

Chapter 2

After returning from work, Yaz slept through most of the day, exhausted from jet lag and in desperate need of a rest. She woke up around six in the afternoon and made her way to the kitchen, where she found Susan washing the dishes.

Susan was her mother's dear friend. They had met years earlier when Yaz's mother was a student and Susan was spending a summer in the UK with family friends. After Susan returned to the US, Yaz's mother maintained their connection. So, when Yaz was offered a job in Los Angeles, Susan was more than happy to welcome her.

"Oh, morning" Susan turns with a smile and leaves the dish cloth on a side of a sink

"Morning" Yaz smiles yawning

"Hungry?"

"Noooo...thank you. I need to come around."

"You look like you need a cup of coffee?"

"I do" she yawned again

Susan laughed and took the cups out "You'll get used to it in few days. When do you start tomorrow?"

"From 9...thank god."

"So, how was your day?" Susan puts a cup of coffee in front of her and sits opposite.

"Thank you...Chaotic" she laughed "There's so much going on and just the scale of it. OMG....I didn't expect it to be so big. But I love it, I like the people...For now everyone seems really nice"

"Did you meet any stars?"

"Yeah...I did...I had a fitting with Frances Louise"

"Waaaw...She's gorgeous...I saw her movie last year."

"She's very pretty and very kind. We had a nice chat. I think I saw two of her movies. But she played a supporting role. In this one she has a main part."

"Hey when the movie is out, we have to go and see it."

"Definitely" she smiled

"Will you be at the premiere?"

"I don't think so" she laughed

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The alarm clock buzzed, and Frances lazily reached out her hand to silence it. She yawned stretching herself and reluctantly moved the duvet swinging her legs over the side of the bed squinting her eyes from the morning sun that filtered through the thick curtains.

She tapped to bathroom, her reflection looking dreary this morning. She splashed water on her face trying to wake herself up. After a quick shower she opened the wardrobe door and pulled out a checkered pair of capri trousers and cream color t-shirt laying them on the bed.

After getting dressed and putting makeup up on she went to the kitchen and made herself a quick breakfast then took a phone stretching the wire across the kitchen, making herself comfortable at the table and made a call.

"Hey Andy, It's me"

"Hi honey" her manager picked up

"Hi, I had a look at that contract."

"Oh, yeah? And did you sign it?"

"No, I didn't...Andy how much is my male counterpart getting paid?"

"I'm not sure Frances, you know those details are confidential"

"Don't give me that crap. Come on how much?"

"You will get me in trouble...Strictly between us 300 000 \$"

"Waaaw....So why am I getting only 150 000 when I'm playing a main role?"

"We've been through this million times Fran...you'll never get paid the same"

"Same!...Andy I'm getting half"

"I know honey, but you need to be reasonable"

"I am reasonable Andy. I'm not doing the same job for half of the money. Call Frank and make him meet me in the middle or I'm not signing this. I'm not doing it under 200...and I think I'm being more than reasonable."

"Fraaaances" he whined on the other side

"Bye Andy" she hung up and took a deep breath trying to calm down, then refocused her attention, looking through the window into her garden.

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Yaz walked fast through the bustling corridors of the studio, her heels clicking rhythmically on the polished floors. The faint hum of voices and the clatter of equipment created a familiar backdrop as she navigated through the maze of production offices and makeup rooms. She clutched a garment bag tightly under one arm.

Turning a corner, she reached the wardrobe department—a large, brightly lit space lined with racks of clothes. The smell of fabric conditioner hovering in the air. As she stepped inside, she was met with creative chaos in the room, seamstresses worked diligently on their machines, and dressers bustled about, carrying garments from one end of the room to the other. Several ladies in the corner were working fast on pressing the garments neatly.

"Morning, Yaz!" Laura called out when she spotted Yaz by the door.

Laura was a head of the wardrobe department, a tall woman with a no-nonsense attitude, walked over with a friendly smile.

"Morning..." she replied, returning the smile. "I've got the dress for Frances Louise here. We need to make some adjustments. She mentioned a few fitting issues."

Laura nodded, taking the garment bag from Yaz. "Alright, let's have a look." She carefully unzipped the bag and revealed the elegant dress inside. The fabric shimmered under the lights.

