

Chapter 32

Evening settled gently over the Pacific, the sun hanging low on the horizon, its final rays casting the sand in a warm, golden glow. The air carried the mingled scents of sea salt, lavender, and the promise of summer. In the kitchen, Frances stirred creamy mushroom sauce for the chicken, a simple dinner paired with gnocchi and a fresh salad. A new song drifted from the radio, and she wiggled her hips to the rhythm as she moved about the stove, her eyes flicking now and then toward the patio.

Outside, Yaz sat patiently in a chair while Lily, completely focused, played the role of makeup artist. With intense concentration, she dabbed eyeshadow on Yaz's lids, her tiny hands working carefully. The table was a delightful mess of colour, Frances's lipsticks, Yaz's blushes, scattered brushes and compacts.

It was in moments like these that Frances let herself imagine a future. A shared home filled with love, laughter, and quiet dreams. A place where her little girl could grow up surrounded by warmth, where triumphs and disappointments alike would be met together, side by side. Something stable. Something lasting. Something she had never known, but yearned for with every fiber of her being.

And tonight, that dream didn't feel so far away. It shimmered at the edges of her world, close enough to touch, filling her heart with a joy no words could ever fully hold.

Frances gave the sauce one last stir, adjusted the flame under the pan, and wiped her hands on the dish towel slung over her shoulder. She peeked through the open patio door.

"Dinner's ready!" she called out, her voice warm and cheerful.

Lily bolted inside like a whirlwind, feet thudding against the wood floor, arms full of invisible momentum. Frances caught her just in time before she collided with the kitchen table.

"Whoa, slow down," she said, laughing. "Wash your hands first, please."

Lily skidded to a stop, gave a dramatic sigh, and darted off toward the bathroom.

Yaz followed in behind her at a slower pace, setting down the little toiletry bag full of makeup on the counter. Frances turned and froze.

For a beat, she went completely still, blinking at the sight in front of her. Then burst into laughter, her breath catching in the hilarity of it.

“Oh my god darling,” she gasped between fits of laughter, “what on earth”

Yaz rolled her eyes, deadpan and full of mischief. “What do you think? Is it too much for the premiere? I was going for ‘glamour with a hint of chaos.’”

Frances reached out, barely able to see through the tears in her eyes. She gently tugged at a crooked, half-detached false eyelash hanging precariously from Yaz’s lid. “Darling, you look like a Picasso painting after a night out,” she choked out, still laughing.

They collapsed into each other, wrapped in the ridiculousness of the moment. The laughter softened into something quieter as Frances pulled Yaz in

"C'mere gorgeous" she smiled and kissed her gently, lips meeting with the kind of tenderness that came from deep familiarity and shared dreams. Yaz's fingers brushed Frances's cheek, then slipped into her curls, anchoring her.

Just then, Lily appeared in the doorway, her hands clean but still dripping slightly, a playful smile stretching across her face. She stopped, watching them with a knowing little glint in her eyes.

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The table was set with quiet care, soft linen napkins, mismatched cutlery, and a jar of wildflowers Lily had collected earlier, now slightly drooping but still colourful. Warm light spilled from the overhead lamp as the scent of creamy mushroom sauce lingered in the air.

Lily was happily shoveling gnocchi into her mouth with both enthusiasm and very little grace.

Frances looked at her fondly. “Slow down, sweetheart, it’s not a race.”

Lily grinned with her mouth full. “It’s nice! My tummy was making noises”

Yaz smiled, her fork paused mid-air. “That’s what happens when you spend hours running around the beach like a little crab.”

“I’m not a crab!” Lily said with a giggle. “I’m a mermaid.”

"Oh...sorry Miss Mermaid..." Yaz giggled "Right now you look more like a blow fish" she laughed at her mouth full of gnocchi.

Lily puffed her cheeks then burst out laughing.

Yaz leaned toward Frances and said softly, "The sea air's worked magic on her."

Frances nodded. "And the running, and the treasure hunting..."

"I'm gonna find more shells tomorrow," Lily declared, holding up a fork triumphantly.

"No doubt," Frances said with a smile. "Just don't bring home any live ones, okay?"

"I won't," Lily replied earnestly, then went back to eating.

As Lily focused on her plate again, Frances picked up her wine glass. "I spoke to that new agent today."

Yaz perked up. "Oh? What's he like?"

Frances kept her tone light. "Seems like he might actually have a brain in his head. Did theatre in New York for a while, then moved out here. Has some decent names on his list. He didn't fawn or talk over me either, which already puts him in the top five percent."

Yaz smiled. "That's promising."

"I thought so too. We're meeting Monday, so we'll see."

Lily looked up between bites. "What's an agent?"

Frances smiled, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Well, sweetheart, an agent is like... a helper. Someone whose job is to find me good stories to act in, and make sure people treat me fair and pay me properly."

Yaz added with a grin, "Kind of like a treasure hunter, but for movies."

Lily nodded solemnly, then added with great seriousness, "Tell him you don't like stinky cheese. That's important."

Frances raised her brows, trying to keep a straight face. "Right. No stinky cheese. Very important note. I'll make sure he knows."

Yaz burst out laughing, nearly choking on her juice, and Frances couldn't hold it in anymore either, her laughter joining Yaz's as Lily beamed proudly, pleased with her contribution.

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Frances stood at the sink, hands in warm soapy water, humming softly as she washed the last of the dishes. Behind her, Yaz swooped in with a grin and scooped Lily up into her arms, hoisting her over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Time for a bath, young lady," Yaz declared, giving her a playful pat on the backside. "We've got half the beach in your hair and sand under every fingernail."

Lily shrieked with laughter, wriggling and giggling uncontrollably. As Yaz passed by the sink, she leaned Lily toward Frances.

Frances turned and pressed a kiss on her daughter's cheek only to pull back and pretend to splutter. "Ugh! I think I just swallowed half of Santa Barbara. You definitely need a wash!"

Still giggling, Lily called over Yaz's shoulder as they headed down the hall, "Mummy! You need to read me a story!"

Frances smiled, drying her hands on a towel. "Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it for the world peanut."

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Frances stood in Lily's room, gently smoothing out a pair of fresh pajamas on the bed, soft cotton with little yellow stars, the ones Lily liked best. The scent of lavender lingered from the laundry, calming and familiar.

Lily zoomed in, fresh from her bath, her damp hair clinging to her cheeks, wearing nothing but her knickers and a big, toothy grin.

Frances couldn't help but laugh. "Goodness, where's the fire?"

Lily giggled wildly and spun in a little circle, arms out like airplane wings. "I'm drying my hair"

Frances laughed slipping into a deep, exaggerated voice "Come here, speedy... before you zoom off to the moon and I have to send a rescue team!" she reached out and caught her

by the waist, pulling her close to wrap her hair in a towel

Lily squealed with laughter, wrapping her arms around Frances's neck as she was scooped up and plopped on the edge of the bed.

