

Chapter 26

Days were still short, and early mornings were dark and chilly as the cold air swept down from the hills. The room was cast in deep shadows, illuminated only by the warm glow of the bedside lamp. It flickered softly against the dark wooden furniture, throwing golden light onto the polished mirror as Yaz fastened the last button of her crisp, ivory blouse tucking it neatly into the high waist of her tailored trousers, sleek, well-fitted, and daring in a time when most women still favored skirts.

She moved with effortless grace, her dark hair cascading in soft waves to her shoulders, glossy and perfectly set. Each curl caught the light as she turned, reflecting the careful attention she gave to her appearance without ever seeming overdone. Her makeup was always subtle but luminous, just a whisper of color on her cheeks, a hint of kohl defining her deep, expressive eyes, and lips brushed with a natural rose hue. She was stunning, not in the delicate, demure way expected of women, but in her own quiet, commanding elegance, confident, refined, yet unapologetically herself.

Reaching for a pair of her grandmother's earrings, she fastened them with practiced ease, casting one last glance at her reflection. The world outside was still wrapped in darkness, but inside this small pocket of light, she was ready, polished, poised, and prepared to step into the day ahead.

The kitchen felt warm and cozy, lit up by the soft glow of the overhead light. The rich smell of freshly fried eggs and hot toast filled the air.

Susan, still in her dressing gown, stood by the table, curlers, tucked beneath a bright flowery scarf. She poured steaming coffee into two mugs, her usual morning ritual.

"Morning!" Yaz chirped, stepping through the doorway. She felt like a spoiled princess with Susan always waiting for her with breakfast and dinner.

"Morning, honey," Susan smiled as Yaz placed the usual morning kiss on her cheek. "Sit up... you're just in time."

"God... where do you get the energy for all this? Seriously, why can't I do this sometimes?"

"Because I like it," Susan said, settling into her chair. "It makes me feel important."

"You are important," Yaz giggled. "But I feel sometimes like you're my maid."

Susan waved a dismissive hand. "For years, I missed this... Preparing breakfast for someone... Having someone to wait for in the evening... Let me enjoy it while it lasts. God knows you're gonna go your way soon, and I'll be back to my old self."

"Oh, don't say that... I'm not going anywhere... Not soon, anyway."

"You never know... You and Frances might find ways."

Yaz giggled, shaking her head. "Hardly... I think it'll be long before that happens. Let's face it."

Susan raised an eyebrow, a knowing glint in her eye. "You never know... Where there's a will, there's a way. So, tell me more about this Africa trip."

Yaz sighed, stirring her coffee absently. "Oh, I don't know... Frances obviously doesn't want to leave Lily alone here... Neither do I... She's never left her alone for so long. Specially after this holiday it would be cruel... But then I hate that she's having to turn down this role. It's so good, I read the script... I can smell the Oscar."

"Really? Oh, that would be something. Could you imagine?"

"You never know... we might come up with something. I've been thinking... maybe paying a nanny or something... have her there without anyone knowing. I dunno, never mind... I'm just talking rubbish now. Guess I'm bloody desperate at this point," she chuckled.

Susan smirked as she took a slow sip of her coffee. "Well, I'm sure you'll figure something out... You two have a knack for that." Her knowing grin suggested she saw more than Yaz was willing to admit.

"Thanks, I'll take that as a compliment," Yaz said with a giggle, raising her mug in a playful toast.

Susan winked. "You should."

Yaz exhaled, her smile fading. "I don't know... Sometimes it feels like I've opened a can of worms and now I'm fumbling in the dark. What if I'm pushing her too hard?"

Susan set her cup down and met Yaz's gaze. "Sometimes the people we love need to be pushed. Frances is one of them. I know the risks... her career, her reputation, but being miserable isn't the answer either. Happiness comes with hard choices and sacrifices."

Yaz nodded slowly. "Yeah... but right now, she feels cornered."

Susan reached across the table, giving Yaz's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Even a corner has a way out, honey. You just have to find it."

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The sky hung low with a muted grey haze, thick enough to blur the sun but not heavy enough for rain. It was the kind of overcast day that made the air feel stagnant, pressing against the skin like an unwelcome hand.

As the car slowed to a stop outside the cemetery gates, Frances exhaled, rolling her shoulders before the driver stepped out to open her door.

She emerged with the kind of elegance that came naturally, but today it was subdued, no bright Hollywood smiles, no playful glances. Just a quiet, solemn grace. She wore a black wool coat that cinched at the waist, the skirt beneath it flowing in soft pleats just past her knees. A black hat with a delicate veil shaded her face, casting faint shadows over her sharp cheekbones. Her gloves, black and pristine, clutched a small leather handbag.

The funeral was well-attended, as expected. Irving Roth had once been one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, a kingmaker in his prime. And though he had stepped away from the empire he helped build, his death had drawn out the industry's elite, directors, actors, producers, executives. Some were here out of duty, others out of genuine grief, and some, no doubt, to take note of who was absent.

As Frances stepped forward, murmurs stirred around her, though no one approached just yet.

The Roth family stood near the burial site, flanked by a handful of close associates. Irving's wife, Miriam, was a slender woman draped in a long black coat, her dark hair neatly pinned beneath a hat. Her lips were pressed into a firm line, betraying no emotion beyond what was expected.

Beside her stood their two sons, Philip and Howard. Both men, well into their thirties, had inherited their father's sharp features and his commanding presence, though grief had softened their usual confidence. Philip, the elder, looked composed, his jaw tight as he accepted condolences with quiet nods. Howard, always the more expressive of the two, had red-rimmed eyes and a handkerchief crushed in his fist.