"It's mainly around the waist and the bust," Yaz explained, pointing to the areas she had noted during the fitting. "It needs a bit more room here and a little tightening there. We don't want to risk any wardrobe malfunctions on set. Also, she's not happy with how it looks in her bust. So, some padding should be added to give her a more fitted look. Also, can we add something elegant to it. I'd like to add some light scarf. It would look a lot more sophisticated"

Laura examined the dress, nodding "Got it. I'll get one of the seamstresses on it right away. We'll make sure it's ready in time for Frances's next fitting."

"Actually, I need it for this afternoon. She's shooting a scene at six." She frowned embarrassed for adding more pressure "Sorry...I know it's a tall order."

"Don't worry...We're used to working under tight schedules here. I'll make sure it's done by five"

Yaz exhaled with relief. "Thanks, Laura. I really appreciate it. I'll find a fabric for the scarf"

"Have a look here..." she pointed to the wall filled with fabrics"

"That's fantastic. Thanks"

As Laura turned to give instructions to one of the seamstresses, Yaz took a moment to look through the fabrics. The multitude of choices was such a stark contrast to the theatre environment she was used to.

"Oh, Yaz!" Laura's voice grabbed her attention back "Could you check in later this afternoon to make sure everything's coming along as planned?"

"Of course," she gave a quick nod "I found a perfect match" she pulled out a beautiful shimmering light fabric

With that, Yaz headed back down the corridor, her mind already racing with the next tasks.

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Frances slid into the driver's seat of her sleek, cream-colored convertible. The morning sun cast a golden glow over the city, reflecting off the polished vehicle. Her blonde curls framed her face in soft, bouncy waves that danced with the breeze as she adjusted the rearview mirror glancing at herself in it, giving a quick touch-up to her lipstick before sliding her sunglasses into place.

She put the key in the ignition, and the engine roared with a satisfying purr. She navigated through the palm-lined streets of Los Angeles, the early morning traffic was a mix of luxury cars and everyday vehicles. Frances skillfully maneuvered through the busy streets, her driving smooth and confident.

The Hollywood studio was ahead, its sign towering over above her. She could see the bustle through the gates, crews setting up for the day, actors arriving, and the occasional fan trying to catch a glimpse of the stars.

She felt excitement bubbling up as she approached the entrance. The studio had become her second home, a place where her dreams were slowly turning into reality despite the challenges she had to face each day. She pulled up to the gate, where a

security guard nodded and waved her through with a friendly smile. Frances parked her convertible in her designated spot, took a deep breath, and stepped out of the car, ready to embrace another day in the world she loved.

"Fran" a voice called her, and she turned around

"Morning Frank"

"What's this I heard you not signing the deal yet?"

She huffed and continued walking into the building. A small chubby man with big glasses following her inside.

"I can see you spoke with Andrew"

"They won't give you more money" he tried keeping up with her as she sped up down the hallway

"Yes, they will" she said taking her sunglasses off and nodded with a smile to the woman passing her by "Morning"

"No, they won't...You're dreaming."

"Well, there's only yes or no answer, isn't it?"

He grabbed her forearm violently and pulled her on a side

"Ey...let go..."

"Listen...I don't know who you think you are or what you got into that dumb head of yours, but you're not gonna mess this up for us. We worked our ass off for you to be where you are today"

Frances hands trembled as she pulled her arm out of Frank's tight grip, her voice steady despite her anger.

"No, Frank," she said firmly, her eyes locked onto his. "I worked my ass off while you just counted the money. I had to deal with one sleazeball after another...and I still do. No money, no deal."

Frank's face cramped with frustration, but before he could say another word, Frances turned and strode down the hallway. Her high heels clicking sharply against the polished floor.

She reached her dressing room and flung open the door with a forceful shove, the sound of it slamming shut echoed through the hallway. She leaned heavily against the

door and gasped, closing her eyes tightly, trying to steady herself, but the tears began to slip down her cheeks despite her efforts.

Her dressing room, usually a sanctuary, felt oppressive now. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and took a deep breath trying to compose herself but the sting of her confrontation with Frank still lingered in the air. The quiet knock on the door made her jump.

"Yes?" She answered with a huff

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Yaz was on her way to the set. She was called in regarding some wardrobe malfunction involving another actress she was looking after. A woman named Anna Bell. She made her way past the team and stepped over the cables on the floor. There was silence on the set, and only the actors could be heard reciting their lines. Several crew members gave her dirty look as she pushed her way to the make-up department, which was right next to the set. Then someone grabbed her arm and stopped her.