Frances smiled, outwardly calm, as Lily started asking questions about the Moon, but her heart ached with a quiet, steady tug. She tucked a damp strand of hair behind Lily's ear and watched her face light up with joy over something as simple as a kiss on a cheek. Her heart was about to explode.

These moments, these soft, ridiculous, precious minutes had only just begun to feel like part of her life. And already, deep in her chest, the thought of losing them hollowed something out.

"Right...let's dry your hair" She said as she helped Lily into her pajama top, her fingers brushing gently over her daughter's arms. "You're getting taller, you know."

Lily looked up with wide eyes. "Am I gonna be tall like you?"

Frances chuckled, her voice catching ever so slightly. "Absolutely" she swallowed hard, words catching at the back of her throat.

She kissed the top of Lily's head, holding her a little longer than needed.

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The waves rolled in steady rhythm, their hush rising and falling like a lullaby over the night. Frances lay stretched across the wooden sun lounger, a cigarette resting between two fingers, its tip glowing faintly in the dark. The breeze coming off the Pacific ruffled her blonde curls, lifting strands across her face. She pulled her cardigan tighter across her chest, tucking one hand beneath it as she exhaled, the smoke curling upwards before vanishing into the soft black of the sky.

The porch light was dimmed, letting the moonlight do most of the work. It caught the crests of the waves like scattered silver, turning the water into something otherworldly. Frances watched quietly, eyes steady, her expression unreadable. Somewhere in the background, a distant gull called, and the faint buzz of a radio hummed low from inside.

She didn't move when the door opened. She only turned her head slightly when Yaz stepped out, carrying two glasses, one of which she offered silently. Frances stubbed out

the cigarette in the ashtray beside her, then shifted forward on the lounge, making space without needing to speak.

Yaz slid in behind her, and Frances immediately leaned back, letting her body settle fully into Yaz's chest. Yaz's arms wrapped loosely around her, one hand resting on her stomach, the other holding her drink.

They sat like that, quiet, the ocean stretching endlessly ahead of them. The rhythmic crash of waves against the shore was their only company. Then, suddenly, Frances broke the silence.

"Do you think Lily should go back to school?" she asked, her voice soft, as if testing the question on the air.

Yaz's breath hitched, the sensation so strong it felt like a hand pressing on her chest, but in the best way. She blinked, confused, as though to ensure she had heard the words correctly. "What?" she asked, voice gentle, hesitant.

Frances repeated the sentence, her gaze now meeting Yaz's. Her eyes were soft, filled with something deeper, love, concern, a quiet plea. "Would you take her back?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No" the response was almost immediate, flat and firm "But then it's not my decision to be made."

Frances set her glass down, her fingers curling slightly before she shifted just enough to face Yaz fully. She reached up, her hand resting gently on Yaz's cheek, her palm warm against her skin. "But you see darling.... I want it to be our decision," she said, her voice filled with the weight of everything they'd already gone through and everything they were still yet to face together.

Yaz frowned slightly, brow furrowing in thought. "Do you want her to go back?" she asked, unsure if she was ready for the answer.

Frances hesitated before nodding, her gaze drifting back to the ocean. "Lily's happy," she said quietly, as if speaking the truth aloud gave it a kind of power. "She's got a spark in her eyes I've never seen before... with each day, I see a new child in front of me, happy, hopeful, filled with wonder. It's like I'm getting to know her all over again." She paused, her voice thickening. "I won't let the choices be taken away from her like they were from me."

Yaz didn't say anything at first, just let the quiet settle between them. Frances's words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of her love for Lily, her desire to give her the kind of

freedom that had once been denied her.

"I want to do this together," Frances added, her voice softer now, vulnerable. "If you're willing?"

Yaz took a deep breath, the corners of her mouth lifting ever so slightly. "I was gonna have that same conversation with you, you know," she admitted, a glimmer of a smile tugging at her lips. "Just picking the right moment."

Frances turned toward her then, a gentle smile lighting up her face, one that spoke of everything unspoken between them. Her heart swelled as she whispered, "Then the decision is made."

Yaz's hand slid up the side of Frances's neck, her fingers brushing lightly against the skin there. Frances leaned in, closing her eyes, and without a word, their lips met. The kiss was gentle, soft, a silent promise that melted into another kiss, and then another. Each one seemed to linger, a quiet affirmation of all they had, and all they were about to build together

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They lay together, wrapped in the softness of the sheets, the quiet of the night surrounding them. The air in the room was still warm from the late evening, the distant sound of the ocean's gentle roar acting as a soothing backdrop. Frances traced her finger lightly down the length of Yaz's arm, the motion so tender it seemed almost reverent.

Their legs were tangled, one of Yaz's feet gently brushing against Frances's calf, the intimacy of the moment more profound than words could express. Their faces were barely an inch apart, breaths mingling in the space between them, each of them savoring the closeness, the warmth, the undeniable bond they shared.

Frances's gaze held Yaz's, her eyes soft, brimming with love, and Yaz smiled, her lips curling up just slightly. It was in these rare, quiet moments that her heart swelled with an emotion that went beyond love, it was a sense of belonging.

Her fingers moved to Frances's cheek, gently grazing the soft skin. "You're beautiful," she whispered, her voice low and full of adoration.

Frances's lips parted as she laughed softly, the sound like a small melody in the stillness of the room. "I'm not sure that's true right now," she teased, her finger still trailing down Yaz's arm, leaving a trail of warmth behind it. "I think I'm all tangled up in you."

Yaz chuckled, her eyes lighting up, the playful exchange carrying a sense of intimacy that spoke volumes. "You're still beautiful," she insisted, her voice full of sincerity.

Frances's heart fluttered at the tenderness in Yaz's eyes, her expression softening as she leaned in to kiss her, a slow, lingering kiss that held all the love and devotion they often couldn't say aloud.

When they finally pulled away, their foreheads rested against each other, breaths still mingling. The silence felt so comfortable, like they were the only two people in the world who mattered.

"I love you," Frances murmured, the words feeling so natural, like a truth that had always been inside her.

Yaz's smile was gentle, her hand moving to Frances's hair, curling a lock around her finger. "Love you too," she whispered back, her voice thick with emotion.

For a moment, they simply lay there, content, lost in the warmth of each other's presence.

Yaz's fingers traced softly along the back of Frances's neck, her touch tender as she leaned in slightly, her voice quiet and intimate. "How did you manage to get here?" she asked, the question not just born of curiosity, but laced with admiration. "To enjoy this... after everything you've been through?"

The words lingered between them, honest and gentle, yet edged with something deeper, a reverent awe for the woman beside her. A raw desire to understand her in the deepest, truest way.

Frances shifted, her own hand stilling on Yaz's skin as she exhaled slowly, her gaze softening, thoughtful.

"I don't think there's a finish line to healing, darling," she said quietly. "It's not a place you arrive to and unpack your bags... it's something that's still very much a part of me." Her hand moved gently, fingertip tracing an imaginary line along Yaz's cheek. "I used to think healing meant forgetting... but then I realized it means remembering without drowning."

