

Chapter 18

A Church in Brooklyn, New York, 1954

The heavy doors of St. Anthony's Church creaked open, releasing a chill that seemed to cut through the warmth of the evening sermon. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of polished wood and faint traces of incense. Streetlights filtered through the towering stained-glass windows, casting muted, colorful patterns across the cold stone floors. The pews, polished but worn, were a testament to decades of use by the working-class families who filled the church every Sunday.

A man stood at the back of the church, his hands clasped in front of him, as though in prayer. He had a presence about him, tall, broad-shouldered, and straight-backed, his figure giving the impression of strength. His dark brown hair was neatly combed, though slightly thinning at the temples, and his face, square-jawed and weathered, bore the marks of middle age. Despite the aging, his posture remained erect, like a man accustomed to bearing burdens no one else could see.

His suit, a well-worn grey, was pressed neatly, the trousers just a little too short, revealing polished brown leather shoes that gleamed in the dim light. The edges of his shirt cuffs peeked out from beneath his sleeves, stiffened by starch, and his black tie was knotted with the kind of care that only someone who took pride in appearances could achieve. He looked the part of a respectable man, the kind who followed the rules, the kind who blended in with his surroundings and wore the mask of decency as though it were his second skin.

The final notes of the organ faded, and the heavy oak doors of St. Anthony's swung open as the parishioners filtered out, their voices low in reverent conversation. Inside, the scent of incense lingered, mixing with the crisp air seeping through the cracks of the old stone building. Stanley stood near the back pew, his hat in hand, observing the solemn procession of familiar faces.

He adjusted the collar of his worn overcoat, brushing off an invisible speck of dust from his lapel. He liked to think he still cut a respectable figure, the kind of man who blended into any crowd, commanding quiet respect.

A few parishioners, mostly old family friends, caught sight of him. Their eyes softened as they approached, nodding politely. Stanley returned their gestures with a tight, controlled smile, careful not to let it linger too long.

“Stanley, my word, I haven’t seen you in ages,” came the familiar voice of Miss Duffy. She shuffled toward him, a small, round woman with graying hair and a perpetual air of concern. Her gloved hand extended toward him, trembling slightly.

“Mary,” he greeted, taking her hand gently. “Didn’t think I’d see you today. How’s Peggy?”

“Oh, she’s fine. We just got back last week,” Miss Duffy replied, her voice warm but tinged with exhaustion. “I figured she no longer needs my help now the baby’s bigger. Also…” She leaned in conspiratorially, a smirk on her face. “I hate Canada. Too cold for me. Don’t tell Henry…he loves it. Barely escaped moving there.”

Stanley chuckled softly, though his eyes remained distant. “Cold’s no place for you, Mary.”

“Exactly,” she nodded, straightening as her husband approached.

“Stanley! Hey, buddy.” Henry Duffy, a tall man with a broad chest and thinning hair, clapped Stanley on the back. They exchanged a firm handshake.

“Henry,” Stanley acknowledged with a practiced warmth.

Miss Duffy, not one to be deterred, pressed on. “Anyways, how are you, dear? Still keeping busy?”

Stanley exhaled slowly, the weight of the question pressing on him. “Oh, I’m managing,” he said, his voice low, almost melancholic. “Business is business. You know how it is…up and down. But I’m making do.”

Miss Duffy frowned, concerned, etching lines into her face. “Must be hard since Maggie left. She was such a help. Lord knows we’re not getting any younger. How is she? Henry and I saw her film at the cinema. Looks a picture, our Maggie.”

Stanley’s jaw tightened, but he kept his expression neutral. “I don’t hear from her much. Busy, I suppose. You know how kids are.”

“I thought you two were so close,” Miss Duffy lamented. “Such a shame.”

Stanley's smile faltered for a fraction of a second. "Yes, well," he said, masking his irritation with a shrug. "As long as she's happy, that's all that matters."

Behind Miss Duffy, a few more familiar faces nodded politely, their expressions carefully neutral.

"What about your boy?" Henry asked, a hint of curiosity in his tone. "Still no word from him?"

Stanley stiffened, his grip on his hat tightening. "Jimmy?" he repeated, as though the name tasted foreign. "Still nothing. No idea where he is. I don't think I'll ever see him again to be honest." His voice had a hollow edge, one that didn't invite further inquiry.

An awkward silence hung between them. Miss Duffy shifted uncomfortably. "It's a shame," she said softly. "After all you've done for those kids."

"I keep telling ya," Henry interjected, "it's a woman. Must've got some girl into trouble."

"Oh, leave it, Henry," Miss Duffy scolded, her eyes flicking back to Stanley. "Well, anyways, why don't you come over for lunch one day? It'd be nice to catch up. I miss those days when you and Libby used to come for dinner." Her voice softened at the mention. "Bless her soul. Feels like it was just yesterday."

Elisabeth Frances—Libby, as everyone used to call his late wife. At the sound of her name, Stanley's face remained impassive, though a flicker of something indecipherable crossed his eyes, too fleeting to grasp.

"Will do, definitely..." he smiled politely "If you'll excuse me," he said abruptly. "I need to get going."

"Of course, dear. Just give us a call," Miss Duffy said, watching him go.

Stanley nodded, tipping his hat slightly as he stepped out into the cold. The snow crunched beneath his feet as he made his way down the street, the church bells tolling behind him. Alone again. Just the way he preferred it.

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It was late afternoon, and the last rays of the sun bathed the streets of Los Angeles in a warm, golden light. A car approached the wrought-iron gates of Frances's estate. Its two-tone paint, a soft seafoam green paired with creamy white, gave it an elegant, almost ethereal presence as it glided down the tree-lined street. The sweeping lines of the body were highlighted by gleaming chrome details that caught the afternoon light in all the right ways, turning heads as it passed.

