

Chapter 8

The sky was an ominous shade of gray as Frances maneuvered her car through the rain-soaked streets of Los Angeles. It has been raining since they came back from the weekend getaway, but she barely noticed the patter of raindrops against the windshield or the rhythmic swish of the wipers. Her mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with the conversation that lay ahead.

Andy's office was only a few blocks away, nestled in the heart of the city, but it felt like she was driving toward a battleground. The roles she'd been taking had started to wear on her, each one more of a gilded cage than the last. The glitz and glamour that had once felt like a dream come true now felt like a trap, locking her into a persona she no longer recognized.

She pulled up to the building, the sleek lines of her car reflecting the dim afternoon light. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out, opened umbrella, smoothed her skirt and straightened her shoulders as she walked briskly toward the entrance. She didn't have time for hesitation, not today.

Inside, the warmth of the lobby was a sharp contrast to the chill outside. She nodded at the receptionist, Clara, who greeted her with a bright smile.

"Good afternoon, Miss Louise. Mr. Montgomery is expecting you."

"Thank you, Clara," Frances replied with a tight smile, her voice steady.

She walked past the desk, her heels clicking with purpose on the marble floor. The elevator ride to the top floor was brief, but it felt like an eternity. Frances could feel her heart pounding in her chest, a familiar mix of anticipation and dread. By the time the elevator doors slid open, she had steeled herself for what was to come.

Andy's office was just as she remembered it, elegant and imposing, with polished wood surfaces and a wall of windows offering a panoramic view of the city. Andy was seated behind his desk, flipping through a stack of papers. He looked up as she entered, a welcoming smile spreading across his face.

"Frances, darling!" he greeted her, standing to give her a quick hug. "Always a pleasure to see you."

She returned the hug, though her mind was already on the conversation at hand. As they both sat down, she wasted no time getting to the point.

"Andy, we need to talk about this new role you're pushing," she said, her tone calm but firm.

Andy leaned back in his chair, his smile fading slightly as he caught the seriousness in her voice. "Ah, you mean 'Summer Fling,' right? What's the problem? It's a solid role...good exposure, decent paycheck. And you'll be the lead. What more could you ask for?"

Frances felt a twinge of irritation at his casual tone. "What more could I ask for? How about a role that doesn't make me feel like I'm trapped in a box, Andy? I'm tired of playing the blonde bimbo.... I want something with depth, something that challenges me."

Andy sighed, leaning forward. "Look, Fran, I get it...I really do.... But you have to understand, this is what sells. You've got a brand. People see you as this glamorous, fun-loving girl. Why mess with that?"

"Because I'm not just that!" Frances's voice was sharper now, the frustration she had been holding back finally breaking through. "I'm an actress Andy, not a walking stereotype. I want to do more than just smile and look pretty. I want roles that actually mean something. I've been working so hard on myself...I can't deal with just flapping my lashes and saying the most idiotic lines anymore."

Andy's expression softened, but there was still a hint of exasperation in his voice. "I understand where you're coming from, but Hollywood isn't kind to actresses who stray from what they're known for. You've got a good thing going, Frances. Why risk it?"

"Because if I don't, I'll never forgive myself," Frances replied, her voice quieter but no less determined. "I'm tired of feeling like I'm playing the same character over and over. I want to show people what I can really do, even if it means taking a risk. Please...come on...there must be something."

Andy studied her for a moment, his eyes searching her face for any sign of wavering. When he found none, he leaned back in his chair, a resigned sigh escaping his lips.

"Alright," he said finally, his tone softening. "I can see you've made up your mind. But I'm not going to let you walk out of here without at least considering one more option."

Frances raised an eyebrow, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Andy reached for a script sitting on the corner of his desk and handed it to her. "It's a comedy, but it's got some depth to it. The character isn't just a pretty face...she's got layers. It's not exactly what you're asking for, but it's a step in the right direction. I would've preferred waiting to see how this last movie will perform...but you're twisting my hand. Give it a read, and if you like it, we can go from there."

Frances took the script, her fingers brushing over the title: **The Girl Next Door**. It wasn't the serious drama she had hoped for, but something about it intrigued her. She flipped through the first few pages, her eyes scanning the lines. It was different, not entirely what she wanted, but it was a start.

"Alright," she said after a moment, nodding slowly. "I'll give it a shot. But Andy, I'm serious...this is the last time I'm doing a role like this. I need to move on."

Andy smiled, a mixture of relief and respect in his eyes. "Deal. But remember, Frances—every decision you make has consequences. I'm on your side, but this industry can be unforgiving."

