

Chapter 19

Frances sat engrossed in her book, Yaz nestled peacefully against her side, her breathing soft and steady. The quiet comfort of the moment stretched on, the world outside forgotten until the sharp crackle of fireworks shattered the stillness. Startled, Yaz stirred, her eyes fluttering open in confusion.

She blinked, taking in the glow outside before her gaze settled on Frances.

"It's midnight, darling," Frances smiled

"I fell asleep... I'm sorry." she said softly, her lips curving into a sleepy smile.

Frances chuckled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "Don't be silly," she said, her voice warm. "Come on, let's watch the fireworks."

Pulling Yaz to her feet, they moved to the window, the night sky was alive with color. Explosions of red, gold, and blue lit up the dark, painting fleeting masterpieces across the horizon.

"Look!" Yaz exclaimed, her voice carrying over the crackle of fireworks as a massive burst painted the sky in gilded veins of light, shimmering like molten gold against the dark canvas.

But Frances's attention was elsewhere. Her eyes, unyielding, traced the lines of Yaz's face. The way the colors danced in her wide, luminous eyes, each flicker of light finding its reflection in their depths. Yaz's dimples carved soft crescents into her cheeks, her laughter rippling through the night like a melody Frances never wanted to end.

A warmth swelled in Frances's chest, filling spaces she hadn't realized were empty. She felt as though she were seeing love itself in motion, fragile, effervescent, and achingly beautiful. Yaz stood unguarded and radiant, and Frances found herself transfixed. Her presence was a storm and a solace, as if she carried a light inside her that could both ignite and soothe.

The fire in the sky paled against the one Frances felt in her soul.

Yaz turned suddenly, the spark of excitement still bright in her gaze.

"Did you see? Wasn't it gorgeous?" she asked, her voice brimming with delight.

Frances's lips parted, but her answer came softly, as though speaking too loudly might shatter the fragile perfection of this moment. "I did," she whispered. But she wasn't speaking of the fireworks.

Frances reached for her hand, their fingers weaving together effortlessly. She leaned closer, her voice a gentle whisper. "Happy New Year, love."

Yaz grinned, her arms looping around Frances's waist. "Happy New Year," she murmured

Their lips met, slow and lingering, as Frances's hand cradled Yaz's cheek, pulling her closer still.

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The morning sun filtered through the curtains, casting soft light across the bed where Yaz stirred, a sleepy smile curling on her lips. She rolled over, burying her face into the pillow, savoring the warmth of the bed. But then, a loud crash, a pot smashing on the floor made her jump, her eyes snapping open. Glancing lazily at her watch, her eyes widened. Almost ten o'clock. She had slept like a baby, the first full night of rest in what felt like forever.

Frances hovered over the stove, juggling too many tasks at once. The bacon spat fiercely in the pan, a few edges already darkened to a crisp. She winced, nudging the strips to the cooler side with a fork, but they seemed determined to rebel. The sausages cooked unevenly, one side browning faster than the other, while the mushrooms soaked up more butter than she'd planned.

She glanced at the eggs in the next pan, debating whether to flip them or leave them sunny-side up. The toast under the grill began to smoke faintly, and she scrambled to rescue it just in time, its edges slightly charred.

She took the bacon out with a sigh, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "Well, it's edible... probably,"

With a contented stretch, Yaz rolled out of bed, her bare feet tapping softly against the floor. The sizzling scent of sausages, warm butter and fresh toast hit her nose, stronger now, making her stomach grumble in hunger. She couldn't help but grin. Whatever Frances was making, it smelled delicious. Curiosity getting the better of her, she padded toward the kitchen peeking through the door.

There stood Frances, still in her blue silky pajamas, humming along with the tune on the radio, completely oblivious as she was fumbling, turning the eggs in a pan. A mischievous grin spread across Yaz's face. She couldn't resist. Silently, she crept up behind her, slipping her arms around her waist.

The other woman let out a blood-curdling scream, nearly dropping the pan in her hand. She froze, wide-eyed, her body going limp from the shock. Yaz burst into laughter, quickly catching her before she could fall.

"Jesus! You're trying to give me a heart attack!" Frances smacked Yaz with the dish towel she'd grabbed in her flustered state.

Yaz's laughter rang out, breathless and uncontrollable. "They heard that to Wyoming!" she gasped, still laughing. "Well, those eggs are definitely scrambled now."

Frances whacked her again, harder this time. "I thought someone broke in!"

Yaz was doubled over with laughter. "And started cuddling you?" she howled, laughing so hard she couldn't breathe.

"You dumbass!" Frances pouted, her voice mocking, but it was clear she was starting to laugh too.

