

Chapter 10

The early afternoon sun was casting a warm glow through the curtains of Susan's cozy kitchen. She was bustling around, nervously adjusting the plates and silverware for the third time as Yaz and Frances walked through the door.

"Hi!" Yaz smiled, stepping into the kitchen with Frances right behind her.

"Hello girls!" Susan greeted, her voice slightly tremulous but welcoming.

"Hello Susan, nice to see you again" Frances flashed a bright smile. "Smells great in here."

"I hope you like roasted chicken?" Susan asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Oh, I love it! It's actually one of my favorites," Frances replied with a light giggle.

A relieved smile crossed Susan's face. "Good, good... I forgot to ask what you liked. Now I feel relieved. "

Yaz stepped over to grab a drink for Frances. "Wine, juice, or lemonade?"

"Wine sounds perfect, thank you," Frances said as she started to admire the warmth of the home.

While they continued chatting, Susan, still a bit jittery, tried to place the baking tray on the counter when she accidentally knocked over a glass. The sharp sound of breaking glass startled everyone for a moment, and Susan flushed with embarrassment.

Frances was quick to react, stepping forward to steady the tray. "Here, let me help."

"Oh, thank you, Frances. I just... I'm not used to cooking for, well..." She trailed off, realizing she was about to say *a movie star*.

"Friends?" Frances finished her sentence, flashing a warm smile.

Susan blinked, her tension softening at Frances' kind tone. "Yes, friends." She chuckled nervously. "It's just that, you know... we don't get much Hollywood glamour around here."

"It looks perfect" Yaz leaned in kissing Susan's cheek

"Trust me," Frances chuckled "there's nothing glamorous about me when I'm hungry."

Yaz laughed sweeping the broken glass, and Susan joined in, finally starting to relax as the air in the room shifted from formal to more comfortable. As they sat down to eat, the mood quickly

became light and easy. The conversation flowed, touching on the familiar things that made Los Angeles feel like home for Yaz. They laughed and shared stories, making the cozy meal feel even more intimate.

“You know, when Yaz first moved here, I didn’t know how to show her around at all,” Susan said, chuckling. “I’m not exactly an expert on the city either.”

Frances smiled warmly. “I know the feeling. When I first came to L.A., I didn’t know anyone either. It was terrifying. It takes time to settle in.”

Susan nodded thoughtfully. “I admire women like you and my Yaz, moving here on your own. I don’t think I could have done that.” She paused, smiling brightly. “Now, how about I get that cake from the fridge?”

“Yes, please!” Yaz said, getting up to clear the table, with Frances joining her.

“You don’t have to do that,” Susan protested lightly.

“But we want to,” Frances grinned, clearly enjoying the homely atmosphere.

As they finished tidying up, Frances, still sipping her wine, turned her attention to the photos on the wall. One particular picture caught her eye. “Is that your daughter? She’s adorable,” Frances asked innocently.

Susan and Yaz exchanged a quick glance before Susan replied softly, “She was…”

Frances’s face immediately fell. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know…”

“It’s alright,” Susan said gently, waving off the awkwardness. “Let’s move to the living room, it’s cozier in there.” She grabbed the cake tray and headed out of the kitchen.

Frances looked at Yaz with a pained expression. “I feel so bad now…”

“It’s alright, you didn’t know” Yaz sighed quietly, nodding. “They died in a car accident years ago.”

“Jesus,” Frances muttered, feeling the weight of the moment.

Yaz gave her a soft smile, placing a reassuring hand on Frances’s shoulder. “Come on,” she said, guiding her toward the living room, where they could continue their afternoon in a more comforting space.

By the time dessert was finished, Susan was fully at ease, laughing relaxed. The lunch turned into an afternoon of conversation and companionship. She had expected the glamorous, distant Hollywood star she had seen on the screen, but as the day progressed, that image began to dissolve. Frances was warm, engaging in conversation with a sincerity Susan hadn’t anticipated.

She spoke with ease, asked thoughtful questions, and even laughed at her own small quirks. Slowly, Susan felt her own anxiety fading away, replaced with the understanding that Frances wasn't just an actress, she was a kind, down-to-earth woman who cared deeply for Yaz. Yaz watched them both, a smile of contentment on her face.

The evening had grown darker, with only a dim glow from the hallway lamp casting soft shadows around them. Yaz and Frances stood by the door, the warmth of the afternoon lingering between them as the cool evening air crept in from outside. Yaz, not quite ready to part, played absentmindedly with Frances's fingers, her gaze flicking between their hands and Frances's face.

"I hate that you have to go," Yaz said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Frances smiled gently, her heart aching at the sight of Yaz's sadness. Without a word, she pulled her into a warm embrace, holding her tightly for just a moment longer than necessary. It wasn't the kiss they both craved, but it was a closeness that spoke volumes. Frances rested her chin on Yaz's shoulder, breathing in the comfort of her.

"I'll see you soon darling." Frances whispered before slowly pulling away.

Yaz nodded, her eyes lingering on Frances's as she reluctantly let her go. She watched her step out into the evening, the cool air rushing in as the door closed behind her. The house felt a little emptier without her.

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Yaz arrived at the studio early, feeling optimistic about the day. She had spent hours finalizing her ideas for the new project, eager to share them with Charlie and the team. But when she walked into the costume department's morning meeting, her excitement was quickly dampened. Charlie wasn't there.

Instead, a woman she had never seen before stood at the front of the room, looking stern and poised. She appeared to be in her mid-fifties, with sharp features and silver hair swept back into a neat bun. Her tailored suit gave her an air of authority that immediately commanded attention.

"Good morning, everyone," the woman began, her voice crisp. "I'm Eleanor Thompson. Charlie had a family emergency and will be away for the next several weeks. I'll be stepping in to oversee things while he's gone."

Yaz exchanged a glance with Tim, the other designer, feeling a little thrown off by the sudden change. Eleanor's tone was formal and slightly intimidating, unlike the easygoing atmosphere Charlie usually cultivated. As Eleanor moved forward with the agenda, discussing the upcoming costumes for the project, Yaz listened intently, waiting for her moment to contribute.

