

Chapter 3

Frances returned from her idyllic holiday in Italy, the sun-kissed glow of her vacation lingering on her skin as she stepped into her LA home. The city buzzed around her, a stark contrast to the serene landscapes she had left behind. With the start of her new movie shoot a month away, she knew there was much to be done to prepare for the upcoming role. But her first priority in her diary was something completely different.

The studio buzzed with the usual activity, but Yaz's focus was solely on her desk. She sat at her drafting table, surrounded by sketches and fabric swatches, deeply engrossed in drawing designs for her upcoming project. Her pencil moved steadily across the paper.

The quiet concentration in the room was suddenly interrupted by the sound of the door creaking open. Yaz looked up, her gaze meeting Frances's as she entered, a wide smile spreading across her face. Frances, back from her holiday in Italy, was dressed in a chic summer dress that emphasized her sun-bathed skin.

"Surprise!" Frances said cheerfully, her voice warm and welcoming.

Yaz's eyes lit up with surprise and delight. "Frances! What a pleasant surprise!" she stood up from her chair.

She stepped further and surprised Yaz with a warm hug and only then Yaz realised just how much had missed her.

"I'm so happy that you're back" she said, her tone warm as she closed her arms around her

"I just had to come by and see you. I've missed our chats"

"I missed you too," Yaz said with a smile across her face "How was Italy? I bet it was wonderful. You got a gorgeous tan"

"Not as gorgeous as yours," she said with a twinkle in her eyes "Italy was beautiful, but I'm happy to be back. I thought I'd drop by and see how everything is going here. I you've been busy" her gaze lingering on Yaz's sketches.

"It's been a bit chaotic around here, but yes these are the once I was telling you about"

"These look incredible, darling" her eyes drifting over the sketches "You've really outdone yourself."

"Thank you," Yaz said, her cheeks flushing slightly with the compliment. "I've been working hard on them. I'm really excited about the project."

"I can tell," Frances said, her gaze softening as she looked at Yaz. "You're so talented, and so kind and genuine."

"So are you." She smiled softly still looking down on her designs "It's one of the things I admire most about you."

Yaz looked up from her work, meeting Frances's eyes. There was a moment of quiet, a shared understanding passing between them.

"So," Frances said, breaking the silence, her expression turning more playful, "I haven't forgotten about our lunch. How about we schedule it soon?"

Yaz's face lit up. "I'd love that. When were you thinking?"

"Let me look at my diary, I think Friday" her voice carrying a hint of frustration. "I have a lunch with my agent and a meeting with a director... I hate those."

Her mood visibly dropped, and Yaz noticed the change immediately.

"You look worried..." she said gently.

Frances glanced down at the desk, her fingers nervously twirling a corner of Yaz's sketch. "Oh, it's just... you know," she said, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Never mind" the silence in the room suddenly became palpable.

"But I do mind. Wait..." Yaz said, walking quickly to shut the door. Frances turned towards her, a mix of pain and embarrassment on her face, struggling to hold back her emotions.

"What's going on?"

"It's nothing... it's just..." Frances fumbled, her gaze dropping to the floor.

"Hey... I'm not gonna tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about. Whatever we say stays between us."

Frances inhaled deeply, lifting her gaze. Her eyes glistened in the soft light from the desk lamp. "I'm scared... I'm so scared, Yaz."

"Of what?" Yaz asked softly.

"Not of what, darling... of who..." Frances's voice trembled. "The director... there's talk about him. You know, using his position to..." She swallowed hard. "I'm meeting him

alone in his office, if I've known that I would've never taken this job." she gasped, covering her face with her hands.

"OMG" Yaz's expression tightened, her mind racing as she sought to maintain her composure. "We'll figure this out. Don't worry."

"There's nothing to figure out" Frances shook her head. "I should've said nothing... I'm sorry... This isn't your problem"

"Don't say that," Yaz interjected firmly.

"I've got to go... I'll call you," Frances said, moving toward the door.

"I'll go with you," Yaz said quickly, causing Frances to stop, her back turned towards her "I'll wait outside if I have to." she said, her voice almost desperate "And If at any point you feel unsafe, get the hell out of there. I'll be right outside. He won't dare if you're not alone." Yaz's voice was steady, but her legs shook as she spoke.