Yaz managed to calm herself long enough to pull her in "Are you making me breakfast?" she murmured wrapping her arms around her waist, her voice softening.

"Yep," Frances replied, her tone dripping with mock sulking. "A real British one as it goes..."

"Really?" Yaz raised an eyebrow, peeking over Frances's shoulder as she eyed the pan on the stove. "That bacon's a bit carbonized." she teased

"Get lost!" Frances huffed, pushing her away, but instead she was pulled into a kiss.

As they pulled apart, their foreheads resting against each other, Frances smiled softly. "And baked beans," she added with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Sounds awesome" She smiled

Suddenly, Frances broke the moment with a dramatic gasp. "Eggs!" she shouted, jumping toward the stove. "Damn!" She scrambled to take them off the heat, flustered as she stared at the slightly charred remnants in the pan. "I think they're burned..."

"They're fine," Yaz murmured, her arms wrapping around Frances from behind

"They're a disaster"

"They're perfect." she squeezed her tighter kissing the back of her neck gently, her smile wide and content.

Frances sighed in relief, leaning back into Yaz's arms as the two of them stood there, the quiet hum of the radio in the background, both basking in the easy, loving moment.

"Guess I need to work on my timing," Frances said with real disappointment in her voice.

"You're perfect," Yaz whispered palming her stomach, her lips brushing against the soft skin of Frances's neck.

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Frances moved around the breakfast table, her joy evident in the lightness of her step. Yaz stood by the stove, frying fresh eggs to replace the burned ones from earlier. A faint smirk tugging at her lips as Frances passed by, leaning in to grab the salt and pepper shakers and press a playful kiss to her cheek. Her fingers brushing Yaz's hip in a gentle, unspoken gesture of affection.

"Thanks for salvaging breakfast," she said warmly.

Yaz giggled, the touch sending a quiet warmth through her. "It's only fair after what I did to you." Her eyes sparkled with laughter as she placed the last plate on the table.

These were the rare moments that made them feel like any ordinary couple, a fleeting gift they both cherished.

"I was going to ask," Frances began, pouring them both coffee. "What about Susan? Did she stay home last night?"

"Oh no. She went to the local community center. They had a New Year's dance."

"That's nice. Does she have friends there?"

"Yes," Yaz nodded. "A woman from her cake shop and a few others she knows. She wasn't alone, so that's something. She seemed really chuffed about it."

"It would be nice if she met someone. It must get lonely for her."

Yaz tilted her head slightly, her expression softening. "It would, but I'm not sure how open she is to the idea. We've never talked about it."

"Shame," Frances murmured. "She's a lovely woman, strong, independent. Not that she needs a man to support her, but just... companionship. Being alone is the worst for me. I hate it." Frances said quietly, folding the napkins on the table.

"Maybe she prefers it. She's been through so much. Losing her family must hurt more than anyone can imagine."

"I can't even imagine that," Frances agreed. "Sometimes, you love someone so much, you just can't move on."

Yaz nodded. "She adored her husband. She doesn't talk about it much, and I don't press. It's private I guess."

"Of course...Oh darling...I need your help with something," Frances said, her voice soft as she began placing cutlery on the table.

"Sure, with what, hun?" Yaz replied, dividing the eggs onto two plates.

Frances hesitated for a moment, then said, "I want to turn one of my spare room into Lily's room...I got some wallpaper samples, I thought we choose together"

Yaz paused mid-motion, the pan still in her hand. "Bloody hell Franny, you did a U-turn in a week," she remarked, her tone playful but laced with curiosity as she set the pan back on the stove.

"I knooow," Frances admitted, drawing the word out with a pout. Her gaze dropping to the table as she twisted a napkin in her fingers, uncertainty creeping into her demeanor. "It's a stupid idea...forget it"

The words cut through Yaz's ears. She walked over and placed a comforting hand on Frances's shoulder, her voice gentle. "I didn't say it was stupid...What's a ling face for?"

Frances let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging. "Nothing... I'm flying off with myself, that's all."

Yaz paused for a moment then pulled out a chair
"C'mere" she said and gently tugged Frances onto her lap wrapping her arms around her
"Talk to me" she said softly pressing a tender kiss to Frances's shoulder, her voice soothing. "What's bothering you?" She gave her a little playful squeeze

Frances leaned her head against Yaz's, her voice trembling as she finally spoke. "It's just something Lily said that's been eating at me."

"What did she say, darling?"

"You know when she was leaving after Christmas?" Frances began, her hazel eyes clouded with emotion. "She asked me to bring the dollhouse here so she could play with it."

"Oh..."

