

Chapter 35

Morning was thick with sun and the scent of new paint. The house buzzed with life, voices echoing off high ceilings, the clatter of footsteps bouncing down freshly polished halls. Boxes were being shuffled, furniture legs scraped across floors, and the distant hum of a delivery truck rumbled somewhere out front like thunder over a hill.

"The rear wing of the guest house, what had once been a painter's atelier was now bathed in morning light, teeming with a flurry of workers. Yaz stood with her sleeves rolled up, watching with barely concealed anxiety as three delivery men hauled her sewing machine table through the double doors. Her mouth tightened.

"Please...be careful with that one!" she called, weaving between bolts of fabric leaning like sleeping bodies against the wall. "That base is original cast iron, if it tips, you'll lose a toe and my sanity."

The men grunted affirmatively without looking up, and Yaz sighed, brushing a wisp of hair from her forehead. Behind her, the cutting table waited to be assembled, and one of the ironing stations had already been plugged in, buzzing faintly like it was excited to get to work.

Yaz darted over to a corner where the dress forms were still swaddled in bubble wrap like bandaged aristocrats. "No, no, that one goes against the window, yes, *that* one." She caught herself and laughed. "Sorry. I'm being a tyrant, aren't I?"

"Only a little," one of the men grinned.

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the house, Frances was knee-deep in curtain samples, each one draped over her arm like she were auditioning them for a film. She stood in the living room where the bay window framed the view of the hills like a watercolor.

"No, the blue is too icy," she told the decorator, frowning thoughtfully. "And the damask makes it feel like a hotel lobby. Try the sand-colored one again, the one with the subtle embroidery..."

Behind her, two movers carefully angled a velvet settee through the arched doorway, one muttering something about tight corners and antique legs. In the foyer, the baby grand piano was already in place, its lid closed like a secret waiting to be told.

As Frances adjusted a curtain swatch, Betty swept in with the grace of a woman who had navigated more hectic days than she cared to count. She stopped just short of Frances and folded her hands.

"Miss Frances," she said, almost triumphantly, "Miss Lily's furniture has arrived."

Frances blinked. "It has?"

"Truck just pulled up. They're asking where to bring it in. Shall I show them to the back?"

Frances lit up. "Yes, yes..please do, Betty. Tell them to be gentle with the bookshelf. It's one of the few things she asked for herself."

As Betty disappeared again, shouting instructions through the front door to someone named Carl, Frances turned back to the designer "Right...where were we? Oh, yeah...the cream curtains"

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A gentle rumble crept up the drive, and the pale blue Hudson sedan curved into view like a well-mannered guest arriving right on time. The sun winked off its chrome trim as it came to a halt near the stone path leading up to the house. The driver's door swung open and out stepped Susan, her hair in soft curls, sensible heels clicking against the gravel. She straightened her skirt and opened the rear door.

"Alright, darling," she said with a smile, offering her hand. "We've arrived."

From the back seat, Lily climbed out, squinting at the bright sky. She paused only long enough to close the door behind her before spotting Yaz at the far end of the guest house. Her whole face lit up like someone had flipped a switch inside her.

"YAZ!"

Yaz turned just in time to brace herself before Lily barreled into her like a cannonball in saddle shoes. Yaz laughed, catching the girl and staggering back a half-step as if hit by a tidal wave of joy.

"Whoa! You trying to knock me over again?" she teased, planting a kiss on Lily's cheek.

"Did it come? Did my furniture come?" Lily asked breathlessly, still clinging to her.

Yaz nodded and pointed down the walk where two men were carrying a delicate white dresser toward the house, a wrapped headboard following behind. "Right on time, see? Your table is even still in one piece."

Lily squealed and took off toward the porch to watch.

"Not too close pumpkin! " Yaz yelled

Susan approached more slowly, smiling at the two of them before greeting Yaz with a light kiss on the cheek. "You look like you've been wrestling tigers."

"Only the upholsterers," Yaz grinned. "They fight dirtier."

"I brought a roasted chicken and potatoes," Susan said, turning back to the car. "And there's a pot on the floor of the back seat..that's the soup, so be careful not to spill it."

Yaz bent over and peered in. "You brought a soup?" she said, eyebrows raised, laughing.

Susan was already hoisting a covered dish from the trunk. Over her shoulder, she called out, "And a cake. We need to celebrate...first proper day in your new home!"

Yaz let out a delighted groan. "You're trying to make me feel guilty, aren't you?"

"Maybe a little," Susan said, disappearing into the house with the dish balanced perfectly in her arms.

The moment Yaz stepped inside, pot of soup cradled carefully in both hands and Lily at her side, it felt like stepping into a well-orchestrated chaos symphony. Workers were maneuvering around each other like clumsy dancers in a crowded ballroom, men lifting wardrobes through narrow doorways, others shouting over one another about screws and missing curtain hooks.

"Watch your left, that's delicate linen!" Frances called from the living room, waving a rolled-up curtain sample like a sword. She was still halfway through a conversation with the curtain installer, pointing to the large front window where sunlight streamed in like golden honey.

Yaz, weaving between a man carrying two lamps and a rolled-up rug, glanced down at Lily then looked up and shouted, "Franny!" Her voice carried, rising over the clatter. "We have incoming! Reinforcements...and soup!"

Lily clung to her side, eyes wide and blinking at all the movement. Yaz huffed a laugh and shifted the hot pot slightly. "Stick with me, chickpea. Last thing we need is you getting knocked into next week by a wardrobe."

"Oi...starlet!" Yaz called again, louder this time, like she was hollering across a battlefield.

From around the corner, Frances finally appeared, graceful but flushed in jeans and a shirt, with a strand of hair stuck to her cheek and her measuring tape still draped around her neck like a fashion-forward general in heels. The moment she saw Lily, her whole face softened.

"Mummy!" Lily squealed, breaking into a run.

"Lily, wait...!" Yaz called, nearly spilling the soup as she sidestepped a crate.

Lily darted past a worker just as he hoisted a heavy chest of drawers. There was a heartbeat of panic as everyone braced for a crash, but she swerved with all the energy of a circus performer and launched herself into Frances's arms.

Frances caught her just in time, staggering back a step and laughing breathlessly, though her eyes had briefly gone wide with alarm. "Goodness, sweetheart...let's try not to give me a heart attack on moving day."

"I missed you!" Lily declared, wrapping her arms around Frances's neck.

"I've been gone ten minutes," Frances said, kissing her temple.

"Still missed you," Lily mumbled.

Frances turned, still holding her daughter, and gave Yaz a grateful look over Lily's shoulder. Yaz, cheeks flushed and the pot of soup still steaming gently in her hands, shrugged like *what can you do?*

"Betty set the table," Frances said, managing a smile. "I told her we'd have lunch once the chaos died down.... but at this rate, we might eat standing up."

"I don't mind eating soup in a doorway," Yaz grinned.

"Don't tempt me," Susan called from the kitchen. "I'll pass out the bowls like it's wartime."

Everyone laughed as the house settled just slightly for a moment, the sound of heavy steps, laughter, and the delicious scent of roast chicken and soup filling the air.

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The kitchen was humming with warm light and the clatter of dishes as the women busied themselves, unpacking bowls and platters like a practiced crew preparing a celebratory feast. The roasted chicken Susan had brought sat proudly in the center of the table, surrounded by golden potatoes, a warm dish of stewed vegetables, and Yaz's carefully transported pot of soup.

Frances reached into a cabinet and turned to Betty, who had just carried in a stack of side plates. "Take out enough for yourself too, please, Betty."

Betty blinked, surprised. "Oh...thank you, Miss Frances, but I'll just..."

"Nonsense," Susan cut in with a wave of her hand, "There's enough here to feed the army *and* the navy."

Betty hesitated for half a second longer, then smiled, a touch shyly. "Alright then. Thank you."

Frances placed a jug of homemade lemonade down before sitting. "I spoke to Lily's tutor this morning," she said, reaching for a serving spoon. "She'll start next week. Three mornings a week to begin with."

Yaz, easing into the chair beside Lily, who was already bouncing slightly in her seat, looked up. "And the art group? Any news?"

Frances nodded, reaching to adjust a slightly crooked plate. "I've made contact. That'll be next week too, I think. And now she's insisting on drama classes, so I've sent out a few enquiries."

"I want to be Juliet!" Lily added, lifting her spoon.

"We'll start with a drama circle and go from there," Frances said gently, brushing a strand of hair behind Lily's ear.

Susan sat down across from her and began ladling soup into bowls. "And what about when you're both out? Will she have a nanny?"

Frances shook her head, her expression clouding a little as she accepted a bowl from Susan. "That's the part I'm still working out. Too many changes, too many strangers... it

could overwhelm her. We need to be careful."

Betty, setting a plate of bread down, looked over. "I'm home most of the time when you're out, Miss. The little Miss is just fine with me."

Frances looked at her, touched by the offer. "I appreciate that, Betty, I really do. And she seems comfortable with you. If Yaz and I are both working late or we're on a trip she'll be staying with Susan. But there's driving to consider, taking her to all these activities whiles we're at the studio... her epilepsy, her safety. A regular nanny won't cut it."

She reached for a napkin and gently tucked it into Lily's collar while Yaz, already watching with quiet attentiveness, shifted Lily's glass a bit further from her elbow.

Frances continued, "Nicole's been asking around. There might be someone who could fit—someone with experience, and the right temperament. We'll see."

Yaz reached for the bread, glancing at Frances. "We'll figure it out. We always do."

Lily gave a small hum of agreement, already distracted by dipping her spoon into the soup. Yaz leaned over, gently guiding her hand and whispering, "Easy now, don't wear your lunch, munchkin."

Frances laughed softly, her fingers grazing Yaz's wrist in a quick, warm gesture. The tension in her shoulders eased just slightly, surrounded by the people she loved, clinking of cutlery, the scent of soup, and the comforting sounds of home finally settling around them.

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The studio courtyard buzzed with its usual mix of sunlight and rush. Frances stepped out of the black Packard in a fitted navy day dress and white gloves, her blonde curls pinned immaculately beneath a small hat. Edward, her newly acquired agent, gave her a reassuring nod as they crossed towards the administrative building.

"Don't worry...it's in a bag" he said opening the door for her.

After a short wait in a hallway a secretary opened the wide oak door, and they stepped into the lion's den.

As expected, the room smelled of cigarette smoke and expensive cologne. A long polished table dominated the space, with four men already seated, studio executives, a legal

counsel, and a man from finance. Coffee cups and water glasses sat untouched before them, next to a stack of contract folders bound in studio-blue cardstock.

All of them rose, though not quickly, when Frances entered. One mumbled her name with a nod. Another gestured toward the seat closest to the end of the table.

"Miss Louise," one said. "Pleasure as always. Mr. Dunne."

"Gentlemen," Edward greeted smoothly, guiding Frances into her seat before taking one beside her. "Let's get straight to it, shall we?"

No one argued. A fresh pot of coffee was poured by a secretary in a trim pencil skirt. Frances took hers black. Edward didn't touch his, he was in his element, dark grey suit, navy tie, and a cigarette burning slowly between his fingers.

"Thank you for seeing us. I'll be direct, Paramount wants Miss Louise for a three-month feature beginning in three weeks. They're offering top billing, full international promotion, and creative control over image rights. It's a major picture."

One of the men raised an eyebrow. "She's under exclusive contract with us, Edward."

"She is. Which is why we're here." Edward smiled mildly, the kind of smile that didn't invite negotiation. "We're requesting a formal loan-out agreement. Miss Louise remains studio's artist, naturally, but under your own framework, she can be lent. Paramount is prepared to pay a premium."

A younger executive leaned forward. "What kind of premium?"

Edward passed a document across the table. "Ten thousand dollars up front to the studio, with weekly billing to the MGM at one thousand. Miss Louise will receive her standard rate throughout, plus a negotiated bonus for promotional events and media obligations. All travel, lodging, and insurance will be covered by Paramount."

Murmurs passed between the executives. Frances sat poised, calm, accustomed to being discussed like an asset.

"There's another matter " Frances added "I'd like Miss Khan on this production as a costume designer. She's designed for me on stage and personally, she understands how I move, how I carry a scene."