They stood in silence for a moment. Frances turned slowly, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"So... do we have a deal?" Yaz's chest heaved, her whole body shaking

Frances stepped forward, embracing her tightly, Yaz's arms closing around her gently.

Although Yaz wasn't fully aware that things were not as simple as that, her overwhelming support meant so much that Frances was left without a word.

"It's alright, you're not alone," she whispered, her voice breaking. She held her close, her own emotions stirred. "Just say yes."

Frances pulled back slightly, her lips trembling as she nodded. "Yes... alright, darling... we have a deal." She exhaled so deeply as if the weight of the world had just lifted from her shoulders.

"Good," Yaz said, her voice firm yet soothing.

"Thank you"

"That's alright. See, told you we'll figure it out."

Their eyes were locked in the silence of the room. Frances held her hand tight grounding herself, feeling of relief taking its place.

"Feeling better?" She smiled a little

"Yes, much better" she sniffed "So about that lunch?" Frances managed a small smile, wiping away her tears. "How about on Friday?"

Yaz returned her smile, feeling a sense of relief "Friday sounds perfect. I'm looking forward to it. I'll bring my folder"

Frances laughed, her mood brightening even more. She glanced at the clock on the wall,
"I should let you get back to work, but it's been wonderful seeing you. And thank you so much"

"No need to thank me for that. Just let me know when this meeting is"

"I will..." she nodded with a softest smile

"I'm glad you stopped by," she said, her voice warm. "It's made my day."

Frances gave her one more warm hug. "Mine too...I'll see you soon darling. And keep up the amazing work. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you," Yaz replied, her smile genuine. "See you soon."

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Yaz hurried through the bustling hallways of the studio, her heels clicking urgently against the polished floors. Her dress swished with each step as she weaved through the crowd of studio employees,

As she reached the courtyard, she quickened her steps and navigated past potted plants and scattered furniture, finally turning around the corner of the building. There, on the parking, she spotted Frances.

She was leaning casually against her car, a cigarette between her fingers. Her light blue capri trousers and crisp white shirt made a striking contrast against the sleek car. The gentle breeze played with her blonde curls. Yaz's breath caught at the sight, the scene almost cinematic in its simplicity.

Frances looked up, her face lighting up with the brightest smile as she saw Yaz approaching.

"Hey," Yaz called out breathless

Frances pushed off from the car and flicked her cigarette away, taking a few steps forward. "You made it," Her eyes sparkled

Yaz nodded, her face flushed "I did. Sorry I'm late. I got caught up."

"No worries." She chuckled "I'm just glad you're here. I was starting to worry I'll have to eat alone."

Yaz smiled, catching her breath. "Not a chance."

Frances looked at Yaz with affection and opened the passenger door gesturing for her to get in. The gesture was simple, but it held an air of intimacy about it. Yaz slid into the plush, cream leather seat, the sleek lines of the car gleaming under the late afternoon sun. Her eyes wandered across the polished dashboard, taking in the array of dials and chrome accents. The speedometer, with its elegant script, and the radio, with its large knobs, were meticulously detailed. She used to admire these cars from a distance, but never did she think she will ever sit in one.

Frances slid into the driver's seat, a faint smell of her perfume lingering in the air. She started the engine and the car roared to life.

They pulled away from the studio and onto the road. Few minutes into the ride Yaz noticed they passed the restaurant they arranged to go to " "You just missed the turning."

Frances smiled cheeky not giving her an answer

"Where are we going?"

Frances grinned, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "It's a surprise. Just sit back and enjoy the ride." she gripped the wheel and pressed on the gas pedal.

As they drove through the sunlit streets of Los Angeles, the smooth hum of car mixed with the mellow tunes flowing from the radio.

Yaz sat beside Frances, her fingers gripping the edge of her seat slightly as she stole glances at the bustling scenery. Frances's carefree laughter and animated conversation filled the car, but Yaz's mind was occupied with a lingering thread of anxiety that started since she realised Frances had other plans than just a casual cafeteria lunch.

She had no idea where Frances was taking her, and the uncertainty tugged at her thoughts. She could only hope that when Frances changed her plans, she had in mind that someone of her skin colour was not always welcomed in certain places. The brutal reality of racial prejudice was something she had encountered more than once, and it was never far from her mind.

She glanced at Frances, who was humming along to the music, seemingly oblivious to Yaz's inner turmoil. Despite the lighthearted atmosphere, Yaz's heart was heavy with apprehension.