"I know," Frances replied, her gaze steady. "But I have to do what feels right."

"I understand...just please don't dismiss me completely...We can do this, but slowly. You're still young, you have time to establish yourself in this industry. It's not in my interest to just sell your face, believe me."

"Alright" she smiled

"Give me call when you read it"

"I will...Thank you"

"Don't mention it."

As she stood to leave, script in hand, she felt a sense of relief washing over her. The road ahead wouldn't be easy, but she was ready to fight for what she wanted. For the first time in a long while, she felt like she was back in control.

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The afternoon sun had already begun rise, casting a warm golden hue over the city as the rain finally stopped. Her next appointment is with her financial advisor, Alan Prescott, one she had been contemplating for weeks. As she neared the towering mid-century modern office building where Alan's practice was located, Frances's grip on the steering wheel tightened ever so slightly.

Parking the car, she adjusted her gloves, a nervous habit she'd developed over the years. The cool breeze kissed her cheeks as she got out, grounding her momentarily. This wasn't just any meeting, it was about Yaz, and in a way, it was about the future of their relationship.

The lobby of the building was sleek, with polished floors and abstract art adorning the walls. She made her way to the elevator. The ride to the top floor was silent, except for the soft hum of the machinery. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirrored walls, her expression composed but the slight tension in her eyes betraying her calm exterior.

The elevator doors slid open with a gentle chime, and Frances stepped into the plush, carpeted hallway that led to Alan Prescott's office. The familiar scent of leather and wood polish greeted her as she entered.

Alan's secretary, a middle-aged woman with a warm smile, nodded, "Good afternoon, Miss Louise. Mr. Prescott is expecting you,"

"Thank you,"

She walked past the secretary's desk and toward the large oak door at the end of the hallway. Taking a deep breath, she knocked lightly before entering.

Alan's office was a reflection of the man himself, elegant, efficient, and devoid of any unnecessary decorations. He stood as she entered, a welcoming smile on his face.

In his late fifties, Alan was a gentleman, with neatly combed silver hair and a tailored suit that spoke of his success.

"Frances, it's always a pleasure," he greeted her, extending his hand.

"Thank you, Alan. I hope I'm not interrupting your day," Frances replied, shaking his hand before taking a seat in the plush armchair opposite his desk.

"Not at all. What can I do for you today?" Alan asked, settling back into his chair, his pen ready to take notes.

Frances paused, gathering her thoughts. "I've been thinking about an investment. It's not one we've discussed before, but it's something that's important to me."

Alan raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

Frances straightened her back pulling skirt down a bit lower over her knees. "It's about Miss Yasmin Khan. You remember I mentioned her before? She's a designer, incredibly talented. Recently she was offered an opportunity to venture outside of studio. It's a life changing opportunity for her. But in order to do that she needs a proper workshop to expand her business, and I want to help her."

Alan nodded thoughtfully, already considering the logistics. "You're thinking of providing financial support?"

"Yes, but I want it to be a pure investment," Frances clarified. "I don't want her to feel like she's indebted to me or that I'm controlling her work. I believe in her vision, and I want to give her the opportunity to grow her business on her own terms. After a year, I plan to step back entirely."

Alan leaned forward slightly, his interest piqued. "A silent partner, then. No involvement in the day-to-day operations, just the initial financial backing?"

"Exactly," Frances affirmed. "I'll help her get the workshop set up and cover some initial costs, but after a year, I want to be completely out of it. Yaz deserves the freedom to succeed or fail on her own, without feeling like I'm watching over her shoulder."

Alan jotted down some notes before looking back up at Frances. “That’s a wise approach. It shows trust in her abilities and gives her the space to build her business independently. I’ll make sure the investment is structured clearly, a one-year commitment with a defined exit plan.”

Frances felt a wave of relief wash over her. “That’s exactly what I want, Alan. I just needed to give you a heads-up, so it doesn’t complicate things financially.”

Alan smiled, his professional demeanor softened by a hint of personal warmth. “You’re doing a good thing here. I’ll have the necessary documents drafted and ready for your review by the end of the week.”

“Thank you, Alan. I appreciate your help,” she said, rising from her seat.

As Alan escorted her to the door, he offered her a final reassuring smile. “Anytime, Frances. I’ll be in touch.”

Stepping back into the hallway, Frances felt lighter, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She hoped she was doing the right thing, not just for Yaz, but for their relationship. It was her way of supporting Yaz’s dreams while respecting her independence, allowing her to flourish on her own terms.