"I didn't know what to say." Frances's voice cracked, her frustration spilling out. "What the hell do you say to that? *'You can't cause you're my dirty secret?'*"

"Franny... don't," Yaz murmured "You know it's not like that"

"But it's true, isn't it?" Frances said, her gaze locking onto Yaz's, her eyes searching desperately for comfort. "Does it even matter what it is? You should've seen her face. She was so hopeful, and I just... I felt like the worst person on the planet." Her composure crumbled, tears spilling out of her eyes and she buried her face in Yaz's neck

"Hey, hey," Yaz whispered, tipping her chin up gently so their eyes met. "First of all, you're not a bad person, and you're not a bad mum either, alright? You're doing the best you can."

"If that's the best it's pathetic" Frances sniffled, her lip trembling.

"None of us have all the answers, Franny," Yaz continued softly, brushing a stray curl from Frances's face. "You love Lily with everything you have, and she knows that. She's not your dirty secret, she's someone you love more than anything and you're doing everything to

protect her.... that's not something to feel guilty about."

Frances swallowed hard, her tears slowing as Yaz's words began to soothe her aching heart.

"What if I screw this up?"

"Is this what this is all about?" Yaz cupped Frances's face in her hand, her own eyes shining with emotion. "You're not gonna screw it up," she assured her firmly.

"But what if I do? What if I fail her... What if I promise things I can't keep and she ends up hating me for it?" Frances's voice wavered, fear and doubt clouding her features.

"Hey," Yaz said softly, taking Frances's hand and pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles. "You're not gonna fail her... okay? And you're not alone. We'll talk about it, make decisions together, alright? We'll make this work. I promise...I have no idea how... But we will... Alright? And we're not gonna give up until we do... okay?"

Frances nodded, blinking her tears away. "I love you," she whispered, her voice steadier now as she twirled the collar of Yaz's pajamas through her fingers.

"Love you too... so much," Yaz replied, her smile warm and reassuring. "Now... wanna show me the wallpaper samples after breakfast?"

Frances laughed softly, the sound mingling with her lingering tears as she wiped them from her cheeks. "Yeah... but your breakfast just got cold."

"That's okay... I love cold eggs," Yaz quipped, her British accent adding a playful lilt to her words as she leaned in to kiss Frances tenderly. The kiss was soft and lingering, a blend of love and determination.

As they pulled apart, Frances looked into Yaz's eyes, finding strength and solace in their shared gaze. "Thank you," she whispered, her heart feeling lighter despite the weight of her fears.

Yaz smiled, her fingers gently tracing the lines of Frances's face. "It's gonna be fine...you'll see."

She wasn't sure if it will, and if she was to be honest with herself, she wasn't sure of anything. How their lives or relationship can withstand the pressures of social norms placed on them. She wasn't sure what their future would look like, or if there was one to begin with. But lingering in hopes and dreams was all they had, little stolen moments behind closed doors where the outside world ceased to exist, where their love for each other blossomed, steadfast and hidden between the sheets and shadows.

They sat there for a moment longer, the room filled with the quiet sounds of their shared breaths and the soft hum of the kitchen radio. It was in these tender, imperfect moments that their bond deepened, a testament to their resilience and unwavering love for each other and for Lily.

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Frances pulled into the small parking lot outside the catering company, smoothing her skirt as she stepped out of the car. It was a brisk January mornin and the city buzzed with its usual energy. The grand opening of Yaz's studio loft was just two weeks and, and Yaz was swamped with work. Frances, determined to lighten her load, took on herself to organise the event.

Inside, the catering office was modest but bustling. The scent of roasted meats, freshly baked bread, and herbs hung in the air. A well-dressed woman in her early forties approached Frances with a welcoming smile.

"Good morning Miss Louise" the woman said, extending her hand.

"Morning," Frances replied warmly. "And you are Mrs. Wilcox, I presume? We spoke on a phone?"

"That's right," Mrs. Wilcox said.

"I do apologise for such a rush. I have a busy schedule recently, no time for anything. I do appreciate you finding time to squeeze this in."

"That's alright, I'm pleased we could help. We've set up a tasting table for you. Please, come this way."

Frances followed her to a small, neatly set table adorned with a white cloth and silverware. Plates of miniature versions of their menu items were arranged, each labeled with a small card.

"This is just a selection of what we can offer," Mrs. Wilcox explained. "For an event like this, we usually recommend finger foods and canapés, something easy for guests to enjoy while mingling."

Frances nodded, her eyes scanning the spread. "That makes sense. Miss Khan wants the event to feel elegant but also approachable."

"Shall we start with the hors d'oeuvres?" Mrs. Wilcox asked, gesturing to a plate of smoked salmon rolls and deviled eggs.

Frances picked up a salmon roll and took a small bite, nodding thoughtfully. "This is lovely, light but flavorful. And the presentation is beautiful."