Frances approached them with the same careful poise she had mastered over years of being watched.

"Miriam," she said gently, taking the woman's gloved hand in hers.

"Frances." Miriam's voice was measured, polite. Not warm, not cold, just appropriate.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Frances said, her voice low.

Miriam nodded once. "Thank you."

Frances turned to the sons. "Philip, Howard... he was a remarkable man."

Philip merely inclined his head, though Howard gave a weak smile, his voice hoarse. "He thought highly of you, Frances."

She returned the sentiment with a small nod before excusing herself, stepping back into the sea of mourners.

That's when she spotted Helen. Even in mourning, Helen had an air of vitality about her. Her dark, wavy hair was pulled back into a low chignon, a simple black dress hugging her frame. Unlike most women here, she wasn't veiled, and her green eyes were sharp as they met Frances's across the crowd.

Without hesitation, Helen stepped forward, closing the distance between them.

"Darling," she murmured, her hands reaching out to take Frances's in hers.

Frances squeezed them tightly. "Helen."

Helen tilted her head slightly, studying Frances. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

Frances exhaled, casting a brief glance at the casket beside the open grave. "Neither was I. We got back yesterday."

A flicker of amusement danced in Helen's eyes, her lips quirking just slightly. "I need details."

Frances shook her head, suppressing a smile. "I bet you do."

Helen sighed, her gaze sweeping across the gathering. "God, this is horrible... It feels like a whole era's gone with him."

"In a way, it has," Frances murmured.

Helen gave a subtle nod toward a cluster of studio executives murmuring amongst themselves. "Bet those bastards are secretly celebrating. He made their lives hell when he wanted to."

Frances followed her gaze, spotting a few familiar faces, men who had once relied on Roth's influence but had no doubt been waiting for him to finally disappear. "They'll be fighting over the scraps before the day is out."

Helen hummed in agreement, then shifted her focus to another group. Her eyes landing on one of the actresses "Look at her..., acting as though she was his dearest friend. She spent years badmouthing him every chance she got."

Frances barely suppressed a smirk. "She's probably rehearsed a few dramatic tears for the occasion."

Helen scoffed. "If they start rolling, I'll throw myself in the grave with him just to escape it."

Their eyes continued scanning the crowd, Helen offering subtle, cutting remarks about those she had little patience for. Some had been Roth's closest allies, others his most bitter rivals, yet they all stood there, wrapped in the same veil of false solemnity.

Frances sighed. "Funny how death makes saints of men. A few months ago, half these people wouldn't have cared if he dropped dead in the street."

Helen gave her a knowing look. "Darling, this is Hollywood. No one truly mourns, they just put on their best performances. Come on," Helen said softly, looping her arm through Frances's. "Let's get through this."

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Yaz stepped into the courtyard, the familiar hum of the studio already in full swing around her. Cast and crew moved with purpose, their voices blending into a low murmur of instructions and conversations. Props were wheeled past on carts, costume racks lined the walkways, and assistants hurried with clipboards tucked under their arms.

The sun was barely breaking through the grey sky, casting a muted light over the lot as a fine mist of rain began to fall, dampening the pavement but doing little to slow the movement around her.

She walked briskly, sidestepping a grip carrying a heavy lighting rig and narrowly avoiding bumping into a young actor, flashing a quick smile and murmuring an automatic "Sorry."

Despite the buzz of activity, fatigue still clung to her. The morning air was crisp, but it did little to shake off the lingering exhaustion.

She stepped inside, the transition from the cool, damp air to the warmth of the hallway immediate. If the courtyard was busy, the inside of the building was even more so. Runners dashed past with stacks of paperwork, assistants carefully balanced trays of coffee for waiting cast members, and makeup artists were already working on actors at open stations. The scent of hairspray, coffee, and fabric lingered in the air.

She barely made it a few steps before a woman stopped her in the hallway. "Miss Louise is waiting for you in your office."

Yaz frowned slightly, caught off guard. "Oh...right. Thanks." She forced a polite smile before continuing down the hallway, her mind already racing.

Yaz quickened her pace, her shoes clicking softly against the tiles as she weaved through the morning bustle. A quiet unease crept up her spine. Frances rarely came to her office this early, if she needed something, she'd usually call or send word by someone.

Reaching her office door, she took a steadying breath before pushing it open.

Frances was already there, perched on the edge of Yaz's desk, her arms loosely crossed over her chest. She looked effortlessly elegant, as always, still dressed in black from the funeral earlier, her blonde curls tucked neatly beneath a small hat. She was wearing her usual red lipstick, though her face had that unreadable quality Yaz had learned to recognize over time, calm on the surface, but with something shifting underneath.

Yaz shut the door behind her, shaking some of the misty rain off her coat "Well, this is a nice surprise," she said lightly, hanging it up.

"Morning darling"

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Frances tilted her head slightly, her hazel eyes scanning Yaz's face before she gave a small, almost hesitant smile. "I needed to see you."

That made Yaz pause for half a beat. There was something in the way Frances said it, something quieter than usual. She locked the door and moved to her desk leaning in giving her a small quick kiss on the lips.

"Alright. You've seen me. Now tell me what's going on." she said resting her hand on Frances waist. "Not like you to come this early...so something's wrong. Is it the funeral hun"

"No..." Frances sighed, glancing down as if weighing her words, then finally met Yaz's gaze again. "I need your advice, and I want you to be honest with me."