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Frances parked on the quiet street outside the diner, the place where she and Yaz had agreed to meet for lunch. The building was modest, tucked away from the bustling studio nearby, a place where they could blend into the background. As she stepped out into the cool afternoon air, the sky was overcast again, casting a soft gray light over everything. Her heart quickened, anticipation and anxiety brewing inside her as she made her way to the door.

Yaz was already there, seated in a booth at the back. When Frances saw her, her breath caught. Yaz looked different somehow, softer, perhaps more vulnerable, and Frances knew it was because of what had transpired between them during the weekend. They had crossed a threshold, and now, in the light of day, the reality of their situation pressed down on them both.

As Frances approached with a big smile, Yaz stood up from the booth, they hesitated for just a moment before stepping into each other’s arms. The hug was brief but full of unspoken emotion, a silent acknowledgment of everything that had changed between them.

“Hello darling” Frances murmured as they pulled apart, both women’s smiles tinged with a mixture of happiness, love and uncertainty.

“Hi,” she responded softly. “You look tired. Is everything alright?”

“Busy,” Frances replied, slipping into the booth opposite Yaz. “Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. But I couldn’t stop thinking about this.”

"Me too..." she smiled a little

The tension between them was palpable, a current of energy that made every glance and word feel heavy with meaning. They ordered their lunch. Frances opting for a salad, Yaz a sandwich, but the food was secondary. Their minds were on the brief moments they had alone, where they could express how much they missed each other without the weight of the world watching.

As the waitress left them alone, Frances leaned forward, lowering her voice, "There’s something I need to talk to you about."

Yaz’s breath hitched, a flicker of panic in her eyes that Frances caught immediately.

"Nothing bad, darling," Frances reassured, reaching across the table. Her fingers brushed briefly but gently against Yaz’s, offering comfort. Yaz’s shoulders relaxed as relief washed over her.

"It’s about that plan I was cooking," Frances continued, a hint of excitement in her tone.

Yaz’s curiosity piqued, and she leaned in closer. "Oh... okay... I’m all ears."

She smiled softly. "I spoke to my financial advisor this morning, and I’ve decided, if you want me to, I’m going to invest in your business. Help you get that workshop set up."

Yaz’s eyes widened in shock. "What?" Her arm stopping mid air, accidentally knocking over her bottle of Coke. She jumped out of her seat fumbling with napkins, trying to clean up the table, her mind racing.

Frances laughed helping her mop up the mess. "It’s just to get you started darling. I’m not gonna to be in your way. Think of it as sponsoring your adventure. You’ll have total control. Then after a year I’m pulling out like I wasn’t even there"

Yaz shook her head in disbelief. "Franny, you don’t have to...."

"But I want to," she interrupted firmly.

"I... I don’t know what to say," Yaz stammered, completely overwhelmed.

"Just say yes," Frances urged with a warm smile. "This is once in a lifetime opportunity. I can’t let you lose it over stupid lack of space. I know you will make it...I can feel it"

"And what if fail?"

"And what if you fly?" She smiled brightly

Tears welled up in Yaz's eyes, a mix of joy and frustration that she couldn't fully express her gratitude in public. "I... I'm gonna cry..."

Frances reached across the table again, her touch lingering on Yaz's hand. "Only happy tears, okay?" She grinned. "So, is that a yes?"

Yaz nodded, her smile bright despite the tears threatening to spill. "Yes... but it feels so strange... I can't even show you how much this means to me."

Frances's gaze softened, filled with understanding. "It's okay, darling. We'll find our moments." She paused, her eyes lighting up. "Now, let's start looking for that space. It's gonna be exciting, right?"

Yaz nodded, still in awe. "Yes... ."

"We will find somewhere nice, and you'll need pins and needles, sewing machines...Iron! You need iron!" She continued excited making Yaz laugh

The rest of the meal passed in making big plans, discussing everything and anything Yaz needed to start her business. Both women stealing glances at one another, each touch of their hands under the table a secret shared. But as they finished, the reality of their separate lives began to settle in.

When they stepped outside, the gray clouds overhead mirrored the heaviness in their hearts. Frances felt Yaz's hand brush against hers as they stood by the curb, the pull to embrace again almost unbearable.

"I hate this," Yaz whispered, her voice tinged with sadness. "Having to say goodbye like this, pretending nothing's changed."

Frances couldn't bear the look in Yaz's eyes. Without thinking, she pulled her into her arms, holding her tight. The hug was longer this time, filled with all the things they couldn't say in public. "It won't always be like this," Frances promised softly, her lips brushing against Yaz's ear. "I'll find a way."