A man with cigarette dangling from his lips squinted at her through a haze of smoke and pointed to the sign that read, "Cast and crew only."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I am the crew," Yaz frowned in confusion.

"Course you are" he smirked gesturing vaguely "Go on, get lost."

"Oi, I'm from the costume department!" she said firmly now, her patience wearing thin.

The man raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "I don't think so."

Before Yaz could reply, a familiar voice called out. "Is there a problem?"

Yaz turned to see Charlie approaching concerned "Charlie," she sighed in relief.

"She says she's from the costume department"

"She is...Let her through."

"Since when are they employing mongrels?" he muttered under his chin

Yaz's eyes widened in shock. "Excuse me?"

"Hey, watch your mouth," Charlie snapped pointing finger at him, then refocused on Yaz with a gentle tone "Go on, hun. You can go through."

Yaz nodded gratefully. "Thanks," she said eyeing down the man as she passed him by.

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With her glasses on and a pencil in her hand Yaz stood at the desk going through some sketches of the designs. She had several changes in her mind already and was diligently making her notes in order to present it all at the next meeting.

"Here's your tea" Tim, one of her colleagues placed the cup on the table

"Thanks, I really appreciate it...What'd you think...blue or green?" she held up fabric samples in her hand

"Ough...tough choice..." he frowned indecisively and took a step back tilting his head having a critical look "I mean I love both...Blue is just so vibrant...Who's it for?"

"Frances"

"Blue...definitely blue"

"That's what I thought"

"She looks brilliant in blue. You lucky girl...I wanted to work with her" he stated leaning against the wall "They declined my request" he pouted dramatically

"Stand in line" Laura remarked laughing leaning over Yaz's shoulder "Frances only works with women"

"Really?" Yaz frowned surprised

"Apparently...she specifically requests a woman each time...And apparently she saw your work and demanded it would be you."

"Oh, come ooon...now you're making this up" she laughed

"Oh noo...she's right..." Tim confirmed nodding

"Frances likes to get involved.... She saw someone from England wearing one of your gowns on a red carpet and a word is she was flabbergasted by it"

"Whaaa?" Yaz laughed, still not quite sure if they were messing her around "That was my attempt of fashion designing two years ago."

"Well, she was quite impressed...So when Abby left, she was going through all the applications and put a bug in Charlie's ear."

"You're actually serious about this?" Yaz smiled beaming with confidence

"You watch out Yaz, maybe you can be her personal designer..." Laura winked

"Oh, don't be silly" she laughed and waived her hand dismissively

"You never know around here. You wouldn't be the first."

"You're all dreaming..." she rolled her eyes laughing "Go on...show me the dress...I have fitting soon"

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Frances's dressing room was so silent and serene that even the faintest sound seemed amplified. She stood poised in front of a large mirror, her excitement palpable as Yaz worked diligently behind her. The room was bathed in soft light, highlighting the intricate details of the dress as Yaz carefully pulled up the zipper.

She glanced at Frances's reflection, her own nerves evident in a trembling hand as she adjusted the delicate straps over her shoulders.

She caught Frances's warm smile in the mirror and returned it trying to hide her own anxiety.

"So, what do you think?" Yaz asked nervously

Frances turned sideways to inspect herself, her movements graceful and gentle adding to the overall look of the dress. She then shifted to face the mirror directly then turned her back to the reflection, giving Yaz a chance to adjust the sheer, flowing scarf that she had added to complete the look.

Yaz stepped back, her heart racing in anticipation of a response.

The other woman's face lit up with a radiant smile. "It's stunning...I absolutely love it."

"You do?"

"Yeees...It's like a whole new dress. It's so much more comfortable now and I love the scarf...It looks a lot more elegant like this"

Without warning, Frances leaned over and enveloped Yaz in a warm, unexpected hug. Yaz's arms hesitated in mid-air, unsure of where to go, before she finally wrapped them around Frances, remembering the etiquette guidelines she'd been given just two days ago.

Frances pulled back still smiling "Thank you so much,"

She nodded, still slightly taken back but smiling "You're welcome"

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The set was quiet and the camera rolling, capturing every movement and a word. Frances moved around the stage, her voice resonating with emotion as she delivered her lines.

"I told you... I'm worried. What if he finds out?"

"Not if you're careful."