Frances turned to her with a bright smile, clearly thrilled by the day's plans. "I promise you'll love this," she said, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. Yaz managed a smile in return, trying to calm herself down.

They pulled up in front of Perino's, the restaurant, renowned for its Italian elegance, stood poised in the heart of Beverly Hills, its warm lights glowing against the early evening sky. The valet opened the door for them with a courteous nod, and Frances stepped out first, her radiant smile capturing the attention of passersby. Yaz followed, her presence marked by a subtle air of anticipation mixed with unease.

As they walked up the marble steps, Frances carried an air of confident grace. Yaz, in a beautifully tailored dress, tried to shake off her anxiety. She glanced at the elegantly dressed customers mingling at the entrance, her heart fluttering slightly.

Frances, noticing Yaz's hesitation, placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "Just relax darling. I've been coming here for a long time. They'll treat us like royalty."

Yaz returned a nervous smile. The head waiter, a gentleman with a crisp suit and a welcoming smile, approached as they entered.

"Good evening, Miss Louise," he greeted warmly. His eyes briefly lingered on Yaz, but his demeanor remained professional. "A table for two?"

Frances offered him a bright smile, her presence commanding immediate respect. "Yes, thank you," she replied smoothly and placed a gentle, reassuring hand on Yaz's arm, her touch lingering a moment longer than necessary. "Shall we?"

As they walked through the restaurant, Frances engaged in light conversation with the staff, her charm evident. They were led to a secluded table with a white linen cloth and a delicate vase of fresh flowers.

Once seated, Yaz took a moment to relax, her initial apprehension gradually fading. Frances seemed to notice, her gaze occasionally drifting towards Yaz with softness.

"It's alright, you have every right to be here, same as everyone else"

"Sorry, I didn't want to bring it up and ruin your surprise."

"It is I who should apologize. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. It just dawned on me..."

"It's not you..."

"I wish you said something, I didn't think. Please don't hold back in front of me" her hand reached across the table gently palming Yaz's "Even if I mess up, please tell me."

She nodded with thankful smile "It is beautiful"

"It is, isn't it? Told you you gonna like it... Now...She'll we order Miss Khan?" She flashed a brightest smile

The evening slipped by in light conversation as Frances and Yaz enjoyed their meal. Frances was attentive and considerate, frequently leaning closer as they spoke. Her laughter was genuine, and the warmth in her eyes was evident as she listened intently to Yaz.

"Are you from LA, or did you move here for work?" Yaz asked, curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

"I'm actually from New York," Frances replied, a hint of nostalgia in her voice. "I only moved here five years ago."

"Do you have any siblings?" Yaz inquired, intrigued by Frances's story.

"No, just me," Frances said. "How about you?"

"Same here," Yaz answered.

"And your family, they're still in England, I presume?" Frances asked, her gaze softening as she took a bite of her meal.

"Yes, my dad's a doctor, and my mother runs a small store with traditional wedding attire."

"That's interesting, I love weddings. You must miss them being here."

"I do," Yaz said, a touch of melancholy in her tone. "But we write to each other every week, and I make sure to call them once a month."

"That's so sweet," Frances said warmly.

"And your family? Are they still in New York?" Yaz asked, savoring the delicious flavors of the meal.

"I don't have any..." Frances said, sipping her wine.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Yaz blinked, her expression one of concern. "I didn't mean to"

"It's alright, darling," Frances reassured her with a soft smile. "No need to apologize. Technically, I do have a family. My dad is still alive, but we haven't been in touch since I moved out at seventeen."

"Seventeen?" Yaz exclaimed, her eyes widening. "That's so young, Frances."

"I would've left earlier if I could."

"It must have been tough. How did you manage?"

"I was working as a waitress and I did a lot of modeling," Frances explained, a nostalgic smile touching her lips. "It paid the rent and covered acting classes. I took loads of auditions, and mostly I was turned down." She laughed "But then I got a few small roles in a theater here and there. And my manager saw me one day and brought me out here."

"That's amazing," Yaz said, admiration evident in her voice. "And look at you now."

"It was my dream, and I wasn't taking no for an answer," Frances said, a smug smile playing on her lips. "Everyone thought I was delusional, but I proved them all wrong."

"Everyone thought I was delusional too when I applied for this job. My dad's exact words were "Oh sure...they will open a red carpet just for you" she impersonated her dad making Frances laugh "And yet here we are."

