the nerves that had settled in her chest. "I suppose so," she said, her voice a little more uncertain than she'd hoped. She glanced between Frances and Victor, still unsure of what she'd agreed to, but willing to let the excitement of the city carry her through. She was here, in New York, ready to explore, even if she wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

"Fantastic!" Victor exclaimed with delight.

He passed Frances her glass of wine, his movements fluid and graceful, before leaning in and pressing a familiar kiss to her cheek. The closeness between them, the ease of their affection, didn't go unnoticed by Yaz, though she didn't dwell on it.

A soft knock on the doorframe interrupted the moment as Henry, the butler, entered the room.

Victor turned to him with a smile, motioning toward Yaz. "Henry, would you bring Miss Khan a drink? What would you like, love?"

Yaz smiled politely, still feeling a little out of place. "I'm not fussy, some juice would be great."

Henry gave a small nod of acknowledgment and retreated quietly from the room, leaving them in a comfortable stillness.

Frances leaned in closer, her hand finding Yaz's as her fingers lightly brushed over her knuckles. "You're going to love it," she whispered

Yaz returned the smile, though her thoughts were still swirling. She felt caught between two worlds, the one she knew and the one she was just beginning to understand. But with Frances beside her, everything felt just a little less daunting. Frances had a way of making her feel as though she belonged, no matter where they were, and Yaz held on to that feeling for whatever the night had in store.

The elevator doors slid open again, and the doorman stepped out with their luggage in tow. Victor led Frances and Yaz through a long corridor that was every bit as grand as the rest of the apartment. Tall ceilings, intricate moldings, and large art pieces lined the walls. The soft glow of vintage sconces illuminated their path, giving the space a timeless feel.

"This way, darlings," Victor said, walking ahead with a graceful sway over the polished wood floors. He opened a pair of tall, double doors and gestured them inside. "Your home away from home."

As the dormen was leaving their luggage in the room, Yaz took on the space. The guest suite was breathtaking. A large, open room with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto the shimmering skyline of New York City. The decor was a perfect mix of modern and vintage, a mid-century velvet sofa in a deep green sat beneath a large abstract painting, while a 1920s vanity gleamed softly in the corner, its mirror framed in gold. The bed was king-sized, draped in a luxurious cream bedspread with pillows piled high in shades of silver and gold.

"I hope this is comfortable for you both," Victor said with a smile, taking a step back to let them take it all in. "If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to call. You have the place to yourselves"

Frances gave him a warm hug. "Thank you, Victor. It's perfect, as always."

Victor kissed her on the cheek and then turned to Yaz, offering her a reassuring smile. "I'll let you two settle in." With that, he left, closing the doors quietly behind him.

Yaz stood in the center of the room, trying to absorb the sheer elegance of it all. She felt overwhelmed by the opulence, the vastness of the space, and the life Frances lived so easily. Everything felt larger than life, from the grand furnishings to the breathtaking view. She found herself drawn to the window, walking slowly toward it and gazing out at the city below. The lights of Manhattan stretched out endlessly, twinkling like stars in the crisp night air. The sound of the distant city hum was faint, muted by the height of the apartment, but still there, a constant reminder of the world they were in.

Frances, always attuned to Yaz's emotions, quietly approached from behind. Her footsteps were soft on the plush rug, and soon, she was standing close, her hands gently resting on Yaz's shoulders. She didn't say anything at first, just letting her presence speak for itself.

After a moment, Frances spoke, her voice as soft and soothing as a lullaby. "What's on your mind, my love?"

Yaz sighed, pressing her fingers against the cool glass of the window. "It's just... all of this," she said quietly. "It's so beautiful, so grand. But I'm not sure I fit into any of it. Your world, this world, it feels like a dream, and I... I feel so small in it."

Frances wrapped her arms around Yaz from behind, pulling her close in a tender embrace. She rested her chin on Yaz's shoulder, her lips grazing her neck lightly. "You don't have to fit into anything, darling," Frances whispered. "This world doesn't define you, and it doesn't define us. You're here because you belong with me, not because of any of this."

Yaz turned her head slightly, her eyes searching Frances's. "But what if I can't be the person who walks through these halls with ease? What if I never feel like I belong?"