Yaz's lips twitched into a smirk. "I'm always honest with you. You just don't always like what I have to say."

That earned her a soft huff of amusement, but Frances wasn't in the mood this morning. Instead, she leaned forward slightly, her expression growing more serious. She reached into her bag and pulled out the envelope passing it to Yaz "This came when we were away...Just read it first"

"Alright" Yaz frowned in confusion, her stomach starting to twist into a knot as she opened it. "Who's it from?" She asked as she opened the letter.

Frances's lips tightened, her eyes closing for a short moment giving silent explanation.

"Shit...not again."

"Just read it"

Yaz's eyes flickered back to the letter, her fingers gripping the paper as she scanned the words. Her expression shifted from confusion to disbelief, then to sheer outrage.

Her voice shot up in a mix of horror and fury. "Whaaat?... Is he for real?"

Frances sat back against the desk, arms crossed over her chest, her face impassive but her eyes betraying the weight pressing down on her. "I'm afraid he is..."

Yaz let out a sharp breath, shaking the letter in the air as if she couldn't believe what she was holding. "120 fucking grand?! You're not seriously thinking about giving this to him?"

Frances hesitated. "I don't want to, but..."

"But what?!" Yaz snapped, pacing the room, the letter now clenched in her fist. "Frances, listen to me. This...this is insane! Let the bastard die."

Frances winced, rubbing at her temple. "Yaz..."

"No! What if he goes public, huh? So what? What if he keeps coming back? You gonna keep handing him every penny you own?" Yaz was seething now, her voice laced with bitter frustration.

Frances exhaled, her shoulders tense. "You don't understand, Yaz. It's not that simple."

"It is that simple." Yaz spun around, jabbing a finger at her. "You give him this, and it won't be the last time, mark my words. He'll bleed you dry until there's nothing left. He's a parasite."

Frances dropped her gaze, lips pressing together in silent agreement.

Yaz threw her hands up. "God, you'd be better off giving a third of this to someone to pop him off!"

A sharp knock at the door made both of them startled.

Yaz inhaled sharply, pressing her fingers to her temple before answering, voice tight. "Yeah?"

"Miss Khan, the meeting starts in ten minutes." The woman's voice said on the other side

Yaz forced a tight-lipped smile. "Right. Thanks."

As the woman left, Frances stood, smoothing down her skirt. "I'm sorry to hold you up."

Yaz shook her head, stepping in front of her before she could leave. "No, don't do that. Don't... don't try to deal with this on your own."

Frances looked at her, silent. Yaz stepped closer, reaching for her hand and pulling her into a tight hug. Frances exhaled, her head slumping onto Yaz's shoulder. The touch grounded her, offering the comfort she had craved since the night before.

"Meet me at the studio tonight," Yaz pressed, pulling away just enough to meet her gaze. "We'll talk about it. Just... promise me you won't do anything stupid in the meantime."

Frances held her gaze, then gave a small nod. "Alright. I promise."

Yaz sighed, cupping her face between her hands. "I have to go now if I don't wanna be sacked." Her thumbs brushed over her cheeks as she softened her voice. "I love you... We'll sort this out, I promise."

Frances let out a quiet, bitter chuckle, shaking her head. "How? You're always so optimistic... How the hell are we gonna fix this?" Her gaze dropped to the floor, but Yaz lifted her chin, forcing her to look at her.

"I don't know... but we will."

A tear slipped down Frances's cheek, and Yaz gently brushed it away before leaning in, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. "It'll be okay... We'll think of something, alright?"

Frances exhaled shakily. "We have five days, darling."

"Then we better be quick." Yaz smiled, pressing another quick kiss to her lips before her thumb traced along Frances's cheek, a lingering touch that Frances leaned into.

She nodded, pulling away reluctantly. "Go... I don't wanna get you in trouble. I love you." Her fingers clung to Yaz's, unwilling to let go.

"Love you too." Yaz exhaled, finally stepping back to grab her notes. "I'll call you. Count on around seven."

"Alright, darling."

As Yaz left for her meeting, her mind stayed locked on the letter—and the gnawing fear that Frances would try to handle this the wrong way.

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The scent of vanilla and warm sugar filled Susan's little cake shop, the air thick with the comforting aroma of freshly baked pastries. The bell above the door chimed, and she looked up from the counter to see a man step inside, hesitating for a brief moment before closing the door behind him. He looked to be in his early forties, dressed neatly but with an air of someone who had been running errands all morning. His dark hair was slightly disheveled, and there was a quiet uncertainty in his eyes as he glanced around at the display cases filled with delicate cakes and pastries.

Susan wiped her hands on her apron and stepped forward with a warm smile. "Good morning! How can I help you today?"

The man exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "I, uh... I need a birthday cake."

"Alright," Susan said easily. "For someone special?"

He nodded. "My daughter. It's her sixteenth birthday next week."

"Sweet sixteen, that's a big one. What kind of cake were you thinking?"

He hesitated, looking almost lost. "That's the thing... I have no idea." He let out a short, sheepish laugh. "My wife... she used to take care of all this. She'd have everything planned out way in advance. I just... I don't even know where to begin."

Susan's smile softened. "Why don't we sit down for a minute? We'll figure it out together."

He looked relieved as she gestured toward a small table by the window. Once they were seated, she pulled out a notepad and a pencil. "Alright, tell me a little about your daughter. What does she like?"

He exhaled, thinking. "She likes chocolate... I think. But not too sweet. And she liked all the little fancy decorations—my wife always made sure the cakes looked special." He paused, then added, quieter, "It's been a year since we lost her. I just want to get this right."