Edward continued, smoothly. "We're requesting a temporary project-based contract for Miss

Khan as lead costume designer. Paramount's already willing to sponsor her temporary clearance through the Guild if needed. She'll be paid at the standard feature rate with a completion bonus."

One of the older men leaned back in his chair. "She's not on our roster. That may be an issue."

"She doesn't need to be," Edward countered. "It's a short-term contract through Paramount. She'll be working off-lot. It will not interfere with your existing teams or projects, they will work out a schedule allowing her to handle both. But her involvement is non-negotiable for Miss Louise."

Another pause. Someone lit a fresh cigarette.

"You're asking a lot," the legal counsel finally said.

Edward tapped ash from his cigarette. "Miss Louise is one of your highest-grossing stars. Paramount wants her, this project will elevate her further, and that lifts her value for MGM, too. She's not defecting. She's building capital. That's good for everyone at this table."

The room quieted.

Charles Harmon, the older man, clearly the final decision-maker, reviewed the papers again and glanced up at Frances. "This project... it's going to bring her back bigger?"

Edward didn't hesitate. "Yes. And MGM gets the credit for developing her talent in the first place."

A long silence. Then the man nodded slowly.

"You'll have the final paperwork by Friday."

"And one more point, gentlemen." Edward opened a folder and laid out figures typed neatly in black ink. "We're asking for an adjustment to Miss Louise's weekly rate, four thousand, starting with the next picture. This aligns with other top actresses in her category. Miss Louise is pulling in returns that justify that figure, and I don't think any of us need a lecture in arithmetic."

A hush settled over the room. One of the men shifted in his chair, the leather creaking under him.

“Four thousand?” said a balding executive with a cigarette dangling from his fingers. “That’s Garson money.”

Edward didn’t flinch. “And Miss Louise is delivering Garson returns. In some territories, better.”

There was a pause, just long enough for tension to settle. Frances sat still beside Edward, her legs crossed, back straight, lips gently pressed together. She’d learned long ago that silence could be a weapon just as sharp as words. Let Edward speak for her. Let the numbers speak louder still.

“I’ve already had preliminary talks with marketing,” Edward added smoothly. “They’re very happy with Miss Louise’s name above the title. The preview buzz for *‘The Girl Next Door’* is strong, and test audiences are responding. That’s not luck. That’s bankable performance gentleman, I believe we can agree on that”

Another executive, slightly younger, with a pencil mustache and a tailored grey suit—glanced down at the figures. “You’re not wrong, Mr. Dunne. But this kind of raise needs to go through channels.”

Edward gave a smile that didn’t quite touch his eyes. “Of course. And I’m sure it will. But we wanted to be clear, this is the rate going forward. Paramount’s already prepared to match or exceed it for the loan-out. I imagine MGM wouldn’t want to fall behind its competitors.”

A low hum of murmured agreements rose among the table. No one wanted to be the one who lost Frances Louise to another studio, even temporarily.

Finally, the man at the head of the table, an older gentleman with a heavy signet ring and thinning white hair, tapped his fingers against the table. “We’ll push it through. Four thousand. Weekly. Starting next picture.”

Frances didn’t smile, but she allowed herself a slow breath. Edward gave a polite nod, then leaned back slightly, still composed, still holding the room.

“Good,” he said. “Then I believe we’re in agreement.... Gentlemen, pleasure doing business, as always.” He closed the folder, tapped it once against the table, and slid it back into his briefcase as the men started to rise, muttering to each other, a few giving Frances courteous nods. She met their eyes with calm confidence, giving nothing away.

“Four thousand,” she murmured once they reached the car, her lips curved just slightly.

Edward grinned, lighting up her cigarette "That's just the beginning."

"That was smooth," she chuckled.

Edward nodded lighting up a cigarette "You don't hire me to be pretty. You hire me to be impossible to argue with."

She chuckled softly. "And Yaz?"

"I'll make sure the call goes out by noon. She's in....Drink?"

"Absolutely" Frances grinned "I'll pay you extra if you get her name on credits" she said opening the car door

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The Wardrobe Department was a whirl of motion and muted chaos, bolts of fabric leaned in lazy piles against the walls, tailors passed by with half-stitched sleeves dangling from arms, and a faint dusting of chalk hung in the air. A wire dress form stood in the corner draped with crimson velvet, already beginning to take the shape of a Tudor gown with an impossibly wide skirt.

Yaz stood at a long central worktable, holding two different silks up to the light, one a deep wine red, the other a pearly oyster shade. Tim hovered beside her, arms folded, brows raised with interest that was half professional, half personal.

"I don't know," Yaz murmured, eyes flicking between the two. "This one's got the weight I want, but it reads too bridal in low light. The other has better movement, but it might crumple too easily."

Tim nodded solemnly. "Tragic, isn't it? All these centuries and not a single Tudor queen had a greater burden than fabric drape,"

Yaz smirked. "Tell that to Anne Boleyn."

He leaned closer, plucking the wine-colored fabric from her hand and rubbing it between his fingers. "This is for the coronation scene, yeah?"

"Mhmm," Yaz nodded. "I want her to look like she could crush armies just by walking into the room. Regal, but not stiff. Dangerous, but divine."

Tim let out a soft whistle. "Your brain's a scary place sometimes."

She chuckled, but his tone shifted with just a hint of teasing sincerity.

"So... speaking of divine...how's the new palace? Or should I say villa? Cottage? Fortress? I've heard three different versions from people who 'casually' passed by it on accident." Yaz gave him a knowing look, folding the fabric carefully back onto the table. "It's a house, Tim. With doors and a roof. Not exactly the Taj Mahal."

"Oh, come on," he grinned. "You're not going to give me anything? Not even a hint? Do you have one of those giant fridges that could fit a small child inside? A breakfast nook? Do you own a breakfast nook now?"

"Maybe," Yaz replied innocently. "Or maybe I eat breakfast standing over the sink like a normal person."

"Liar," Tim accused. "You've got throw pillows now, don't you? Coordinated ones."

Yaz raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "Timothy James Carter, are you interrogating me over upholstery?"

He clutched his chest dramatically. "I just want to make sure you haven't gone soft on us. You used to be grounded. Gritty. A girl of the people."

"I still am," Yaz said, handing him a swatch of brocade to distract him. "Feel this and tell me if it screams monarchy or murder."

Tim dutifully examined the fabric, then said casually, "I'm coming over."

Yaz blinked. "You're what?"

"To the house. I've just decided. I'll bring pastries. And wine. Or a bottle of that weird cordial you like."

"I never said you were invited."

"You didn't say I wasn't," he pointed out, wagging the brocade like a flag.

Yaz laughed, shaking her head. "You're impossible."

"And you're secretive," he shot back. "We're a perfect match."

She rolled her eyes, but the affection was unmistakable. Tim had been there from the start, through the frayed hems and panic fittings and studio politics. He had her back then, and Yaz knew he still did now. Even if he was nosy as hell.

“Fine,” she sighed. “But don’t touch my throw pillows. They’re sacred.”

Tim beamed. “See? I knew you had them.”

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The phone rang just as Frances was finishing the last of her script notes, pages spread across the kitchen table, a half-drunk glass of lemonade sweating beside her elbow. She reached for the receiver, tucking it between her shoulder and cheek as she continued making notes in the margin.

“Hello”

“Hey it's me.”

“Mm. You’ve got that tone. What’s going on?”

Nicole chuckled lightly on the other end. “Nothing’s wrong. Actually, it’s good news. I think I’ve found someone for Lily.”

Frances sat up straighter. “For her activities? The driving?”

“Driving, security, a bit of part-time childcare. The whole package. This man comes highly recommended and I....”

Frances froze. “It’s a man?”

A beat of silence.

“Yes,” Nicole said cautiously.

“There’s no chance in hell.”

“Frances...”

"I said no. Absolutely not." She stood now, hand gripping the edge of the table. "Do you seriously think I'm gonna trust my daughter's safety to some man I don't know? Have we all gone mad?"

Nicole let out a breath, her voice dipping into dry amusement. "Honey....When's the last time you saw a female security guard who could drive, lift a fainting child, and keep a calm head in a medical emergency?"

Frances didn't respond.

Nicole's tone softened. "I know what you're afraid of....you don't have to spell it out. And I respect it. But listen to me...he's been vetted. Decorated Army officer. Father of two girls himself. He worked for De La Vega."

Frances frowned. "The singer?"

"Yes. For five years. Her younger daughter had similar challenges to Lily. He was with them through all of it. Seizures. Meltdowns. Hospital visits. You name it. Actually a worse case than your Lily. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find someone like that?"

Still, Frances said nothing.

"Frances," Nicole continued gently, "he comes with glowing references. He knows the job. He's not a nanny, not a therapist. But he's steady. Quiet. No nonsense. And he understands children like Lily. He's done this before."

Frances pressed her lips together, jaw tight.

"Just meet him," Nicole urged. "Nothing decided. Just a conversation."

There was a long pause, then the sound of Frances slowly lowering herself back into her chair.

"What's his name?"

"Danny Moran."

"How old is he?"

"44"

Frances sighed. "Fine. One meeting. That's all I'm promising."

"That's all I'm asking," Nicole replied, a smile in her voice. "You'll see."

Frances stared at the empty glass of lemonade, her fingers now quiet against the table.

"We'll see," she said softly.

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The sitting room in the house was cool and shaded, the French doors open to let in the sea breeze. A record played softly in the background, instrumental jazz, barely audible beneath the occasional thump of moving furniture from elsewhere in the house. The scent of fresh paint still lingered faintly from the polish on the mahogany floors.

Frances sat poised in one of the armchairs, her posture perfect, one leg crossed over the other. A china cup of coffee rested untouched on the side table beside her.

Yaz sat slightly to the side on the settee, her fingers gently drumming against the armrest.

Across from them sat Danny Moran. He looked every bit the professional, dressed in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves neatly cuffed, a narrow tie knotted just right, and well-pressed slacks that spoke of care and discipline. His dark hair was combed back with a modest touch of pomade, and polished leather shoes completed the look, subtle, clean, and unmistakably put-together in the style of a man who understood presentation mattered. He carried himself with quiet confidence. Mid-forties, calm eyes, and the kind of tan that came from afternoons outdoors, solid, grounded, unfussy.

"So, Mr. Moran," Frances said, her voice cool and composed, "tell me why you're interested in working with a child like my daughter."

Danny didn't shift or fidget. He leaned forward slightly, hands resting on his knees.

"First of all," he said, "thank you for seeing me. I know this kind of position isn't typically advertised, and I respect the privacy you're trying to protect."

Frances remained quiet. Yaz gave him a polite nod of encouragement.

"I've been in personal security for over fifteen years now. Started with the Army, then worked private, families, some politicians, and one actor. But about six years ago I was

hired by Miss. De La Vega"

Frances blinked. "The singer?"

"Yes, ma'am. She brought me on primarily for her younger daughter. Special needs, epileptic, nonverbal for a while. Behavioral challenges, especially in the early years. But incredibly bright once you understood her rhythm. I was with them five years. I was contacted primarily because I fit your needs. And to be honest, children are less stressful than adults."

Frances's voice sharpened slightly. "And why did you leave?"

"She turned sixteen and started at a private residential school, more structure, more focus on daily skills and independence. She didn't need me in the same way anymore."

There was a pause. Then Frances's tone changed, cold and clinical.

"Have you ever been accused of misconduct with a child?"

"No, ma'am." His tone stayed even. "I understand why you're asking. I'd do the same in your position."

Frances's hand tightened slightly on the porcelain handle of her coffee cup. Yaz glanced at her, then gently steered the conversation forward.

"You'd be driving her to activities, art group, maybe drama class." Yaz said "Waiting nearby. Sometimes engaging directly. You'd help manage transitions, make sure she's safe. Some days she may have a seizure. Some days she might shut down. Can you handle that?"

"I can," he said simply. "I'm not a therapist. I've had training in emergency response, basic first aid, seizure protocols, that sort of thing. Came with the job when I worked with the Miss De La Vega. I kept a log, knew her daughter's triggers, how to act fast but keep calm. I'd do the same for your child"

"Fortunately Lily doesn't have seizures that often any more" Frances's jaw worked, but the tension in her throat visible. "But when she's frightened, she'll grab the nearest hand and put all her trust in it. You'd better be the right one."

Danny gave a small, respectful nod. "That's my job. To be the right one."