Yaz nodded, her head resting on Frances's shoulder for a moment longer before they pulled apart. The separation was reluctant, both of them clinging to those last few seconds of closeness.

"Come over after the brunch on Saturday," she suggested quietly as they parted. "Spend the night with me." she whispered, "Can you do that?"

Yaz smiled, the light returning to her eyes. "I'd like that," she whispered.

Frances smiled softly "I'll call you tonight...Usual time"

"Okay" she nodded

"You know what I wanna say?"

"I do..." Yaz nodded "Same here"

"Bye darling" she smiled brightly "Make a list"

"I will" she laughed

With one final, lingering look, Frances stepped back and watched Yaz walk away, her heart aching with both the thrill of their connection and the pain of having to keep it hidden. As she climbed back into her car, Frances took a deep breath, focusing on the thought of Saturday, when they could finally be themselves again, even if only for a night.

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That evening as Yaz came off the bus, her footsteps were rushed. Excitement bubbling inside her as she couldn't wait to share the news with Susan. She burst through the front door, the house was quiet, except for the soft hum of a radio playing in the kitchen.

"Susan!" Yaz called out, her voice full of energy as she practically ran through the hallway.
"Susan, where are you?"

Susan appeared from the living room, a book in hand, and looked up with a mix of curiosity and concern at Yaz's breathless excitement. "Yaz? What's going on? Are you alright?"

Yaz's face broke into a wide grin as she hurried over, grabbing Susan by the hands. "You're not gonna believe this! Frances....she's gonna invest in my business! She wants to help me set up my own workshop!"

Susan's eyes widened in shock, and for a moment, she was speechless, her mouth opening and closing as she processed the news. "Oh my God, really...That's... wow!" She pulled Yaz into a tight hug, laughing with sheer happiness. "This is amazing! You've worked so hard for this honey!"

Yaz hugged her back, the joy bubbling up in her. "I know! I still can't believe it. I was so worried how I'm gonna pull it off."

"I can't believe it myself.... So she's going to give you money for space?"

"Space, machines, everything I need including if I need to employ someone"

"Oh my god!"

"I knooooow right.... No pressure... It's all happening so fast, and I just...God... I better make this work?"

"Oh, don't be silly. Why would it not work? This lady wants your dress"

"That's one dress...just one"

"And there's gonna be others." She palmed her cheek gently "You need to believe in yourself"

"I couldn't wait to tell you!" Yaz grinned mischievously. "You know what we need to do now, right?"

Susan raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on her lips. "What?"

"We need to celebrate! I'm thinking wine for you, Shirley Temple for me." Yaz's eyes sparkled with the idea.

Susan laughed, shaking her head in disbelief but completely on board. "You're right. This calls for a celebration!" She turned toward the kitchen, still smiling. "I think there's a bottle of red I've been saving. It's about time I open it up."

As Susan headed to the kitchen to grab the wine, Yaz felt a wave of happiness and relief wash over her. This was it, everything she'd dreamed of was finally starting to come together, and she couldn't imagine celebrating it with anyone better than Susan. Tonight was going to be special.

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After a peaceful evening with Susan, the cozy atmosphere was suddenly interrupted by the ringing of the kitchen phone. Susan, nearest to it, picked up.

"Hello?" she answered, her voice still light from the evening's cheer.

"Good evening, Susan, it's Frances. I apologize for a late call"

"Not at all, I guess you want to speak to Yaz?"

"Yes please"

"I'll pass her on"

"Thank you"

Susan glanced over at Yaz with a knowing smile. "It's Frances," she said, offering her the receiver with a soft grin.

Yaz's heart fluttered. It was late and she hadn't expected Frances to call. Taking the phone, she murmured a quick thank you to Susan, who quietly left the room closing the kitchen door, leaving Yaz in privacy.

"Hi hun." She answered cheerfully

"Hello darling.

"I didn't expect you to call anymore." Yaz smiled

"Sorry to call this late. I was on a phone with Andy for ages"

"That's okay. Don't worry about it....Susan and I were celebrating our little business deal." She giggled

"Oh, did you? That's nice...I'm happy we saw each other today. I was gonna say... I am so sorry we couldn't meet any other way, I felt so bad about it. It was a mad day today. I was trying to sort everything out before the shooting starts again."

"That's alright, I understand. So, you're starting tomorrow?"

"I need to be at the make-up table at six in the morning...I can't wait to finish this where I don't need to look at his ugly face every day. It's making me feel ill"

"Is he leaving you alone?"