"I am careful, John, but these walls have ears."

"Cut!" The director's voice broke through the scene, and Frances looked at him puzzled.

He stood up from his chair and walked toward her.

"What?" She asked, frowning as she followed his gaze.

The director reached out and grabbed the shimmering scarf tossing it aside with a dismissive gesture. "That's better. You're selling your body, darling. We don't want to cover it."

Frances blinked, taken back. "I thought we were selling my talent?"

The director smirked, ignoring her question as he made his way back to his chair. "Again," he called out.

Frances closed her eyes for a brief moment, taking a deep breath to steady herself then nodded to the crew and resumed her position.

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Back in her dressing room, Frances quickly changed out of her costume, her movements brisk and tense. The director's comment replayed in her mind, making it hard to shake off.

She reached for the shimmering scarf Yaz had added to the gown earlier. The fabric felt cool and soft in her hands.

With a sigh, she draped it over her shoulders, its elegance contrasting the director's sharp comment. Her gaze raising to her own reflection in the mirror. She squared her shoulders and smiled brightly stepping out of the room.

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Three months had passed since Yaz moved to Los Angeles, and she found herself calmer and happier than ever. The studio had seamlessly become her second home, where she spent long hours, sometimes stretching into the long nights immersed in new projects and creative ideas. It offered her a newfound freedom to express her creativity, filling her with a sense of belonging and optimism for the future. Her colleagues had grown into a close-knit, extended family, giving her both support and laughter in equal measure.

She walked through an empty set. The shooting just ended, and the crew was busy moving the props.

"Hey Tim!" Yaz called out jumping over the cables, a thick folder in her hand

"Yes, my exotic princess?" He left the costume on a side and turned

"Oh, stop it, you silly sod" she laughed catching up with him "Have you seen Anna Bell?"

"No... she hasn't been around for few days, why what's up?"

"God this woman is driving me nuts. We were supposed to have a fitting an hour ago...She's nowhere to be seen and she's not picking up her phone. This is the third time I'm trying to arrange it."

"Have you told Charlie?"

"Nooo...I didn't want to stress him out, but now I'm gonna have to"

"Yaz!" Laura called for her

"I'm here"

"She's here waiting for you."

"Thank god." she exhaled relieved "Thanks...See ya"

"See you darling" Tim smiled

She rushed down the hallway and as she reached the dressing room took a big breath then knocked on the door

"Come in"

As Yaz stepped inside the woman sitting at the make-up table waived at her gesturing for her to wait. She was on the phone in the middle of the conversation, so Yaz patiently waited for her to finish.

Anna Bell was an established actress in her early thirties. With a gentle face and stunning ginger curls cascading over her shoulders, she was petite in stature but made up for her lack of height with her vibrant personality. Her polished accent vanished the moment a director called "Cut," giving way to a strong Southern drawl. She was known for her love of luxury and dangerous men. She enjoyed night life and too much alcohol often late for shooting or not turning up at all. But Yaz liked her bubbly character and enjoyed having a little chat.

She finally hung up the phone and turned in her chair

"Hey there, sugar."

"Hi...you stood me up."

"Aw, I'm real sorry about that. Been havin' a rough few days and just plum forgot. Then yesterday, I got hit with a headache and was draggin' my tail like a broke-down mule."

"Oh alright..." she rolled her eyes laughing "You're forgiven. Come on, let's get this done so we can finish these or you're going on that trip in your knickers"

"I ain't never been to New York. I'm real excited about it," she said, her voice dreamy and full of anticipation and excitement as she slipped off her dressing gown.

"Me neither. It's supposed be amazing"

"I went out with this fella a couple years back. He had three bars in New York. Promised he'd take me, but never did," she pouted her lips and stepped into the skirt.

"That's a shame. What happened?"

"Ended up gettin' himself locked up."

"Right" Yaz barely contained herself from laughing

In three months of working around these women Yaz leaned that keeping a level of professional distance was easier said than done. She knew more details about their personal life and gossip than the tabloids and has seen everything from meltdowns to arguments.

"Do you have a fella? I never asked."

"No"

"Why's that? You're a real looker. I'm sure they must be queuin' up to take you out."

She smiled pulling a zipper and changed the subject "So does it feel comfortable?"

"Yes..."