"How?" Yaz frowned, trying to make sense of the words.

"By reclaiming myself... my body."

"How do you even do that, love?... I don't think I could ever..."

"It wasn't easy," Frances said softly, her voice steady despite the weight of what she was sharing. Her fingers tucked a strand of Yaz's hair behind her ear. "It wasn't something that just... clicked into place. It's a feeling that creeps in... quietly. Like when you laugh with someone enjoying the moment. When someone touches you and it doesn't make your skin crawl. When it suddenly feels... nice, because the person doing it gives you space, respects your boundaries... gives you the choice to say no."

She paused, her thumb grazing Yaz's cheek as if grounding herself in that very moment.

"I suppose I just... I don't know... learned over time that intimacy doesn't have to be about what was done to me. It can be something different. Something mine. That it could feel good... Safe. ...Real and passionate. It was more like reclaiming a part of myself that had been taken away... and then, eventually, learning to love that part again. Does that make any sense?"

Yaz nodded, her eyes soft. "Perfect sense, my love." She cupped Frances's face in her palm, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. "You're bloody amazing, you know that?"

"Stubborn, I'd say," Frances giggled, then fell quiet, her gaze drifting between Yaz's eyes and her lips. The space between them seemed to shrink until their lips met in a kiss that was both soft and passionate, tender and true.

They lay tangled till late into the night, their bodies warm under the sheets, the window cracked just enough to let in the hush of the waves. Yaz rested her head against Frances's shoulder, her hand idly tracing circles over her collarbone.

Frances broke the silence first, her voice a soft murmur in the dark. "You know what I was thinking?"

"Oh, here we go." Yaz laughed, her hand tracing small circles on Frances's arm as she spoke, eyes dancing with amusement.

"Iiii was thinking..." Frances shifted slightly, turning to face her. She raised an eyebrow, lips curling into a playful smile. "We should buy a little villa in the hills."

Yaz propped herself up on her elbow, her lips quirking into a grin. "I thought you wanted a beach?"

"I did, but I changed my mind now... Too many creeps..." Frances waved her hand dismissively, the playful roll of her eyes matching her words.

Yaz burst out laughing, nudging Frances with her knee. "Okay, no beach... check. No creeps... check. But you're gonna explain the beach to Lily... I'm not getting involved." She held up her hands in mock surrender, grinning.

"Oh, so suddenly I'm a single parent?" Frances teased, her tone light but laced with mock disbelief.

"No... but you know that one... how do you say it here? Bad cop, good cop?" Yaz gestured with her hands as if weighing the options. "Well... you're gonna be the bad one in this." She laughed, leaning back into the pillows.

"Thanks... much appreciated. Anyway... hear me out... A beautiful Spanish-style villa... not too big, not too small. Swimming pool's a must... with lemon trees, and sun-warmed tiles under our feet." Frances lifted her hand, tracing the air in front of her as if sketching the picture she was creating. "You'd have your studio with big open windows. I'd grow roses I'd have no idea how to keep alive."

Yaz chuckled, brushing her thumb gently along Frances's jaw, eyes warm with affection. "I thought you wanted to move to Paris?"

"I dooo... But I want you first..." Frances leaned in, her voice dropping to a teasing whisper. "Aaaall to myself."

"And to every tabloid in town..." Yaz's lips twisted into a wry smile as she arched an eyebrow, her fingers still resting lightly on Frances's cheek.

"Screw them..." Frances flicked her wrist dismissively, a cheeky grin tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Excuse me... Since you flushed your father, you're beating up reporters, screwing the press, and learning French..." Yaz raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "What else got flushed down that loo?"

They both burst into laughter, their bodies close, the sound of their shared joy filling the quiet room. Then, as the laughter settled, Frances's expression softened, and her gaze turned inward. "My fear.... I don't care anymore...I won't be ruled by others...It's gone too far." she said quietly, her voice barely a whisper. She looked down at her hands, fingers now resting lightly on Yaz's wrist. "I just like imagining... a place that's ours. Where we can walk hand in hand down the street without thinking twice. Where no one cares who kisses who in public."

Yaz's smile faded into something gentler. She reached up and cupped Frances's cheek, her thumb brushing softly over the skin there. "That's what you want most, isn't it?"

Frances nodded slowly, her eyes filled with a quiet longing. "More than anything. I want what everyone else gets to take for granted. I want a life where loving you doesn't feel like a rebellion."

Yaz leaned up then, pressing a soft kiss to Frances's shoulder. "Me too..." she whispered, voice thick with emotion. "But like Susan said... We'll have to build it ourselves."

Frances grinned, her lips curling even as a tear slipped silently down her cheek. She laughed, a soft, bittersweet sound. "We better be. Otherwise, I'll be just some mad woman in the hills, surrounded by dead plants and broken dreams." She winked, her fingers brushing lightly over Yaz's arm.

Yaz laughed, cupping Frances's face gently, her gaze full of love. "Not while I'm around." She kissed the tip of her nose, soft and tender.

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The soft morning light spilled through the cabin window, dancing across the wooden floor and brushing golden warmth over Lily's hair as she sat patiently on the chair by the vanity. Frances stood behind her, gently drawing the brush through her daughter's fine, honey-blond waves, careful not to tug. Lily hummed quietly, swinging her feet as she watched her own reflection in the mirror.

"Mummy," she asked suddenly, her voice curious and bright, "what's a fair?"

Frances smiled, her strokes never faltering. "It's like a little party that the whole town goes to. There are games and sweets, people selling things they've made... music too, sometimes. You can ride a little train, or a carousel if they have one."

Lily's eyes grew wide. "Like the roundy-round horses?"

"Exactly," Frances nodded, smiling at the delight in her voice. "And you might even win a prize if you're lucky. What do you think?"

Lily clapped her hands together. "I wanna go now!"

Frances laughed softly, setting the brush down on the table. She crouched down so she was eye-level with her daughter, her hands resting gently on Lily's small knees.

"Before we go," she said, her tone shifting just slightly, softer, more serious. "I need to ask you something important. And I need you to be honest with me, okay?"

Lily nodded, suddenly still, sensing the shift.

Frances tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked into her eyes. "Do you like your school, sweetheart?"

Lily tilted her head, mouth twisting to the side. "I like my friends," she said slowly, "and the palys... but not the school. I like Susan's better."

Frances nodded thoughtfully. "Wouldn't you miss your friends though, if you didn't go back? The plays, the games?"

Lily looked down, fiddling with the hem of her cardigan. "Yes... but..."

"But what, darling?"

She paused, then her little voice came out quiet and shaky. "But I don't like it there anymore. I wanna stay with you. And Yaz. And go to the cake store with Susan."

Frances's heart twisted, her breath catching in her chest. She reached up and cupped Lily's cheek. "What if... we made a plan?" she said gently. "What if you stayed with Susan a little longer, just until Mummy and Yaz sort a few things out... and then..." she smiled, a hint of wonder in her own voice "...we'd all live together?"