A soft breeze lifted the edge of a linen curtain, and somewhere in the hallway, the floor

creaked as someone passed.

"We'll be checking references. In detail," Yaz said.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

Frances finally spoke again, her voice quieter. "We'd like you to meet her. Lily. There's no promise of anything beyond that. But it'll tell us what we need to know."

Danny's gaze didn't waver. "I'd be honored."

Frances finally reached for her coffee and took a sip. It had gone cold, but she didn't flinch. A little of the steel in her shoulders softened.

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Later that evening, the house had settled into silence. Outside, the garden was draped in moonlight and shadow, the occasional rustle of wind against the lemon tree the only sound. Inside, Frances paced barefoot across the living room rug, her silk dressing gown trailing slightly behind her. She couldn't sit still. Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her robe as she walked, back and forth, her mind heavy and turning.

Yaz sat curled on the arm of the sofa, her dark robe loosely tied at the waist, a half-empty teacup resting on the table beside her. She watched Frances with calm eyes, letting her speak, or not speak on her own time.

"I don't know if I can do this," Frances said finally, stopping near the window. "I know what he seems like. I know he said all the right things. But I've heard men say the right things before."

Her voice tightened. "And then they didn't mean a damn word of it."

"I know," Yaz said softly, her voice like velvet, "I know, darling."

Frances glanced toward the hallway, her eyes drifting as if she could see through the walls into Lily's room. "She's so trusting. If he smiles at her, if he gives her something pretty, she'll fold like paper. And she doesn't always know what's okay and what's not. I don't know if I can ever feel safe letting her go with anyone. Let alone a man."

Yaz nodded gently, not arguing, just listening.

"She can't live under a glass bell forever, Frances," she said after a pause. "You don't want her trapped."

Frances sat down beside her, her body folding slowly, like it cost her something to let go.

"I'd rather trap her than risk her being hurt like I was."

Yaz reached for her hand, lacing their fingers. "Then let's make sure she's protected and free. That's the balance we have to try."

She squeezed Frances's hand. "Nicole told you Danny's been with this woman's younger daughter for almost five years. Took her to dance class every week. Waited backstage, helped with costumes. Not a whisper of trouble. Not from her. Not from anyone. Besides, you're seeing her tomorrow. Hear what she has to say"

Frances said nothing. Her thumb traced slow, repetitive circles over Yaz's knuckles, as if trying to soothe herself through touch.

"Why does it feel like I'm gambling with everything?" she whispered.

"Because you are," Yaz said. "But you're not doing it blindly. You asked the hard questions. You watched him like a hawk."

She smiled faintly. "You saw how careful he was. How steady. That wasn't an act."

Frances exhaled, her breath shaky. "And if I'm wrong?"

Yaz looked at her, serious and grounded. "Then we pull Lily back. That's it. One step at a time, love."

She leaned in and pressed a kiss to Frances's temple. "We're not handing her off. We're building a team."

Frances leaned into her, her head resting against Yaz's shoulder, finally still.

"He really did say the right things," she murmured.

"He did," Yaz replied. "And he didn't flinch when you asked about abuse. That says something."

They sat together in quiet. Frances's shoulders softened, the stiffness beginning to ebb.

"If he ever laid a finger on her..."

Yaz didn't blink. "We'd bury him in the garden," she said simply. "Together. And Susan will pot a rose bush on top of his corpse"

Frances let out a breath of a laugh—barely there, but real. Yaz smiled and brushed a thumb across her knuckles.

"Let's give her a little more sky," Yaz whispered. "Just a bit. With us watching close."

"Alright"

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The late afternoon sun bathed the Hollywood Hills in gold, casting long shadows across driveways lined with trimmed hedges and marble fountains. Frances turned her car onto a quiet private lane, her grip on the steering wheel tightening as the tires crunched over pristine gravel.

She pulled up in front of an elegant Spanish-style villa with terracotta tiles and ironwork balconies. Before she could even unfasten her seatbelt, the grand wooden front door swung open, and a butler appeared with impeccable timing, dressed in a crisp charcoal suit.

"Miss Louise?" he asked, already stepping down the stone path to greet her.

"Yes," she replied, smoothing her skirt as she exited the car.

"This way, please."

He led her through an arched foyer that opened into a tastefully decorated parlour, light-filtered curtains, cream walls, soft classical music floating from somewhere in the background. The air smelled faintly of gardenias.

A woman rose from the armchair near the window. Mid-forties, elegant without effort, with dark hair swept into a loose chignon and warm amber eyes that gave her presence more than any jewels could. She smiled as Frances entered.

"Miss. Louise. I'm so glad you came."

“Thank you, Miss. de la Vega,” Frances said, offering her hand. “I really appreciate you making time for me.”

“Please, call me Rose,” the woman replied, her handshake firm but kind.

As Frances lowered herself onto the settee, a maid entered quietly.

“Would you care for something to drink?” Rose asked. “Coffee, tea, or perhaps something stronger?”

“Just coffee, thank you.”

“Make it two,” Rose told the maid, who offered a polite nod and disappeared as silently as she’d come.

A pause settled between them, not uncomfortable, more like the pause before an honest conversation.

“I understand,” Rose said gently, folding her hands in her lap, “that you have some concerns.”

Frances gave a faint, tired smile. “Yes... I do. I hope you don’t think I’m overstepping. It’s just... my daughter means everything to me.”

“I’d expect no less,” Rose said.

“She has epilepsy. Cognitive delays. She’s gentle and trusting but easily overwhelmed. We’ve only recently decided to bring her home to live with us permanently, and it’s been a huge adjustment. For all of us.”

Rose nodded, patient, listening.

“I met Mr. Moran this week. He seems kind. Capable. But...” Frances hesitated, her voice hitching slightly. “Unfortunately surrounding her at this point with several strangers might be overwhelming for her, so naturally I was looking for....let’s say all in one solution...But... I went through... things. And trusting a man...especially with her...feels like a ledge I’m not sure I can step off.

The maid returned, placed their cups on the side table, and left. Rose waited until the door clicked quietly shut before speaking.

"I understand," she said. "Truly."

She reached for her cup, letting the warmth of the coffee settle between them. "My youngest, Camila, was diagnosed at three. Severe epilepsy. Delayed speech, trouble with transitions, panic attacks. She's fifteen now and still marches to her own drum, but she's extraordinary."

Frances listened, the tension across her shoulders easing just a little.

"I hired Danny when she was nine. I was a single mother then, and afraid...like you. He was one of a dozen we interviewed. And... the one Camila walked straight up to and handed her doll. No words. Just trust."

Frances felt her chest ache a little at the image.

"He was gentle. Firm when she needed him to be. Never once raised his voice. She trusted him, and I did too, slowly, over time."

Rose leaned forward slightly.

"She still sends him birthday party invitations. Every year. She insists he comes to her dance recitals, even if he's not working with us anymore."

Frances looked at her then, eyes softening. "You don't think she'd do that... if something had ever been wrong."

"No. I don't," Rose said simply. "And neither would you, if you were in my shoes."

The two women sat there quietly, the moment full of something fragile and warm. Gratitude, shared understanding, the invisible threads between mothers of daughters who needed more of the world's gentleness.

"Thank you," Frances said at last. "For this."

Rose reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You're not alone, Frances. And you're asking the right questions...World can be an ugly place."

Frances carefully placed her coffee cup back on its saucer. The nerves in her chest had quieted some, replaced with a cautious sort of relief.

“Thank you again,” she said softly. “Truly. You didn’t have to..”

“But I wanted to,” Rose interrupted gently, standing with her. “I’ve been where you are. And when someone made space for me, it mattered more than I could say.”

.....

Frances rose from the settee smoothing her skirt.

They walked toward the front door together, sunlight now casting a warm glow through the glass panels. Frances paused as Rose’s hand rested on the doorknob.

“If you’d like,” Rose said, her voice gentle but sure, “I can ask Camila to speak with you later this evening. She’s very open about her feelings for Danny, and she’s old enough to explain in her own words what he meant to her. Sometimes hearing it from the one who lived it makes all the difference.”

Frances blinked, caught off guard by the offer. Her throat tightened. “I’d... I’d appreciate that more than I can say.”

Rose smiled, her eyes kind. “I’ll tell her to expect your call. Around seven?”

Frances nodded, her voice thick. “Yes. Thank you.”

“No need for thanks,” Rose said. “Just promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ever let guilt or fear convince you you’re not already doing enough. You’re protecting your daughter. That’s love, not weakness.”

Frances swallowed hard. “I’ll try to remember that.”

And with a parting smile, she stepped out into the fading daylight, lighter, steadier, and one step closer to believing that maybe, just maybe, Lily’s world could be safe and wide.

....

Friday morning the house was finally still. For days, it had echoed with the noise of strangers, furniture being shuffled in, walls drilled and painted, voices shouting instructions. But now, all that was gone. The silence left behind this early morning was soft, almost

sacred. For now, Lily was still with Susan, but by the end of today, she will be home, truly home with them.

Morning light poured through the kitchen window, painting golden streaks across the tiled floor. Yaz stood barefoot at the stove, her dressing gown cinched loosely at the waist, a lock of hair curling free behind her ear as she moved with quiet purpose. She was focused, brow lightly furrowed as she worked, humming under her breath while something sizzled in the pan.

Frances lingered in the doorway, breath caught, the quiet hum of morning wrapping gently around her. She didn't move at first—didn't dare disturb the picture before her.

God, she was beautiful.

Not the kind of beauty that demanded attention, but the kind that crept up slowly, catching you off guard and sinking deep into your bones. Effortlessly, quietly beautiful in a way that made Frances's chest ache. The soft slope of Yaz's shoulders beneath her robe, the subtle curve of her back as she moved, the morning light catching in her hair and casting her in gold.

This was their kitchen now. Their home. And Yaz...Yaz belonged here, in the tender hush of morning, in the air they breathed and the walls they would fill with memories.

It hit Frances then, a thought so completely rooting her in place, she's mine. Not in possession, but in love. Yaz was hers to come home to, to wake up beside, to hold in silence and in laughter. And she would never stop being grateful.

She stepped forward softly, arms wrapping around the woman who had changed everything.

"Morning, love," she murmured, giving her the slightest, playful jolt.

Yaz just smiled, as if she'd known Frances was there the entire time. "You trying to make me drop breakfast?"

But the moment Frances's arms circled her, Yaz's body softened instinctively, melting into the embrace like a breath finally exhaled. Her weight settled against Frances with quiet trust, as though every part of her had been waiting for this stillness, this warmth.

Frances pressed a kiss to her neck, gentle, reverent, then another, slower, trailing upward just beneath her ear. Yaz tilted her head ever so slightly in invitation, her eyes fluttering shut

for a heartbeat as she leaned into the touch.

With unhurried grace, Yaz reached up and placed the knife gently on the counter, as if letting go of the world outside them. Then she laced her fingers through Frances's, grounding them both in that quiet, golden moment.

Frances tightened her hold, pulling her just a little closer, as though even an inch of distance would be too much now.

"We did it, didn't we?" Yaz said quietly.

Frances exhaled against her skin. "We really did."

They stood like that for a moment, still and silent in the soft morning light, the world outside their windows distant and unimportant. It was domestic and tender and everything they never thought they could have.

"I keep expecting someone to come and tell us this isn't ours," Yaz murmured, her voice a little shy, a little disbelieving. "That we're just borrowing it for a while

Frances gave a soft hum of agreement, nuzzling her nose into the curve of Yaz's shoulder. "Let them try," she whispered. "This house, this kitchen, you... all of it is mine."

Yaz turned in her arms then, slow and sure, her fingers brushing along Frances's cheek. "And you're mine."

There was no rush to kiss. Just a quiet understanding as they looked at each other, their foreheads touching, breath mingling between them. Frances smiled, wide and real. Yaz did too, the kind of smile that tugged at her dimples and lit up her whole face. In this moment, the only thing that mattered was the feeling of home, found, claimed, and finally, deserved.

.....

The bedroom was warm with the late morning sun pouring through the sheer curtains, casting soft golden shapes across the floorboards. The world outside was muffled by the thick windows, leaving just the quiet rustle of clothes and the occasional clink of accessories being fastened.

Frances turned slightly, holding her hair up and glancing over her shoulder. "Could you zip me up, darling?"