Finally, when Eleanor mentioned one of the key characters, Yaz saw her chance. She raised her hand politely and was given a nod.

"I actually had some thoughts on that," Yaz started, her voice confident but respectful. "Charlie and I discussed making a slight adjustment to the lead's costume to better reflect—"

Eleanor cut her off abruptly. "We're not making changes right now. Let's stick to the original plan," she said, dismissing Yaz's words without even hearing her out.

Yaz felt her face flush, but she wasn't ready to give up. "But Charlie and I had already agreed on—"

"I said no changes," Eleanor repeated, more firmly this time, her eyes flicking away from Yaz as though she were already moving on. She turned her attention to Tim, asking him for his input without so much as a glance back at Yaz.

Yaz clenched her jaw, frustration building inside her. It wasn't just that Eleanor had disagreed with her; it was the way she had completely dismissed her without a second thought. Yaz had worked hard on those ideas, and Charlie had approved them. To be shut down like that in front of the whole team stung.

As the meeting continued, Yaz sat in silence, her mind racing with irritation. Eleanor's curt attitude had thrown her off balance, and it was hard to focus on anything else.

After the meeting, Tim approached her as they walked out of the room. "That was rough," he said sympathetically. "She didn't even let you finish."

Yaz sighed, forcing a small smile. "Yeah, it was... frustrating, to say the least."

"She didn't have to cut you off like that. It wasn't fair," Tim added, clearly feeling bad on her behalf.

Yaz shrugged, trying to brush it off. "Maybe she's just under pressure, filling in for Charlie so suddenly. I don't know... maybe I'm overreacting."

Tim shook his head. "You're not overreacting. That was rude."

Yaz appreciated his support, but the frustration still lingered as they parted ways. She headed back to her office, replaying the meeting in her mind. Eleanor's abruptness had shaken her, but she tried to push it aside. Maybe it was just a one-time thing. Maybe she really was overthinking it.

But as she sat at her desk, the sting of being dismissed so casually refused to fade. Still, Yaz told herself that she just had to keep doing her job, as Charlie had trusted her to do. Eleanor's presence might make things harder, but Yaz wasn't about to let that stop her.

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Yaz sat across from Frances at a cozy corner table, her fork idly pushing around the food on her plate. The restaurant hummed with the soft chatter of other guests, but her mind was elsewhere. Frances noticed Yaz's absent gaze and the way she barely touched her lunch, her usual spark noticeably dimmed.

She leaned forward, her voice soft but curious. "You seem miles away, darling. What's on your mind?"

Yaz blinked and looked up, a small smile crossing her lips as if she was trying to shake off whatever was bothering her. "Oh, nothing... It's just work. Something with the new boss."

Frances raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "Tell me. You haven't been yourself all morning

Yaz sighed, placing her fork down. She hadn't meant to let her frustration show, but it was hard to shake it off. "It's just... this new woman who's filling in for Charlie while he's gone. Eleanor. She's been... dismissive, I guess.... it's just..."

Frances frowned, concern creeping into her expression. "Dismissive? How so?"

Yaz shrugged, trying to downplay it. "She just cut me off during a meeting. Twice, actually. I was making a suggestion, something Charlie had already approved, and she didn't even let me finish the sentence. It's no big deal...I mean...I don't know...she's probably just stressed, stepping in last minute like that...It just felt a bit humiliating in front of everyone, that's all."

Frances leaned back in her chair, her gaze sharpening. "It doesn't sound like stress, Yaz. It sounds like something else."

Yaz gave a small, forced laugh. "No, really, it's nothing. She's probably under a lot of pressure. I'm probably just taking it too personally."

But Frances wasn't convinced. She knew Yaz well enough to hear the hurt and frustration beneath her words. And the idea that someone might be undermining her set off alarm bells. Frances reached across the table, gently touching Yaz's hand.

"Don't let her dismiss you like that," Frances said firmly, her protective instinct kicking in. "You've worked too hard to be ignored. She has no right to treat you that way, stressed or not."

Yaz smiled again, this time a bit more genuinely, squeezing Frances's hand. "I know. It just... caught me off guard, I guess. I'll be fine."

Frances didn't want to push, but she couldn't shake the feeling that this was more than just a one-time incident. She could sense the unease lingering behind Yaz's eyes, the way she was trying to brush it off even though it clearly bothered her.

"If it happens again, promise you will tell me?"

Yaz nodded with a subtle smile. Frances let the topic drop for now, not wanting to dampen their lunch further, but inside, she felt a growing concern for Yaz.

They continued their meal, Yaz trying her best to focus on Frances and their time together, laughing at a story Frances told about a mishap on set. But Frances, despite smiling and laughing along, kept an eye on Yaz, silently vowing to watch this situation closely. She couldn't bear the thought of her being mistreated at work, knowing too well what it feels like.

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The air on set was thick with exhaustion. The cast and crew had been shooting for hours, the end of the day still teasingly out of reach. Everyone moved in a haze, their hunger gnawing at them as they shuffled between scenes. The food that had been provided earlier did little to satisfy, and their only consolation was knowing that the ordeal would be over in two days.

Frances stood in front of the camera, her line flowing automatically now, every word coming out of sheer force of habit. Opposite her, Jack delivered his part, though he was clearly as tired as she was. As the camera continued to roll, Frances felt her head grow lighter with each take. The edges of her vision blurred, the room spinning slightly, but she fought to stay upright. She couldn't afford to falter now.

"Cut!" the director called out once more, and the collective sigh from the cast was almost audible.

"Now what?" Jack grumbled, frustration slipping into his tone as he rolled his eyes, throwing a look toward the crew.

Tensions were running high. Off to the side, the director was already caught in a heated argument with the cameraman. The entire set was on edge.

"I've had enough of this," Frances muttered, mostly to herself, though Jack overheard.

"You and me both," he replied, shaking his head.

"I need a break," she said, feeling her patience stretch thin.

Just as she was about to step away, the director turned to her, his face a mix of anger and exhaustion. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm taking a break," Frances said, her voice firm.

“No, you’re not,” the director snapped, his authority trying to pull her back in.

Frances met his gaze, eyes hard. “Watch me.” And with that, she stormed off the set, leaving the director and crew in stunned silence behind her.