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After wrapping up a shooting schedule, Frances finally took the long-awaited break she needed, heading to the South of Italy to visit a dear friend. With her next project still a month away, she was determined to fully immerse herself in a well-deserved break enjoying the sun-drenched beaches and a good book. She lay on a comfortable beach towel, her sunhat providing a gentle shade over her face while her sunglasses shielded her eyes from the dazzling sunlight, the warmth of the sun caressing her skin.

"Here darling" her friend Giulia returned with the glasses of cold drink

"Thanks" Frances sat up crossing her legs and reached for the glass

"I'm so glad you came. I missed you"

"I missed you too. I've been so busy recently that even my plants died" she laughed but her voice hinted a touch of sadness as she turned her gaze towards the sea

"At least they agreed to pay you more"

"More...but still not fairly" she raised her brow making a point

"Have you been seeing anyone? You don't tell me anything"

Frances chuckled dropping her gaze and twirled a glass in her hand "No... I haven't"

"You can't be alone for the rest of your life"

"And I'm not planning to" she turned with a cheeky smile "But I can't now...It would be all over the papers"

"So, you're waiting to be less famous then?" she laughed

Frances laughed back, playfully throwing a fist full of sand at her. Then left her drink on a side and ran into the water

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She got up at the crack of dawn and sat on the terrace learning her lines. The air was still crisp, a light breeze bringing in the salty smell of the Mediterranean Sea. Small fishing boats were returning from the night out in the sea, their engines purring rhythmically was the only sound that could be heard coming from the distance apart from the odd seagull. Tranquility felt soothing, the vast contrast from the bustling noise of the never sleeping city she was used to.

She enjoyed Giulia's company. She was an old friend from her modeling days in New York. They used to share a small apartment in the Lower East Side. Sometimes she missed those days and the narrow streets lined with tenement buildings, crowded and modestly maintained but she loved the vibrancy, vendors selling fresh produce, street musicians, and local shops offering a variety of goods. She missed the friends she made at the time. The honesty and simplicity of the relationships, a stark difference to the people surrounding her now.

Despite the fulfillment her job brought her on many levels, she struggled to find her place. The nightlife, so often glamorized, was not her escape but more a battleground of discomfort. She loathed the sleazy men, many old enough to be her father, whose hands frequently ventured where they had no right. The constant feeling of vulnerability, an ever-present shadow she couldn't shake.

What stung most was the pervasive condescension she encountered. Being treated as if her intellect were no higher than the room temperature, left her feeling diminished and frustrated with a sense that her worth was reduced to mere appearance, overshadowing the aspects of her career that should have been her triumphs.

She preferred the company of hard working crew around her and felt safe in their presence, often venturing inside their working quarters seeking a casual chat. But they kept their distance, wary of breaching professional etiquette and jeopardizing their jobs leaving her feeling isolated and frequently depressed spending hours of her free time immersing herself in books and photography, hobbies that offered her a small measure of comfort and escape from her loneliness.

"Morning darling" Giulia's voice startled her

Frances turned over her shoulder with a warm smile "Morning honey"

Giulia yawned, still trying to shake off her sleep. She was still in her nightie wrapped in a dressing gown.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since five"

"Jesus" she laughed joining her on a sun lounge next to her "I had an idea"

"I'm all ears" Frances closed the script smiling intrigued

"How about we go to town, walk around a bit, do some casual shopping, go to the marketplace. You know, do what normal people do. I think you could do with that."

"I could definitely do with that."

They spent a whole morning roaming the streets. Frances enjoyed the bustling market. She spoke fluent Italian and enjoyed chatting away with locals.

She strolled leisurely among the colorful stands, the sun casting a warm glow on her pink summer dress. Her blonde curls bounced with each step, adding to her carefree charm. The air was filled with the enticing aroma of fresh produce, spices, and baked goods.

As Frances admired the array of fruits and vegetables, a charming Italian vendor with a friendly smile approached her.

"Buongiorno, signorina!" he greeted her with a big smile. "You must try these peaches. They are the sweetest in the market."

Frances smiled back, her eyes lighting up "They look wonderful. How much for a basket?"

The vendor, eyes twinkled, he waved his hand dismissively. "For you, a special price. How about a kiss on the cheek as payment?"

Frances laughed, shaking her head playfully. "I think I'll stick to the price but thank you. I'll take a basket."

Nearby, another vendor, noticing the interaction, called out with a grin, "And don't forget to try our tomatoes, signorina. They were picked fresh this morning. Perfect for a summer salad."