Yaz stepped forward, her fingers deftly finding the zipper and pulling it up along the soft green fabric of Frances's dress. "You're wearing the silk today," she noted, smoothing her hand over Frances's back.

"I have that table reading at Paramount," Frances said, adjusting her earrings in the mirror. "Then lunch with Helen, she'll kill me if I cancel again. After that, I'm picking up Lily. You'll be at the studio all day?"

Yaz nodded, slipping a belt through the loops of her high-waisted trousers. "Yes, but I've got a meeting over at the Wardrobe Department at five. So depending on how long that runs, I might be late coming back."

Frances glanced at her reflection, brushing a hand through her hair. "Can you call the gardener today? Pleeease....I'm not gonna be anywhere near the phone today and he's meant to come next week, we need him to trim that awful hedge before it devours the roses."

Yaz gave a mock sigh. "I don't even know what day it is, let alone when he's meant to come."

Frances grinned and turned, walking to the dresser. "Welcome to the Hollywood grind, Miss. Khan"

Yaz rolled her eyes fondly and reached for her bag. "I'll call him before I forget. Maybe he'll show up early and catch us both unprepared."

"Like Betty nearly did yesterday?" Frances raised an eyebrow, swiping on her lipstick.

"That was close" Yaz laughed.

Frances shook her head with a grin. "I had to give her a proper schedule, otherwise she'd just be floating around trying to be helpful at the worst possible time. This way's better. She's in when we're out, and out when we're trying to be a couple."

Yaz fastened the last button on her blouse and declared, "Done. Let's go."

Frances capped her lipstick, tossed it into her bag, and gave her hair a critical look. "I need to go to the hairdresser. This..." she gestured to the curls, "...isn't movie star material today."

Yaz leaned against the doorframe, smirking. "I know what a mess... lucky you're pretty."

Frances shot her a wink.

They left the room together, heels clicking and voices fading as they disappeared down the hallway, their life now unfolding in the small, sweet domestic rituals of a home they are building together.

.....

The car hummed along the road, the morning breeze whipping through Yaz's hair as the city blurred past. She leaned back into the seat with a long, exaggerated sigh, eyes closed behind her sunglasses.

"One thing I'm happy about is no more buses," she declared, the words soaked in satisfaction. "No more waiting in the rain next to that man who smells like pickles."

Frances laughed, one hand on the wheel, the other tapping the beat of the jazz tune playing softly on the radio. "You sound positively spoiled already."

"I'm adapting fast," Yaz said primly

"You really should learn how to drive darling."

Frances gave a nonchalant shrug, eyes still on the road. "I've been chauffeuring since I was sixteen. It's practically tradition here."

Yaz arched an eyebrow. "So is public hanging, but we phased that out."

Frances gasped in mock offense. "Are you suggesting I'm some kind of relic?"

"I'm suggesting if I ever get behind the wheel, I'll need to update my will."

Frances grinned wickedly. "You worry too much. Besides, I'm buying you a car for your birthday."

Yaz sat up straight, spinning to face her. "Don't you dare!"

"Oh, I will!" Frances said, flashing a victorious smirk as she pressed her foot a little harder on the gas pedal. "And it's gonna be the prettiest thing in the studio parking lot."

"Nothing screams lovers like you buying me a car...But sure, let's keep a low profile." Yaz groaned, but she was grinning.

Frances laughed and turned up the music, her hand tapping the wheel in rhythm. The wind roared louder around them, laughter trailing behind like a ribbon in the breeze.

....

Yaz was bent over her worktable, pencil tucked behind one ear, swatches spread like a fan of colour across the surface. She was cross-referencing sizes and measurements, making tidy notes in her workbook when the telephone rang. She leaned across, brushing a tape measure aside, and picked it up.

"Yasmin Khan."

"Good afternoon, Yaz. It's Edward."

She straightened a little. "Oh, hi. Is everything alright?"

"More than alright," he said, crisp and direct. "I've just stepped out of a meeting with the legal team over at Paramount. We've agreed on the loan arrangement. They're thrilled, by the way. You'll receive all the paperwork before end of day, ready to be signed."

Yaz blinked. "That quick?"

"I don't believe in wasting time," Edward said smoothly. "Now, important part. You'll be paid directly by them during the loan period. Higher than your current rate, I made sure of that. It reflects the scope of the project and your portfolio. It's well-deserved."

Yaz didn't say anything for a moment. Her pencil hovered above the page. "More than I make now?" she asked, just to be sure.

"Yes." A pause. "Quite a bit more, actually."

Her breath left her in a quiet puff. "Right..."

"You don't need to answer now," Edward continued, tone measured but not unkind. "Take the weekend to read through the documents thoroughly. If there's *anything* you're unsure about, any concerns at all, call me. No pressure. You need to be completely happy with what you're signing."

That stopped her short. Her throat tightened, unexpectedly.

No pressure.

She tried to recall the last time anyone had said that to her. Asked for her opinion. Given her space to make a decision instead of handing it to her, already made.

“...Thank you,” she said quietly.

Edward’s voice lightened just a touch. “If you’re happy with the terms and everything’s signed, you can hand the papers off to Frances—she’s meeting with me on Monday morning. Or, if it’s easier, I can pop by your office.”

Yaz blinked, shook her head gently. “No, that’s alright. I’ll give them to Frances. That’s perfectly okay.”

“Excellent.” A beat. “And Yaz?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re going to knock them flat.”

She smiled, even though he couldn’t see it. “I’ll try.”

Yaz placed the receiver back in its cradle, her fingers lingering for a moment on the cool metal. The quiet hum of the room returned, rustling paper, the faint ticking of the clock on the wall, but everything felt... different now.

More than her current rate.

Take your time.

If you’re unsure, call me.

No pressure.

She exhaled, slow and shaky, and leaned back against the edge of the worktable. All her life, choices had been something other people made for her. She was expected to be grateful, to fall in line, to say *thank you* no matter how tightly the collar sat around her neck. She’d never been offered time. Or respect. Or trust in her judgment.

Now, suddenly, she had all three and she wasn’t quite sure what to do with them.

Yaz looked down at the notes in her hand, the sketches and swatches, the colour-coded

chaos that was her mind on paper, and smiled wiping tears that have escaped.

Not because she was surprised she'd earned it, but because for once... someone else saw it too.

.....

The restaurant was tucked into a quiet corner of West Hollywood, sun pouring through latticed windows and catching in the gold of Frances's hair. Helen looked vibrant as ever, her dark curls pinned back with a splash of red to match her lipstick. They'd barely ordered their food before diving into conversation.

Frances sipped her iced tea, smiling. "I read the reviews. They're calling it a smash. You must be floating."

Helen grinned, waving a dismissive hand. "I'm exhausted, actually. But yes, it's going really well. And I hear Paramount's got you wrapped up for the next few months, congrats girl."

"Mmm" Frances nodded "I'm really excited, I've never been poached by anyone before...I feel very important" she laughed

"Don't let it go to your head too much... I might have to smack some sense into you," Helen laughed, stirring her iced tea with a clink of ice. "Now spill...tell me everything."

Frances set down her menu and leaned back with a soft sigh. "It's a thriller. Lots of tension, long shadows, that kind of thing. First table read was today. Honestly, it's shaping up to be something special."

Helen grinned. "You're always in something special. I swear, you've got a sixth sense for picking the good ones."

Frances smiled but then hesitated. "I'm so sorry I missed your premiere, Helen. I hated not being there, it just landed right in the middle of New York."

Helen waved her off. "Don't be dumb. I missed yours too, remember? We'll call it even."

They both laughed, then eased into the kind of silence that only old friends could share comfortably. After a moment, Helen tilted her head. "And the new house? Tell me everything."

Frances lit up. "It's... a dream. Truly. We're finally unpacked, which only took a minor miracle and three painters who hated me by the end. But it's home. Ours."

Helen's face softened. "I'm so happy for you, Fran. Really."

"We're planning a little party soon," Frances added, setting her fork down. "Small. Close friends only. You absolutely need to come."

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away," Helen smiled.

Then, something shifted in Frances's eyes. She reached across the table, her fingers brushing Helen's. "I don't say this enough," she said, voice quieter now, more softer. "None of this, Yaz, the life I have now....none of it would be possible if I didn't have you in my corner. You've never made me feel like I needed to hide. Not with her, not with anyone before. You've just... always loved me. Exactly how I am and I never felt alone."

Helen blinked once, twice, then smiled softly and gave Frances's hand a squeeze. "Well darling, you've always made it very easy to love you." She gave her a playful look, brushing away the emotion with practiced grace. "And I can't wait to meet Lily. Tell me what she likes, I'm not showing up empty-handed."

Frances laughed, a sound full of affection. "She's obsessed with drawing and tiny tea sets at the moment. So pick your weapon."

"Perfect," Helen said, reaching for her drink again. "I'll bring both."

....

The afternoon sun cast a soft golden glow over the quiet street as Frances pulled up outside Susan's house. Lily's little suitcase stood neatly in the hallway, already zipped and ready, just as Susan had said it would be.

Before Frances could even knock, the front door flew open.

"Mummy!" Lily came hurtling out like a cannonball, flinging her arms around Frances's waist.

"Hey, my darling girl," Frances laughed, scooping her into a tight hug. She pressed a kiss into her hair, breathing her in.

Susan appeared behind her, smiling as she leaned against the doorframe. "You'd think you

hadn't seen each other in years," she said fondly.

Frances leaned in to kiss her cheek, and Susan pulled her in for a proper hug.

"Come in, come in."

Frances stepped into the familiar house. It smelled like lavender and baked apples. The walls, lined with photos of Susan's late husband and daughter, drew her attention the way they always did, gentle reminders of what had been. Her gaze drifted to the fridge, where one of Lily's drawings was proudly pinned, a crooked house with a smiling stick-figure family, a sun that took up half the sky.

She followed Susan and sat down at the table. Susan moved about easily, filling the kettle and chatting as if this were any other day.

"How was your day?" she asked over her shoulder. "How's Yaz? Is she eating?"

Frances chuckled. "She's eating, yes. Though she thinks coffee counts as a full meal. Oh, I have something for you." She reached into her bag and pulled out two invitations "Since you couldn't come to the premiere, I pulled a few strings, there's a special early showing next week, before it hits the wider theaters."

"Are you kidding me?"

Frances laughs "I won't be there...it's just a small screening for early audiences...but I saved you two seats. You can take a friend."

"Oh my God...Thank you honey" She leaned over kissing her cheek "Debbie and I planned on going together, she will lose her mind"

Just as Susan placed their coffee on the table and sat down, Lily clambered into her lap, crayons already in hand.

Frances watched them with a weight in her chest. Love was always heavy, always aching. The silence between them was soft, almost tender.

After a moment, she spoke. "Yaz and I have been talking..." she started carefully.

Susan looked up, her expression open and calm.

"If this is something Lily would like...Which I'm sure she would....We thought...maybe every

other weekend she could stay with you.”

Susan stilled.

Frances braced.

Susan’s eyes welled instantly. “Are you trying to kill me?” she whispered, a tremble in her voice.

Frances laughed through the tightness in her throat. “It’s purely selfish,” she said. “We just want some time alone...you know...”

“Bullshit,” Susan said with a shaky laugh, wiping at her eyes.

Lily wriggled down from her lap, padding over to the fridge for a juice box. In the quiet moment that followed, Frances reached across the table and took Susan’s hand.

Her voice lowered. “I’ve been thinking lately... about my mother. And how I lost her so young. I think... I think maybe she sent you to me. Somehow. When I really needed her most.”

Susan’s fingers gripped hers. Frances’s throat tightened.

“You’ve given me something I forgot...something I didn’t think I’d get again, comfort, safety, someone who... who truly sees me and Lily. I want you to know, I’ll always carry you with me. Always.”

Susan stood up quickly, tears spilling. Frances rose too, and they fell into each other’s arms. This hug was different, deeper. Not just gratitude or affection. Something more eternal. Something like soulmates of a different kind.

When they finally pulled away, Susan cradled Frances’s face between her hands. “I think my family sent you to me, too,” she whispered. “All three of you. Just when life felt like it had nothing left to give.”

Frances closed her eyes, tears warm on her cheeks.