As Frances stormed down the hallway, her frustration boiling over, she nearly bumped into Yaz, who was walking toward her. “Hey... what’s going on?” Yaz asked, seeing the fuming look on Frances’s face. But before she could get an answer, Frances grabbed her hand and yanked her along without a word, leading her straight to her dressing room.

“What happened?” Yaz asked again, confusion and concern in her voice as they reached the dressing room. Frances slammed the door behind them with such force that Yaz flinched.

“I’ll kill him! I swear to God, I’ll kill him!” Frances exploded, pacing the room like a caged animal.

“Who? What’s going on?” Yaz repeated, her eyes wide as she tried to figure out what had set Frances off so intensely.

Frances, still shaking, fumbled into her bag and pulled out a piece of chocolate. “I can’t take this anymore,” she muttered, unwrapping the chocolate with trembling hands. “Nineteen takes. Nineteen takes of a three-second scene, and one. single. line.” She said throwing her bag across the make-up table.

Yaz stood frozen, never having seen Frances this unhinged before.

“Do you know what the line is?!” Frances continued, her voice cracking with frustration. ““You’re lying to me!” That’s it! That’s the damn line!” She slumped into her chair, exhausted and overwhelmed.

There was a sharp knock on the door, causing Frances to spin around. “What now?!”

“Excuse me, Miss Frances,” a timid voice said from behind the door. “Mr. Carter is asking for you.”

“Tell him I quit!” Frances yelled back, not caring who was on the other side. The person hesitated, unsure of what to do, then silently walked away, leaving the two women alone in the tension-filled dressing room.

Yaz, still trying to process the intensity of the moment, moved closer to Frances, her voice gentle. “Hey... it’s okay.”

She stepped in front of her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “C'mere.”

Frances, her walls crumbling, slumped forward, resting her head on Yaz's stomach. Yaz wrapped her arms around her protectively, stroking her hair. "It's alright, darling... just two more days." She whispered softly, trying to ease Frances' tension.

Suddenly, the door flew open, startling them both. Yaz quickly stepped back as the director barged in, his face red with anger.

"You! Get out!" he barked, pointing straight at Yaz.

"Hey!" Frances snapped, her tired body suddenly alert.

"Excuse me?" Yaz stood her ground, her voice firm.

"I said, get lost!" He shouted louder, his finger still aimed at her. "Leave us!"

Frances stood, her eyes blazing. "You will not speak to my staff this way." She shifted her gaze toward Yaz, her expression softening. "It's alright, wait for me outside," she said gently.

Yaz hesitated, her eyes questioning Frances, but Frances nodded, reassuring her it was okay. Reluctantly, Yaz left the room, giving the director one final look before the door closed behind her.

As soon as Yaz was gone, the director turned on Frances, his voice dripping with fury. "What the hell are you playing at?"

Frances calmly sat down at her table and picked up her lipstick. "I told you," she said, her tone dangerously calm. "I'm taking a break. I'll be back in a minute."

Without warning, the director swiped the lipstick from her hand, sending it flying across the room. He leaned in, his face inches from hers as he growled, "You get back there now."

Frances slowly swiveled her chair to face him, her eyes locked on his, her patience finally snapping. "Make me." She said, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a moment, he just stood there, stunned by the cold defiance in her eyes. Then, his face twisted in rage. He swept his hand across the table, knocking everything to the floor with a loud crash, before storming out of the room.

As he exited, the door slammed against the wall, echoing down the hallway. He spotted Yaz still standing nearby, watching him.

"What are you gawking at?" he spat, his voice dripping with venom. "Don't you have work to do?"

He stormed off, leaving Yaz standing alone, her heart racing as she glanced at the now-closed door behind which Frances sat, undoubtedly shaken but fiercely holding her ground.

Frances sat at the table, her gaze catching Yaz's reflection in the mirror. Her breath hitched slightly as the weight of everything settled in. For a moment, she stared, her chest tight with suppressed emotion. But then, something inside her broke.

Without thinking, she stood abruptly and crossed the room, closing the distance between them. Yaz barely had time to react before Frances threw herself into her arms, her body trembling as the weight of the day's frustrations and exhaustion overwhelmed her. The moment her arms wrapped around Yaz, her façade shattered, tears spilling from her eyes.

"I can't..." Frances sobbed, her voice muffled as she buried her face into Yaz's shoulder, holding her so tightly it was as though she feared she might slip away. "I just can't do this anymore."

Yaz tightened her embrace, her hand gently rubbing Frances's back, trying to offer some semblance of comfort. "It's okay," she whispered, her voice steady, though her heart ached seeing Frances so vulnerable. "I've got you."

For a while, Frances just clung to her, letting the flood of emotion spill out in a way she rarely allowed herself to. She was always so composed, so in control, but here, in Yaz's arms, she let herself be seen, broken, fragile, human.

As the tears subsided, Frances pulled back slightly, her eyes searching Yaz's. Her lips trembled as she whispered, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

And then, without another word, Frances leaned in and pressed her lips to Yaz's in a desperate, almost frantic kiss. It was as if all the pain, all the frustration, all the love she couldn't express through words was poured into that single kiss. Yaz responded instantly, her hands moving to cradle Frances's face, kissing her back with equal intensity, offering all the comfort she could in that tender, unspoken moment.

Time seemed to stand still as they held onto each other, their lips locked, their emotions raw and open. In that moment, nothing else mattered. It was just the two of them, finding solace in one another amidst the chaos of the world outside.

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Yaz and Frances stood outside the modest building, the late afternoon sun casting a warm glow on it. It was tucked away down a narrow street, just a short ten-minute walk from the studio. The exterior of the top floor was simple but charming, with tall windows that hinted at the brightness within. As they stepped inside, the space opened up, high ceilings with exposed beams and plenty of natural light flooding in from the windows. The top floor, higher than surrounding buildings, offered a perfect privacy.

Though it wasn't a massive room, but it had everything Yaz could need. There was just enough space for sewing machines, cutting tables, and racks to display fabrics and completed pieces. Tea kitchen in the corner and the small gallery made it even more charming.