"Here's to us both," Frances said, raising her glass and toasting with a cheerful giggle.

"Wait until I tell them where I had dinner" Yaz laughed.

"Wait until you tell them you were at a movie premiere," Frances said with a cheeky grin.

Yaz choked on her drink, almost spilling it over herself. "Pardon? What do you mean?"

"It's already arranged," Frances said, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "You're going with me."

"Are you serious?"

Frances nodded with a grin.

"What...why? Why me?" Yaz asked, her surprise evident.

"Because you've always treated me with nothing but kindness," Frances said, her tone sincere. "And I wanted to do something small for you too"

"Small?" She laughed

"Besides, it'll be fun having you around."

“I don’t know what to say,” Yaz said, her voice soft with emotion.

“Just say yes,” Frances encouraged.

“Of course, it’s a yes,” Yaz laughed. “Thank you.”

“Should we order dessert?” Frances asked, her smile warm.

As dessert was served, Frances leaned in slightly, her gaze locked on Yaz. “I’m really glad you could join me today,” she said softly, her voice carrying an intimate warmth. “It’s been wonderful catching up.”

“Same here,” Yaz replied, her own feelings reflected in her eyes. “Thank you for this. It’s been absolutely wonderful.”

“Still is,” Frances said, her smile radiant as she looked at Yaz, the connection between them deepening with each passing moment.

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Frances maneuvered the car down Yaz’s street, the evening air cool and gentle. As they approached Yaz’s home,

“Left here,” Yaz directed, pointing to the house was located. “Here we are.”

Frances brought the car to a stop and Yaz turned beaming. “Thank you for this evening. It was absolutely beautiful.”

Frances smiled warmly. “Thank you. I really had a wonderful time.”

Leaning over, Yaz initiated a hug this time, closing her eyes as she held Frances tightly. “I’ll see you on Monday,” Yaz murmured softly.

“See you, darling,” Frances replied, her voice filled with warmth.

As Yaz reached for the door handle, preparing to exit, Frances gently grabbed her hand. “Yaz,” she said softly.

Yaz turned back, “Yes?”

“About what you said that evening...”

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

Frances looked at her, her eyes reflecting a mix of surprise and appreciation. "Nobody has ever done anything like that for me."

"They should've done"

Frances sighed, pursing her lips as she gazed at Yaz with affection. "Thank you," she said softly.

Yaz smiled, giving Frances's hand an encouraging squeeze. "Good night darling."

"Good night," Frances responded, her smile widening as Yaz stepped out of the car.

Yaz closed the door gently, watching as Frances's car drove away into the night. As the taillights vanished around the corner, Yaz stood alone, the gentle touch of Frances's hand still lingering on her skin, the smell of her perfume still drifting around her. Her heart was in a tangle of emotions she wasn't ready to face.

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Frances and Yaz walked down the long hallway, their footsteps echoing off the polished floors. Frances wore an elegant navy suit with a pencil skirt and a fitted jacket, her appearance polished and composed. Yaz, equally well-dressed, walked beside her with a steady presence.

They reached the secretary's desk, and Frances spoke calmly. "Frances Louise for Mr. Carter."

The secretary looked up with a practiced smile. "Of course, Ms. Louise. He's expecting you. Please have a seat, and I'll let him know you're here."

Frances nodded, sitting in the waiting area with her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Yaz stood nearby, her eyes scanning the hallway and offering silent support.

A few minutes later, the secretary gestured towards the office door. "Mr. Carter will see you now."

Frances took a deep breath and walked toward the door. She paused for a moment, offering Yaz a final smile. Yaz nodded back encouragingly.

Inside the office, the room was adorned with luxurious leather furniture and framed awards. Mr. Carter, a man in his early fifties with a self-assured demeanor, looked up from his desk as Frances entered.

"Ms. Louise, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person," Mr. Carter said smoothly, his eyes lingering a fraction too long.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Carter,” Frances replied, her voice steady as she shook his hand and took a seat across from his desk.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No thank you"

Mr. Carter leaned back in his chair his gaze fixed on her. “I must say, you’re even more impressive in person. I'm looking forward to us working together. The role will definitely suit you."

"I am looking forward to it myself." Frances smiled politely, though she could sense an underlying tension in his gaze. “I’ve read through the script thoroughly and have some ideas and questions about the character’s development that I’d like to discuss.”