In the next room, Lily sang softly to herself, sipping her juice. And for that quiet, perfect second, everything was exactly as it should be.

....

Yaz smoothed the heavy sketchbook closed as a soft knock sounded on the office door. She looked up, straightening a little in her chair.
"Come in!"

The door swung open to reveal a young woman with striking features, dark hair pinned neatly back, bright, curious eyes, and the faintest nervous smile. She stepped inside, balancing a small handbag against her hip.

"Hello, They sent me over from casting." she said, voice light but steady. "Anna Ward,"

"Yasmin Khan, please just call me Yaz" she replied, standing and offering her hand warmly.
"Lovely to meet you, Anna. Come on in, have a seat."

Anna slipped into the chair opposite Yaz's desk, glancing around at the rolls of fabric stacked in the corner and the costume sketches pinned up along the wall.

"I feel like I'm seeing a secret world," she said with a little laugh.

Yaz grinned. "Well, it won't be secret for long. We're about to throw you into the sixteenth century."

Anna laughed, the tension easing from her shoulders. Yaz flipped open her notebook, already prepared.

"Alright, first things first, I'm just going to take a few measurements, if that's alright. It helps me get a better idea before we start fitting properly."

"Of course," Anna said, standing and slipping off her jacket.

As Yaz moved around her, carefully noting down measurements, waist, hips, bust, shoulders, they chatted easily.

"Have you done much period work before?" Yaz asked, looping the measuring tape gently around Anna's waist.

"Not much," she admitted. "I did one Victorian drama, but nothing on this level. I only had one line. I'm so excited, though. The gowns are gorgeous. And this is my first bigger part."

"Oh wow...that's proper exciting then. They're heavy too," Yaz said with a chuckle. "Hope

you're ready for corsets, layers, and very small steps."

Anna laughed. "I'll start practicing my royal glide immediately."

Yaz smiled to herself as she scribbled down another number. She liked Anna already, good humor, relaxed, willing to go with the madness of it all.

"You're a Brit?"

"Yes, born and raised" Yaz smiled

"What are you doing here?"

"I guess same as everyone else, finding my place under a Sun"

Once she finished, Yaz handed Anna a few swatches of fabric.

"These are the early choices for your main costume. We're going for a palette of deep reds and golds for your character, rich, but not flashy. You'll look like you belong in Henry VIII's court without outshining the queen."

Anna nodded thoughtfully, running her fingers over the velvet. "They're beautiful. It's so much easier to imagine it all when you can feel the fabric."

"Exactly," Yaz said. "Costume isn't just about looking right, it's about feeling like you've stepped into another life. We'll be building a world around you."

Anna smiled, clearly caught by the excitement Yaz carried in her voice. "I can't wait," she said. "Thank you for making it feel so real already."

Yaz tucked the notebook under her arm. "You're welcome. Trust me, I'm excited as you are. It's my first historical epic....we're gonna make something amazing."

They shook hands again, a bit more warmly this time. As Anna left, Yaz sat back in her chair, already picturing how the gowns would take shape. Another piece of the world she was building had just clicked into place.

....

The air buzzed with chatter and the scratch of pencils over paper. Bolts of fabric leaned against the walls, sketches pinned everywhere like a chaotic mood board. Around a long table sat the costume team, a dozen designers and assistants, coffee cups in hand, flipping through portfolios.

Charlie, the head of costumes for the project, stood at the head of the table, sleeves rolled up, flipping through large, vibrant sketches pinned to a board.

Charlie tapped one. "Here's one vision for Queen Anne's coronation gown. Big, bold colors, lots of red and gold. Real 'regal' feel, you know? I like this one, good job."

There were nods around the table.

Yaz leaned forward, brow furrowed. She glanced again at the other designer's sketch, bright lipstick-red velvet, a neckline cut so low it would've scandalized any Tudor courtier, jewels so enormous they looked more Broadway than historical.

She bit the inside of her cheek, heart pounding. Another designer showed his sketch for Henry's outfit, a puffed-sleeve doublet with gold lamé trousers. Lamé.

Charlie chuckled. "Gotta make him pop on screen."

Yaz cringed, she couldn't help herself. She set her pencil down with a soft click. "Excuse me," she said, voice cutting neatly through the room's noise.

Heads turned.

She smiled politely, but her hand trembled slightly as she smoothed the paper in front of her.

"I don't mean to be difficult... but the Tudor court never looked like this. I mean, not remotely." She nodded toward the sketches. "Queen Anne's coronation would have been somber, rich fabrics, sure, but muted jewel tones, not circus red. Necklines were modest. Heavy sleeves. And no one, no one wore lamé trousers."

Silence.

Charlie gave a genial shrug, smiling indulgently like one would at an overeager intern. "Well, Yaz, it's Hollywood, not the Tower of London. We're aiming for big visuals. You know... drama."

There were a few polite chuckles around the table.

Yaz felt her cheeks flush, but she held Charlie's gaze.

"Drama's not the issue," she said, steady now. "But if you lose authenticity, you lose truth. And audiences, even if they don't know it... feel that."

Charlie lifted his hands, easygoing. "We'll take it under advisement."

The conversation moved on. People shuffled papers. More horrible costume sketches were shown. The meeting adjourned with the scrape of chairs.

But Yaz didn't move.

She waited until Charlie gathered his sketches. Then quietly stepped closer.

"Charlie" she said, her voice low "...could I have a private word?"

He blinked, a little surprised, but nodded. "Sure. Let's step outside."

.....

Yaz followed Charlie into his office, shutting the door firmly behind her. The soft click of the latch echoed in the small room.

She stood for a moment, gathering her thoughts, then crossed to his desk. Without a word, she opened her leather sketchbook and placed it in front of him, turning it so he could see.

Charlie paused, glancing down.

The pages were filled with meticulously detailed designs, gowns in somber velvets and rich brocades, heavy sleeves trailing intricate Tudor embroidery, stiff gabled hoods perched precisely on queens' heads. It was regal. Grave. Powerful.

It was nothing like the cheap, gaudy sketches that had been passed around the morning meeting.

"You see this?" Yaz said, her voice steady, refusing to let her nerves creep in. "This is proper. This is a Tudor court. Believe me I know, been there, many times. What everyone else is designing out there..." she gave a dismissive flick of her fingers toward the door "...is a Halloween party."

Charlie exhaled heavily, dragging a hand over his face.

"Yaz," he said carefully, "you're not wrong about the history. But this is Hollywood. Audiences want bigger. Brighter. They want a bit of fantasy with their facts. That's just the business."

She shook her head, stepping closer, her whole body tense with quiet determination.

"You didn't hire me to give them a fancy-dress pageant. You hired me because you said.... and I quoteI want something real. Something fresh." She tapped her sketchbook with two fingers. "You trusted my knowledge. Trust me now."

Charlie leaned back slightly, folding his arms.

"You say you want an epic," Yaz went on, her voice building, "then let's give them a real epic. We can make people gasp when they see the screen. We can make them feel it, the weight, the terror, the beauty. Not just pretty costumes, but the soul of that world."

Charlie watched her in silence, his mouth tight.

"You put Henry VIII in gold lamé trousers," Yaz said, biting the words out, "and you turn a dynasty into a joke. But you show the truth, the rich fabrics, the hard lines, the solemn faces...and you show the audience a world they believe in."

She drew a breath, steadying herself.

"This could be something Oscar-worthy, Charlie. Not just 'good enough'. Something people will remember for decades to come"

For a long moment, he didn't say anything.

Then he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Brocade. Hand embroidery. Custom jewelry," he said. "You're upping the budget. That's not my decision to approve."

"Fine," Yaz said without hesitation. "Then whose is it?"

Charlie hesitated, clearly weighing his options.

"Producers' office."

"Then set the meeting," Yaz said simply. "I'll bring my work. I'll pitch it myself if I have to."

Charlie studied her, really studied her as if seeing her properly for the first time.

There was nothing meek about her now. No polite deference.

This wasn't just a costume designer.

This was someone dangerous. Someone who could change the shape of the whole project if they let her.

Finally, a slow, reluctant smile tugged at his mouth.

"You've got brass, kid," he said, half-admiring, half-wary. "Alright. I'll set the meeting."

Yaz closed her sketchbook with a crisp snap, her heart thudding hard but even.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "You won't regret it."

....

The kitchen was filled with the soft crackle of an old jazz tune drifting from the radio perched

on the windowsill, the kind of music that wrapped around the walls and made everything feel a little warmer. The smell of roasted chicken and fresh bread hung thick in the air, seeping into every corner of the house with a promise of comfort.

Frances moved easily around the kitchen, her hands quick and practiced as she set the table. Beside her, Lily, already changed into her favorite daisy-print pajamas clutched a stack of glasses, her face scrunched in determined concentration.

"Here we go, sweetheart," Frances said, smiling as she nodded to the table. "One glass at each spot."

Lily nodded solemnly and got to work, her little hands placing each glass with careful precision, tongue peeking out slightly as she focused. Frances watched her with an affectionate chuckle, the kind of sound that made the room feel even more alive.

"You're doing brilliantly, darling," Frances said, smoothing down the tablecloth as Lily finished.

They moved around each other in an easy rhythm, chattering away without needing to think about it.

"What are we going to do this weekend?" Lily asked brightly, her face turned up with eager excitement.

Frances wiped her hands on a tea towel and bent down slightly to meet her eyes. "Well, if we're lucky and the sun sticks around," she said, throwing a glance toward the purple-tinged sky outside the window, "maybe we'll get a swim in the pool. How does that sound?"

Lily's whole face lit up. "Yeeessss! And Yaz too!"

Frances laughed, lifting a basket of warm rolls and setting it in the center of the table. "Oh, darling... Yaz can't swim."

Lily froze mid-bounce, her expression pure confusion. "Why not?"

Frances shook her head, still smiling. "Where Yaz grew up, it was far from the sea. No beaches, no swimming pools... nothing like here."

Lily frowned slightly, trying to imagine it, before her little shoulders squared in a determined nod. "Then I'll teach her!"

Frances let out a soft, adoring laugh, crouching down so they were eye to eye. She brushed a loose strand of hair from Lily's forehead "You are brave little mermaid, you know that?" She pressed a long kiss to her cheek

Lily giggled and threw her arms around Frances's neck, squeezing tight. Frances hugged her back, breathing in the sweet scent of her daughter's hair, feeling the simple, fierce joy of the moment settle deep into her bones. It was the kind of happiness she hadn't dared hope

for, a home, a family, her child's laughter filling the spaces where loneliness used to live.

As the light outside faded into a soft, dusky blue and the radio crooned gently on, Frances kissed the top of Lily's head "I think Yaz would be the luckiest girl in the world to have you as her teacher." she whispered,

Lily, proud of her glass arrangement, now busied herself setting the cutlery by each plate, humming along with the radio. Suddenly, the upbeat strains of one of her favorites "*Shake, Rattle and Roll*", burst from the speakers, filling the kitchen with a playful energy.

Without thinking, Lily gave a little wiggle of her hips, the fork and knife clinking together in her hands as she danced. Frances, carrying a jug of fresh lemonade to the table, caught the sight and laughed.

She set the jug down and reached for Lily's hand. "C'mere, you little rascal," Frances said, grinning as she pulled her into the open space between the table and the stove.

Lily giggled, her cheeks pink with excitement as Frances guided her into a twirl, her small feet spinning lightly across the floor. Frances danced along with her, keeping the rhythm, making exaggerated steps and silly turns that sent Lily into fits of laughter.

The two of them moved with the carefree, easy joy that only music and a warm evening could bring. Lily let go of Frances's hand for a moment to spin on her own, her pajama bottoms flaring around her legs.

Frances clapped her hands in rhythm, egging her on. "That's it! You've got the moves, kiddo!"

Just as Lily finished a wobbly pirouette Frances grabbed her before she could fall. As they both dissolved into laughter the front door swung open.

"Hiya!" Yaz's familiar voice rang down the hallway.

Lily gasped, her face lighting up like a Christmas tree. Without a moment's hesitation, she bolted from the kitchen, her feet pattering against the floor. "Yaz!" she squealed, her little body a blur as she sprinted down the hall.

Frances leaned against the doorway, laughing softly as she watched Lily launch herself full-speed at Yaz.

Yaz barely had time to drop her bag before Lily crashed into her legs, wrapping her arms around her with all the force a small, excitable eleven-year-old could muster.