"Thank you," Mrs. Wilcox replied, clearly pleased. "We can also do miniature beef wellingtons, stuffed mushrooms, and prawn cocktails served in little glasses."

Frances made a note in her small notebook. "I think the beef wellingtons would be perfect. Classic British dishes with a twist...I love it."

Mrs. Wilcox moved to the next plate. "For the mains, we've prepared a few options for buffet-style service...roasted chicken with herbs, honey-glazed ham, and a vegetarian quiche."

Frances sampled a bite of the quiche, nodding approvingly. "I assume everything can be served warm?"

"Absolutely," Mrs. Wilcox confirmed. "We can arrange for warming trays to keep everything at the proper temperature."

"Wonderful," Frances said, jotting it down. "And for desserts?"

Mrs. Wilcox smiled, clearly proud of the next offerings. "We've prepared miniature éclairs, fruit tarts, and a classic Victoria sponge, served as individual slices."

Frances's face lit up at the sight of the fruit tarts. "Oh, these are gorgeous. Yaz adores anything with fresh fruit."

As Frances tasted the tart, Mrs. Wilcox continued. "We'll also provide tea and coffee service, and perhaps a champagne station for the toast?"

"Yes, champagne is a must," Frances agreed. "Do you also provide staff for serving?"

"We do," Mrs. Wilcox said. "Our servers will ensure everything runs smoothly. They'll wear formal attire to match the tone of the event."

"Perfect," Frances said, leaning back slightly. "I think we have most of it sorted. Now, how soon would you need final numbers?"

"One week in advance is ideal," Mrs. Wilcox replied. "And we'll handle the setup, so you won't need to worry about a thing on the day."

"That's a relief," Frances said with a smile. "My friend has been working so hard. I just want this to be perfect for her."

"It will be," Mrs. Wilcox assured her. "You're clearly putting a lot of thought into this."

Frances stood, shaking Mrs. Wilcox's hand. "Thank you so much for your help. I'll confirm the final details by next week."

As Frances walked back to her car, she felt a small sense of accomplishment. With the catering sorted, she could focus on helping Yaz in other ways, ensuring that the grand opening of her studio would be as stunning as her designs.

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It was late in the afternoon and Yaz was still at the studio, her hands pinning the coat hanging over the mannequin. She glanced at the clock and winced. She'd lost track of time. Frances's dress still needed repairs, and the dry cleaners would close soon. Grabbing the phone, she dialed the number to her loft studio.

It rang twice before Mildred's warm voice answered, "Hello, Yasmin Khan's studio Mildred speaking, how can I help you?"

"Mildred, it's Yaz," she said with a chuckle "That was very professional"

"Oh, hi there...thanks...Is everything alright?"

"Arrh...not really...I'm running late at work, and I just realized I won't make it to the dry cleaners in time to pick up Miss Louise's dress."

"Oh no!" Mildred replied, though there was a hint of humor in her voice. "Don't tell me you've gone and double-booked yourself again."

"Guilty as charged," Yaz said with a small laugh. "But seriously, I need a massive favor. Could you be a star and go pick it up for me?"

"Yeah sure"

"Thank you so much. The note from the cleaners is on my desk, it's all payed for, you just need to pick it up. I'd get it myself, but I've got to start working on the repairs the moment I get back. Frances needs it for some do she's going on."

"Of course...I'll handle it," Mildred said without hesitation. "Don't worry about it...I got you girl."

"Thank you so much. I owe you big time," Yaz said, relief flooding her voice. "I'll be back soon, and we'll sort it all out then."

"No problem," Mildred replied. "See you soon!"

Hanging up the phone, Yaz leaned back in her chair for a moment, letting out a sigh of relief. She glanced at the sketches on her desk, readying herself to dive back into work, confident that Mildred would take care of everything.

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Mildred adjusted her grip on the shimmering gown, its intricate beadwork catching the light as she maneuvered it carefully over her arm. The weight of the dress and her oversized bag made it awkward as she fumbled for her keys. They slipped from her grasp and clattered onto the sidewalk.

"Damn," she muttered, crouching quickly to retrieve them, careful not to let the dress brush against the pavement. As her fingers reached for the keys, a shadow cast over her, and she froze.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" a sneering voice broke the relative quiet. She looked up to see a young white man standing over her, his grin sharp and unfriendly. Another man leaned casually against the stoop, snickering.

Mildred straightened slowly, holding the dress protectively. "Excuse me," she said coolly.

"That's nice dress" The first man took a step closer. "Where'd you get that?" he asked, his tone dripping with accusation.

"It's my job, it's for a client..." she replied firmly, though her heart pounded in her chest. She willed herself to stay calm, her voice steady. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

She bent down again to grab her keys, but the man kicked them away with a smirk. Her stomach dropped as she tracked the keys skittering out of reach.