Yaz wandered around, touching the wooden workbenches and glancing up at the ceiling, imagining the room full of creativity, laughter, and the quiet hum of machines.

"It's really nice," she said, her voice soft, almost as if she were speaking to herself.

Frances, who had been watching her with a smile, took in the space. "It's not just nice...it's perfect," she said, her excitement bubbling over. "Just think, you'd be ten minutes from the studio. You could work here, pop over to the set, and still come back whenever you need. No wasted time, no stress."

Yaz smiled but then hesitated, a crease forming between her brows. "The rent, though... \$150 a month is more than I was hoping to spend." Her voice trailed off as she looked around, clearly torn between practicality and desire.

The agent who had been showing them around stepped in. "It is a bit steep, but for the location and the size, it's a rare find."

Frances, sensing Yaz's hesitation, turned to the agent. "Could you give us a moment?" she asked politely.

"Of course," the agent said with a nod, stepping outside and leaving the two women alone.

Frances crossed the room and took Yaz's hand, her touch gentle but firm. "Yaz, listen to me. Don't worry about the rent. I want you to focus on what you love. You have so much talent, and this space could help you build something incredible. There's plenty of money there. Don't worry about it."

Yaz looked down, still unsure. "But, Frances... I don't want to rely on you for everything."

Frances lifted Yaz's chin, their eyes meeting. "You're not relying on me darling. I'm investing in you, in your future, because I believe in what you're capable of. This place is the start of something big...I can feel it."

Yaz's face softened as she considered Frances's words. The excitement she'd felt when she first walked in began to grow again, the possibilities filling her mind. "Okay," she said finally, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I'll do it."

Frances beamed, pulling her into a tight embrace. Her arms wrapped around Yaz with such warmth that it made her laugh, a sound that eased the tension between them. "You won't regret this," Frances whispered, her voice laced with certainty and a spark of excitement.

Yaz chuckled, her eyes glancing around the room, still caught between hope and hesitation. "I really hope so."

Frances, sensing the mix of emotions, gently turned Yaz toward the space, her arms moving around Yaz's chest as they both took in the workshop. "Just imagine it," Frances murmured, her

voice soft but full of conviction. "We could put a cozy sofa right over there," she pointed to a corner near the windows. "And up on that gallery.... your very own little office. Dream big, darling. This is your canvas."

Yaz's lips curved into a smile, Frances's vision starting to resonate with her, stirring excitement and belief. She turned in Frances's arms, their eyes meeting for a brief moment, an unspoken understanding passing between them. With a gentle movement, Yaz leaned forward, pulling Frances into a slow, tender kiss, one that lingered with affection and the promise of new beginnings.

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Yaz's new workshop buzzed with activity as the countdown to Christmas loomed, only three weeks away. With just two weeks until Lillian's dress needed to be completed, the pressure was palpable. The air inside the workshop felt charged from the excitement and urgency of launching Yaz's business.

Frances stood in the middle of the room, cigarette balanced between her fingers, commanding the space with her usual confidence. "No, no, the sofa needs to go there," she called out, gesturing toward the back corner by the window. "And the picture...hang it higher please...above the sofa. It needs to be the centerpiece." Her voice carried an edge of authority, but there was a warmth to it.

The workers nodded, following her directions, as they carefully positioned the massive, framed artwork that Yaz had received from Gloria St. Clair, one of the many gifts pouring in since Yaz's venture had begun gaining attention.

Yaz stood nearby, biting her lip as she watched the space come together. The stress of meeting deadlines and setting up her new business weighed heavily on her, but Frances's unwavering support kept her grounded. They had already hired three seamstresses, purchased all the necessary equipment, and gotten the business license, all in the span of two frantic weeks. Now, it was all about making the workshop feel like home.

Frances flicked the ash from her cigarette and crossed the room to Yaz who was overseeing machines being installed, her heels clicking softly on the floor. "It's coming together, isn't it?" she said with a small smile.

Yaz nodded, her gaze sweeping the space. "It is. But, God, the pressure. I have to finish Lillian's dress, set up this workshop, and somehow pull off a grand opening right after Christmas." She let out a sigh, her hands resting on her hips.

Frances put a reassuring hand on Yaz's arm. "You're going to do just fine. You've done so much already and look at this place...it's exactly what you envisioned. It's glorious darling."

Yaz smiled softly. "I couldn't have done it without you." Her eyes met Frances's, gratitude evident.

Frances shrugged lightly, the cigarette smoke curling up around her. “I’m just giving a little push. You’re the one with the talent.”

Just then, one of the workers approached, wiping his hands on a cloth. “Miss Khan, where do you want the final set of lights? We’ve got the overhead fixtures installed.”

Yaz turned back to the room, eyeing the space thoughtfully. “Let’s keep it simple. Focus on the back corner near the cutting tables. We need that area well-lit for when we are working late.”

The worker nodded and turned away to carry out the instructions.

Yaz walked over to the workbench, her fingers tracing the edge. She glanced at Frances again. “Do you think the women from the brunch will show up to the opening?”

Frances gave a confident nod. “Absolutely. And once they see this place, they’ll be lining up to have you design for them. Trust me.”

Yaz chuckled, but there was a touch of anxiety in her laugh. “You make it sound so easy.”

Frances stepped closer, leaning in with a knowing smile. “It’s not easy. But you’re a fighter, darling. You’ve proven that already. Now, let’s get through this, and by New Year’s, this place will be the talk of the town.”

Yaz exhaled, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. “It’s all planned in your head, isn’t it?” she chuckled

“That’s part of the job, isn’t it?” she winked playfully, crushing her cigarette in an ashtray.

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Late in the evening, after the last of the workers had left, Yaz stood in the center of her newly finished workshop. The quiet stillness filled the room as she placed a vase of fresh flowers on the coffee table in front of the plush burgundy sofa. The space felt intimate, almost magical under the dimmed lights.

She took a moment to take it all in. The beautiful, exposed brick wall behind the sofa added a touch of raw elegance, now adorned with a stunning painting that Gloria had gifted her. Above, the gallery space overlooked the workshop, and a small light illuminated her desk, and a bed in a corner, casting a warm, golden glow that softened the room. It was a perfect nook for her to spend the long nights engulfed in her creations surrounded by all the energy and creativity she was bringing to life in this space.