"Whoa!" Yaz laughed, staggering back a step but catching her, lifting her off the ground in a tight hug. "Hey, my wildflower. Did you miss me that much?"

Lily nodded vigorously, clutching Yaz's shoulders.

Frances, from the kitchen, called out, "Dinner's done...you two coming, or do I have to eat all this chicken myself?"

Yaz glanced down at Lily with a mock conspiratorial whisper. "Think we can beat her to it?"

Yaz stepped into the kitchen, the warmth and delicious smell hitting her at once. She set her bag down with a heavy thud and smiled as she crossed the room. Frances was just putting the last of the dishes on the table, and Yaz caught her around the waist, stealing a quick kiss.

"Mmm," Yaz murmured against her cheek as she pulled back, slipping off her cardigan and tossing it over the back of a chair. "Smells nice. I'm about ready to eat the table."

Frances chuckled, setting down a jug of lemonade. "Don't give me too much credit. Susan did most of it. I'm just playing hostess."

Yaz laughed as she grabbed an oven mitt and pulled a tray from the oven. "Why am I not surprised?"

Lily was already at the table, her small hands clumsily setting out the last few forks, still bouncing slightly to the music coming from the kitchen radio. Yaz ruffled her hair fondly as she passed.

"Oh, by the way.... Lily's teaching you how to swim tomorrow" Frances winked at her with a grin.

"Is she now?...Did you tell her I sink faster than the rock?" She laughed

Once everyone was seated, plates filled and glasses clinked, Yaz wiped her hands on her napkin and leaned forward.

"Alright, I've got good news and bad news," she announced. "Which one you want first?"

Frances lifted an eyebrow. "Good one I suppose...I might feel better when you disappoint me after."

Yaz grinned. "I'm fighting to get the wardrobe budget raised. You wouldn't believe the horror show they tried to pass off as Tudor court costumes. Like Halloween rejects...honest" she said, making Frances laugh. "Anyway, I've got a meeting with the producer on Monday to plead my case properly.."

Frances's face lit up with pride, her whole posture lifting. "You're kidding?"

"Nope, Charlie set up a meeting"

"Oh my God darling...Do you have any idea how big this is?" she reached for her hand squeezing it tight "This is your chance to show them what real talent looks like. I'm so proud of you darling."

Yaz smiled, warmed by her excitement, but held up a hand. "Before you get too carried away, wait until you hear the bad news."

Frances gave a mock groan. "Go on then."

"I'll be working the whole weekend," Yaz said, grimacing a little. "Sketching, planning, prepping everything for that meeting. No rest for the wicked."

Frances's face fell, the sparkle in her eyes dimming a little as she set down her fork. "Oh," she said softly, trying to hide her disappointment.

Across the table, Lily looked between them, sensing the shift even if she didn't fully understand it.

"I'm so sorry...I know it's our first weekend together" Yaz reached across the table, threading her fingers through Frances's. "I hate it... I'll make it up to you, both of you...I swear."

"Are you leaving?" Lily asked, her tiny hand pausing mid-motion, her eyes clouded with worry.

"No, pumpkin, I'm not going anywhere," she said softly, brushing a stray hair from Lily's face. "I'll just have a little less time to play this weekend cause of work. But I'll still be right here by the pool with you."

Frances gave her hand a gentle squeeze, her smile returning — a little sadder, but still full of love. "Sorry... "I can't help it," she murmured.

"I know, love," Yaz whispered, giving her hand a tender squeeze before pulling her into a soft kiss. "When it's all over, we'll celebrate properly. Just us. Deal?"

Frances nodded with a smile "Deal"

"Besides," Yaz added, glancing at Lily with a grin, "someone's got to teach me to swim, right?"

At that, Lily lit up and launched into excited plans about swimming lessons, making both women laugh as the mood lifted again. The kitchen filled with the clatter of plates, the low hum of the radio, and the comforting sense that even when things got hard, this little family would be alright.

.....

The afternoon sun shimmered over the sparkling surface of the pool, its bright glare softened by the striped umbrellas scattered around the patio. It was the kind of golden day that seemed made just for laughter.

In the shallow end, Frances waded waist-deep in the water, her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. She grinned as she held onto Lily's tiny hands, twirling her in the water.

Lily was a sight to behold, her little polka-dot swimsuit, all red with crisp white spots and a frills around the edges. She giggled uncontrollably.

"Hold tight!" Frances laughed, twirling her again until Lily squealed with delight, her blonde hair plastered in wet ringlets around her face.

A few feet away, Yaz lounged on a sunbed, her legs stretched out lazily soaking in the afternoon sun in navy shorts and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her dark hair tucked behind one ear. A sketchpad balanced against her knees, pencil tapping thoughtfully as she worked, completely absorbed in her drawings until a little voice called out, shrill and urgent.

"Yaz! Yaz! Look at me!"

Yaz lifted her head shading her eyes with her hand. She smiled as she saw Lily poised dramatically at the edge of the pool, arms flung wide for balance.

"I'm watching, love!" Yaz called back, grinning.

With a tiny gasp, Lily bent her knees and made a brave little jump, more of a hop, really into the water. Frances caught her lifting her back to the surface with practiced ease.

"You did it!" Frances smiled, scooping her into her arms. Lily's laughter bubbling out of her like the happiest song.

"That was brilliant!" Yaz cheered from her spot clapping her hands and blowing exaggerated kisses into the air.

Lily beamed, absolutely glowing with pride, splashing water in all directions as she wriggled happily. For a moment, the whole world seemed made up of nothing but sunshine, water, and the sound of a little girl's giddy laughter — and Yaz, watching them, thought she had never seen anything more perfect in her life.

.....

Early evening sunlight slanted through the little office, casting long golden stripes across the floor where Lily sat cross-legged, deeply absorbed in arranging a row of wooden animals into a parade. Every so often, she hummed quietly to herself, the occasional "neigh" or "moo" slipping out as she moved a horse or cow along her imaginary route.

At the desk, Frances leaned over a weekly planner, pencil tapping lightly against her bottom lip. Across from her, Yaz sat with her sketchbook closed beside her, listening intently.

"Okay," Frances said, glancing down at her notes. "I should be home by six on Tuesday

and Friday... maybe Thursday, if rehearsal wraps early. But Wednesday..." she pulled a slight face, "...Wednesday's going to be late. There's the table read, then dinner with the producer and director afterward."

Yaz nodded, jotting a quick note on a scrap of paper. "No worries... Wednesday might be tricky for me too," she admitted. "Depends how long the fittings run. But..." she brightened, "Susan said she's happy to come over after work. She offered to stay with Lily until one of us stumbles back through the door."

Frances's brow creased in worry. "I feel awful asking her to do that. We're treating her like a nanny..."

Yaz chuckled, reaching across the table to squeeze Frances's hand. "Don't. She *loves* it. She's taking her role of Lily's honorary granny very seriously, I think she's got half a toy store hidden at her place just for emergency visits."

Frances laughed, the tension easing from her shoulders. "She's gonna spoil her rotten."

"That's what grandmothers do," Yaz said, her voice warm. "It's practically a rule."

Lily crawled a little closer to the desk, humming louder now, oblivious to the talk swirling above her. Frances smiled down at her, then turned back to Yaz, reaching into her folder.

"Here," she said, handing Yaz a neatly typed schedule. "Lily's routine. Mealtimes, bath, story time... all her activities this week, including drama and art lessons. I thought if we each have a copy, no one will miss anything."

Yaz took it, giving it a mock-serious look. "This is more detailed than my entire project schedule," she teased, grinning.

Frances laughed again and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Welcome to family life."

Yaz smiled down at the paper in her hands, feeling the warmth of it spread through her chest, from everything it meant. A home. A routine. A little girl on the floor playing and a life she would have fought the world for if she had to.

.....

Later that evening, the bathroom was filled with faint scent of lavender soap. Lily sat happily in a sea of bubbles, only her head and the tips of her knees poking out from the foam.

Frances knelt beside the tub, sleeves rolled up, her hair a little messy from being tugged by small, wet hands earlier. She held a yellow rubber duck in one hand, giving it a playful squeeze so it let out a ridiculous little squeal that made Lily burst into a fit of giggles.

"Captain Duck reporting for duty!" Frances announced, making the duck bob across the water. "Permission to sail across the high seas, Miss Lily?"

Lily, her cheeks flushed pink from the warm water and laughter, splashed with her hands. "Permission granted!" she declared, mimicking Frances's serious tone.

Frances chuckled, reaching for the shampoo bottle. "Alright, little sailor, time to scrub the deck."

"Nooo," Lily whined half-heartedly, trying to sink deeper into the bubbles, but Frances was quicker, gently lathering her soft, blonde hair.

"You've got bubble horns," Frances teased, shaping the foam into two silly peaks on Lily's head.

Lily shrieked with laughter and tried to make a mustache on her own face, smearing bubbles across her upper lip.

"Very distinguished," Frances said, putting on a posh voice, making Lily giggle even harder. "Captain Lily, brave adventurer of the bathtub!"

After rinsing the soap from her hair Frances wrapped her up in a giant fluffy towel, scooping her up like a bundle of laundry. Lily snuggled into her chest, smelling of soap and warmth, and Frances pressed a kiss to the top of her damp head.

"You, my darling, are squeaky clean and ready for bed," Frances murmured, smiling as Lily yawned into her shoulder.

....

After drying her hair they padded to Lily's room, a little corner of the house fit for a princess. The bedside lamp glowed softly, its light catching on the carved white furniture and the shimmery pale pink damask drapes that spilled from the half-moon canopy above her bed. It looked like something out of a storybook, a little girl's castle tucked high in the Hollywood hills.

Frances set Lily down and walked over to the chest of drawers, pulling out a fresh set of soft cotton pajamas. But Lily made a beeline for her dollhouse and sank onto the plush carpet, already deep in plans for the next tea party.

"Not now, sweetheart... come here before you catch a chill."

"Just ten minutes," Lily pouted.

"Lily," Frances called with a laugh, "you're not moving in there darling, it's bedtime."

"Five minutes...?"

"No, baby, it's late. You had a long day." Frances shook the pajama bottoms invitingly. "Come on."

With a theatrical sigh, Lily placed the teapot back into the house and dragged her feet across the room.

“Cheer up... we’ve got a whole day together tomorrow.”

“Is Susan coming?” Lily asked as she stepped into her pajamas.

“Not tomorrow... but probably on Wednesday.”

“When’s that?”

“Well, if today is Saturday... what’s tomorrow?”

“Sunday.”

“And after that?”

“Umm... Mooonday... Wednesday?”

“You forgot Tuesday, darling...” Frances smiled, buttoning up the top and planting a kiss on her cheek. “Try again.”

“Sunday... Monday...” Lily paused, brow furrowed. “Tuesday... Wednesday!”

“Yes, my smarty pants.” Frances kissed her again. “Right, come on, bug. Time for bed.” She lifted the duvet and tucked Lily beneath it with practiced care.

Frances had just settled on the edge of the mattress, a storybook open in her lap, when soft footsteps padded down the hall. A moment later, Yaz appeared, drifting in wearing pajamas and one of those silk hostess robes, the kind with sleeves like butterfly wings and a pattern that looked lifted from a Japanese screen, a pencil still tucked behind one ear.

“There’s my two favorite girls,” Yaz said warmly, stepping into the cozy glow of the room.

“Yaz!” Lily squealed, sitting up straighter. “Read too!”

Yaz chuckled, crouching by the bed to kiss Lily’s forehead. “I wish I could button, but I’ve got to finish some sketches tonight.”

Lily’s face fell into a small, wounded pout.

Frances gently smoothed her daughter’s hair. “She’s working hard, sweetheart. We’ll save a special story for Yaz tomorrow, okay?”

Lily wasn’t entirely convinced, but Yaz kissed her again and whispered, “You dream me into your story tonight, and I’ll dream about you.”

That seemed to do it. Lily gave a sleepy nod, her thumb sneaking toward her mouth before she remembered and clutched her favorite doll instead.

“Night, love,” Yaz said softly, casting one last look over the pretty little room — the dollhouse twinkling under lamplight, the bookshelf lined with well-loved stories, and Lily nestled under the pale pink quilt like a pearl in a shell.