Susan met his eyes, a quiet understanding passing between them. "I know how that feels," she said softly. "I lost my husband a few years back. The first birthdays, the first holidays... they're the hardest."

He swallowed, nodding. "Yeah. They are."

She reached for her pencil. "But here's the good part, you don't have to do it all alone. Let's start simple. How about a chocolate cake with a light mousse filling? Not too sweet, but still rich. And for decorations, we can keep it elegant—maybe a bit of gold leaf or some delicate sugar flowers?"

His brows lifted slightly. "That sounds... perfect."

Susan smiled. "See? We're getting somewhere. Want her name on it? Or maybe a little message?"

He thought for a moment. "Just 'Happy Sweet Sixteen, Emma.' She's not one for a lot of fuss."

"Got it." Susan jotted it down. "And I can box up some extra treats, maybe some macarons or little cupcakes? Something to go with the cake."

He let out a breath, the tension easing from his shoulders. "That would be amazing. Thank you. Really."

She tapped her notepad. "Alright, we're all set. You can pick it up next Friday, does morning work for you?"

"Morning's perfect." He stood, reaching for his wallet, but Susan waved a hand.

"Payment when you pick it up."

He hesitated, then nodded. "Thank you. You have no idea how much this means."

She smiled warmly. "It's what I do. And it was nice meeting you...?"

"Daniel," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Daniel, I'm Susan. I'll see you next week."

As he left, Susan watched him go, a quiet warmth settling in her chest.

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The bright bulbs surrounding the mirror cast a warm, flattering glow, illuminating the cluttered makeup station in front of Frances. Glass jars of cold cream and powders sat alongside an array of lipsticks in shades of red and pink, their golden tubes gleaming under the lights. A tray of brushes and puffs lay beside a row of neatly arranged compacts, and bottles of setting lotion and hair spray crowded the surface, filling the air with the faint scent of rosewater and alcohol.

Behind her, the hairdresser worked methodically, pinning sections of her blonde curls into perfect, structured waves. The soft hum of chatter filled the dressing room, quick, cheerful conversations bouncing between the women in makeup and hair. They gossiped about a starlet's scandalous affair, debated the best way to set pin curls overnight, and giggled about the studio's latest publicity stunt. It was the usual morning chaos, familiar and lively, but today, Frances barely heard any of it.

She sat still, unusually quiet, staring at her reflection but not really seeing it. The hairdresser's voice drifted through the noise, directing a question toward her, something about how she wanted her hair styled for the shoot.

Frances didn't respond.

A beat passed, then another, before the woman gave her a light nudge. "Frances, darling, you with us?"

She blinked, snapping out of her thoughts. "Hmm?"

The chatter around them briefly quieted as a few of the women glanced over. "You okay, honey? You've been awfully quiet this morning."

Frances managed a small smile, waving a hand dismissively. "Just a headache. Didn't sleep well."

One of the makeup girls, a kind-faced woman in her forties, reached into the pocket of her smock and pulled out a small white tablet. "Here, take this. It'll help."

Frances hesitated for only a second before taking it. Saying no would only invite more concern, and she didn't have the energy for that. She popped the pill into her mouth, reaching for the glass of water that was always kept on the station for her. It went down easily, cool against her dry throat.

"Thanks," she murmured, setting the glass back down.

The woman gave her an understanding pat on the shoulder before turning back to her work, smoothing powder over Frances's already flawless complexion. The conversation around them picked up again, moving on to some director's rumored affair.

Frances exhaled slowly, focusing on the feel of the brush running through her hair, the soft tug of pins securing her curls. The makeup artist reached for a powder puff, tilting Frances's chin slightly to dust away any shine.

She let them fuss over her, let them transform her, knowing that in just a short while, she'd step in front of the camera, slip into the role they expected of her. The ever-radiant Frances Louise, the perfect girl next door.

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The silk blouse slipped effortlessly over the actress's shoulders, the delicate sheer sleeves floating as Yaz adjusted the fit. She stepped back, tilting her head as she examined the overall look, the soft elegance of the blouse against the structured lines of the pencil skirt. It was a perfect match.

The actress, Vivian Hayworth, a rising starlet with a sharp wit, twisted slightly, admiring her reflection in the mirror. "Yaz, darling, I swear, you have magic hands. This is divine."

Yaz smirked, smoothing a crease near the waist. "Glad you like it. You'll be comfortable enough to move about in it?"

"Oh, absolutely. Though I doubt I'll be moving much in this picture. Not with Joseph barking

orders every five minutes.” She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Honestly, between him and Jackson, I’m lucky if I get a word in edgewise.”

Yaz chuckled. She was used to these conversations by now, actors venting about their co-stars, their directors, their contracts. It was all part of the job.

Vivian leaned in conspiratorially. “You know, between you and me, I think Joseph only hired Jackson cause they go to the same goddamn poker nights. He can’t act for shit, but oh, he knows how to play a hand of cards.”

Yaz snorted, shaking her head, but before she could respond, there was a sudden, urgent knock at the door.

She frowned, stepping away from the fitting area. “Give me a second.” She opened the door to find one of the other costume designers, Agnes, standing there wide-eyed, breathless, and clutching Yaz’s arm.

“Do you have a towel?” her voice was barely above a whisper, but her grip was tight. “It’s urgent!”

Vivian, still standing by the mirror, frowned. “I do, here.” She grabbed one from a nearby shelf and handed it over. “What’s going on?”