"He's keeping his distance for now.... Thank god...But just being in a same room with him is making me feel nervous. I'm so jumpy all the time...One more week, that's all I keep telling myself. I'll take my money and I'll never have to see him again"

"God this is wrong in so many ways...He should be behind bars not behind the camera"

Frances sighed deeply "A lot of people should be behind bars, and unfortunately they are still breathing the same air as us.... I do have some good news"

"You do?"

"You know the script I picked up today. Its not bad you know"

"Really?"

"Yeah...It's not really what I wanted, but Andy is right. It's not that bad either...He seems to think this movie is gonna flop"

"Noooo...come oon...why would it flop?"

"Cause I'm looking like someone dragged me through dirt and I'm buttoned up to my neck" she laughed

"Surely not? The story is fantastic"

"It is...but it's a big jump from my previous work. I was aware of it when I took it.... I knew the risk...So now I need to apparently slow down and be all glammed up again"

"You'll get there in the end.... Besides, you can still be glammed up and play a serious role"

"And that's exactly what I keep saying. Anyways, enough about me...I'm so exited about your workshop.

"It's still not registering. I'm so exited about it...I need to apply for a business permit tomorrow. I hope it will go quickly"

"It shouldn't take more than two weeks, I think. Did you think of a name?"

"I thought perhaps 'Belle Couture', what do you think?"

"I love it...My financial advisor should have all the paperwork done by Friday. Then next week we go together to have it all signed and I can release the money."

"That sounds perfect...I still need to get my head around this. I can't believe you're doing this for me."

"And who else would I do it for if not for you" she smiled

"I miss you...I feel so different...It's all changed so much...Does that make any sense?...Like a part of me is missing when you're not around."

"I've missed you too," Frances confessed. "More than I thought possible. These past few days... they've been harder than I expected. I miss your touch, your scent... everything about you"

"Just few more days"

Frances whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I can't wait until we can be together again. I need you with me, more than you know."

"Love you" Yaz whispered

"I love you too ...I'll let you go now honey...It's really late and you need your rest too..." she whispered

"Alright ...Night night hun"

"Sweet dreams darling"

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The morning sunlight streamed gently through the sheer curtains, casting a warm, golden hue across the room. Frances stirred awake, the softness of the sheets brushing against her skin as she slowly opened her eyes. The house was quiet, the only sounds being the chirping of birds in the garden. She slipped out of bed, padding barefoot to the kitchen where she prepared herself a simple breakfast, toast with butter and a cup of strong black coffee.

As she settled into her chair, taking a moment to savor the first sip of coffee, the phone rang, slicing through the serene atmosphere. Frances frowned, setting her cup down and reaching for the phone on the counter.

"Hello?" Her voice was calm and warm.

"Margaret "

The voice on the other end was like a punch to the gut. Frances's grip tightened on the receiver, her knuckles turning white. Of all the people she could have heard from this morning this was the last she expected or wanted.

"What do you want?" she asked, her tone immediately cold, all warmth draining from her face.

"Now, is that any way to greet your old man? I was just thinking about you, that's all." His voice was slick, a familiar mixture of insincerity and manipulation that made Frances's stomach churn.

"You've got exactly two seconds to get to the point," she snapped, no patience for his games.

There was a pause on the other end before he finally cut to the chase. "I need more money. You know, things have been tight, and I could really use a little help."

Frances felt her blood boil. "I just sent you money three weeks ago!" she exclaimed, anger flaring in her chest. "What did you do with that?"

"That was then, this is now," he replied, his voice smooth but with an undercurrent of desperation. "I've got expenses, few dollars aren't gonna cut it, now is it?"

Frances clenched her jaw, every muscle in her body tensing. "I'm not your personal bank. You've drained me enough."

"Come on, you got plenty. Few thousands here and there isn't gonna break the bank" His next words were like a dagger aimed directly at her heart. "You know, Margaret, it would be a shame

if your little secret got out. I'm sure the press would have a field trip with a story like that. Might even pay good money for it."

"You bastard," she hissed, but the fear in her voice was undeniable.

Her breath caught in her throat, her heart hammering in her chest. He had always known how to manipulate her, how to dig his claws into her deepest fears. Frances closed her eyes, trying to steady herself, but the weight of his threat hung heavily over her.

"Come on you know the deal, you pay, I keep my mouth shut." he said, his tone smug, knowing he had her cornered. "Your choice sugar"

Frances felt a wave of helplessness crash over her. She had worked so hard to build a life away from his toxicity, to protect herself and her daughter. But with a few calculated words, he always had a power to pull her back into his twisted web.