Frances waited until Yaz’s footsteps faded down the hallway, then lay beside Lily, opening the storybook once more.

Her voice, low and soothing, carried gently through the room. Before long, Lily was asleep.

Frances closed the book softly, her voice trailing into the hush. Lily had already begun to drift, eyes heavy, one arm slung across her doll, the other curled near her face. Slowly, her thumb crept into her mouth, one of those tender traces of babyhood that still clung to her, and made Frances smile.

The bedside lamp caught the pale fringe of her lashes, the flush of her cheeks, the quiet rise and fall of her chest beneath the quilt. Frances lingered, taking it all in like someone who hadn’t quite convinced herself it was real.

She leaned down, pressed a kiss to Lily’s forehead, and tucked the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders.

Then, without a sound, she rose and crossed the plush carpet, pausing in the doorway for one last look. And in that moment, with the scent of children’s soap still faint in the air and the warmth of her daughter’s presence filling every corner of the room, Frances felt something almost unbearable swell in her chest.

She had her little girl. Really had her. And the joy of it was so fierce it trembled.

.....

The house was quiet in the deep dark of early morning—the kind of hush that only settles after everything else has finally surrendered to sleep. Next door, Lily was fast asleep in her room, her small nightlight casting soft shapes on the walls. The gentle rhythm of her breathing was the only sound besides the faint ticking of the hall clock.

Frances stirred, frowning as her hand reached across the bed and touched only cool sheets. Empty. Again. She blinked blearily toward the sliver of light creeping in under the door, then sighed and pushed the covers back, padding barefoot through the house.

The study door stood open a crack, golden light spilling out.

She peeked in.

Yaz was hunched over the table, a pencil in hand, shadows under her eyes. Her

sketchbook lay open, surrounded by scattered pages—Tudor gowns with stiff collars, puffed sleeves, and embroidery dancing along the hems. A forgotten cup of coffee sat cold by her elbow.

Frances leaned against the doorframe, arms loosely crossed.

“It’s almost five,” she said softly, teasing.

Yaz didn’t look up right away. She scribbled a bit more, then yawned and stretched. “I know.”

Frances stepped into the room, letting the door creak behind her. “And still here you are... haunting the house with your Elizabethan sleeves and doomed heroines.”

Yaz grinned, finally looking up. “They’re not all doomed. This one keeps her head.”

Frances raised a brow, pulled out a chair, spun it around, and straddled Yaz’s lap, draping her arms over her shoulders.

“My bed’s cold,” she murmured, tucking a loose strand of hair behind Yaz’s ear.

Yaz smirked. “And I wonder what you’re really here for.”

“Can’t a girl miss her wife?”

“She can. But she usually wears more clothes when she does.”

Frances smiled, unbothered, the silk of her robe slipping off one shoulder. Her fingers traced lazy lines down Yaz’s arms.

“You’re not helping,” Yaz murmured, though her hand had already found Frances’s thigh.

“I am helping,” Frances said, kissing her neck. “I’m making sure you don’t die hunched over a sketchbook at thirty.”

“I’m twenty-eight.”

“Exactly. Prime time to start sleeping again.” Her voice dropped. “You’ve been at this for hours. I think your pencils can survive one night without you.”

“I was in the zone.”

“You were in the obsession. There’s a difference. I need you to obsess about me.”

“No shit,” Yaz whispered, eyes fluttering closed as Frances’s mouth moved lower.

“You’re not playing fair,” Yaz added, her hands sliding up Frances’s back.

"I don't do fair," Frances grinned, rolling her hips slowly in Yaz's lap, making her breath catch. "I do persuasive." Her fingers slipped between the buttons of Yaz's pajama top, unhurried and wicked, like she had all the time in the world.

"You're a very dirty player," Yaz said through a breathless laugh as another button popped.

"I can be," Frances whispered, lips brushing Yaz's ear. "Now stop pretending you're not into this and kiss me properly."

Yaz's hands found her waist, tugging her closer with an exaggerated sigh. "Bossy."

"And you love it." Frances leaned in, nose grazing hers. "Come to bed."

Yaz hesitated, for show, then tangled her fingers in Frances's curls and kissed her slow, deep, like surrendering to something she'd been resisting all night.

Frances smiled against her lips. "Told you I was persuasive."

...

They stumbled into the hallway like drunk teenagers sneaking in after curfew—only they were drunk on each other. Yaz had an arm slung around Frances's waist while Frances kept trying to kiss her neck, half-laughing, half-whispering, "Shhh!" every time a floorboard creaked.

"We're not making it down the hall like this," Frances said, barely stifling a giggle.

"We're absolutely making it," Yaz insisted, kissing the corner of her mouth. "I just might dislocate a hip on the way."

"Worth it," Frances said, slipping her hand under Yaz's top again as they shuffled down the corridor.

The house was too quiet for how loud they were being. Which only made them worse.

Frances tried to move ahead, but Yaz caught her wrist and spun her around, pinning her to the wall. "Detour," she said, grinning.

"We're gonna wake Lily," Frances gasped as Yaz kissed down her neck.

"Only if you moan."

Frances's fingers curled into Yaz's shirt as she kissed her back just as hungrily until a picture frame rattled on the wall.

Frances froze, grabbing Yaz's hand. "That was loud."

"She sleeps like a log," Yaz whispered.

“Still.”

They tiptoed on, giggling like schoolgirls. Frances led the way, tiptoeing like a burglar, glancing back to make sure Yaz was still behind her.

As they passed Lily’s door, Frances raised a warning finger to her lips.

Yaz nodded solemnly... then pinched her bum.

Frances yelped, whirling with wide, scandalized eyes. “Yaz!”

Yaz doubled over, laughing silently into her sleeve.

Frances slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes blazing with laughter, then yanked her by the wrist and dragged her toward their room, backing through the door.

Once inside, she pulled Yaz close and shut the door with quiet finality.

“You,” Frances said, stalking forward, “are so gonna pay for that.”

“Promise?” Yaz grinned backing toward the bed

Frances tackled her. Their bodies collided with heat and urgency. Yaz’s hands roamed up her thigh, pulling her closer. Frances moaned into her mouth

Then...

“Mummy?”

They froze.

“Shit,” Yaz whispered, sitting bolt upright, hair falling in her face.

Frances was already scrambling off her, snatching her dressing gown from the foot of the bed and tying it around herself with lightning speed. Yaz fumbled with her pajama buttons like she was defusing a bomb.

She cracked the door open, her voice instantly soft and composed, as if she hadn’t just been straddling her girlfriend two seconds ago, “Yes, baby?”

“I need to pee,” came Lily’s sleepy voice.

“Of course, sweetheart. Come on.”

Yaz collapsed backward onto the bed, laughing into a pillow, her face red.

Frances glanced back and silently mouthed, *This is your fault.*

Worth it, Yaz mouthed back, grinning.

A minute later, the toilet flushed, and Lily shuffled down the hall, rubbing her eyes.

"Can I sleep with you?" she mumbled.

Frances smiled and held out a hand. "Of course you can."

"C'mere, button," Yaz said softly, lifting the covers as Frances helped Lily climb into the bed. She curled up instantly between them, snuggling against Frances's side with a happy little sigh.

Frances lay back, her eyes meeting Yaz's across the pillow.

"Persuasive, huh?" Yaz murmured, raising an eyebrow.

Frances gave her a tired but amused look. "Shut up."

"Love you,"

"Love you too." Frances reached across Lily and laced their fingers together.

.....

Late next morning, the bathroom echoed with giggles. Lily stood on her little stool at the sink, brushing her teeth, cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. Frances hovered beside her, toothbrush in hand, pulling the same goofy face in the mirror. Lily tried to keep brushing but kept snorting with laughter, nearly dropping her toothbrush as Frances crossed her eyes and blew out her cheeks even more.

"How do you do that?" Lily giggled

"Like this" Frances mumbled around a mouthful of toothpaste.

Lily nodded, giggling through the foam. "Yeth...like thys!" she tried crossing her eyes

They both erupted into muffled, bubbly laughter.

Later on the kitchen was just as lively.

Lily was perched on a chair by the counter, sleeves rolled up, whisking pancake batter like her life dependent on it. Frances moved around her, barefoot and humming, opening cupboards and grabbing ingredients. She set the maple syrup down, leaned over, and planted a loud, silly kiss on Lily's cheek, complete with a comical farting sound.

Lily squealed with laughter and dropped the whisk into the bowl.

“Hey!” Frances gasped, staggering back like she'd been struck. “Did you just toot on me?”

“Nooo!” Lily's eyes widened, grinning. “That was you!”

“I heard it,” Frances said, feigning scandal, wagging a finger. “You better not be blaming it on me, little bean. That was loooud missy.”

“It was youuu!” Lily was laughing so hard she had to lean against the counter for support.

Just then, Yaz padded in, yawning, her hair sticking up in all directions. “Morning” She blinked sleepily at the scene. “Alright, what’s with all the giggles?”

“Lily farted,” Frances said brightly over her shoulder.

“I didn’t!” Lily squeaked, still grinning. “It was her.”

Yaz smirked, stepping over and scooping Lily up into a warm, squishy hug. “It’s alright, love,” she said with a gentle squeeze and a tap on the bum. “Your mum trumpets all the time. Just don’t tell the neighbors.”

Lily hiccupped from laughing.

Frances gasped in mock outrage. “Hey!” She grabbed a kitchen cloth smacking her.

Yaz set Lily down and leaned in looping an arm around Frances’s waist, “I’d still love you.” she smiled planting a soft kiss on her lips.

“I’ll remind you of that when I’m eighty.” Frances laughed, brushing a streak of flour from Yaz’s shoulder.

“Remind me sooner,” Yaz said, grinning. “You’ll probably beat me to it.”

They kissed again, and Lily groaned theatrically between them. “All you do is kiss”

Frances and Yaz snorted, bursting into laughter.

Frances pulled back and winked at her. “Come on, Miss Pancake. Let’s finish breakfast before Yaz tells the whole street I tooted.”

“You did!” Lily declared again, belly laughing as she scrambled back onto her chair.

Yaz leaned against the counter and looked at Frances. “Did she though?”

Lily laughed nodding.

.....

Sunday turned out to be a beautiful, golden-skied day, the kind that made even the dust motes in the air feel magical. Yaz had been tucked away in the study all morning, but by noon, she finally completed her sketches, stretched her arms above her head with a groan of satisfaction, and pushed her chair back with a grin.

"Done!" she declared to no one in particular.

She peeled off her clothes and changed into her favourite swimming costume, deep teal, with a sweetheart neckline and quickly plaited her hair into two neat French braids to keep it off her face. After slathering on some sunscreen, she grabbed a wide-brimmed straw hat from the bed and padded barefoot down the hall toward the garden, excitement bubbling in her chest.

The patio doors were open, and Yaz stepped out into the sunlight, squinting until her eyes adjusted.

She burst out laughing at the sight before her, Frances lounging like a proper silver screen goddess in her sleek black and white bikini, one leg bent just so, sunglasses tilted ever so slightly, book in one hand, a White Wine Spritzer in another. And right next to her, Lily, the miniature version, stretched out on her own little sun lounger, wearing her red polka-dot swimsuit, pink sunglasses balanced on her nose, a strawberry milkshake in hand complete with a tiny parasol and stripy straw. She had one leg crossed over the other and was mimicking Frances's pose, right down to the serene expression on her face.

"Oh, come off it," Yaz laughed, shielding her eyes from the sun. "What in the name of Mini Me is going on here?"

Frances lifted her sunglasses with a smirk. "Jealous?"

"Of which one of you? The glam movie star or her eleven-year-old stunt double?"

Lily grinned behind her straw. "I'm Frances Louise...film star"

"Ouch." Frances clutched her heart, feigning deep offense. "I didn't know I was being replaced."

Yaz shrugged. "Sorry, love. She's got the look, the attitude... and a better milkshake."

Yaz padded across the warm patio and flopped onto a pool chair beside them, tucking her legs beneath her and fanning herself with her hat. "Well then. I guess I'll just sit here and wallow in my assistant's duties. Do you glamorous ladies require anything? Grapes? A fan? Someone to adjust your sunglasses?"

"Actually," Frances said, stretching like a cat, "a kiss wouldn't go amiss."