"Your job, huh?" the second man chimed in, his eyes glinting with mockery. "What kinda job's got someone like you handling a dress like that?"

Mildred clenched her jaw, refusing to rise to their bait. "A legitimate one," she replied tightly and sidestepped them, each step rushed as she moved toward the door of the building.

"Not so fast," the first man said, cutting her off just as she reached it planting a hand against the doorframe to block her way. "Ain't no way you're supposed to have something like that. Looks like it's worth a fortune."

The second man chuckled, his voice heavy with malice. "Yeah, ain't no respectable lady lettin' someone like you waltz around with that. Reckon it's stolen."

"I didn't steal it!" She frowned "What are you talking about? I work here" she pointed to the building "Told you... it's belongs to a client....Now please sir, I don't want any trouble...let me pass."

She made a step forward placing her hand on a door in hopes they will give up and leave her alone. Although she knew deep down there's slight chances of it happening at this point.

"Yeah, tell ya what, I think you oughta hand it over before we go callin' the cops." he grabbed the dress trying to take it off her

Mildred's hands shook as she tightened her grip on the dress, her pulse quickening. "Call them then... Get out of my way," she snapped, her voice sharp and full of defiance as she pushed his arm out of the way.

The man's face darkened, his patience fraying as he grabbed just as she was about to slip through the door and swung her against the wall.

"What'd you just say to me, girl?" he hissed grabbing her jaw, his nails digging into her skin. She yelped in pain, his hot breath sour against her cheek. Her breath caught in her throat, but her eyes blazed with defiance. She knew standing up to him was dangerous, but every part of her screamed to refuse to yield.

"Get your hands off me," she spat, trying to squirm free and push him away.

"Oi!" A voice rang out, fierce and commanding. Yaz stormed down the street, her face set with a mix of fury and determination.

"Oh look...Squaw come to save the day?" the man's companion sneered, laughter bubbling out, mocking and cruel.

The grip on Mildred's jaw loosened as the man turned, momentarily distracted.

Without hesitation, Yaz ran forward, her body propelled by a surge of adrenaline. She launched herself at the man, pushing him off Mildred with all her strength. "Get your bloody hands off her!" she shouted.

Chaos erupted. The man's immediate reaction was to swing at Yaz, but before he could land a blow, Mildred swung her bag at him, smacking him across the head.

"Fucking bitch!" the man snarled, slapping Mildred across the face so hard her ear went numb.

Yaz stepped in, blocking the man's path, her fists swinging. The two women were a whirlwind of strikes, scratching, hitting, and defending each other.

The second man, seeing the fight spiral out of control, grabbed his companion's arm, trying to yank him back. "Let it go, man! We're gonna get in trouble!" he hissed, fear finally creeping into his voice.

But before they could retreat, the first man swung wildly, his fist landing with a sickening thud against Yaz's face. The force of the blow sent her head snapping back, crashing into the wall. She crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

"Yaz!" Mildred dropped to her knees beside her friend, her voice cracking with desperation. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she shouted at the men, her fury giving her strength. "Heeeelp!" She screamed holding Yaz's head in her lap, blood soaking her clothes.

The men stood frozen, their cruel smiles fading as Mildred's blood curdling scream ripped through the air.

"You fucking killed her man!" the other man's voice shook

The commotion drew the attention of a local barber, who came rushing out of his shop wielding a baseball bat. "Hey! What the hell's going on here?" he roared.

"Let's go!" The second man, now visibly shaken, grabbed his friend trying to pull him but he stood frozen looking at Yaz's lifeless body and the pool of blood. "Come on man...Let's go!" the man urged, dragging him away.

The barber started after them but stopped as they disappeared around the corner.

Mildred's sobs wracked her body, her tears streaming as she knelt on the cold, grimy pavement. Her blood-covered hands trembled, the red smears across her fingers and dress painting a haunting picture of the chaos that had unfolded. She clutched Yaz's limp hand, as she rocked back and forth, too consumed by grief to notice the blaring sirens growing louder in the distance.

The flashing red and blue lights illuminated the street as the police cars skidded to a halt. Officers emerged, but to Mildred, the world was muffled, reduced to a whirl of her cries and Yaz's still form beside her.

"Call an ambulance!" One officer shouted, his firm yet gentle hand touched her shoulder, shaking her from her daze. "Ma'am, what happened?" an officer's voice broke through as he rushed crouching down next to Yaz, but Mildred didn't respond, her wide, tear-filled eyes fixed on Yaz. "Ma'am can you hear me?"