“You look like the war just started” Yaz frowned

“Worse!” The woman said with a shaky voice

Yaz’s confusion deepened. “Agnes, what the hell is this about?”

Agnes swallowed hard, glancing over her shoulder. “Please help me, I don’t know what to do. Just, please, be discreet.”

Vivian exchanged a look with Yaz, her earlier amusement gone. Without hesitation, both women followed Agnes down the hallway, their heels clicking against the polished floor.

Agnes led them into another dressing room and quickly shut the door behind them.

Yaz barely had time to take in the scene before her stomach twisted.

A young actress, barely out of her teens, lay curled up on a recliner, her face twisted in agony. Blood soaked the fabric beneath her, staining her legs and pooling onto the floor. Her breathing was ragged, and every so often, a strangled whimper escaped her lips.

Yaz’s heart lurched. “What the, what the hell is going on?” She turned to Agnes. “We need to call an ambulance.”

The woman on the recliner suddenly gasped, her body tensing. “No,” she choked out. “No hospitals.”

Vivian took one look at her and knew exactly what's going. She crouched beside her, gently taking her trembling hand. "Sweetheart, you need help," she murmured. "You're not gonna make it like this."

Yaz, still trying to process the scene, looked at Maggie. "Agnes, for God's sake, tell me what's happened."

Agnes hesitated, glancing at the girl on the recliner before finally whispering, "She had an abortion yesterday. And they...they messed her up."

"Waaa?" A cold chill swept through Yaz's body.

Vivian tightened her grip on the girl's hand. "Baby, you're bleeding too much. If you don't get help, you're going to die."

"Nooo!" the girls face twisted in pain, she rubbed her face into the recliner

Yaz inhaled sharply, trying to keep herself together. She'd never seen anything like this before, never felt this kind of fear humming under her skin. But one thing was clear, this girl needed help, and fast.

She turned to Agnes, her voice low but firm. "We have to do something. Now...She'll bleed to death!"

Vivian leaned closer to the young woman, still gripping her hand tightly. "Sweetheart, listen to me," she murmured, her voice steady but urgent. "I know you're scared, but you have to let us help you. You can't stay like this. I'll drive you...nobody needs to know. I swear I won't tell a soul...Pleaseeee."

"I'll lose my job!" the woman barely said through pain

"You won't...Nobody will know...I promise sweetheart." Vivian pleaded

The girl's labored breaths hitched, and for a moment, Yaz thought she might refuse again. But finally, with a weak nod, she whispered, "Okay."

Vivian exhaled in relief and turned to Yaz, her expression sharp and decisive. "Go. Let everyone know I won't be shooting today...I'm not feeling well." She gave Yaz a look that left no room for argument. "I'll take care of everything here."

Yaz hesitated for half a second before nodding. Then she turned and rushed out of the dressing room.

She moved as fast as her heels would allow, weaving through the maze of hallways, past dressing rooms, makeup stations, and prop storage. The distant hum of conversations and the whirl of sewing machines faded behind her as she neared the soundstage.

As soon as she stepped onto the set, she spotted the director, Joseph Langford, a stout, balding man with a perpetual scowl standing near the camera rig, barking instructions to the crew. Bright lights bore down on the half-finished set, where assistants scurried to adjust props and lighting.

Yaz took a breath and stepped forward. "Mr. Langford."

Langford barely looked at her as he waved a hand at one of the grips. "No, no, I want that lamp angled down....do I have to do everything myself?" He finally turned to Yaz, already impatient. "What?"

"Miss Hayworth won't be shooting today," she said, keeping her voice firm but polite. "She's unwell."

Silence.

Then, a sharp laugh. "Unwell?" Langford echoed, his expression twisting in disbelief. "Unwell?" He turned, throwing his hands in the air. "This is goddamn Hollywood! We don't get to be 'unwell'!"

Yaz didn't flinch, though every nerve in her body was on edge. "She won't be coming," she repeated, standing her ground.

Langford's face turned red as he clenched his jaw. Then, without warning, he slammed the clipboard onto the floor, the sound echoing through the set. "Do you have any idea what this does to my schedule? To my picture?" he bellowed.

Yaz sighed, unimpressed. "Look, I don't have time to argue, I'm sorry. I'm just delivering the message."

Langford jabbed a finger at her. "You costume girls think you can just waltz in here..."

"I really must be going," Yaz cut him off, voice clipped but polite. "Terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and walked off the set, Langford still fuming behind her.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, she exhaled and picked up her pace again.

She ran back down the hallway, her breath coming fast, her heart hammering. She burst into the dressing room, where Vivian and Agnes were already at work, doing their best to tidy up the younger woman. The girl was trembling, pale as a ghost, her dark curls damp with sweat. Now washed and in a clean skirt she was sitting down in pain. Agnes knelt beside her, buttoning a fresh blouse, while Vivian draped a coat over her shoulders.

"Help me get her to my car," Vivian said, her voice tight with urgency. "I'm taking her straight to the hospital. I'll register her under a fake name."

Yaz hurried to the girl's other side, slipping an arm around her waist as they gently pulled her to her feet. She let out a soft cry, curling in on herself, and Vivian winced.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath. "This town treats abortion like it's contraception." She shook her head, anger and fear flickering across her face. "And half the time, it's some butcher doing it in a goddamn basement."

The girl whimpered again, and Vivian softened, smoothing her hair back. "Almost there, sweetheart."

They guided her toward the door, trying to make it look as natural as possible. The bright midday sun streamed through the hallway windows, catching dust in the air. Just as they stepped into the corridor, a voice called out.

"Miss Vivian? What's wrong?"