The dimmed lights fell softly over the workstations, where sleek, brand-new sewing machines stood ready for use. A year ago, owning equipment like this had been a distant dream, something

she could only hope for. Now, it was her reality, the culmination of years of hard work Frances's unwavering support.

Yaz wandered through the room, running her fingers over the edges of the cutting tables, feeling the wood beneath her fingertips. The space felt alive, as though it held the potential for endless creations. She smiled, her heart swelling with happiness and pride. This was hers, her workshop, her dream, finally brought to life.

As she expected, by the time she finished tidying up the remnants of the workers' day, it was too late to head home. She had already decided she'd spend the night in the workshop, a thought that sent a spark of joy through her. Pleasantly exhausted, she took a refreshing shower in the modest little bathroom tucked in the corner of the space. Though humble, it had all she needed. After changing into her cozy pajamas, she poured herself a glass of juice and made her way to the plush sofa, ready to unwind with a book and savor the quiet of the moment.

The soft sound of heels echoed in the hallway, followed by a light knock. Frances stepped into the room, effortlessly chic in her capri trousers and a fitted black turtleneck. Her playful grin lit up the space as she sauntered in, holding a bottle of champagne in one hand and a small bag full of goodies in the other. Even in her casual attire, she exuded an air of elegance, her energy unmistakably vibrant,

"Hello, darling," she chirped, popping a short kiss to Yaz's lips, her voice full of energy despite the late hour "You should really have that door locked, you know"

"Oh my god" Yaz laughed, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I called, and Susan told me you were still here. So, I figured you'd be starving by now," Frances replied, walking over to the table and setting down the champagne. She began taking out the contents of the bag, finger sandwiches, crisps, peanuts, and a couple of bottles of Coke.

Yaz couldn't stop laughing. "I don't believe this! Are you moving in?"

Frances glanced up at her with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "Why do you think there's a bed up there?" she teased, nodding toward the gallery above.

Yaz doubled over with laughter. "Maybe we should've got some blinds for that!"

"I think we've earned ourselves a little celebration, don't you?" Frances raised an eyebrow, her playful tone making Yaz smile even more.

"Absolutely," Yaz agreed, still grinning.

Frances popped open the champagne while Yaz cracked open a bottle of Coke. They raised their drinks, Frances offering a toast, "To your success, darling. May you bring Hollywood to its knees."

Yaz raised her bottle, smiling warmly. "Our success."

They clinked glass to bottle and took a sip, Yaz's eyes sparkling with affection. She gently hooked her finger in the waistband of Frances's trousers, pulling her close. Without another word, she kissed her passionately, the weight of the day's hard work fading in the warmth of the moment. Frances giggled, resting her forehead against Yaz's.

"Did I tell you how much I love you?" Yaz murmured softly.

"Nope," Frances replied with a playful smile, her nose brushing against Yaz's as she wrapped her arm around her waist.

Yaz smiled, her heart full. "I couldn't love you more, even if I tried."

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They sat close together on the plush sofa, sinking comfortably into the deep cushions. Frances held her glass of champagne, taking slow sips, while Yaz nibbled on peanuts. The dimmed lights of the workshop and few lit candles on the table added a soft glow to the space, casting a cozy warmth around them.

"I've been thinking," Frances began, her voice carrying a gentle hint of excitement. "I know it's going to be hectic the next few weeks, but I need to fly to New York for the weekend before Christmas."

Yaz looked at her curiously. "Oh? How come?"

Frances smiled, her eyes lighting up. "A friend of mine, a photographer I used to work with during my modeling days, has asked me for a favor. He wants me to do a Christmas shoot."

Yaz's eyebrows raised, impressed. "Wow, that's fantastic."

Frances nodded, leaning in slightly. "So, I was thinking... wanna come with me?"

Yaz blinked, taken aback. "What, to New York?"

"Mhm," Frances hummed, giving a subtle nod. "We'd stay at his place, totally discreet. I trust him with my life. And I thought it'd be lovely for you to see New York at Christmas. It's magical."

Yaz hesitated, glancing around the workshop. "What about this place?"

Frances gently set her champagne down, her gaze playful as she leaned forward on all fours, bringing her face inches from Yaz's. Her voice dropped into a teasing murmur. "I'm sure they can handle one weekend without you," she whispered, her lips brushing against Yaz's neck, sending shivers down her spine. "Besides... you're the boss."

Yaz smiled, her breath hitching, her fingers tangling in Frances's soft hair as she tilted her head back. The warmth of Frances's lips on her neck made her pulse quicken, her eyes fluttering closed.

Frances leaned back slightly, her eyes glimmering with mischief, "So... is that a, yes?"

Instead of answering, Yaz pressed their lips together in a passionate kiss, pulling her closer and Frances eagerly, deepened it, her fingers wrapping around Yaz's neck as she caged her in with a slow, tender intensity.

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The loft was flooded with soft morning light, streaming in through the large windows. The scent of new furniture mingled with the fresh paint and the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Outside, the world seemed quiet, the usual hum of traffic reduced to a distant murmur, leaving the workshop in a peaceful silence. The only sound that punctuated the stillness was the gentle clink of cups.

Yaz lay sprawled on the bed, her skin warm against the cool, crisp sheets. A soft sigh escaped her lips as she shifted, content and relaxed. A smile tugged at her lips as she peeked over the edge of the bed and gazed down across the open loft. Below, Frances moved around barefoot, dressed casually in Yaz's shirt. She was pouring coffee, nibbling on some leftover sandwiches from the night before.

The sight was pure bliss, a perfect moment encapsulating everything Yaz had dreamed of, her own workshop, her success, and the woman she adored, all under one roof. Feeling a wave of happiness wash over her, she slipped out of bed, pulling her knickers on and pajama shirt over it then made her way downstairs, her steps quiet on the metal staircase as she approached Frances.

"Morning, darling," Frances greeted, her smile radiant as she stood by the counter, the warmth of the morning sunlight casting a soft glow around her.

Yaz's face lit up with a grin, her eyes sparkling. "Mooooorning," she sang, drawing out the word as she made her way over.