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Frances reclined on the plush sofa in her living room, the dim glow of a table lamp casting soft light over her features. A book rested in one hand, its pages worn and dog-eared, while the other held a glass of deep red wine. She savored the quiet moment, the subtle hum of the city outside blending into the gentle strains of a jazz record spinning on the turntable.

Just as she turned a page, the shrill ring of the telephone pierced the stillness. Frances frowned slightly but placed her book down on the side table with care. She set the glass next to it and crossed the room to the phone, picking up the receiver.

"Hello?" she said casually, but her relaxed demeanor shifted almost instantly as Susan's voice came through the line.

Her expression tightened, her free hand gripping the edge of the table for support. "What?" she whispered, her hazel eyes wide with shock. Her fingers trembled, and for a moment, she nearly dropped the receiver.

Her breath caught, and she nodded absently, though Susan couldn't see her. "I'm on my way," she said firmly, her voice breaking slightly "Do you have a number please" she quickly grabbed the notepad and a pen.

Hanging up the phone, Frances didn't pause. She ran through the house, grabbed her bag

and keys from the small tray by the door. Her movements swift and focused, her mind racing as she slipped on her coat.

Betty appeared from the kitchen, a dishcloth in hand. "Miss Frances, is everything alright? Where are you off to in such a rush?"

"The hospital," Frances called over her shoulder, "Here, call this number" she quickly passed her the little note "Tell them I'm on my way and ask for Miss Yasmin Khan to be transferred to a private ward immediately...This important... I'll sort it all out when I get there ..."

"Alright ma'am... Is she alright, Miss Khan?"

"I don't know ..." she said already halfway out the door. "She's been attacked.."

"Oh my god!"

Before Betty could respond, the door closed behind Frances, leaving Betty confused and shocked.

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It took Frances almost 45 minutes to get there, her nerves fraying with every passing mile. She slammed the car door behind her and hurried toward the hospital entrance, her heels clicking sharply against the pavement.

Inside, the hospital lobby was a sterile mix of stark functionality and mid-century charm. White walls with pale green trim framed rows of wooden chairs, their surfaces worn from years of use. Nurses in crisp white uniforms moved with purpose, their caps perched neatly atop their heads. A faint hum of activity filled the air, muted voices, the shuffle of footsteps, and the occasional cry of a child.

Frances barely noticed any of it as her eyes darted around, her usual composure crumbling under the weight of her worry. She strode toward the reception desk, where a stern-faced woman was scribbling in a logbook.

"Excuse me!" Frances tapped the desk impatiently, her voice sharp with urgency. Before the woman could respond, a familiar voice called out.

"Frances!" Susan's voice cut through the background noise, heavy with concern.

Frances spun around, relief momentarily flashing across her face as she spotted Susan and Mildred hurrying toward her. The relief vanished when her gaze fell on Mildred's clothes, the blood-soaked fabric sending a wave of nausea through her.

"Jesus!" Frances gasped, clasping a hand over her mouth. She took an unsteady step forward, her eyes wide with horror.

“She’s fine,” Susan said quickly, her voice soothing as she closed the distance. “It’s alright, honey.”

Frances clutched Susan’s arm. “What happened? Where’s Yaz?” Her voice trembled, the panic sweeping through her.

Susan placed her hands on Frances’s shoulders, steadying her. “She’s fine honey. She’s okay,” she reassured her, pulling her into a brief hug. “It looks worse than it is. The doctors just want to make sure she hasn’t got a concussion.”

Frances exhaled shakily, but her eyes were still brimming with fear as she turned to Mildred. Her gaze flicked over the bloodied fabric, her tears spilling over. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around the woman. “They could’ve killed you,” Frances whispered, her voice breaking.

“We’re alright, miss,” Mildred said softly, her tone strong despite her exhaustion. “We were lucky.”

Susan stepped in again, her voice gentle but factual. “She’s got a few stitches, but it’s nothing serious. The doctor said head wounds bleed a lot, so it looks scarier than it is.”

Frances pulled back, gripping Mildred’s hand tightly. “What the hell happened?” she asked, her voice a mix of fear and anger.

Susan glanced at Mildred, then back to Frances. “Two men attacked her,” Susan began. “Yaz intervened. The girls tried to fight them off, but one of them hit Yaz hard. She fell and hit her head.”

Mildred’s voice cracked slightly as she added, “They accused me of stealing your dress, ma’am...I was just picking it up from the dry cleaners...They tried to take it off me. I wouldn’t give it...”

Frances’s face went pale, she sighed shaking her head “To hell with the dress! It wasn’t worth risking your safety over, honey!” she said softly. “Where are they? The bastards who did this?”

“They ran off,” Susan said grimly. “The police are looking into it.”