Frances reached up, gently cupping Yaz's face, her thumb brushing against her cheek. Her gaze was steady, full of love and understanding. "You belong with me, and that's all that matters. It's not about the glitz or the glamour. It's about us, right here, in this moment.... You're enough, just as you are darling. " She leaned forward, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to Yaz's lips, her warmth offering reassurance and comfort.

Yaz's breath hitched slightly as she closed her eyes, savoring the tenderness of the kiss. When they parted, she rested her forehead against Frances's, her heart swelling. "I love you." she whispered.

Frances smiled, her arms still wrapped securely around Yaz. "I love you too...so much."

"I promised I'll call Susan" she asked hesitantly

"You can use the phone, it's okay" she pointed to the side table.

Frances turned her towards the window, her arms wrapping around her as a comforting blanket, her head resting on Yaz's shoulder as she spoke softly. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's gorgeous" Yaz smiled savouring the tender moment between them. She exhaled, feeling the weight of her worries lift ever so slightly, the warmth of Frances's love settling deep in her bones.

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As night settled over New York, the mood in spacious guest suite was one of quiet excitement. They were getting ready for dinner at El Morocco, one of the most exclusive and glamorous supper clubs in the city, and Frances had promised that it would be an unforgettable night.

Frances sat by the make-up table, her hairdresser carefully sculpting her hair into soft waves. In the large mirror, Frances glanced at Yaz, who was sitting on the edge of the bed. "You look exhausted darling. Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"I'm tired, but I'm sure I'll be fine once I get out."

"Just let me know when you wanna go home. It's been a long day."

"Alright" she smiled

The makeup artist was meticulously applying the final touches to Frances's makeup, winged eyeliner and light red lips that perfectly matched her ruby satin gown. Her

jewelry was simple but dazzling, diamond drop earrings and a bracelet that glimmered softly under the soft lighting.

Yaz, on the other hand, was still in her dressing gown, her dress hanging on the closet door. She looked at the makeup artist, who was now turning her attention toward her, "Let's make you shine, dear."

Yaz sat back as the makeup artist went to work, carefully applying foundation, blush, and eyeliner. Her lips were painted a soft rose, the perfect complement to her dress, while her hair was styled into loose, elegant waves that cascaded down her back. By the time they were finished, she hardly recognized herself. She looked... radiant.

As the women left, leaving them alone again, Frances watched with a tender smile as Yaz stood before the mirror, admiring her reflection. She looked stunning in the sleek, off-the-shoulder emerald cocktail dress that hugged her figure perfectly. The rich color brought out the warmth of her complexion, and the fit accentuated her silhouette in all the right ways. It was one of Frances's own dresses, lent to her for the evening, as she didn't own anything quite this glamorous.

"You look breathtaking," Frances whispered, moving to stand behind her and wrapping her arms around her waist. "Are you ready?"

Yaz nodded, though her heart was still racing. "As ready as I'll ever be." she smiled lacing their fingers together.

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The sleek, black limousine pulled up in front of 'El Morocco'. Located in the east midtown area of Manhattan, from the outside, the club didn't have the grandiose look one might expect from such a famous nightclub. Instead, it appeared fairly understated, with a simple facade that blended into the neighborhood. A modest canopy above the entrance didn't give any indication of the glamorous interior.

The night air was crisp, but the excitement of the city buzzed all around them. Frances stepped out first, effortlessly graceful in her black satin gown, followed by Yaz, stunning in Frances's emerald dress, and Victor, always the dapper one in his perfectly tailored suit. The soft glow of the streetlights illuminated the entrance, where New York's elite were already gathering. Yaz's heart raced as she took in the grandness of it all, her eyes sweeping over the opulent interior and the stylish patrons who flitted about like movie stars, though in Frances's case, she actually was one. Frances, sensing Yaz's nerves, gave her a reassuring smile and hooked her arm into Yaz's before leading the way inside

As they stepped into the plush, dimly lit interior with the distinct zebra-striped décor. The atmosphere changed to softer, more intimate. The band played softly in the

background, the buzz of conversation mingling with the clink of glasses. Waiters in crisp uniforms floated past, and the whole scene felt like something out of a dream.

"Right this way, darlings," Victor said with a slight flourish, guiding them to a prime table. Heads turned as they passed, eyes lingering on Frances, but also on Yaz, whose exotic beauty in Frances's dress made her stand out even more.