"Coffee?" Frances offered, holding out the cup with a teasing smile.

Without a word, Yaz stepped behind her, slipping her arms around Frances's waist. She leaned in, placing a soft kiss on her neck, sending a pleasant shiver through Frances. "Mmmm," Yaz

hummed against her skin, enjoying the intimacy of the moment, her hands palming the length of her lover.

Frances closed her eyes for a second, savoring the gentle affection, then turned her head to meet Yaz's lips in a tender, lingering kiss. A quiet sigh escaped her as they parted.

"I could get used to this," Yaz said with a playful beam, finally reaching for the coffee.

"You and me both," Frances replied, her tone soft and full of warmth.

She sighed content, glancing around the space that felt so perfectly theirs. The large windows, offering a view of the nearby rooftops, created a private, peaceful atmosphere, a sanctuary just for them. It felt right, natural, as if this place had been waiting for them all along.

Frances stood by the open window, a cigarette in one hand, coffee in the other, gazing out with a playful smile dancing on her lips. The morning light bathed her figure, casting soft shadows on her bare legs, barely covered by Yaz's shirt.

Yaz, perched comfortably on the sofa and munching on a sandwich, noticed Frances grinning to herself. "What?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Frances glanced back over her shoulder, eyes sparkling with mischief. "There's just something amusing about standing here half-naked by the window, and no one can see me."

Yaz chuckled, shaking her head. "It'll be even more amusing when you end up on the cover of every tabloid in town."

Frances dramatically leaned against the window, eyes wide and lips slightly parted. With exaggerated flair, she declared, "Scandalous Sighting! Starlet Frances Louise Caught in Passionate Embrace with Mysterious Woman!"

Yaz burst out laughing, nearly spilling her coffee. "You're absolutely crazy, you know that?"

Frances's grin only widened as she flicked her cigarette out the window and strolled over to the sofa, her confidence unshaken. She flopped down, draping her legs over Yaz's lap with a teasing smirk. "Not as crazy as I want to be," she said, her voice low and mischievous.

Yaz, still laughing, rolled her eyes playfully, leaning back into the cushions, her hands tracing lazy lines over Frances's legs. The warmth between them felt unshakable, their intimacy natural, as if the world outside couldn't touch the little bubble they'd created.

Frances sighed contentedly. "This... this is what I want every day," she whispered.

Yaz's smile softened as she glanced down at Frances. "Me too."

Frances sat in the quiet as Yaz was finishing her breakfast talking about the dress she needed to make. Suddenly Frances's heart grew heavier than it had been just moments ago. Watching Yaz sip her morning coffee, lost in her own thoughts, Frances felt an overwhelming love that consumed her. She adored every part of Yaz, and there was no doubt in her mind that she was the woman she wanted to spend her life with, and that realization both thrilled and terrified her. She had never loved anyone like this, never let anyone so close. And now, the wall she had carefully constructed around her heart felt like it was ready to crumble.

But with that love came a deep, nagging guilt. The fact she hadn't told Yaz everything about herself, about her past, the things she had kept hidden, even from herself. The things she had run from. But Yaz had earned her trust in a way no one else had, and it was time. Time to let her in fully, no matter how vulnerable it made her feel.

"Yaz," Frances whispered, her voice barely audible, as if speaking any louder would cause her resolve to break.

Yaz, her mind clearly elsewhere, barely noticed, murmuring absently, "Mmm?" Her thoughts were on the dress she needed to finish, and a chronic lack of time she had to complete it.

Frances swallowed, her pulse quickening, but she continued.

"Yaz darling.... There's something I want to tell you," Frances said, a little louder this time, her heart pounding harder now. She tried to steady herself, but the words felt heavier as they settled in her chest.

"Oh, sorry hun, what was that?" Yaz turned,

"I said there's something I want to tell you darling. Something really important. " Frances reached out, taking Yaz's hand and lacing their fingers together. Her touch was grounding, but the fear that Yaz might look at her differently after what she was about to reveal made her hesitate. She had never been this exposed with anyone.

"You look so serious... you're scaring me." her brows furrowing slightly in confusion as she saw the change in Frances's demeanor.

"Before I tell you, I need you to promise me... promise you won't change your mind about us."

Yaz, still confused, didn't hesitate. "What? No... God, no. Never." She turned fully toward Frances, her expression both soft and determined. "Let me make this clear...there's absolutely nothing you could possibly say that would make me let go of you. Nothing. Does that answer your question?"

Frances's lips trembled as the tears she had been holding back began to blur her vision. Without another word, she tugged on Yaz's hand, pulling her into a desperate, almost pleading kiss. She needed to feel Yaz's reassurance, needed to know she wasn't going to lose her.

Yaz, taken aback by the intensity of the kiss, pulled back slightly, her brows drawn together in concern. "Darling, what's going on? Where is this coming from?" She took Frances's hands and kissed her fingertips, trying to soothe her.

Frances looked down, her voice barely a whisper. "Just... just don't ask any questions until we get to Santa Barbara."

"Santa Barbara?" Yaz echoed, her confusion deepening, but Frances shook her head, unable to explain more. Not yet. But soon.

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Frances gripped the steering wheel tightly as they sped along the coastal road, the early morning mist rolling in from the ocean. Yaz sat beside her, casually humming a tune, glancing at the rolling hills and the sea stretching out into the horizon, unaware of where they were headed. The air in the car was tense, though not uncomfortable.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going, or do I have to guess?" Yaz asked, her tone light, trying to break the silence. She reached over and placed her hand on Frances's knee, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Frances smiled, though it was tight, almost forced. "Soon," she replied, eyes still on the road.

Yaz raised an eyebrow, curious but not pressing. She had learned that when Frances was ready to open up, she would, but pushing her too soon would only make her retreat further.

As they passed through stretches of quiet coastline and then wound through small, sleepy towns, Yaz noticed the shift in the landscape. It grew quieter, more serene. The bustling energy of Los Angeles was far behind them now.

"Are we going to meet someone?" Yaz ventured, watching Frances for a reaction.

Frances's lips tightened again, but this time she let out a breath. "Yes. Someone... very important to me."