Lily's eyes widened, her lips parting in shock. "Live with you? And Yaz?"

Frances nodded. "Yes. All of us, together."

There was a pause, just one heartbeat and then Lily's chin wobbled. "So, I don't have to go back?"

"Not if you don't want to bug" Frances smiled

Lily's eyes flooded with tears, and she broke. A sob escaped her throat as she flung herself into Frances's arms, trembling with the intensity of her emotion.

"Oh, sweetheart..." Frances whispered, pulling her close, wrapping her arms tightly around her daughter, one hand cradling the back of her head as if to shield her from the world. "Are

those happy tears, my love?"

Lily nodded into her shoulder, her small arms clinging around Frances's neck. "Yes," she sobbed, voice muffled. "So happy..."

Frances's own tears spilled freely now, her cheek pressed against Lily's temple as she rocked her gently. "I love you so much," she whispered. "More than anything."

After a long moment, she pulled back, brushing the tears from Lily's cheeks with her thumbs.

"But you need to understand something," she said softly. "It's going to take a little while. Yaz and I need to make some plans first, find the right place to live, talk to some people. But in the meantime, you'll stay with Susan and Yaz, and I'll visit as much as I can."

Lily's face was still wet, but she was beaming, her whole body practically vibrating with joy. "Okay," she said, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "But I don't go back to school?"

"No darling you don't "Frances kissed her forehead and pulled her close again. "Then that's what we'll do."

And for a few minutes, they just stayed like that, mother and daughter, tangled in sunlight and quiet promises, wrapped up in a moment of joy that neither of them would ever forget.

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The sun was already high by the time Frances turned off the main road and eased the car onto a grassy makeshift parking lot just beyond the fairgrounds. A low hum of chatter and music drifted toward them, carried on the warm May breeze.

Frances pushed her sunglasses up onto her head and glanced around with a smile, her eyes squinting slightly in the light. "Alright," she said with a grin, pushing open the door and stretching her legs as she stepped out. "This is gonna be fun."

Yaz opened the back door, reaching in for the picnic bag while Lily scrambled out after her, practically bouncing in her little yellow dress with puffed sleeves and white sandals. The dress danced around her knees as she turned in a slow circle, her mouth falling open in wonder.

The fair had taken over a gently sloping park on the edge of town, the kind surrounded by

tall eucalyptus and blooming jacaranda trees that dusted the grass with tiny lavender petals. Bunting in pastel colors flapped from poles, and the scent of grilled onions, sizzling meat, and sweet popcorn hung warm and thick in the air.

Families wandered between rows of wooden stalls where local artists displayed watercolor seascapes, hand-painted ceramics, and patchwork quilts. Near one corner, kids gathered around a booth where a kindly woman helped them dip brushes into bright tempera paints and guided them through making their own postcards or simple drawings. Lily's eyes lit up the moment she saw it.

The scent of barbecue smoke, cotton candy, and freshly popped corn drifted in the air. "Woah..." Lily whispered, her eyes wide as saucers. Then she gasped, grabbing Frances's hand and tugging at it, nearly hopping with excitement.

Across the field, a small paddock had been roped off, and a line of ponies in colorful saddles waited patiently as children were helped up by cheerful handlers in cowboy hats. One of the ponies had a pink ribbon tied into its mane, and Lily pointed at it, eyes shining.

"LOOK! Horses!...I want to ride the pink one!" she shouted, then caught herself, glancing up at Frances with hopeful urgency. "Can I? Pleeease?"

Frances laughed, brushing a hand down Lily's back. "Of course you can...But let's see what else is here first, sweetheart...we've got all day."

Yaz, sunglasses perched on her nose, chuckled and stepped up beside them, shading her eyes with one hand. "I don't think she's taking no for an answer," she said with a grin.

"Definitely not," Frances agreed, taking Lily's hand as they began walking toward the heart of the fair, her other arm brushing lightly against Yaz's as they moved together into the sun-soaked crowd.

The closer they got, the more animated Lily became, bouncing lightly on her feet, her fingers tightly gripping Frances's hand. Her whole face was lit with excitement as the ponies came into full view, their manes brushed and decorated with cheerful ribbons, each one waiting patiently as children took turns riding slowly around the enclosure.

A tall man in his late forties, wearing jeans and a sun-faded cowboy hat, turned at the sound of footsteps and immediately did a double-take. "Well I'll be," he said with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Aren't you ...?"

"Shhhh" Frances laughed lightly, pushing her sunglasses down on her face. "Guilty," she

said, flashing a warm smile. "We're just here for the fair."

The man chuckled, tipping his hat. "No problem, ma'am. Real pleasure to meet you. And who's this little miss here?"

"This is my daughter, Lily," Frances said, glancing down as Lily peeked out from behind her. "She's never been on a pony before."

"Looks like we'll have to do something about that, don't we?" The handler crouched down so he was at Lily's level, his voice gentle but animated. "Well, we're gonna make sure today's a blast. You ready to saddle up one of these fine ponies?"

To Frances's surprise, Lily didn't shrink back or go quiet. She lit up, her voice full of energy. "Yeah! I want the pink one!"

The man grinned. "Ah, Princess here...she's a good one," he said, motioning to the pony with the pink ribbon. "Alright then, up we go!"

With practiced ease, he lifted Lily up and settled her carefully into the small saddle, checking the straps and giving her reins a gentle loop into her hands.

Frances had already pulled her camera from her bag, pulling sunglasses on top of her head and stepping back with a wide smile. "Hold on tight darling...smile for me!"

Lily beamed, holding the reins proudly as Princess began her slow, careful walk around the enclosure. Frances snapped photo after photo, capturing the joy in her daughter's face.

Lily giggled, clutching the reins tighter. "Look at me, Yaz! I'm riding!"

Yaz chuckled, shaking her head with a grin. "Look at you, love, a proper queen, aren't you?"

Frances lowered the camera just long enough to laugh, brushing Yaz's arm lightly. "She looks like she was born for it."

"Don't let her hear you say that or she'll be asking for a pony next," Yaz teased.

"Oh God," Frances murmured, eyes sparkling.

They both laughed, watching her make another happy loop around the pen, cheeks flushed, hair bouncing with every step.

Frances was leaning on the fence, camera in hand, absolutely beaming. Her laughter carried with the breeze.

Then Yaz caught some older woman near the popcorn stand squinting their way, elbowing her husband. She didn't even hesitate.

She sidled up next to Frances and with one smooth move slid her sunglasses down from her hair and over her eyes.

Frances blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You're beaming like a premiere," Yaz murmured with a grin. "Tone it down, Miss. You're making memories and headlines."

Frances gave a soft huff of laughter and leaned in. "Am I?"

"Yep. And that lady at the popcorn stand's already sussed you out."

"Damn. Good eye darling" she said then broke into quiet laughter.

Yaz nudged her playfully.