Yaz's stomach clenched as they turned to see one of the studio's senior secretaries, watching them with a concerned frown.

Vivian barely hesitated. "She's not feeling well. I'm driving her home."

The woman's eyes darted to the girl, who was barely upright between them, but she didn't push. She simply nodded. "Alright. Hope you feel better, honey...You look as pale as a sheet."

"She'll be fine. Thank you" Vivian forced a smile

They kept moving, steady and purposeful, out of the studio doors and into the harsh afternoon light. The sun was relentless, baking the pavement, and the lot was bustling with crew members on their lunch break, cars coming and going. By the time they reached Vivian's car, the girl was barely conscious.

"Here, easy now," Agnes murmured as they helped her onto the back seat. She curled up immediately, shivering despite the coat around her shoulders.

Vivian turned to them, gripping their hands tightly. "Thank you. Really." She glanced back at the girl, then back at them, her expression desperate. "Please...can we keep this between us."

Yaz and Agnes exchanged a look, then nodded.

"Sure" Yaz whispered barely audible

Vivian exhaled in relief. "Alright. I have to go." She climbed into the driver's seat and, with one last glance at them, pulled away.

The two women stood there in the glaring daylight, stunned, shaken. The sun pressed

down, but Yaz felt cold, her hands clammy.

“D’you think she’ll be alright?” Yaz murmured.

Agnes swallowed, arms wrapped around herself. “I hope so.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Then Agnes exhaled and squared her shoulders.

“Come on,” she said. “Can you please help me to clean up all that blood before anyone sees it.”

“Sure” Yaz swallowed hard but nodded, following Agnes back inside.

.....

The studio was buzzing with activity, but Frances felt like she was watching it all from a distance. The bright overhead lights, the rustling of fabric, the chatter of assistants adjusting props—it all blurred together. She was seated on a stool in front of a painted backdrop, a vision of poised glamour in a fitted silk dress that hugged her figure just right. Her makeup was flawless, her golden curls perfectly styled, yet the smile she forced onto her lips felt brittle.

The photographer, an older man with a kind face, lowered his camera slightly. “You alright, Frances?” he asked, peering over the lens.

She blinked, snapping out of her haze. “Of. Yes, of course,” she said quickly, tilting her chin up and shifting her pose.

He didn’t press, but his eyes held quiet understanding. “You don’t have to push through if you’re not feeling well.”

Frances hesitated. “It’s just a migraine,” she lied.

The truth clawed at her chest. The weight of it made her feel as if the ground beneath her was crumbling, the seconds slipping through her fingers like sand.

The photographer studied her for a beat, then nodded. “Let’s take a short break.”

Relief flooded through her. “Thank you,” she murmured, sliding off the stool.

She walked briskly toward the dressing area, weaving past crew members adjusting lighting equipment and costume racks filled with gowns. The space smelled faintly of warm dust and face powder, mixed with the sharp tang of hairspray. She slipped through a discreet door marked Ladies’ Room, shutting it behind her with a soft click.

The bathroom was a typical studio powder room, modest but clean. A long counter with a wide mirror stretched across the wall, lined with small glass light bulbs that cast a flattering

glow. The walls were pale pink, the tiled floor checkered black and white. The scent of talcum powder and perfume lingered in the air.

Frances gripped the edge of the sink, splaying her palms over the cold porcelain. Her breath hitched, her chest tightening, too tight. She felt like she couldn't breathe, like the walls were pressing in. A distant ringing filled her ears.

Pull yourself together.

The door swung open, and she stiffened. A woman, another actress she vaguely recognized, walked in. Their eyes met in the mirror, and the woman gave her a polite nod before disappearing into a stall.

Frances turned back to the sink, twisting the tap. Cold water gushed from the faucet, and she cupped her hands under it, letting the chill seep into her skin, grounding her.

After a moment, she straightened, reaching into her handbag with damp fingers. Her hand closed around the small glass bottle, the label peeling slightly from being handled too often. She hesitated, her heart still racing.

Then, with a sharp inhale, she twisted the cap off, shook a pill into her palm, and shoved it into her mouth.

She swallowed dry, pressing her hand briefly to her stomach as if that would settle the uneasy feeling clawing inside her.

Exhaling slowly, she met her reflection in the mirror. Her face was still the picture of elegance, her lipstick flawless, but she could see the tension in her own eyes.

Enough.

She squared her shoulders, tossed the crumpled paper towel into the bin, and walked out, head held high.

.....

The midday sun beat down on the studio courtyard, casting long shadows across the pavement as Yaz hurried, her heels clicking against the concrete. The events of earlier still clung to her like a second skin. She was already painfully late.

She dodged a group of crew members hauling set pieces, murmuring rushed apologies as she weaved through the maze of buildings. Sweat pricked at the nape of her neck, but she barely noticed. The set was just ahead, one last push.

As she reached the entrance, she barely had time to catch her breath before a voice cut through the air like a whip.

"Well, well, what an honor. We're absolutely thrilled by your presence, Miss Khan. Truly.

Wouldn't want to start the whole damn show without you."

Yaz exhaled sharply, straightening her blouse as she turned to face the man. One of the assistant directors, Charles something-or-other—always smug, always impatient. His arms were crossed, his expression dripping with sarcasm.

"I'm sorry," Yaz said quickly, still breathless. "Got caught up with something urgent."

"Oh, did you?" His brow arched. "Hate to break it to you, but the world doesn't revolve around you, darling."

Yaz muttered under her breath, just loud enough to hear, "Well, it certainly doesn't revolve around women bleeding out in a dressing room either."