His smile widened slightly. “I’m intrigued. But before we dive into the details, tell me, what attracted you to this role in the first place?” he got up from his desk strolling around it and sat on the corner in front of her. His eyes dropping to her knees lingering there uncomfortably. He wasn't even making any effort in hiding it.

She shifted, adjusting her skirt pulling it more over her legs, hesitated for a moment, then spoke confidently. “The character’s complexity and the opportunity to work with a talented team were key factors. I’m very passionate about exploring deep and nuanced roles. I was hoping I will get challenged. And when I saw the script, I knew it was exactly what I wanted.”

He leaned forward and took her hand, his tone taking on a more personal note. “You know, Ms. Louise, there’s something about you that’s just captivating. I’m sure you hear this all the time, but you have an extraordinary presence.”

Frances cleared her throat, shifted slightly pulling her hand back, maintaining her professional demeanor. “Thank you, Mr. Carter.

I was going to ask, is Grace inspired by Marianna from Gambara?" She tried shifting the conversation back to business

"You read Honoré de Balzac?"

"I read a lot of books Mr. Carter, but yes. Her character just seems very similar and it's what made me interested in this part. Marianna sacrifices herself for her husband, working in humble jobs to pay for their household's upkeep, for she strongly believes in his misunderstood genius. Just like Grace. So, I wondered if this is the angle you had in mind?"

His gaze remained fixed on her, and he leaned in a little closer. “Impressive, I appreciate your dedication. It’s just that, when I see someone as talented and beautiful as you, it’s hard to talk about work.”

Frances met his gaze evenly, her voice steady. "I believe in keeping our focus on the work entirely. It's important to maintain a professional environment to achieve the best results. Don't you agree Mr. Carter"

Mr. Carter's smile faltered slightly, but he continued. "Of course, of course. I just thought I'd mention it. Let's talk about the project. What are your thoughts on the direction we're taking with this character?"

Frances took a moment to compose herself, then shifted the conversation back to the film. "I think the character's arc is quite compelling and complex. I believe I could enhance some scenes to better capture the emotional depth. For example, I feel like in the climax, her internal struggle needs to be more pronounced. I would like to know your thoughts about the direction you attended for me to take"

Mr. Carter nodded, though his gaze was still a bit too lingering. "I see your point. We're both definitely passionate about making this film exceptional."

Frances nodded, grateful for the shift in focus. "Absolutely. I'm committed to delivering a performance that resonates with the audience. I think we'll make a great team."

Mr. Carter leaned back, his demeanor regaining its professional edge. "I'm sure we will. Let's set up a follow-up, table reading with other actors, I want to see what you have in mind. When I see you reading the lines I will be able to give more of feedback, and we will go from there."

Frances stood up, ready to leave. "That sounds really good. Thank you for your time, Mr. Carter. I look forward to working with you."

As she left the office, Frances felt a rush of relief. Yaz was waiting outside, her concerned eyes searching Frances's face.

"How did it go?" Yaz asked quietly.

Frances exhaled, her face a mix of tension and relief. "He tried to make it personal, kept commenting on my looks. It was so cringing, but I managed to keep things professional. It was uncomfortable, but not as bad as I thought it would be, I had it worse. I think I handled it." she smiled relieved. "I'm so glad you were here, it made me feel a lot more confident"

Yaz gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm glad to hear that. I hope he keeps it that way. Let's get out of here."

They walked down the hallway together Frances hooked her arm into Yaz's leaning slightly on her for support. Her presence so comforting.

"Hungry?" Frances smiled

"Starving" she smiled softly, the closeness of this short moment between them making her heart flutter.

As they entered the elevator, Frances stood behind Yaz, her gaze soft and lingering as she admired the way Yaz's dark hair cascaded down her back in gorgeous waves. The muted hum of the elevator seemed to amplify the quiet intimacy of the moment, with Yaz facing the doors and Frances unable to look away.

Her heart raced with a mixture of admiration and feelings she wasn't quite ready to confront. The way Yaz's hair shimmered under the elevator's lights, the subtle curve of her shoulders. She found her breath catching as she tried to ignore the warmth spreading through her chest.

The elevator jolted to a stop, the doors sliding open with a soft whoosh. Frances snapped out blinking as if waking from a dream. She cleared her throat, her cheeks flushing a faint pink.