"Fine," she spat, the word bitter on her tongue. "I'll send you the damn money. But this is the last time, do you understand me?"

"Good girl, now you know it's a right thing to do"

"Rot in hell you sick bastard! And don't you ever call my house again."

She slammed the phone down, her hands trembling with a mixture of rage and fear. For a moment, she just stood there, breathing heavily, trying to contain the storm of emotions raging inside her. She felt so desperately alone and wanted nothing more than to confide in Yaz, to let her in on this dark corner of her life, but the thought of exposing such a raw and painful part of herself was too much to bear. Not yet. She wasn't ready.

She grabbed the glass from the kitchen top and threw it into the wall then sank into the nearest chair, burying her face in her hands, wishing she could erase the conversation from her memory. But the reality was there, gnawing at her, a reminder of the past she couldn't fully escape, no matter how far she ran.

Frances sat there, still grappling with the turmoil of the call, her mind racing as she tried to suppress the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. The quiet of the house had been her refuge, but now it felt suffocating, the walls closing in as the weight of her father's threats bore down on her.

The sound of the front door opening jolted her out of her thoughts. She quickly wiped at her eyes, straightening up in her chair, just as Betty appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

Betty was a middle-aged woman with a warm, round face, her brown hair neatly pinned back, and always with a cheerful smile that could brighten even the darkest of days.

"Good morning, Miss Frances!" Betty greeted her, her voice bright and full of the usual cheer.

Frances forced a smile, pulling herself together as quickly as she could.

“Morning, Betty,” she replied, trying to keep her tone light, though she could feel the tension still tight in her chest.

But Betty, perceptive as ever, noticed the faint traces of distress on Frances’s face, the slight redness in her eyes, the way her hands fidgeted slightly on the table. Then her eyes caught the broken glass shattered on the floor. Her smile faltered a bit as concern crept into her expression.

“Is everything alright, Miss Frances? You seem... troubled.”

Frances’s first instinct was to brush off the question, to hide behind the mask she had perfected over the years. She quickly plastered on a brighter smile, her tone almost too cheerful as she responded,

“Oh, I’m fine, Betty. Just... you know, thinking about work. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, that would be lovely, thank you.”

Frances quickly reached for the dustpan and brush. "I knocked it, clumsy hands" she smiled

"That's alright Miss... Let me" Betty reached for the brush "Don't want you cutting yourself" She didn't look entirely convinced, but she knew better than to push.

"Thank you" Frances turned towards the kitchen top, her movements a bit too brisk as she made herself busy with the coffee pot. The clinking of cups and the sound of pouring coffee filled the silence, giving her something to focus on besides the whirlwind of emotions inside her.

She handed Betty a cup, their fingers briefly brushing. Betty gave her a small, reassuring smile, accepting the coffee.

“Thank you, Miss Frances.”

Frances nodded, sitting back down, wrapping her hands around her own cup as if it could anchor her to the moment, to the present, away from the dark shadows of her past.

Betty took a sip, her eyes still on Frances, but she let the silence hang between them, offering comfort in her presence alone. Frances was grateful for that, for Betty’s understanding that sometimes, silence spoke more than words ever could.

As they sat there, she tried to focus on the warmth of the coffee in her hands, the normalcy of the moment, desperately trying to push away the lingering dread that her father had left. But even as she smiled at Betty, there was a part of her that wished she could confide in someone, to not bear this burden alone.

But that day hadn't come yet.

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Yaz was in her office, gathering fabric swatches and sketches getting ready for the meeting that was scheduled in just a few minutes. As she checked everything one last time, a knock on the door interrupted her concentration. She looked up, a bit surprised. Before she could respond, the door squeaked open.

A bright smile instantly spread across her lips when she saw who it was. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Franny?" she said, her voice tinged with surprise and excitement. "What are you doing here?"

Frances stood in the doorway, dressed in her costume for the day's shoot. She grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she closed the door behind her.

"I can't stay long. I said I needed to go to the restroom."

"Oh my God..." Yaz laughed at her cheekiness.

Before she could say more, Frances was already crossing the room quickly, and Yaz found herself being pulled into her arms. She wasted no time, capturing Yaz's lips in a long, passionate kiss that spoke volumes of the longing and excitement that had been building up inside her. Yaz melted into the kiss, her hand instinctively reaching out the nape of her neck, pulling her closer as if trying to make the moment last longer.