Charles narrowed his eyes. "What was that?"

She flashed him a perfectly poised smile. "I said, 'I'm sure the world keeps spinning just fine without me.' But of course, I wouldn't dream of testing that theory any longer than necessary."

Charles eyed her suspiciously, but before he could dig any further, someone called his name from across the set, drawing his attention away. Yaz seized the opportunity, slipping past him and into the controlled chaos of the soundstage, still trying to shake the weight of the morning from her shoulders.

....

The moment Frances stepped through the front door, she kicked off her heels, sighing as the plush carpet cushioned her aching feet. The weight of the day clung to her shoulders, pressing down with every breath. She unbuttoned her coat, shrugging it off and hanging it neatly by the door, just as Betty appeared from the hallway, a stack of post in her hands.

"Long day, Miss Frances?" Betty asked, giving her a quick once-over.

"You could say that," Frances muttered, running a hand through her hair.

Betty nodded knowingly and handed over the letters. "Your assistant called, said it wasn't urgent, but she'd like you to ring her when you can. Oh, and we're running low on a few things. Kitchen staples, some cleaning supplies. The cleaner's coming in two days, so I figured I'd let you know."

Frances barely glanced at the letters before tossing them onto the side table with a dull thud. "Just get whatever we need," she said flatly, already making her way towards the living room. "I trust you, Betty. No need to check with me all the time."

Betty hesitated for a second before nodding. "Alright, ma'am, I'll take care of it." She turned to go, but something in Frances's demeanor made her pause.

Frances realized it, too, the shortness in her tone, the dismissiveness. She exhaled, forcing herself to soften. "Betty," she called gently.

Betty turned back.

"I'm sorry," Frances admitted, rubbing her temple. "That was abrupt. It's just been... a rough day."

Betty's expression shifted from professional efficiency to quiet concern. "Are you alright, Miss?"

Frances nodded, offering a small, tired smile. "I just need some rest, that's all."

Betty studied her for a beat, then gave a warm, understanding nod. "Alright. I'll leave you to it."

As Betty turned to leave, Frances spoke again. "You can head home early. There's nothing else that needs doing."

Betty looked surprised for a moment, then gave a grateful smile. "That's very kind ma'am. Thank you."

Frances only nodded, already sinking onto the couch as the silence of the house finally settled around her. She leaned her head back against the cushion, closing her eyes, trying to will away the weight pressing down on her chest.

After few minutes she exhaled as she pushed herself upright from the sofa, running a hand through her hair. The weight of the day clung to her like a second skin. She reached for the buttons of her blouse, flicking them open one by one before shrugging it off and letting it slide down her arms. With a sigh, she tossed it onto the armrest and reached for the telephone on the side table.

She hesitated for only a second before picking up the receiver, pressing it to her ear as she turned the rotary dial, the mechanism clicking softly.

The line buzzed once. Then, twice.

Then a familiar voice answered, clipped but unmistakably hers. "Yasmin Khan speaking."

Frances let out a slow breath, some of the tension in her chest easing just slightly.

"It's me," she said, her voice quieter now. "Are you alone?"

There was a brief pause on the line before Yaz's voice came through, softer now. "Yeah, I'm alone."

Frances exhaled, running a hand through her hair. "I gave Betty the rest of the day off." She

hesitated for just a second before continuing. "Would you rather come here instead of meeting at your studio?"

Yaz didn't need to think long. "Course. What changed your mind?"

Frances sighed, her voice barely above a murmur. "I just... I need you in my own bed tonight. If you don't mind."

Yaz's response was instant, warm. "I don't mind which bed I share with you, love. As long as I'm in it."

A soft giggle escaped Frances, light, fleeting, but genuine. She whispered, "I love you."

"Love you too," Yaz said, smiling against the receiver.

"I'll send the driver to pick you up from the studio. When are you finishing?"

"In an hour" Yaz huffed a small laugh. "I've got nothing with me."

Frances giggled again, the sound like a quiet relief. "I've got a spare toothbrush."

And for the first time all day, she truly smiled.

Yaz chuckled. "Oh well, that settles it then. Can't say no to a spare toothbrush."

Frances sighed, the warmth in Yaz's voice already easing the tension in her shoulders. "I'll tell him to be there soon. Shouldn't take long."

"Alright," Yaz said, then after a beat, added softly, "See you soon, love."

Frances closed her eyes for a moment, holding onto that. "See you soon."

Neither of them hung up right away. It was one of those moments where neither wanted to let go first.

Yaz eventually exhaled a little laugh. "Alright, darling, hang up before I start getting all sappy."

Frances smiled. "Too late for that."

Yaz laughed, then there was a quiet click as she hung up.

Frances held the receiver to her ear for just a second longer before finally placing it back down. The house was silent again, but this time, it didn't feel quite so heavy.

The quiet of the house settled around her, but her mind was far from still. She straightened up, reaching for the phone again. Her fingers brushing the cold wood as she dialed "0" for the operator.

"Operator, how may I assist you?" came the familiar voice.

"I need to place a call to Santa Barbara, 1212 Crescent Avenue," Frances replied, her voice tinged with urgency.

"One moment, please," the operator said, the faint clicking of the switchboard in the background.

Frances pressed the receiver to her ear, letting out a soft sigh. She tapped her fingers against the desk as she listened to the faint clicking and buzzing of the connection being made. She paced, the phone cord trailing behind her as she moved toward the large window. She twisted the cord around her fingers, her thoughts spinning, waiting. She stared out into the fading light of the evening, the garden outside barely visible through the dusk.