Yaz turned, catching her flustered expression. "Everything okay?"

Frances forced a smile, her heart still fluttering "Yes, just... lost in thought," she replied embarrassed, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Let's go" she grinned haply

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They walked into a classic American diner, with typical red leather booths and chrome accents. The hum of conversation mixed with the sizzle from the grill, creating a relaxed atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the tension of the earlier meeting. They slid into a booth, the vinyl seats creaking softly as they settled.

Frances glanced around, her eyes wandering over the cheerful decor before focusing on Yaz. The waitress, wearing a cheerful smile and a crisp uniform, brought over two menus and refilled their coffee cups.

As they perused the menus, Yaz looked up with concern. "Is it always this way when you go for meetings?"

Frances sighed, setting down her menu "Not always, but you'd be surprised how often. This is a man's world, Yaz, and we're often treated like props. These meetings are a part of my job. I can't avoid them."

"What are they all about?"

"When you get cast you meet the director for a short meeting about your role. They want to see who they will be working with. It's an introduction of a sort where they tell you what they expect of you. You can ask them any questions or give your thoughts. Normally it should be fun, just

getting to know each other and bounce off the ideas. But in some cases, it's not like that at all, it gets uncomfortable, and conversation isn't about the movie it gets too personal. And then It's hard to stay professional when you just want to walk out. But you can't...I'm not in a position yet where I can do that. Nobody will cast me again if I do."

Yaz's brow furrowed sympathetically. "That sounds incredibly exhausting."

Frances nodded, her eyes reflecting the diner's bright lights. "It is. I worked with some wonderful people but it's not always like that. The worst thing is that sometimes you don't know what you're walking into. Like me today. Most of the times I know, I hear people talking and I have to be careful. I know some people I would never work with. But it's hard...You have to smile and flatter them, feeding their stupid egos while trying not to sound dumb. Put up with smirking, the gazes, condensing attitude, it's sickening. I wish I could work with women. It would be so much easier."

"And yet from the outside it all looks so glamorous and fun"

"It's far from that Yaz. It can be, but it can also be extremely dangerous."

Yaz reached across the table, her hand gently touching Frances's. "I'm sorry you have to go through that. It's not fair, but I'll be there when ever you need me, and you don't have to deal with it alone."

Frances looked up, her expression softening at Yaz's support. "Thank you darling."

The waitress arrived with their plates, placing hearty sandwiches and fries in front of them. Frances's eyes lingered on Yaz's hand before she withdrew it, her gaze still tender.

"I'm just grateful for moments like this," Frances said softly. "It's nice to have a break from the stress and just enjoy being with you."

Yaz smiled warmly, "And I'm happy to be here with you. Now, take a chip"

"A chip?" Frances laughed, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Yeah, chips," Yaz replied, biting into one with a playful grin.

"Fries," Frances corrected, dipping potato in ketchup and giving Yaz a cheeky smile.

"Chips," Yaz insisted, munching on another.

Frances laughed, shaking her head. "What's your favorite food, then?"

"Fish and chips," Yaz said, bursting into laughter.

Frances chuckled, tossing a potato at Yaz. Yaz quickly grabbed the ketchup bottle from the table, aiming it playfully.

"Don't you dare!" Frances laughed, trying to fend off the impending ketchup attack.

They began eating, their conversation shifting to lighter, more personal topics as the comfort of the launch and each other's presence chased away the earlier tension. The simple pleasure of sharing a meal and a light conversation brought a sense of normalcy and connection, making the afternoon feel soothing.

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The next day Frances sat alone at a corner table in the bustling restaurant, savoring a glass of wine and the scenic view through the window. She was lost in thought when a magazine was abruptly dropped onto the table in front of her. Startled, she looked down to find a glossy tabloid featuring a photo of her and Yaz at their recent lunch. The headline read: "Hollywood Starlet Frances Louise and Her Designer Share a Playful Moment: Frances and Yaz's Lunchtime Fun."

"Aaaa... we came out cute," Frances said with a grin, lifting the magazine to get a better look.

Her manager, Andy, approached with a serious expression. "That's not funny."

"I didn't say it was funny," Frances replied, her smile still in place. "I said the photo was cute."

"They won't be happy about this."

"About what, exactly? Me having a life outside work? Or just needing to eat?"

"She's a member of staff."

"So?" Frances shrugged nonchalantly. "We had a meeting."