As they settled into their seats, a waiter arrived promptly to take their drink orders. Victor, always the gracious host, ordered a round of champagne for the table, though Yaz opted for something non-alcoholic.

Frances glanced around the room, her eyes lighting up as she spotted a few familiar faces. She leaned over to Yaz. "Are you alright darling?"

"I think so" she nodded with a bright smile

"Oh, she's fine..." Victor smiled at her "Give her half hour and she'll be dancing"

Yaz giggled, her nerves settling down slowly.

Within minutes, a couple approached the table. Frances rose to greet them with bright smile, her arms outstretched. "Darling, it's so good to see you!" She kissed the cheek of a tall, elegant woman in a silver gown, then turned to introduce Yaz. "This is Yasmin Khan. She's a brilliant designer and my business partner."

Yaz stood, offering her hand with a smile. The woman greeted her warmly, her husband offering a nod and a polite handshake. Small pleasantries passed between them, but Frances handled the conversation with such effortless grace that Yaz felt herself easing into the rhythm of the evening.

Just as they sat back down, Victor's friend, a flamboyant man named Robert, made his entrance with an air of drama. He strolled over to their table with arms wide open. "Victor.... You haven't been keeping these beauties to yourself, have you?"

Victor grinned, standing to greet him. "Of course not. You're late as always."

Robert chuckled, his eyes twinkling as he turned to Frances. "Frances, you're stunning as ever! And who's this goddess you've brought along?"

"This is Yaz," Frances said, beaming. "Yaz, meet Robert. He's practically family."

"Charmed," Robert said, offering a hand to Yaz with a dramatic bow. "Anyone who can sit beside Frances and hold their own is a treasure in my book."

Yaz blushed, her earlier nerves giving way to amusement as Robert's playful energy enveloped the table. Victor signaled the waiter for another glass, and soon Robert was seated, fully integrated into the conversation.

As the champagne flowed freely, the room came alive with laughter. Victor leaned back in his chair, his eyes twinkling as Robert animatedly recounted a recent photoshoot debacle.

"So, there I am, trying to get this model to stop pouting like a duck," Robert began, his hands gesturing wildly. "I just wanted something real, you know? And she's standing there, stiff as a mannequin!"

Frances chuckled, taking a sip of her drink. "Maybe she was just petrified when she saw your apartment, Robert. Honestly, it looks like you're stashing bodies under the floorboards."

Yaz furrowed her brows, glancing between them. "Wait, what?"

Victor smirked, leaning in to clarify. "He's got a collection of Victorian oddities. Very... unique."

"Unique?" Frances teased. "It's creepy! Anyway, did you ever get the shot?"

"I did," Robert nodded triumphantly. "Took a while, though."

"Frances would understand," Victor said, turning to Yaz with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Did she ever tell you about her first shoot?"

Frances groaned, already anticipating the story. "Victor, don't you dare."

"Oh, I dare," Victor grinned, undeterred. "Yaz, you should've seen it. Frances wasn't always the goddess you see before you. Her first photoshoot was... well, memorable."

Yaz's eyes widened with curiosity as Frances buried her face in her hands, laughing despite herself.

"Picture it," Victor continued, his voice dripping with nostalgia. "A cramped, rundown studio, floorboards creaking with every step, lighting so dim you could barely see your hand in front of your face. But there she was, this breathtaking beauty, walking in like she owned the place."

Frances couldn't help but interject, "Oh my god, I was a mess."

"So," Victor pressed on, "we start the shoot. She spends half the time trying to figure out where to look, classic rookie move, right? Then comes the pièce de résistance. I ask her to pose on this old, rickety chair. 'Lean over,' I say, 'lift your leg, give me that pin-up

look.' She does...and bam! The chair flips over, and down she goes, headfirst onto the floor."

"Oh no!" Yaz gasped.

"I swear," Frances giggled, "I thought I'd never model again. There I was, bleeding on the floor, sobbing like a child, my makeup completely ruined. And Victor? He's running around like a madman, banging on the neighbor's door, screaming, 'Help! There's a woman bleeding in my studio! I swear I didn't do it!'"

The entire table erupted into laughter, including Yaz, who had finally relaxed, fully swept up in the warmth of the group.

Victor wiped a tear from his eye, still laughing. "I thought I was going to jail for sure. The poor old lady next door looked at me like I was a murderer!"