"St. Mary's School, how may I direct your call?"

Frances gripped the phone tighter, her voice steady but laced with an undercurrent of impatience. "This is Frances Louise Bennett. I'd like to speak with my daughter, Lily Bennett, please."

"Certainly, Miss. Please hold for a moment."

The seconds stretched uncomfortably long and felt like hours as Frances continued to twist the cord between her fingers, walking in circles, until finally, the line clicked again.

"Hello?" came a soft voice, a familiar one that made her heart leap.

"Lily?" Frances's voice softened with relief.

"Mummy!" Lily's voice was light, almost breathless with happiness.

Frances smiled, her eyes closing for a moment as she let her daughter's voice soothe her. "Hello, sweetheart."

....

Yaz was deep in her work, hunched over her desk, pencil in hand. The warm glow of the desk lamp illuminated the desk. She bit her lip, her other hand smoothing the edges of the paper as she worked, determined to get everything in order before leaving when a soft knock broke her focus. She exhaled through her nose, momentarily irritated by the interruption.

"Come in," she called, not bothering to lift her head.

The door creaked open, and a male voice greeted her. "Miss Khan."

She looked up, blinking as she took in the vaguely familiar face of the man standing before her. Clean-cut, well-dressed, and exuding the kind of smooth confidence she had come to associate with people who worked behind the scenes in Hollywood.

"Can I help you?" she asked, setting her work aside.

"You probably don't remember me," he said, stepping forward and extending a hand. "Andy, Frances's..."

"Agent," Yaz finished for him, standing to shake his hand. "Yeah, I remember. Sorry, I'm bad with faces. If you're looking for Frances, she's gone for today, but I can deliver a message."

"I'm not here to see Frances," he said smoothly.

Yaz's brow furrowed slightly. "Oh?"

"I came to speak with you."

Yaz hesitated, her confusion deepening. Still, she gestured to the chair opposite her. "Alright. Please, sit. Can I offer you something? I don't have much here, but..."

"No, thank you. I won't be long."

She studied him as he sat, still unsure where this was going. Straightening her skirt, she took her own seat again. "So, what's this all about?"

Andy leaned forward slightly, clasping his hands together. "I'm not a man to beat around the bush, so I'll be direct with you, Miss Khan. As direct as I possibly can be."

Yaz tilted her head, intrigued despite the unease creeping into her chest. "Go ahead. By all means, I appreciate that attitude

He nodded, exhaling as if preparing for a difficult conversation. "See Miss Khan, this business has rules. It doesn't matter how talented or beautiful someone is. Plenty of young women come through here every day hoping to make it, but success isn't just about talent. It's about knowing how to play the game."

Yaz's lips twitched. She had a good idea of where this was going, but she let him keep talking.

"Frances is young," he continued. "She has an incredible career ahead of her. She's smart, determined, and she has the kind of star power most people can only dream of. I would hate to see anything jeopardize that."

Yaz leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. "I agree," she said coolly. "But for someone who claims to be direct, you're taking your time getting to the point."

Andy exhaled through his nose, as if debating whether to drop the polite act. "Alright," he said. "I'll put it plainly. Frances's relationship with you... it's a complication. One that could cost her a lot."

Yaz's jaw tensed, but she kept her face unreadable.

"I'm sure you understand how things work in this town," Andy went on. "People talk. They speculate. And while it might not seem like a big deal to you, it is to the people who make decisions. The ones who determine which faces get to be on those magazine covers, who gets the starring roles, who..."

"Let me stop you right there," Yaz cut in, her voice sharp. "Because I'd hate for you to waste your breath trying to dress this up as concern. What is it you actually want?"

Andy sighed reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small leather-bound notebook. He flipped it open, retrieved a pen, and scribbled something down before tearing out the page and placing it on Yaz's desk.

"Would seven thousand be enough?" he asked casually, as if he were negotiating the price of a used car.

For a moment, Yaz just stared at the check. A cold wave washed over her, then a slow-burning heat crawled up her spine. She let out a quiet laugh, more disbelief than amusement before dragging a hand down her face.

Then her expression hardened. The smirk faded, replaced by a look so sharp it could cut glass.

"You're trying to buy me off," she said flatly.

"I'm offering you an opportunity," Andy corrected. "A generous one."

Yaz's leaned over taking a check smoothly then tore it in half throwing it on the desk. "You rotten, pathetic bastard."

Andy sighed as he put his checkbook away. "We can do this the easy way, Miss Khan," he said as he stood. "Or we can make things very uncomfortable for you."

Yaz rose slowly, keeping her gaze locked on him. "Is that a threat?"

"A warning," he said smoothly. "A word of advice. This place is very good at creating illusions. Don't forget that."

Yaz let out a short, humorless laugh. "You know," she said, stepping around her desk until she was just a foot away from him, "if you had as much power as you're pretending, you wouldn't be here trying to pay me to disappear."

For the first time, something flickered in Andy's eyes. A momentary lapse in control.

Yaz leaned in slightly, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Now get the hell out of my office."

Andy straightened his tie, smoothing his expression back into indifference. "Your courage is admirable," he said. "Good day, Miss Khan."

And with that, he turned and walked out.

Yaz stood there, fists clenched, heart hammering in her chest. The moment the door clicked shut, she released a slow breath and shook her head.

"Bloody bastard," she muttered. Then, with a deep breath, she sat back down, rolling her shoulders as if shaking off the weight of the conversation.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't quite get rid of the bitter taste it left behind.

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