Yaz was puzzled by the seriousness of Frances's tone but nodded, deciding to give her space. She turned her gaze back to the scenery, though her thoughts now swirled with questions.

It wasn't until they pulled off the main road and down a winding path that Yaz realized they had arrived. A large, well-kept building came into view, nestled among trees and gardens, with a sign that read "St. Mary's Home for Children"

"Frances, what is this place?" Yaz asked, her voice soft but laced with concern.

Frances parked the car and took a moment, staring at the building through the windshield. She could feel her heart pounding, the secret she had kept from Yaz for so long now sitting heavily between them.

"This..." Frances began, her voice catching slightly, "this is where my daughter lives."

Yaz's eyes widened in shock, not just from the revelation but from the emotion that filled Frances's voice. She turned to Frances, not sure what to say.

"I've never told anyone about her, Yaz. No one knows. I was young, and things were... different. When I found out she had special needs, I..." Frances paused, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I wanted to give her the best care. This place... it's the best. But it's been hard, living with this distance. It's time I showed you."

Yaz, still processing everything, gently placed her hand over Frances's. "Darling... why didn't you tell me?"

Frances looked at her, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. "Because I didn't want you to think less of me. I didn't want you to see the part of me that's broken. But you deserve to know everything."

Yaz squeezed her hand tighter. "I could never think less of you... thank you for trusting me."

Frances nodded, her emotions swirling inside her, but she felt a weight lifting now that Yaz knew the truth. Together, they got out of the car, Frances holding her breath as they approached the front entrance. This would be the first time anyone from her other life had met her daughter, and she prayed Yaz would see the love behind her decision.

As they walked inside they were greeted by the familiar face at the front desk "Good morning, Miss Frances. I wasn't expecting you today." she greeted warmly, her voice soft. "Here to see Lily, I presume?"

"Good morning, Miss Wilson, yes. I'm so sorry, it was unplanned visit today. May I introduce you to Miss Yasmin Khan. Yaz this Miss Wilson, she's in charged of this place."

"Very nice to meet you Miss Khan" she extended her hand politely

"Nice to meet you too" Yaz smiled

"She will be going with me."

"Of course, Miss. Frances. She's in a drawing room"

"Thank you" Frances nodded

She guided Yaz through the corridors, her hand trembling slightly in Yaz's. When they finally reached the room where her daughter was, Frances paused.

"Are you ready?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Yaz smiled softly, her heart filled with warmth for Frances. "Definitely"

Frances stood at the doorway of the room, her heart pounding with both anticipation and a touch of fear. Yaz remained by her side. They had walked into a brightly lit room full of children sitting at small tables, some engaged in drawing, others chattering quietly amongst themselves. A young woman, clearly an attendant, noticed their entrance immediately but paused when Frances lifted a finger to her lips, signaling to remain quiet. The woman nodded with a soft smile.

A young girl, no more than ten or eleven, sat quietly at a small table by the window, her back to them. The sunlight streamed in, casting a soft glow on her ponytail, tied neatly with a pink bow, and the few shades darker hue of her hair, a reflection of Frances herself.

Taking a deep breath, Frances stepped forward.

"Lily?" she called out gently, her voice filled with a tender warmth that Yaz hadn't quite heard before. The little girl turned at the sound, her wide eyes brightening instantly as they landed on Frances.

"Mommy!" Lily exclaimed, her face lighting up with a beaming smile as she stood from her seat and ran across the room.

Frances moved forward quickly, kneeling to meet her daughter's height, pulling her into a soft embrace. Yaz watched, her heart swelling at the sight, a flood of affection for Frances washing over her.

"Hi, sweetheart," Frances murmured, pulling back slightly to look into Lily's eyes. "I've missed you so much baby." She stroked a loose strand of hair behind Lily's ear, her smile trembling with emotion.

"I missed you too Mommy"

"Sweetheart, I have someone very special I'd like you to meet."

Lily's gaze followed her mother's as Frances turned to beckon Yaz closer. Yaz approached, her steps slow and cautious, not wanting to intrude on such an intimate moment. But Frances's hand reached for hers, pulling her into the circle of love that seemed to envelop the room.

"Lily, this is Yaz," Frances said softly, her voice almost reverent. "She's a very special friend of mine."

Lily's bright, curious eyes took Yaz in, and for a moment, there was a quiet pause. Then, with all the innocence and openness of a child, she broke into a smile, "Hi, Yaz!" Lily said eagerly, her pink bow bobbing slightly as she nodded with excitement.

Yaz's heart softened at the innocence in Lily's voice. She knelt down beside Frances, gently taking Lily's small hand in hers. "Hi, Lily. It's so nice to finally meet you," she said, her tone warm and welcoming. "Your mummy told me all about you."

Lily giggled, her bright eyes darting between her mother and Yaz. "Mommy got me Daisy. Wanna see her?" she asked excitedly.

Yaz smiled, her heart swelling at the joy on the little girl's face. "I'd love to meet Daisy."

Frances glanced at the young woman tending to the other children and spoke softly, "We're going to the garden for a bit. I'll bring her back soon."

"Of course, Miss Frances," the woman nodded kindly.

Frances then turned to her daughter. "Lily, sweetheart, take Daisy and let's go outside."

Lily's eyes lit up as she rushed back to grab her doll from the table. With the doll clutched to her chest, she bounded back to Yaz and Frances, eager to lead the way.

As they walked toward the garden, Lily's curiosity got the better of her. "Are you an actress?" she asked Yaz, her little voice filled with wonder.

Yaz chuckled, her eyes twinkling. "No, I'm not. I make dresses that your mommy wears."

"Can you make me a dress?" Lily asked, her excitement growing.

Yaz grinned and exchanged a glance with Frances, who gave her an encouraging smile. "Of course I can. What kind of dress would you like?"

Lily's face lit up with excitement. "Glinda's dress!"

Yaz laughed softly, amused by the little girl's request. "I thought you might say something like that. Alright, you've got yourself a deal."

Frances squeezed Yaz's hand gently, their eyes meeting in a moment of shared warmth and affection. This was the most vulnerable part of her life, and Yaz being there for it made everything feel better.