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The next stop was a game booth with a row of colorful prizes hanging from the sides, stuffed animals, little porcelain figurines, and tiny glass trinkets. A large sign above the booth proclaimed "*Knock the Can, Win a Prize!*" with a photo of an overjoyed child clutching a teddy bear.

Lily's eyes lit up as she bounced toward the booth, her little hands reaching up to touch the sign. "What's this, Mummy?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Well, darling, it's a game where you have to throw a ball and try to knock it into the little can at the bottom. If you do, you win a prize!"

"Can we play?" Lily's eyes lit

Yaz turned to Frances with a grin, "What do you think? You're in?"

Frances raised a playful eyebrow, "Oh, I'm always up for a challenge."

"Oh, so it's a challenge?"

"Absolutely" Frances smirked raising her glasses on a top of her head

"Alright, bring it on"

Lily, still enthusiastic, clapped her hands together.

The man behind the counter handed them each three balls. He seemed to recognize Frances for a moment, but with her easygoing demeanor, he simply nodded and moved along. Yaz winked at Frances as they both lined up, ready to take their shots.

Lily stood beside them, holding her ball like a little champion.

"Alright bug...Take your aim right at that can over there" Frances pointed at the nearest one
"and take a shot"

"What if I miss?"

"You play again..." Frances shrugged "You got tree shots, we take turns. You go first."

"Yaz....Watch me!"

"Go on pumpkin...give it your bets shot!" Yaz cheered her on

She aimed, then threw the ball with all her might. The ball flew past the can and rolled away
"I missed" she pouted

"That's alright, don't thret..."Frances smiled "Yaz will miss it too" she looked at Yaz with mischievous smile

"Oh yeah, you recon?" Yaz raised a brow

"Go on then, prove me wrong?"

Yaz took her turn, aiming carefully before tossing the ball with confidence. It landed neatly in the can, and she grinned triumphantly. "Ha! One point for me, none for you!" she teased, nudging Frances with her shoulder.

Frances smirked and grabbed her ball, clearly not deterred. "Oh, you're going down," she said, her tone light but competitive.

"Sure you can hit the spot?" Yaz winked her way

She took her aim, her hand steady, "With a precision of a surgeon" she gave her mischievous look and with one perfect toss, the ball landed right into the can. "Boom!" She raised her arms in victory, beaming. "See...I always hit the spot"

Yaz laughed and crossed her arms, playfully shaking her head. "Alright, I'm impressed. You're not all looks, are you?"

Frances winked. "Nope...full of talents"

Lily unaware of the hidden layers beneath their banter giggled.

"Alright love...your turn" Yaz said

Lily took her turn still trying her best to knock the ball in, missed again. She scrunched her face in disappointment, kicking the dirt with her shoe "Not agaaain!" She pouted

"Hey, hey....never give up." Frances said, "You'll get it.... Just need to be persistent. You're doing great sweetheart! It's all fun, right?" she smiled

Lily nodded, a small pout on her face. "But I want to win," she muttered, her eyes glistening with determination.

"And you must believe you will.... But for now, let's see how Yaz loses, ha?" Frances smirked

"Don't get too cocky now," Yaz teased eyes gleamed. "It's my turn now," she said with determination. She picked up her ball, spun it in her hand like a pro, and aimed carefully. She tossed it. The ball went flying, hitting the can squarely... and then it bounced off again. "No way!" Yaz said, laughing in disbelief. "This game is rigged!"

Frances couldn't help but laugh at her frustration. "What was that about cocky?"

The air between them crackled with fun as Frances got ready to take another shot "Prepare to lose love" Frances threw the ball and missed "Damn!" Frances turned on a spot kicking the air with her fist in frustration

"Yeees!!" Yaz jumped up "Sweet victory...I can already taste it on my lips"

"Not yet sweetheart..." Frances smugged

It was Lily's turn now. She aimed with concentration, closing one eye then threw the ball. It finally landed in the can.

"Boom!" Yaz cheered, raising her arms in victory.

"YEEES!...Straight to the can...That's my girl!" Frances cheered

"YEEES!" Lily jumped up and down, her face lighting up with pure joy. "I did it! I did it!" she squealed

"See...told you" Frances nudged her with her hip "Never give up" she held her hand up for high five and Lily smacked her hand haply

"Right....last round" Yaz picked up her ball kissing it for luck, She aimed carefully and tossed it. The ball went flying brushing the can but fell on the floor. "Oh, come ooon!"

Frances burst out laughing "You need to hit the spot darling!" She winked wickedly getting ready for her last shot. Frances smiled and tossed the ball again, this time with a twist. The ball flew into the can with a perfect swish. "Yes!" she shouted, fist pumping the air in triumph turning to Lily slapping both of her palms into hers in victory.

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The midday sun was blazing now, and as they passed by the cluster of food stalls, the familiar jingle of an ice cream cart made Lily's head whip around.

"Oh! Ice cream!"

Frances and Yaz both looked at one another and smiled.

"Well, we *did* say it was your day," Frances said, guiding Lily over to the cart.

Moments later, Lily had a double scoop cone in one hand, strawberry and vanilla, her favorites and Yaz had a chocolate one already starting to melt. Frances opted for lemon sorbet, refreshing and light. They wandered down the path shaded by fluttering banners and cottonwood trees, licking their ice creams as they walked.

But Lily, so caught up in her excitement, wasn't paying much attention to her grip. A long stream of pink dripped down the cone and splashed right onto the front of her dress.

“Oh nooo!” she whined, staring down at the bright splotch on her stomach.

Frances gently took the cone from her and crouched down, inspecting the mess. “Well, darling... that’s ice-cream for you...Don’t worry.”

She flagged down a nearby vendor. “Sorry, would you mind...could I get a cup of water, just plain?”

The man handed one over obligingly. Frances dipped a napkin in and dabbed at the stain while Lily stood as still as she could.

“It’s alright, bug. It’ll come out. It’s just a dress.”

“I liked this dress,” Lily muttered, but her mood was lifting again as Frances smiled and kissed her forehead.

“Good thing you’ve got an in-house designer,” Yaz chimed in, “she’ll whip up another before bedtime.”

Lily giggled, and with that crisis averted, they carried on their stroll.

A few stalls down, Yaz slowed, her eyes catching on a stand displaying handmade jewelry, tiny glass pendants, beads threaded like dewdrops, and delicate wirework shaped like leaves and constellations.

“Oh, this is gorgeous,” she murmured, stepping closer.

The woman behind the table smiled warmly. “Thank you, honey. I make it all myself.”

Yaz picked up a necklace with a tiny copper leaf and a green gem in the center. “This one’s beautiful. I’m a designer too, clothes. This kind of detail always inspires me.”

“Oh, lovely! We’ve got to stick together, don’t we?” the woman beamed. “Do you sell in town?”

“Not yet,” Yaz said, grinning. “I’m still building things up, I have a small studio. But I’m working on something special.”

The two women chatted easily, talking about fabrics and colours and the joy of making things by hand.