Frances’s jaw tightened. “Bastards,” she muttered, squeezing Mildred’s hand again. “You’re lucky to be alive. You must’ve been terrified.”

“I’m alright, ma’am,” Mildred said, her voice steady but quiet. “Just shaken a bit.”

“I’m not surprised,” Frances said, still holding on to her. She turned to Susan. “Where’s Yaz? Can I see her?”

“She’s upstairs,” Susan said. “She was transferred to a private ward, just like you requested. The police are with her now, but...” She hesitated, her face darkening. “It doesn’t

seem like they're taking this seriously."

Frances's eyes flashed with anger. "Excuse me, *what?* What do you mean they're not taking it seriously?"

Mildred sighed, stepping in softly. "You know what it's like, ma'am. Two white boys against us, it's always the same. They'll sweep it under the rug or try to pin the blame on us."

Frances's expression turned icy, her voice dropping to a dangerously low pitch. "Over my dead body," she said. Her fists clenched at her sides as she turned to Susan. "Where are they? I wanna speak to them. They're not getting away with this," she muttered

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Yaz sat in the hospital bed, wrapped in the sterile white sheets, trying to process the events of the day. She was still shaken, her head was hurting and talking was difficult. The officer, standing across from her, gave her an overly scrutinizing look.

"Now, are you sure you remember everything clearly?" he asks, his tone patronizing, eyebrows arching

Yaz sighs, her fingers gripping the sheets tighter. "Course, I do," she snaps, her patience fraying. "I told you exactly what happened...twice now."

"Well, you hit your head pretty hard, so things might be a bit... blurry, right?" he pressed, his gaze lingering like he was waiting for her to crack.

"This was before I hit my head," Yaz fired back, her voice sharper now. "I remember what happened. Are you even listening to me?"

"Let's start from beginning, you and that coloured girl.."

"Mildred...her name's Mildred" Yaz snapped losing her patience

Before the officer could argue further, the door to the room swings open, and in strides Frances, her heels clacking against the tiled floor. Her entrance grand but controlled, her tailored coat draped over her shoulders, lips painted the perfect shade of crimson. Her eyes immediately zero in on Yaz, and her composure falters for a split second, lips parting as she takes in Yaz's bruised face but she quickly regains herself.

"Yaz... darling!" Frances exclaims, her voice dripping with concern, as she sweeps across the room. "I came as fast as I could."

Yaz blinked, utterly confused. "Frances? How did you..."

"The officer, caught off guard, straightens up. "Excuse me, ma'am, this is an ongoing investigation. You can't just...oh..." His words trail off as recognition dawns on his face.

"Miss Louise," he stammers, his tone switching to reverent awe. "Ma'am."

She nodded acknowledging him and refocused back to Yaz reaching for her hand "My God, your poor face."

"How did you..." Yaz frowned

"Susan called me darling... said you'd been attacked! She said someone tried to rob you!"

"Wha?" Yaz blinked again, lost.

The officer, now visibly flustered, cuts in. "I wouldn't exactly call it a robbery..."

"And what would you call it then?," Frances shot him a look over her shoulder

"It was all over some dress ma'am...I wouldn't worry..."

"Well yes my dress. It's worth a fortune..." Frances interrupts, her sharp gaze fixing on him. "They were trying to steal, weren't they darling?...They attacked these young women in broad daylight. It's criminal!"

"Well, yes, but..." the officer starts, but Frances waves a hand, silencing him. "It's absolutely scandalous," she continues, her tone a mix of outrage.

The officer interjects, his composure faltering. "I didn't realize it was your dress, Miss Louise. No one mentioned..."

"I've told you twice already" Yaz intervened "...the bloke shoved her up against the wall, accusing her of nicking it! But no, you're making bloody fools out of both of us...as per usual!"

"They could've really hurt my girls. They could've been killed!" Frances gave Yaz's hand a reassuring squeeze, her eyes sparkling with indignation.

Frances continued, her tone shifting, "I trust you've already apprehended the men responsible for this?" She asks, her words slicing through the air like a blade.

The officer hesitates, looking uneasy. "Well, ma'am... we didn't realize Miss Khan was—"

"My *business partner*," Frances cuts in smoothly, not missing a beat. Her voice calm but leaving no room for argument. She glances at Yaz, then continues, "...and Miss Mildred, a valuable member of staff. Now, I trust you'll hold those men accountable?"

The officer fumbled "Yes, of course, ma'am. I... I apologize for the misunderstanding...It makes perfect sense now. We'll make sure to get those boys. Don't you worry, ma'am."

Frances suddenly shifts gears, flashing her most dazzling smile. "Well then, it's sorted. I knew I could count on you boys to do your job properly."