"And then we ended up in the emergency room," Frances added. "The doctors asked him if he was my husband, and he, in his panic, says, 'No, I don't know her!'"

Yaz was laughing so hard she could barely breathe.

"Next thing you know," Victor chimed in, "they're questioning me about why a strange woman was in my apartment."

"You're lucky you didn't get arrested," Robert quipped.

Victor grinned and pulled Frances closer, draping an arm around her. "But, in the end, it was worth it. It was the start of something beautiful."

Frances smiled softly at him, her eyes full of affection. "You nearly gave up on me after that shoot."

Victor shook his head with mock seriousness. "Never. I knew from the moment I saw you you were going to be a star."

As Yaz observed the exchange, she couldn't help but feel the depth of their connection. It wasn't just professional; it was a friendship built on years of shared experiences, laughter, and mutual support.

Interrupting her thoughts, Robert turned to Yaz with a charming smile. "So, Yaz... care to dance?"

Yaz hesitated for just a second, glancing at Frances, who gave her an encouraging nod and smile. She stood, taking Robert's hand as he led her to the dance floor.

Victor turned to Frances. "What about you, darling? Fancy a spin?"

"Always," Frances grinned, taking his hand.

As the music played, they danced, laughter and joy swirled around them. Though the world of glamour and fame still felt daunting to Yaz, sitting at that table, surrounded by such genuine company, she began to feel like maybe, just maybe, she could find her own place in it too.

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As Yaz drifted off to sleep, worn out from the long day, Frances quietly slipped out of the bedroom and into the living room. Victor stood by the bar, pouring himself another drink.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now," he said with a grin, handing her a glass of scotch as she approached.

"I guess I'm too wired to sleep," Frances replied with a playful smile.

Victor chuckled, raising his glass. "Well, I'm flattered."

Frances laughed softly, clinking her glass against his. "Oh, don't flatter yourself. I meant I'm excited about the parties, not you."

He feigned a wounded expression. "Ouch. And here I was, thinking you actually adored me."

"I do," she teased, taking a sip. "You've always been a confidence booster. It's wonderful having you around."

Victor moved closer, standing behind her as she looked out the window. "You're the kind of woman I could only dream of being," he whispered, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Frances turned to him, her expression tender as she gently placed her palm on his cheek. "You've always been that person in my eyes," she said in a soft tone. "And so much more."

Victor smiled, kissing her palm. "We've always been dreamers, haven't we?"

Frances chuckled as she turned back to the window. "I sometimes wonder what our club would've been like if things turned out differently."

"Scandalous," he quipped with his usual dramatic flair.

Frances laughed. "Definitely."

"Beautiful girls, beautiful boys, champagne, and glitter everywhere."

"And diamonds, darling," she added with a mischievous wink. "Always diamonds."

Victor chuckled, his eyes sparkling. "You know, you could always come back if you get bored...or if you decide to elope with your lovely girlfriend."

Frances chuckled, shaking her head. "I suppose Yaz could design the costumes for the club."

Victor's tone softened as he looked at her. "You seem happy."

"As happy as I can be," Frances replied, her voice contemplative.

Victor poured himself another drink, leaning against the window frame. "I suppose life is like bingo. We keep playing, hoping to hit the jackpot."

Frances smiled gently, her eyes soft. "I think I've got a winning card this time around."

Victor leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek, the warmth of their shared history lingering in the quiet moment. They stayed up for a little longer, catching up and enjoying each other's company.

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Frances quietly made her way back to the bedroom, the warm lighting of the apartment casting long shadows as she moved.

As she slipped under the covers, Yaz murmured softly in her sleep, her body instinctively shifting closer to Frances. Smiling to herself, Frances gently wrapped her arm around Yaz's waist, pulling her closer. She buried her face in the cascade of Yaz's dark hair, breathing in the familiar, soothing scent that she had come to love so deeply.

In the stillness of the night, Frances's thoughts wandered as she held Yaz close. It wasn't just the warmth of the embrace or the way Yaz fit perfectly against her—it was the overwhelming sense of peace and love she felt. She'd been through so much in her life, faced so many uncertainties, yet somehow, with Yaz beside her, it all felt right. Everything felt like it had led to this moment, this love. She loved her deeply, completely, and without hesitation.

Frances pressed a soft kiss to Yaz's shoulder, her heart full as she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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