Meanwhile, just across the way, Frances and Lily had stopped in front of an artist's stand. A young woman was sketching a portrait of a little girl seated across from her. She used broad strokes, her hand swift and confident, dark smudges streaking her fingers.

Lily tilted her head. "What's that black stuff you're using?" she asked suddenly, surprising even herself.

The artist looked up with a wide smile. "This? This is charcoal darling," she said, holding up the stick between her fingertips. "It's great for shading, soft and bold, all at once."

Frances, stroking Lily's head, chuckled. "She lives with a pencil in her hand. Always drawing. It's her passion."

"Is it now?" the artist's eyes twinkled. She reached into her bag and pulled out a fresh stick of charcoal, then wrapped it carefully in a napkin. "Here you go, sweetheart. A little gift from one artist to another."

Lily's eyes widened. "Really?!"

"Really. But only if you promise you'll keep at it. You've got to keep going, even when it's hard. You'll get better with time. Every artist does."

Frances smiled, her heart warm with pride. "Well, that's going right into her treasure box. Thank you, that's very kind of you"

Lily clutched the charcoal like it was made of gold. "Thank you! I'm gonna draw something amazing."

"I bet you will," the woman said, returning to her sketch as Lily waved goodbye.

Just then, Yaz returned, slipping beside Frances. "Look at that, already collecting fan mail?"

Frances grinned. "She's the star today."

Yaz leaned down to Lily. "Hey, maybe one day you will have your own stand."

"With my drawings?" Lily asked, eyes wide.

"Exactly."

Frances nodded. "You better start practicing, bug."

Lily looked down at the charcoal stick in her hand. "I will. I really, really will."

They continued strolling through the fare, the sounds of laughter, music, and carousel bells all around them, warm, sweet memories blooming with every step.

....

The sun had long since dipped below the horizon, casting the world in a gentle twilight as the car hummed along the road back to Los Angeles. In the back seat, Lily had surrendered to sleep, her head resting against the window, a soft rhythm to her breathing. Yaz turned, her eyes tender, and carefully pulled a blanket over the child, tucking it around her with a mother's care.

As they pulled into Susan's driveway, the familiar surroundings brought a sense of calm. Frances switched off the engine, and silence enveloped them. This goodbye felt different, less like an ending and more like a gentle pause in a story still unfolding.

Frances leaned in, her hand finding Yaz's. Yaz tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, her touch lingering. They kissed, a soft, unhurried meeting of lips in the quiet darkness, a promise exchanged without words.

"Let me know about the meeting," Yaz whispered, her voice barely audible.

Frances nodded, her forehead resting against Yaz's. "I'll be at the studio later anyway. I'll pop into your office."

They stepped out of the car, the cool night air wrapping around them. Frances retrieved their bags from the trunk while Yaz gently lifted the sleeping Lily into her arms. The front door opened, revealing Susan, her face lighting up at the sight of them.

"Back already? I was just about to put the kettle on," Susan said, her smile warm.

"Perfect timing," Frances replied, returning the smile. "But I won't stay. Just wanted to get Lily settled."

Susan stepped aside to let them in. "Shame, I hoped you'll stay for dinner."

"I'd love to. But I have early meeting. Next time."

Frances leaned down, pressing a kiss to Lily's forehead, then turned to Yaz, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I'll see you soon," she murmured.

"See you soon hun" Yaz smiled

"See you soon sweetheart" Susan said with a smile.

As she walked back to the car, a sense of contentment settled over her. This time, the goodbye carried the weight of hope and the promise of a shared future.

....

Frances sat at a sunlit table by the window of the tucked-away West Hollywood café, a place far too serene for the conversation she expected. Dressed in her usual quiet glamour a crisp ivory blouse, high-waisted trousers, her sunglasses resting like a crown, she exuded poise. But beneath it, a flicker of guarded curiosity burned.

The man arrived right on time. Sharp suit. Expensive shoes. A lean frame and a blunt jawline that suggested he didn't waste time with pleasantries. Edward Dunne. He introduced himself, swept his hat off and dropped it onto the seat beside him as though he owned the place, then sat down across from her.

"Black coffee," he said to the approaching waiter, without looking up. "Nothing fancy."

Then his attention turned to Frances, and for a moment, he just studied her.

"Miss Louise," he said finally. "You look better in person than your studio makes you out to be on paper."

Frances arched a brow. "That's... one way to start a meeting."

"It's honest. I've been through your portfolio. The filmography is impressive, but the management?"

He shook his head.

"A mess. Half those roles should've launched you straight into the upper tier. You should be top-billing across the board. You're not."

"Not for lack of trying," Frances said softly.

"Exactly. And that's the part that floored me. I understand you've been handling your own battles with the studio? Scheduling? Negotiations? Press junkets?"

"When I had to."

"Jesus. And your agent just let you?"

"Let's just say he cashed the cheques and kept out of the way."

Edward scoffed. "Unbelievable. I've represented divas, dancers, women who can't spell contract and even they had better support."

He leaned in, elbows on the table.

"You've been carrying your career uphill, barefoot, with a studio tying bricks to your ankles...I must say I'm impressed. But...with me as your agent It would stop now."

"I've heard that before," she murmured.

"Not from me."

He leaned back again, folding his arms.

"Listen, I don't invest in sinking ships. My name's on every deal I broker. Your success is mine. The more money *you* make, the more powerful I become. That's the truth, no sugar-coating. But I don't gamble. I don't waste time. If I take you on, you become my responsibility."

He paused, his tone shifting to something firmer.

"That includes the personal stuff too."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean?"

"Miss Louise....When your personal life goes to hell you show up late. Or not at all. You're medicated. You're miserable. You start missing scenes, lines, press days, premieres. I've seen it all. It always bleeds."

He let that settle before continuing.

"You're a talented actress and as far as I can tell equally talented business women...So

selling you won't be a problem...But as I understand this isn't why you need a new agent Miss Louise?"

Frances went quiet, her finger tracing the edge of the wine glass.

"So before we go any further I need you to be perfectly honest with me...If there's something going on...family, relationships, skeletons in closets, I need to know if it's stable. I don't need gossip. I need facts."

Frances tensed. She didn't speak for a long moment. Finally, she said coolly, "That's none of your concern."

"Wrong. It is. Because you are. And if you're walking around with one foot in your personal life and the other in some career quicksand, you'll drag me down with you. I won't let that happen. So, tell me...can I count on you to be solid?"

He said it with no heat, just the kind of calm that didn't leave room for argument.

Frances hesitated, then exhaled slowly.

"Fine...I'm raising a daughter. Her name is Lily. She's not like other kids, she's got some challenges, but she's the brightest light I've got. And I'm seeing someone. A woman. Her name is Yaz. She's a designer for the studio. And neither of them are negotiable."

Edward gave a single nod. "Good. Now we're getting somewhere."

"And since you're being blunt, so will I," Frances continued. "I've got a premiere next week. Studio's expecting the usual 'smile, wave, act single' routine. Yaz will be by my side. Not tucked away in the wings. Not arriving separately. With me."