"Was frowning French fries at each other part of the wardrobe discussion?"

"It might have been," she replied with a smirk.

"You're not taking this seriously."

"And you're taking it way too seriously. It's a tabloid, Andy. It's how they make money."

"And your public image is how you make yours, Fran."

"I can't see how having a lovely meal with a coworker and sharing a few laughs could harm my image. Relax. I'll go in and talk to them. I don't want Yaz to have any trouble either. Just take a deep breath."

"You do that today."

"I will, honestly Frank, you will catch an illness by this rate...Relax" Frances said, her smile softening as she looked at the magazine again.

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Yaz stared in shock at the magazine Charlie had tossed onto the table. Her eyes widened as she saw a photo of herself with Frances on the cover.

"Whaaaa?" Yaz gasped, picking up the magazine and stared at the image in disbelief.

"This is not professional, Yaz," Charlie said, his voice sharp and disappointed.

"Oh my God..." her eyes widened as she opened the article

"Yes, that was exactly my reaction. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't... I was just..." Yaz stammered, struggling to find the right words.

"I should really, by rights, let you go... You know the rules,"

"No, please, Charlie..." Yaz pleaded, panic rising in her voice.

"It's my fault," came a calm voice from the doorway. Both Charlie and Yaz turned to see Frances standing there, her expression a mix of concern and determination.

"Miss Louise," Charlie looked surprised but respectful.

"Come on, Charlie... Don't complicate things," Frances said, walking into the room with confidence.

"But the rules..." Charlie began, trying to maintain his stance.

"I know the rules, and so does Miss Khan. But the rules only apply during working hours, correct?" Frances said firmly.

"That would be true ma'am," Charlie conceded.

"So, this was taken yesterday at five, after Miss Khan's working hours. And I don't have to remind you that what I do in my personal time is nobody's business but mine," Frances asserted.

"Yes of course, ma'am," Charlie replied, clearly subdued. "That goes without saying"

"Well then... That's sorted. Now if you'll excuse us, Miss Khan and I have a fitting to do, and I have a very tight schedule today," Frances said, her tone softening slightly but still authoritative.

“Yes, of course, ma’am. Yaz, you’re free to go,” Charlie said reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Yaz said, her voice filled with relief.

As they walked down the hallway toward the fitting room, Frances moved quickly, Yaz scrambled to keep up.

“I’m sorry... That was so stupid,” Yaz said, her voice trembling with embarrassment.

“Not here,” Frances said, her face serious. Yaz’s heart sank.

Once inside the fitting room, Frances shut the door firmly behind them. Yaz stood there, frightened and unsure of what was to come. Frances walked slowly over to the makeup table and threw her bag down.

“Now... Where was I...” she said firmly, “Oh yes...” her expression shifting from stern to playful as she turned around with a broad smile “Do I get a hug?”

“OMG,” Yaz gasped relieved as Frances laughed

She stepped forward and embraced her tightly. “I got you”

“Don’t you ever do that to me again. I thought I’d die,” Yaz said, shaking her head, clearly relieved.

“So, how’s my acting skills?” Frances grinned mischievously.

“For an Oscar,” Yaz laughed, a playful glint in her eyes.

“Awww, thanks, darling.” Frances winked cheekily. “We do look cute though.” She glanced at the magazine. “My agent had a fit too. Said the big bosses won’t like it.” She impersonated her agent with exaggerated seriousness.

“Oh my god, you’re not gonna get in trouble, are you?”

“Noo,” Frances laughed. “I’ve done worse things than tossing a few fries around.”

“Oh, have you now?” Yaz raised an eyebrow.

“Should’ve seen their faces when my nudes got out,” Frances said nonchalantly.

“Your whaaa?” Yaz’s eyes widened.

“Hey, I had to pay rent,” Frances shrugged.

“I’m not judgy,” Yaz said, still in shock but laughing. “I’m just... I don’t know...”

“Shocked?” Frances teased, a playful smirk on her lips leaning on the table

“I suppose so,” Yaz admitted, her amusement growing as she saw this new, zippy side of Frances. “You mean like proper nudes?” she clarified again

“Are there any other kind darling?” Frances laughed. “Come on,” she pushed off the table “Let’s grab a coffee. Your working hours are up, we can throw whipped cream around this time.”

Frances’s lightheartedness was infectious, and Yaz couldn’t help but laugh.

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