"Grazie," Frances replied, her eyes sparkling. "I'll take a few. It all looks so gorgeous."

As she collected her purchases, the vendors chatted with her, their gestures animated and voices warm. The lively exchange, combined with the stunning Italian backdrop, made her feel embraced by the local charm and hospitality, a perfect contrast to her busy life back in LA.

By the time they returned she was beaming with happiness. They giggled carefree in the kitchen putting away all the beautiful fruits and vegetables they brought earlier.

"We can make some pasta for dinner?" Frances suggested

"Why not...We can sit outside on the terrace. I have a really wonderful wine I got from the locals"

"You're speaking my language girl!" she smiled happily

The phone rang and Giulia picked it up

"Yes, this is her...Just a moment please. Let me see if she's in" she moved the phone from her ear holding her palm over it. Frances turned around puzzled.

"It's your costume designer." She whispered, "What should I say?"

"It's alright...I'll take it"

Giulia passed her a phone and left the kitchen giving her privacy. Frances stretched the wire across the kitchen and leaned on a bar.

"Hello, darling. Your call wasn't on my bingo card today," Frances's voice came through warmly, though tinged with surprise.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but it's quite important," Yaz replied anxiously.

"Don't be silly. You're the only person I'm happy to hear from. What's up?" Frances asked, her tone shifting to concern.

"You know the dress I'm working on for that event you have in three weeks?"

"Yes... Is everything alright?"

"Not really. I just heard from the fabric supplier. They don't have the fabric you picked... I'm so upset. They gave me some samples of what they do have, but now I don't know what to do. Not like you can see them or anything."

"Don't stress...I tell you what, how about you surprise me?" Frances suggested, her voice encouraging.

“You want me to decide?” she asked one more time taken back

“Yes...That’s exactly what I want you to do”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I trust you.”

“And what if you hate it and you rip my head off?”

“But I won’t...Besides, I could never rip off that beautiful head of yours, darling,” Frances laughed.

“That’s reassuring.” She laughed “Alright then. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. I promise I won’t disappoint you.”

“I know you won’t.”

“Well, that’s relief. I couldn’t sleep last night. ” She exhaled, build up stress leaving her “Alright then...Well...I won’t bother you anymore.”

“You can’t even if you tried. Wait, don’t go... I fancy a chat.” Frances settled at the bar, kicked off her shoes, and propped her feet up on the chair.

“Really?”

“Yeah...I do...”

“You do know you’re paying for this call?” she chuckled

“I don’t mind,” Frances giggled. “How are things over there? I haven’t seen you in ages. I do miss you.”

“Really?” Yaz was taken back by the unexpected sincerity. “I miss you too.”

“You do?”

“I really do. It’s not the same passing by your empty changing room, and Anna Bell is driving me nuts.”

Frances burst out laughing. “She can be a bit much.”

“It’s a bit hectic...Tim had a heated argument with a director over wardrobe choice.”

“Oh my...I hope he’s alright?”

"His ego is bit hurt, but he will recuperate...I'm working on a new project by the way. My first proper designing attempt. It's quite exciting but terrifying"

"I'm sure you're gonna do a great job. I'm so happy for you, darling. You deserve it."

"Thank you. And how's your holiday?"

"Oh, it's so gorgeous here. I wish you could see it. The sea is wonderful, and the beach is stunning. Have you ever been to Italy?"

"No... I'd love to go one day."

"Maybe you will. It's beautiful. I'm totally relaxed."

"Well, you deserve it."

"I'm coming back in two weeks... We could grab lunch. If you'd like that?"

"I'd love that... As long as I keep my job?" she laughed.

"I won't tell if you won't," Frances said smugly. "We can pretend it's a business meeting."

"I'll bring my folder?" Yaz laughed.

"And we'll keep it open on the table."

"And pretend we're serious about it."

"I will ask you occasional important question, I promise."

"You got yourself a deal. I should go, or your whole salary will go on this phone call."

"I wouldn't mind," Frances replied cheekily. "Alright, darling, it was so nice hearing from you."

"Nice hearing from you too. Have a wonderful holiday. See you soon."

"See you soon, darling. Take care."

"You too."

After ending the call, Frances sat in silence for a moment, a soft smile lingering on her lips. The playful exchange about their lunch meeting and pretending to be serious professionals made her chuckle.