When they pulled back slightly Yaz laughed into her lips "Your makeup silly." she used her finger to wipe her lipstick from her lovers' lips.

Frances shook her head if it were nothing "I don't care," she murmured, pulling her into one more quick kiss "I missed you too much."

Yaz couldn't help but laugh, her heart swelling with affection for this woman who had turned her world upside down.

"Missed you too cheeky nugget." her fingers playing with the collar of Frances's blouse. She could sense that behind her smile there was a hint of sadness, the way she kissed her and held her was different. As if she wasn't just looking for a moment of escape but comfort in her arms.

"What's wrong? You look like something is bothering you?" She reached out, her thumb brushing softly over Frances's cheek

"It's nothing" she dismissed it with a smile that hasn't quite reach her eyes, her fingers tracing lines down Yaz's hip

"Are you sure?" Yaz hooked her finger underneath her chin lifting her gaze "If he's been bothering you..."

"No... it's not that..." she nodded, her lips twitching as the words were desperate to come out, her arms wrapping around Yaz's waist savoring the stolen moment holding on to her almost desperately.

She needed her more than she could ever explain, her touch, her lips on hers felt like a soothing balm she needed to save herself from going insane. She stole another gentle kiss.

Just as they were beginning to lose themselves in each other again, there was a sharp knock on the door. Both women froze, their eyes widening. Frances quickly stepped back, straightening her blouse, while Yaz hurried to smooth her hair.

"Yaz, you in there?" came Charlie's voice from the other side of the door. "The meeting is in two minutes."

"Coming!" she called out, trying to keep her voice steady.

Yaz exchanged a quick glance with Frances, her heart sinking momentarily.

Frances sighed, her hand reaching for Yaz's, fingers gently hooking up to them "I guess I should get back too," she said, her tone filled with regret.

Yaz nodded, her smile bittersweet. "We'll make up on Saturday... And promise you'll tell me what's on your mind?" she said softly, squeezing Frances's hand before letting go.

Frances nodded giving her one last lingering look, then turned and slipped out of the office, careful to close the door quietly behind her. Yaz took a deep breath, composing herself before heading out to meet Charlie, the taste of Frances still lingering on her lips, a sweet secret she will carry the rest of the day.

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Yaz was carefully folding a sweater into her suitcase, the anticipation of the weekend making her movements light and deliberate. The soft knit jumper she'd bought just the other day lay across the bed, its warm autumn colors reflecting the late afternoon light streaming through the window.

As she tucked away a pair of shoes, she heard the door to her room creak open. Susan stood in the doorway, her presence as comforting as ever. She leaned against the frame, arms crossed, a small smile playing on her lips.

"That's a beautiful jumper," Susan remarked, "Is it new?"

Yaz looked up, smiling as she glanced at the jumper. “Yeah, I couldn’t resist it when I saw it. It’ll be perfect for the chilly evenings.”

Susan stepped closer, running her fingers over the soft material. “It’s lovely. You’ve got good taste.”

“Thanks,” Yaz replied, returning to her packing. “I won’t be long... I’m starving”

There was a moment of comfortable silence between them as Yaz continued to pack. Then Susan’s voice softened, a slight shift in her tone that caught Yaz’s attention.

“Yaz,” she began, her words careful, “I’ve noticed how happy you’ve been lately. It’s nice to see you smile all the time...You have that spark in your eyes...”

Yaz paused, sensing where this might be headed. She looked up at Susan, their eyes meeting with understanding.

“But,” Susan continued gently, “I can’t help but worry. What you have.... it’s beautiful, but it’s also... risky. You know that, right?”

Yaz nodded, feeling the weight of Susan’s concern settle over her. “I know... I do.”

Susan moved to sit on the edge of the bed, her hands resting in her lap. “I just don’t want anything bad to happen to either of you. Especially not you, Yaz. People can be cruel, and the world isn’t as forgiving as it should be.”

Yaz sighed softly, walking over to sit beside Susan. She took her hand, squeezing it reassuringly. “We’re being careful...I promise...We know what’s at stake.”

Susan looked at her with a mixture of worry and affection. “I’ve always tried to give you space, I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable... I just needed to make sure you’re thinking about that.” She gently moved a strand of hair from Yaz’s forehead

“I am,” Yaz said earnestly. “We both are. This isn’t the first time Frances has been in a situation like this. She knows how to handle it, and I trust her. I trust myself.”

Susan nodded slowly, a hint of relief in her expression. “I just want you to be safe, Yaz. I’m happy for you, truly. I just... I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I know,” Yaz said softly, her voice filled with gratitude “You don’t have to worry. I promise.”