She held his gaze, daring him to challenge it.

"You want to prove you're worth every dollar?" she said. "Tell me how you'd handle that."

He paused for effect, his tone cooling into something more serious.

"I don't do damage control Miss Louise. I do prevention. That's the difference."

Frances smirked, just slightly. She leaned back in her chair, narrowing her eyes. "Alright, What's your strategy? No smoke. No mirrors."

Edward didn't miss a beat. "First, I need to understand what I'm working with. You said Yaz will be at your side. How public is this relationship already?"

Frances hesitated, her jaw tightening slightly.

"We're not hiding. But we're not parading either. We've been careful. Discreet. Enough for people to whisper, not enough for headlines."

"Right. So, there's already talk. Which means the vultures are circling. If you don't own the story, someone else will."

He leaned forward, elbows on the table again, voice low and focused.

"So here's what I need from you...What is this? A fling? Casual? Something that'll be over in three months? Or are we talking real deal here?"

Frances blinked, thrown by the bluntness of it. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I'm not a priest or a therapist. But I've been doing this long enough to know when personal chaos wrecks careers. I need to know what kind of investment you're making here. Because if I go to bat for you and her I'm betting on the long game."

Frances looked away for a moment, the question cutting deeper than she expected. A breeze rolled in through the open café window, tugging at the silk scarf tied loosely at her neck. She exhaled, choosing honesty.

"It's serious," she said quietly. "She's serious. Yaz isn't some distraction or tabloid fling. She's... the one thing in my life that feels like peace. She's been there. Through all of it. With Lily. With me. Even when it cost her."

Edward nodded slowly. "Good. That's what I needed to hear."

He pulled a small notepad from his jacket pocket, flipping it open like a magician about to reveal his trick.

"Here's what I'd do...step by step."

Frances leaned in despite herself.

"First, we control the visuals. A trusted photographer will be positioned inside the premiere, not out with the mob. A few posed shots. Just you two. Hand on hers, but nothing over the

top. Elegant. Confident. Just enough to say, yes, this is what it looks like and leave the rest to interpretation."

"Second, we soften the story before they sharpen their knives. A carefully timed interview done subtly where you mention how balance in your life has made you a better artist. You don't name names. But you mention love, stability, and the importance of people who believe in you."

"Third, we build allies. I'll have a feature ready to go in *Photoplay* or *Motion Picture*, a spotlight piece on you. The narrative is this...after years of being mishandled by a crumbling studio system, Frances Louise has taken control of her career, is finally getting the roles she deserves, and has found unexpected strength in her personal life. Not scandal. Not gossip. Growth. That's the story."

Frances tilted her head, visibly impressed now.

"And Yaz?"

"She'll be included in the margins at first, pictures, mentions. No grand declarations. But we treat her with dignity. No hiding, no shame. She's not 'the friend.' She's your partner and we treat her with respect, but we guide the press to adjust to that without feeding them the meat they want to rip into."

Edward's eyes met hers with cool certainty.

"And if someone gets bold, starts asking the wrong questions I've got people who'll shut it down before it sees ink. This isn't just about spin, Frances. It's about narrative. We don't run from the truth. We reframe it before they can."

He paused, letting the silence settle like the final note of a symphony.

"You give me full access, you follow my lead, and in six months people won't be whispering about who you're dating. They'll be talking about how Frances Louise survived the worst of Hollywood and came out swinging."

Frances stared at him, her lips parting slightly.

"Jesus," she murmured. "You're good."

"I know," he replied without a blink. "That's why Victor sent me."

Frances sat back, a slow smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She looked past him, out the window, as if seeing a different version of her life waiting just a few months down the road. Then her gaze returned to him.

"Alright, Mr. Dunne," she said softly. There's something else," she began, her tone quiet but certain. "Something I haven't said yet, not to anyone outside my home."

Edward tilted his head slightly, intrigued. "Go on."

"I want Yaz to move in. Not this minute, but soon," she said. "We've talked about it, her brand, her studio. I invested in it. We've even discussed relocating it to a more private space, something we could build on the property."

"You're planning to set her up inside your estate?" he asked, a brow lifting.

"Not set her up," Frances said, tone sharp. "Support her. It's hers, her work, her name. I believe in what she does. And I want her close, because I love her. And because I'm tired of living like I'm renting my own life from people who think they own me."

Edward's expression flickered, impressed now, not just by her resolve but by her clarity.

She went on, voice more vulnerable now.

"My daughter will be coming home as well. She's leaving boarding school and moving in full time. It's what's we decided is best for her. She needs stability. Familiarity. Love. Not institutions."

"And the press?" Edward asked. "Because I can already tell, this arrangement isn't something you're looking to hide."

Frances exhaled, then looked him directly in the eye.

"If it ever becomes too much, We will leave. We'll pack up and move across the world if we have to. But the living arrangement isn't up for debate. I've lived under other people's expectations my whole life. Studio rules. Men in my private life and offices making choices for me. I've done it their way, Edward. And I nearly lost myself."

He sat back in his chair, arms folded, watching her with an expression that shifted from curiosity to full-on admiration.

"You know," he said slowly, "I've worked with a lot of stars who say they want control. Who

say they're ready to fight. But they crumble the minute it threatens their comfort. You... you've already made peace with what you could lose."

Frances nodded. "I know what matters now."

Edward nodded slowly, then leaned forward, lacing his fingers together.

"Alright. Let's talk about that," he said. "You want Yaz there, no negotiation. Fine...But let me ask you something more personal."

Frances gave a small sigh. "You've already asked plenty."

He ignored that. "How are you planning to live? I mean it. What's the setup going to be once this all kicks into motion?"

Frances frowned slightly. "I just told you"

"And I heard you," he said. "But I want the shape of it. The full picture Frances. You want to keep your career and I assume hers as well. I need to know details. Where will she sleep? Who handles the press if they come knocking at your gate with a camera? Because if I'm representing you, Frances, I need to know not just what your life looks like, I need to know how it runs."

Frances gave him a wary look. "What's your point?"

"My point is," he said, "a happy home can't be a powder keg. It can't look like a scandal waiting to blow, or are we just playing pretend in the press and hoping the walls don't crack? So, tell me how did you have this in mind? You must have a plan. Neither of you seem like airheads, so you must've talked about it."

Frances looked away briefly, then back again. Her voice was low, measured.

She exhaled deeply, sharing so many personal details made her feel uncomfortable, "Yaz will have her own wing of the house. Separate entrance is a must because of her studio, people who work for her, clients and so on. She'll have everything she needs without being obvious to anyone coming in or out unless we want it to be."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "And your daughter? What's the dynamics there?"

"My daughter knows about us. She loves her. Yaz has never tried to replace me. She's just... there. Gentle. Present in my daughter's life no different than any parent would be. In

fact, she lives with at the moment since the press madness started.”

Charles leaned back, tapping his fingers lightly on the arm of the chair.