Yaz leaned over and gave her one, slow and warm. Lily giggled behind her straw "Not the smooching again!"

"You'll change your mind in twenty years," Yaz teased her kissing the top of her head.

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By late afternoon, with the sun warming the tiles and the scent of jasmine drifting on the breeze, Frances clapped her hands together and announced, "You know what this day needs? A proper barbecue lunch."

Yaz raised a brow from her seat on the patio steps. "You mean one of those smoky, all-American meat-fests where everything tastes vaguely like charcoal?"

Frances grinned. "Exactly! I bought that little barbecue from Sears two months ago and it's just been sulking in the garage ever since. Time to christen it."

Ten minutes later Frances was already half inside the larder cupboard (*pantry), her silk house robe billowing behind her like she was preparing for takeoff. "I swear I saw it," she muttered, pushing aside a can of peaches like it had personally offended her. "Betty bought it last week. The one with the little checkered lid, you know...None Such or Some Such."

Note ; *Mincemeat used to be sold in air tight mason jars and kept in the cupboard in 50s.

Yaz leaned on the doorway, arms crossed, watching Frances dramatically shuffle cans and clink bottles like she was conducting an orchestra. "Very questionable," Yaz said under her breath, stepping in. "Alright, move over before you take out the paprika again."

Frances stood aside, one hand on her hip. "Be my guest, Sherlock. But it's not there. I've searched every shelf twice."

Yaz leaned in, after few seconds of looking at the shelves she looked straight ahead, and deadpanned, "It's literally poking me in the face."

Frances blinked. "What?"

Yaz pulled the jar off the middle shelf, right behind a tin of evaporated milk and a gravy packet. "Here. You stacked the Betty Crocker in front of it like a wall."

"That was Betty"

"You sound like Lily...and no it wasn't. You were unpacking food"

Frances took the jar with mock reverence. "Well. It's always good to have some instant mash."

Yaz grinned. "For what, nuclear war?"

Frances smirked. "You never know with Russians."

Yaz rolled her eyes shaking her head. "Yeah...mash is a must if it happens"

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Short time later Lily had her hands full, making patties and carefully stacking them up on the plate while Yaz and Frances were chopping up onions and tomatoes.

Half hour later, the shiny new kettle-style barbecue sat on the edge of the patio, box just opened, half-assembled. Frances was crouched beside it with a screwdriver and a frown. Yaz, kneeling beside her in her swimsuit, was unfolding the yellowing instructions like a treasure map.

"This diagram makes no sense," Yaz muttered, squinting. "Is this even English?"

Frances jabbed a bolt into place. "I think that part's upside-down."

Yaz groaned. "That was step two. We're on step nine now!"

From her sunbed, Lily called, "Are there going to be any burgers? Or just a pile of metal?"

Frances looked over her shoulder, smirking. "Bold for someone who's not helping."

"I offered... and you told me to stay put," Lily spread her arms up to make a point.

Yaz snorted. "She's got you there."

"Is it just me or is she getting more sassy?"

Eventually, through a combination of trial, error, and mild swearing in polite British and very American tones, the barbecue stood assembled. Frances poured in the charcoal like a woman possessed. "Right...ready to go."

Yaz blinked "I don't think so missy...What about wood chips?" She lifted the paper bag with hickory chips

"Oh yeah" Frances laughed

Yaz shook gracious amount on top of charcoal.

"You think we should put this on a top?" Frances said pulling a tin of lighter fluid from the crate.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yap...absolutely "Frances poured gracious amount over the chippings

"I think that's too much."

"I'll be fine." She waived if off and slapped her hands exited "Right...Fire time."

"Are we sure we want you to do the fire?"

Frances held up the matches like a challenge. "Trust me, I've lit cigars bigger than this barbecue."

"You've what?"

But Frances was already bent over, flicking the match. A small flame burst into life with a hiss and a plume of smoke. Frances jerked back, coughing and waving her hand furiously. "Holy crap!"

Yaz laughed, waving the smoke from her face. "Very elegant. Shall I fetch your pearls, darling?"

Frances straightened, face flushed and hair slightly frizzed. "So much for Hollywood glamour," she muttered, batting smoke away from her curls. Her swimsuit straps had gone slightly crooked and there was an ashy smudge across her cheek. She looked less like a movie star and more like someone who'd wrestled a dragon and lost.

"Is it supposed to look like Mount Vesuvius?" Yaz asked, eyeing the flames.

Frances hesitated, backing up a little. "I think so? Possibly? It feels... aggressive."

"I feels like we've summoned something.... Right let's get the burgers"

She returned with a plate of neatly formed beef patties covered with wax paper while Frances hovered near the now roaring barbecue.

Lily leaned forward on her lounge. "Are the burgers ready yet?"

"They're going on now sweetheart" Frances said triumphantly, slapping the patties down.

A sizzle. A pop. A lick of flame.

"Oh no—no, no!" Yaz grabbed the tongs and began frantically turning the burgers as one corner blackened almost instantly. "Franny, they're gonna be scorched! Where's the flipping thing?"

Frances grabbed a metal spatula. "I'm flipping! You're crowding me!"

"You're crowding them! You can't rush burgers! It's not a race, it's a slow dance!"

"You just told me to flip now you want a slow dance, make up you damn mind"

Lily frowned. "Why are you fighting?"

"We're not love, we're debating technique," Yaz said with dignity, flipping a patty like she was performing heart surgery.

Frances looked dubious. "Yaz. That one's charcoal."

"It's got character."

In the end, after much flipping, poking, arguing about lid-on vs. lid-off, and one near-sacrifice to the fire gods, they managed a batch of slightly wonky but perfectly edible burgers.

Yaz carried the platter to the table, proud as anything. "Ladies, lunch is served."

Lily inspected the plate. "This one looks like toast."

Frances slid a bun onto her plate and winked. "That one's extra flavourful."

Lily giggled. "It smells funny."

"Yeah, don't eat that one darling"

They all sat down together under the umbrella's shade, sun-kissed and smoky, laughing over the chaos of their culinary adventure. Frances lifted her lemonade, clinking it gently against Yaz's glass.

"To teamwork."

"To surviving your barbecue," Yaz added.

"To not burning down the new house!" Frances giggled

And Lily, mouth full of burger, mumbled, "It's nice"

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The afternoon heat had mellowed into a golden warmth, filtered through the gauzy umbrella above their heads. Frances had moved their drinks to the little rattan table between their chairs. Lily had returned to the sun, jumping off a lilo with her inflatable armbands on.

Yaz sat cross-legged in the shade, her damp braids trailing over her shoulders, a stack of pages in her lap. Her brow furrowed in concentration. "Okay... what does 'first position services' mean?" she asked, tapping her pen against the top corner of the Paramount letterhead.

Frances leaned over, still in her swimwear, sunglasses pushed to the top of her head. "That just means where your primary obligation lies. So, your home studio has you in *first position*, meaning if both they and Paramount want you at the same time, the home studio wins."

"Right," Yaz said slowly, squinting. "So this means they're lending me, but only when my studio isn't using me?"

"Exactly. It's a standard clause in inter-studio loan agreements. You're still their employee, but they're letting you work part-time for Paramount under agreed terms."

She nodded, scanning further. "And this bit ... 'exclusive services rendered as costumer', does that mean I can't work for anyone else at all?"

“Only for the duration of the contract. It’s tied to the production dates for this film. It just means while you’re under this contract, you can’t moonlight for another studio, but only during that window.”

Yaz glanced at the clause again. “Okay. And this bit about ‘screen credit to be negotiated separately’, is that normal?”

“Completely. Customers aren’t always credited unless it’s negotiated. We’ll get that in writing, don’t worry. My agent’s already asked for a shared card in the costume credits for you. If they try to wriggle out of that, they’ll be hearing from me.”

Yaz smiled, touched, but also daunted. “And the pay?”

Frances reached for her drink looking over her shoulder. “They’re offering you scale, which is normal for a non-union costumer, but we’ll bump that. I want you listed as designer, not an assistant. That gets you a higher rate and proper recognition.”

“But... can we even do that if I’m not in the Guild?”

“They’ve already agreed in principle,” Frances said, gently taking the pen and flipping the pages back to the summary clause. “You won’t be doing the union seamstresses’ work, just design and fittings, which is how we’re getting around it. I’ll be doing my fittings with you, not some junior at the lot. They signed off on that because, well...” she gave Yaz a warm, proud smile “...you’re damn good in what you do.”

Yaz rolled her eyes with a grin but felt her heart swell a little. She tucked her legs under her and glanced back at the contract. “Alright. I think I understand it now. We’re not selling my soul, just lending it temporarily.”

Frances laughed. “Yap”

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The bathwater had long gone lukewarm, but Lily sat in it quietly, her hands absently drifting through the foam. Normally she’d be splashing or chatting, but tonight she was subdued. Frances knelt beside the tub with a soft towel in her arms, brows gently furrowed.

"Alright, little mermaid," she said softly. "Let’s get you wrapped up before you turn into a prune."

Lily stood up, silent as Frances lifted her out and bundled her in the towel. Frances rubbed her dry with practiced ease, pressing a kiss to the top of her damp head.

"You're very quiet tonight. Is everything alright sweetie?" She touched her forehead making sure she isn't having a fever.

Lily didn't answer right away. Frances crouched to meet her eye, brushing wet strands off her forehead.

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

"I dunno," Lily muttered with a shrug, her voice small.

Frances raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe that for a second. Come on. Out with it."

Lily hesitated, then glanced up. "When are you coming home tomorrow?"

Frances paused, towel still in her hands. "After work, when you finish your dinner. Why?"

Another shrug. Then, in a near-whisper: "I'm scared."

Frances's heart ached. She kept her expression calm and soothing as she crouched again, taking Lily's little hands in her own and kissing her knuckles.

"Scared of what, baby?"

Lily stared at the floor. "I don't know... just... when you're not here. With Betty and Danny."

That hit Frances square in the chest. She pulled Lily into a gentle hug, holding her tight.

"Oh, baby... There's nothing to be scared of sweetheart. I promise."

She lifted Lily's chin with her fingers, her tone warm but steady. "Listen...We'll all get up together in the morning and have breakfast. Yaz and I will go to the studio, and your teacher's coming straight after breakfast. Then after lunch, you're going to your first art class...isn't that exciting? You're gonna have a great time and meet new kids who also love to draw."

Lily didn't look entirely convinced.

"And before you even notice, we'll all be home again. Just like that."

"But what if they don't like me?" Lily said, her voice trembling.

Frances blinked. "Who?"

"The kids at art," Lily whispered.

Frances gave her a small smile tapping her nose. "I doubt that very much. I think you'll meet some nice new friends. But listen...this is very important darling....If you really don't like it, you have to tell us, alright? Don't keep it bottled up."

Lily nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I'll miss you," she said, her voice catching. "And Yaz."

Frances hugged her again, kissing her temple. "And we'll miss you too...sooooo much darling. But I promise, time will fly...you'll see."

Lily leaned into her, quiet for a moment. Then softly, "Why can't I stay with Susan?"

Frances gently rubbed her back. "Cause Susan has to work honey."

"But I won't bother her..."

Frances smiled sadly. "I know, darling. But this is just how it has to be for now. But you're seeing her on Wednesday, remember? And I promise ...everything's gonna be fine. It's just the first day. First days are always the hardest. But by Friday? You'll see. It'll feel better."

Lily nodded against her shoulder

"Hey, listen" Frances pulled back just enough to look into her eyes tucking a strand of hair behind her ear "When I first time had to go to the studio I was petrified. I didn't know anyone, I had no friends...And look at me now, studio is my second home...And I met Yaz...Who would know, ha? And I got you back" she stroke her cheek gently "I never thought I could be so happy."

"Maybe I will meet my Yaz"

Frances almost choked on this sentence, blinking as Lily looked up at her with complete sincerity. She had to clamp her mouth shut to stop herself from laughing.

"Well," Frances managed after a moment, smoothing a hand over Lily's damp curls and

schooling her face into something resembling maternal wisdom, "Someday, far into the future, you'll meet someone who makes you feel brave. That's what Yaz does for me. And that's what you deserve too. Someone who sees how wonderful you are, even when you're scared." She kissed the top of her head and added, mostly to herself, "But let's save the romantic soulmates talk until you're at least thirty."

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