Yaz sat back and watched, utterly stunned by the scene unfolding before her. Frances was

putting on a right show, and it was both hilarious and impressive.

The officer, visibly flustered, grins sheepishly. "Of course, Miss Louise... Always." He nervously adds, "I'm a big fan, ma'am."

Frances leans in slightly, her teasing smile softening her sharp edges. "Oh, are you, honey? How sweet."

The officer fumbled with his notebook, clearly starstruck, while Yaz, still bewildered, watched the entire exchange with an amused smirk.

"Could I possibly..." the officer stammered, unable to finish his sentence.

"Why, of course you can," Frances interrupts, her voice warm but in control as she takes the notebook from him. "And your name?"

"Frank, ma'am," he replies, his voice almost trembling.

Frances scribbles her name with a dramatic flourish, adding a bold heart beside it. She hands the notebook back to him with a charming smile. "Here you go, Frank. Now, if Miss Khan and Miss Mildred need any legal assistance to resolve this properly, I'll make sure they're taken care of. But I trust you'll handle this professionally, as I'm sure you always do."

Frank clutches the notebook to his chest like a priceless treasure, his grin widening. "Absolutely, ma'am. You can count on us."

"Fantastic, now if there's nothing else, I think Miss Khan needs a rest, she's been through enough today."

"I think we have everything we need. Miss Khan may have to come to the police station for official identification if we do find them, but of course we will let her know in time...Good day, Miss Louise, Miss Khan," the officer said, his voice almost reverent.

"Bye," Yaz mumbled, giving a half-hearted wave as he hurried out.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Frances let out a long sigh and dropped the act, her expression immediately shifting from bubbly and charming to sharp and serious.

Yaz stared at her, mouth slightly agape. "... I don't even... What the hell was that all about? *Honey?* You called him honey?"

Frances's composed facade cracked, and she burst into laughter. Yaz, however, was just getting started.

"*Oh my dress*, it's worth a fortune," Yaz mimicked, fluttering her lashes dramatically in her best Frances impression. "*Scandalous... absolutely scandalous!*"

Frances laughed harder, clutching her stomach. "I can see you're feeling better. Well, if

pretending I care about my dress is what it takes to get the ball rolling, then so be it. I want those bastards behind bars!"

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am!" Yaz continued with her mockery. "Could you sign my notebook? Let me just wipe my dribble off it first."

Frances nearly doubled over now. "It's gross, I know!" she managed between fits of laughter, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"And you drew a heart!" Yaz added, making a fake gagging noise.

"I knooow...it's disgusting...But they weren't going to take you seriously..." Frances said, straightening up and regaining some composure.

"Well, they're definitely taking it now," Yaz retorted, shaking her head with a wry smile. "You're one smooth operator, Frances Louise I'll give you that. I'm gonna have to watch you."

Frances winked, leaning closer. Yaz opened her mouth to say something, but Frances, suddenly serious, gently reached out tucking a strand of hair behind Yaz's ear. Her fingers lingered for a moment, brushing Yaz's temple before moving to her cheek. Her touch featherlight as her thumb traced the bruise. "That looks so sore," Frances murmured, her voice laced with worry, her hazel eyes swimming with concern.

"It wasn't about the dress..." Yaz said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Frances froze for a moment, the words hanging between them. Her thumb traced gently over Yaz's lips, the soft touch a mixture of comfort and concern. "I know, darling." Frances swallowed hard, the weight of everything settling heavily on her chest. "I know."
"Are you in pain? Do you need me to get something for you?"

Yaz met her gaze, the warmth of Frances's care tugging at her heart. She shook her head gently, her own hand coming up to hold Frances's, fingers brushing softly against her skin. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Her lips curved into a smile, small but genuine, a spark of warmth in her eyes that spoke volumes. "I'm just glad you're here."

Frances leaned in slightly, her forehead brushing against Yaz's "Of course I'm here. Where else would I be?" Her brows knitted together, concern etched into her every feature.

Yaz's eyes sparkled, a glint of mischief dancing behind them. "There *is* something you can do," she said with a sly smile.

"Sure...Anything honey," she replied, her voice gentle but still carrying the weight of their conversation.

Yaz's smile widened, her eyes twinkling with playful mischief. "You can dress up as a nurse

and take care of me. I reckon you'd be good at it."

Frances's eyes went wide, her mouth falling open in disbelief. "Yaz!... I don't believe this." She leaned back letting go of Yaz's hand, barely holding back her laughter.

Yaz's grin only grew, and she playfully tugged at Frances's hand. "C'mere," she said, pulling her closer. With a spark of mischief still in her gaze, she planted a tender kiss on Frances's lips.

Frances couldn't help but chuckle, her lips still brushing Yaz's as they pulled apart. "Dumbass,"

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