“So,” he said, “a real home. A functioning one. Sounds like something worth protecting.”

Frances nodded once. “It is.”

He let a moment pass, then added, “One more thing.”

Frances exhaled. “Go on.”

“Are you absolutely sure this is permanent? This isn't your wish or a dream... or a test run to see if you can pull it off?” His tone was flat, no malice, no judgment, just clarity.

“You're asking a lot of personal questions?”

“Yes I do...Because if you want me to pitch you as a woman reborn, come-back queen, power in pearls you need to know who's beside you in the long run.”

She was quiet for a moment, then gave a small, steady nod.

“I'm not looking for a phase,” she said softly. “I've had those. I've lived my life falling in and out of things. This isn't that. I want a life with her and she wants it with me. Full stop.”

Edward let out a quiet breath.

“Well then,” he said. “Now we're really getting somewhere.”

Edward leaned forward, resting his elbows on a table.

“Alright,” he said. “Here's how I'd package it.”

Frances raised a brow. “Go on.”

“We don't lie. But we don't put it all out on a silver platter either. She is your creative partner. She's the designer behind your gowns, the one who helps you look like a million bucks on every red carpet. That's the truth, isn't it?”

Frances gave a small nod.

“She’s also someone you’ve invested in professionally which is already a public knowledge. You’re helping her build a brand. You’ve got a studio being designed on your property? We call it what it is, a private creative compound. You’re supporting local artist building a brand. Female entrepreneurship.”

“And the living together part?” Frances asked, carefully.

“She’s your house guest. Your closest friend and business partner. The press doesn’t need a bedroom layout, they need optics. You’re two women in the industry who respect each other’s work. The public eats that up. Behind the gates, that’s your business. But on camera? Class. Poise. Subtlety.”

Frances studied him, eyes narrowing slightly. “And when they start digging?”

“They already dig sweetheart,” Edward replied. “But if they don’t smell scandal, they won’t go too deep. You don’t sneak around. You just... don’t make it a headline. You go to events together, you smile, you leave in separate cars if needed. But we control the narrative on your terms.”

Frances gave a thoughtful nod. “And you think the public’s gonna eat that? Not that I care anymore, I’ll be honest with you. We’re both gambling and we’re aware of it. But we made a choice that our relationship and my daughter comes first this time...no matter the cost.”

“Not all of them will,” he said bluntly. “But you’re not aiming for all of them anymore. You’re building the next chapter. We keep it elegant. We keep it quiet, but intentional. If the gossip columns push too hard, we shut it down with grace, not denial. You don’t hide, Frances. You simply don’t explain.”

There was a long pause.

“Sounds like a hell of a dance,” she said finally.

Edward smiled. “And I’m one hell of a choreographer.”

She chuckled then took her glass raising it "I guess you got yourself a new client"

....

Frances stepped into Andy’s office with her usual grace, the soft click of her heels echoing off the polished floor. Sunlight poured through the tall windows, spilling golden light across

the carpet and catching the gleam of brass fixtures. The space, filled with the scent of cigars and old leather, was a shrine to Hollywood power.

Andy rose from behind his sleek desk, arms wide, a smile plastered on his face like it had been rehearsed.

“Frances! My god, you look luminous. Come here.”

He kissed her cheek, all charm and habit, the way men in his world always greeted the women who made them rich.

“Can I get you something, darling? We’re celebrating soon, after all!”

He turned to the sideboard, where a crystal decanter waited like a prop from a set. Without waiting for an answer, he poured two glasses of amber liquid.

“Why not,” Frances said, accepting the drink with a faint smile.

Andy handed it over and eased himself into his chair again, eyes gleaming.

“So... what brings you in? Couldn’t stay away from me, huh?” he teased.

Before she could respond, he barreled ahead.

“Tell me...are you excited about the premiere? It’s gonna be a knockout. The whole city’s buzzing.”

Frances gave a soft nod, taking a sip of her drink. “Mm-hmm.”

“And the script?” Andy leaned in a little. “That one I sent last week. You had a chance to read it?”

She set her glass down gently.

“I did. And I’ll be turning it down.”

He blinked, caught off guard.

“You what?”

“You heard me.”

"Frances, you can't do that. That's a major studio production, months of press, potential Oscar talk. You can't be serious."

She tilted her head slightly, voice calm and steady. "Oh, I'm very serious. My priorities have changed. And spending several months on location? Out of the question right now."

Reaching for her handbag, she placed it on her lap and opened it with measured ease.

"But that's not actually why I'm here."

Andy frowned as she pulled out a folded piece of paper and laid it on the table between them.

"This is."

He picked it up, pulled his glasses from his pocket, and unfolded the paper. His eyes scanned the contents, and slowly, his expression shifted.

"Is this a joke?" he asked.

"Do I look like I'm laughing?"

He stared at her in disbelief.

"You're terminating our contract?"

"Correct." Frances crossed one leg over the other and smiled, slow and sharp.

He stood abruptly, voice raised. "This is a breach of contract. I'll have my lawyers on this immediately...You can't..."

She cut him off, lifting a hand, then reached back into her bag.

"Oh, don't worry. There's more.... I anticipated that. Which is why I've included this..." She pulled out a check and slid it across the table. "This should cover it. Seven grand. You can frame it if you like."

Andy stared at it, dumbfounded, then scoffed, anger creeping into his voice.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? This won't end here," he warned. "I'll sue you."

"Go ahead.... You're welcome to try. But consider this... any legal action you pursue will bring to light certain... indiscretions."

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you threatening me?"

She leaned in slightly, voice low.

"Just reminding you" she said, rising to her feet. She was taller now, unshakable. "Let's see if you win. Breach of contract? Please. Let's add blackmail. Invasion of privacy. Breach of trust. Want me to keep going?"

His expression curdled into something uglier. "You have no proof. It's my word against that mongrel's."

There was a beat of silence.

Frances didn't flinch. She calmly reached for her gloves, sliding them on with slow, deliberate movements. "You really are stupid, Andy. Did you honestly believe the woman I share my bed with wouldn't tell me? That I wouldn't protect her?"

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off.

"She kept the check you moron. With your signature." Her eyes locked onto his. "Checkmate."

"You're bluffing"

"Test me, and you'll find out. This town has no shortage of agents. But reputations? Those are harder to rebuild."

Andy stood frozen, silent. For once, without a single thing to say.

Frances adjusted her purse, smoothed her skirt, and gave him a look of cool, absolute dismissal.

"Oh and... You open your mouth about me, or Yaz, or this meeting... and I will make sure every actor in this town knows what you did. You'll be lucky if you're still booking voiceovers for dog food commercials by Christmas. Wanna bring me down?...I'll bring you down with me."

He didn't answer. Couldn't.

She smiled once more, calm and lethal. "Have a good day, Andy."

She turned and walked out, her heels tapping sharply against the floor, her exit a declaration.

Behind her, Andy remained motionless, then rage took over and he smashed the glass into the wall. Brown liquid spilling on the floor.

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