As the three of them sat down on a bench together, Lily eagerly began chatting about the book she'd been reading and the drawings she'd been working on, her excitement bubbling over as she shared her world with Yaz. Frances sat back slightly, watching them, her heart full. She had

never imagined a moment like this, never thought it possible to bring these two parts of her life together.

As she sunbathed the garden in a soft, golden light, Lily played nearby, her small hands carefully examining the flowers, a tiny smile on her face as she became lost in her own little world. The children's home had become a safe haven for her, a place where she could explore and grow, shielded from the harsh realities of life. But for Frances, watching her daughter play brought a complex mix of emotions, love, pain, fear, and guilt.

Frances and Yaz sat on a bench under the shade of a large oak tree, the rustling leaves offering a sense of calm. But beneath the surface, Frances was anything but calm. She had kept so much hidden, so much buried deep inside, but now, here with Yaz, she felt an overwhelming need to finally let it all out.

"Yaz, there's something else I need to tell you," Frances began, her voice trembling slightly as she kept her eyes on Lily. "Something I've never told anyone..."

Yaz turned to her, sensing the gravity in Frances's tone. She gently took Frances's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze, silently encouraging her to continue.

Frances took a deep breath, her heart pounding in her chest. "Lily... she's my daughter, but not in the way most people would think."

"I don't understand" Yaz frowned, her thumb brushing the side of Frances's hand. "It's alright... What ever it is..."

Frances exhaled deeply and cut her off, "...She's the result of..." her eyes closing for a moment as the words she was about to say lay heavily on her soul, "... My father Yaz.... he did things to me that no parent should ever do to their child." Her voice cracked as she forced the words out, her eyes filling with tears. "I was just a girl, and he... he took everything from me."

Yaz's breath caught in her throat, her eyes widening in shock. She had sensed that Frances carried a heavy burden, but she could never have imagined something so horrific. She tightened her grip on Frances's hand, struggling to find the right words, but none came. How could there be words for something like this?

Frances continued, her voice thick with emotion. "When I was seventeen, I finally ran away. Then I found out I was pregnant, I was terrified. I didn't want her... I didn't want anything that would remind me of what he did to me. I planned to leave her at the hospital as soon as she was born, just walk away and never look back."

Yaz's heart broke for Frances, for the unimaginable pain she had endured, and for the impossible choice she had faced.

"But the birth... it was so difficult," Frances went on, her tears now flowing freely. "When I finally saw her, she was so small, so fragile. The doctors told me she might not survive, that the

birth had damaged her and that she would never be like other children even if she lived. But when I looked into her eyes... I saw something in her. A strength, a will to live. I realized then that she was a fighter, just like me. And I couldn't leave her. I couldn't abandon her to a world where she might get hurt like I did."

Yaz was speechless, her mind reeling as she tried to process everything Frances had just revealed. The thought of Frances, so young and alone, having to make such a heart-wrenching decision... it was too much.

Frances turned to Yaz, her eyes filled with a mix of pain and resolve. "All we were both doing, Yaz... all we've ever done... is try to survive. I couldn't let her go. Lily is eleven, but she's really on a level of a five year old...She would never survive in this world. She wouldn't even have a chance. Ashe would only have pain and misery. I had to protect her, even if it meant giving up everything else."

"Franny, I..."

"Wait... there's more," Frances interrupted, her voice trembling as she inhaled deeply. "My father... he didn't know about Lily at first. Years went by, and then, two years ago, out of nowhere, I got a phone call. Somehow, he found us... got my number. And since then, he's been blackmailing me for money. That's why I moved Lily here from the previous home. I needed to keep her safe, where no one knows she exists."

Yaz's heart sank as she listened, horror creeping in with every word.

"I'm not doing this because I'm ashamed of her, Yaz," Frances continued, her voice thick with emotion. "I'm doing this because I can't have her dragged through the tabloids, with reporters hiding in the bushes trying to get pictures of her. My life... it's no life for her, it never was. She deserves more than that."

Yaz's eyes widened, her throat tightening. "So, you're paying him to stay quiet?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Frances nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yes. I pay him... and for now, he keeps quiet. But his demands... they're growing. He's becoming insatiable, and I'm terrified." She glanced up at the sky, her voice breaking as she whispered, "I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

Yaz's eyes filled with tears as she pulled Frances into her arms, holding her tightly as if trying to shield her from the world's cruelty. "Franny..." she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "You're the bravest person I've ever known. Lily is so lucky to have you."

Frances shook her head, her fingers reaching to cup Yaz's cheek, her touch tender. "I'm not brave, Yaz. I'm scared... and lost," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "The only time I feel like myself is when I'm with you."

Yaz placed her hand over Frances's, squeezing it softly. "You're not alone anymore, love. You never will be again. We'll find a way together, I promise."

Their eyes locked, the weight of the promise between them so palpable, offering the reassurance that Frances hadn't known she needed until that moment. Yaz pulled Frances into her arms, holding her tightly, offering comfort and warmth.

Frances clung to her, feeling the weight of everything she had kept hidden slowly lift. For the first time in years, a sense of calm and peace began to settle deep within her, as if the love Yaz surrounded her with was unlocking something she had long thought lost.

The walls she had spent a lifetime building, the secrets she had shielded herself with, were finally crumbling. In their place, something far more powerful took root, a love so deep, it made her feel complete in a way she had never imagined possible. A love that allowed her to breathe, to exist fully.

Just as Frances let out a small, quiet sigh, Lily's soft voice cut through her thoughts, pulling her back to the moment. "Mommy... are you crying?" Lily asked, her wide eyes filled with concern.

Startled, Frances quickly blinked away the tears, smiling through the emotion as she stroked Lily's cheek tenderly. "No, sweetheart," she whispered, her voice gentle. "Something just got in my eye, that's all."

She lifted Lily onto her lap, holding her close, and wrapped her arms around her, the love she felt for her daughter grounding her even more. "I love you so much," Frances whispered, kissing the top of Lily's head. Her gaze then shifted to Yaz, her eyes full of gratitude and adoration.

Yaz met her gaze, smiling warmly, the connection between them deep and unbreakable. They didn't need words in that moment. Everything Frances had ever wanted was right here, her daughter, her love, and for the first time, she felt truly free.

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