Susan smiled, leaning over to give Yaz a tender hug. “Alright,” she said, pulling back, “I’ll trust you on that.”

Yaz smiled, feeling a sense of comfort knowing that Susan was looking out for her. “Thank you.... For everything. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Susan smiled squeezing her hand gently.

"I'll get the plates out. Potatoes must be done by now"

"I'll be done in few minutes"

With that she got up leaving the conversation filled with a sense of quiet understanding. Yaz returned to her packing, while Susan lingered for a moment, watching her with a fond smile before quietly leaving the room.

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Susan stood in front of the house watering her plants, the hose in her hand sending a gentle shower over the vibrant green leaves. The morning air was crisp, still carrying the coolness of the night, though the early morning sun was beginning a promise of a warm day ahead. She always found peace in these early moments, the quiet hum of the neighborhood slowly waking up around her.

As she adjusted the flow of water, Susan's attention was drawn to the soft purr of an approaching car. She glanced up and couldn't help but smile as a cream convertible eased to a stop in front of her house. The car was immaculate, its polished surface catching the sunlight, casting a gentle glow on the street. It was a familiar sight by now, but it still carried a certain thrill, an indicator of the special visitor it brought.

Frances, stepping out of the car, looking immaculate as always. Even from her spot in the garden, Susan could see the way the early light played off Frances's blonde curls, styled in those soft, glamorous waves. She wore a cream suit that fit her perfectly, highlighting her figure without being overly showy. Her lips painted in bright coral lipstick were the only bold note in her look, standing out like a signature on a well-composed letter. Susan found something almost otherworldly about her, the way she moved with effortless grace, exuding confidence and charm.

She waved, setting the hose down to walk toward the car. Frances's visits had become more frequent lately, a fact that hadn't escaped Susan's notice. But this morning, as always, she masked her curiosity with a friendly smile.

"Good morning, Frances!" she called out as she approached the car, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Frances extended her arm, her smile as radiant as ever. "Morning, Susan! I always admire your garden. It's so beautiful"

"Thank you. It's my little hobby"

"Oh, just to confirm tomorrow's lunch.... Two o'clock, right?"

Susan chuckled, nodding. "Yes...It's all set. I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too"

She could see Frances's eyes shift slightly, her gaze scanning the porch, looking for Yaz. The unspoken connection between them was almost palpable. Susan felt a tug of protectiveness for Yaz, mixed with a quiet acceptance of the inevitable, whatever was unfolding between them, it was real, and it was deep.

The front door opened, and Yaz came out. Susan turned slightly, watching her step out into the morning light. She was dressed simply yet elegantly in brown trousers and a cream jumper with a beautiful brooch on the collar, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders in loose waves.

There was something about the way Yaz carried herself, a quiet confidence mixed with a touch of vulnerability, that always tugged at Susan's heart.

As Yaz approached the car, Frances's gaze locked onto her, and Susan could see the way her smile softened, becoming more personal, more intimate. It was as if the rest of the world disappeared immediately, leaving just the two of them in their own private moment as Frances leaned in closing her arms around Yaz.

"Morning darling" she smiled brightly

"Hi" Yaz's eyes sparkled

As they pulled apart Yaz rushed around the car putting a small suitcase in the booth.

"Don't keep her waiting too long" Susan teased lightly as Yaz opened the door, trying to keep her tone light despite the surge of emotions she felt.

Yaz laughed softly, the sound bringing a genuine smile to Susan's face. "I won't. Have a nice day." she said leaning in for a hug

"See you tomorrow honey" Susan said softly

As Yaz settled into the passenger seat and Frances closed the door, Susan stepped back, giving them space. She watched as Frances circled back to the driver's side, her every movement smooth and controlled, betraying none of the passion she'd just shown a moment ago.

"See you tomorrow Susan" Frances waived before sitting behind the wheel

"Have a nice time"

"We sure will"

The car pulled away slowly, and Susan found herself standing there, the garden forgotten for a moment, as she watched them disappear down the street. A small sigh escaped her, a mix of happiness and concern swirling in her chest. She wanted nothing more than for Yaz to be happy, but she knew all too well the dangers that came with such a relationship in their world.

With a final glance at the now empty street, Susan turned back to her plants, her mind already shifting to the Sunday lunch she'd promised. She'd make sure it was perfect, a small way of showing her support, even if she couldn't protect them from everything.

As she resumed her watering, the sound of the hose hitting the leaves brought her back to the present.

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