Inside, a young woman with dark, wavy hair framing her heart-shaped face glanced toward the gates. With a smile, she extended her arm and pressed the button on the intercom. The soft buzz echoed through the house, and inside, Frances, seated in the living room with a book in hand, put it down on the side table and hurried to the wall-mounted speaker.

"Yes?" she answered, her voice warm.

"Just your boring old friend, coming for some fresh gossip," came the cheerful reply.

Frances laughed, a light, airy sound, and pressed the button to notify the gatekeeper. "Let her in," she murmured with a smile.

As the gates swung open, and the car parked in front the woman stepped gracefully from the car. Her deep navy pencil dress hugging her figure, its sleek lines contrasting with a white, elegant coat, perfect for a light Los Angeles winter.

Betty opened the door and greeted the visitor with a polite smile. "Good afternoon, Miss Helen"

"Hello Betty" the woman smiled cheerfully

Betty nodded in acknowledgment, and with a swift but graceful gesture, led the visitor into the house. The soft click of the door closing behind them was the only sound as they made their way through the spacious hall.

The two women entered the living room where Frances was already waiting impatiently. Dressed casually in capri trousers and a white, light jumper adorned with pearl beading around the collar. Her blonde curls pinned on one side. She slid the book back on the shelf and turned around. Frances beamed, her face lighting up with joy as she walked towards her friend, arms open, giving her a warm hug.

"It's been too long," she said, her voice full of affection.

"I know, I know," the woman replied with a laugh, hugging Frances back. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

"Impossible," Frances teased, pulling back to take in her friend's outfit. "You look stunning, as always."

Betty, with her usual quiet grace, offered to prepare refreshments. As she stepped away the two women settled onto the sofa, making themselves comfortable as they exchanged stories of the past month. The chatter was light, full of laughter and ease.

Betty came back settling the tray with drinks, some sandwiches and biscuits on the coffee table.

"Thank you Betty." Frances smiled

"Is there anything else Miss Frances?"

"No, that would be all, thank you."

Betty nodded and left the room closing the big sliding glass door behind her and leaving the two women to their privacy.

As the door clicked shut, Frances's expression changed. Her smile faded, and she set her wine glass aside, turning to her friend. The lighthearted mood was replaced by a quiet seriousness.

"Helen... there's something I wanna talk to you about," Frances began, her voice low.

Helen raised an eyebrow. "Okay... Jesus, don't look so serious. You're scaring me."

Frances let out a quiet chuckle, trying to break the tension. "I just wanted to apologize."

"Apologize for what?"

"For lying to you..."

Helen's confusion deepened. "I don't understand, darling... lying about what?"

Frances took a breath, looking down for a moment. "You caught me off guard last time when you asked about me and Yaz."

Helen's eyes widened. "Oooh, that."

"I'm so sorry, darling. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't something I felt I couldn't decide on my own... you know I trust you completely, but Yaz deserves to have a say in all of it. It's her life too."

Helen nodded slowly. "I knew you weren't telling me the truth. You were way too defensive about it. That's just not you."

Frances winced. "I'm really sorry. We spoke about it and she's ok with me telling you."

Helen reached for Frances's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Hey, don't worry about it. I get it. I'm not upset. I never was. I knew you'd tell me eventually." She chuckled, leaning forward a bit. "So... can I finally know all the details? I'm dying here, girl."

Frances chuckled shyly, her cheeks warming.

"Is it serious? I'm guessing it is since you've been hiding it so much."

Frances met her gaze, her eyes softening. "I think it is this time."

"That's wonderful, darling. I'm so happy for you. She seems lovely... I only worked with her for a week, but she seemed really nice."

"She is," Frances said, her voice brimming with affection. "She's kind and gentle but also fierce and independent. So creative, so smart..." Her eyes sparkled as she continued. "She makes me laugh like no one else. And more than that...she makes me feel something so new. I feel loved, Helen. Truly loved. And alive. We talk about everything, nonstop. It's like... I don't know, it's just different with her."

"It sounds like it?"

Frances leaned back, her voice quiet but thoughtful. “Every relationship before... it was like chasing shadows. I’d hoped for something real, but deep down, I always knew it wasn’t. You know how it was.... I was holding on cause... well, you know what I’m like... I hate being alone.”

Helen gave a knowing smile. “Who doesn’t, honey?” She tilted her head, studying Frances.

Frances’s face softened, a genuine glow lighting up her eyes. “I’m happy. Really, truly happy. She gets me. She makes me feel safe, like I can be myself in a way I never thought possible.”

Helen’s eyes lit up. “Oh my... you’re really into her, aren’t you?”

Frances nodded, her tone more certain than ever. “I am. I know I can be... a bit much sometimes. A little intense.”

Helen snorted. “No, you’re not.”

Frances laughed. “Oh, I am. Clingy as anything. But she doesn’t seem to mind.”

“You’re not clingy, you’re just starved for love, Fran. Look at everything you’ve been through, being used, lied to. It’s no wonder. Your relationships were a car crash. And let’s face it, being with a woman, you’ve got more on your plate than most of us ever will. Cut yourself some slack.”

Frances blinked back tears, reaching for Helen’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “You’ve always been my rock, Helen. Through every love disaster and meltdown.”

Helen grinned. “Oh, come on. We’ve both had our moments. I’m hardly a picnic myself.”

“You? A picnic?” Frances smirked. “More like a rollercoaster.”

They burst into laughter, and Helen pulled Frances into a warm hug. “I’m really happy for you, Fran. I hope this works out.”

“I do too.” Frances’s voice softened as she pulled back, eyes shining with hope. “I just... I want her around all the time. Waking up next to her every morning.” She exhaled deeply “I know...it sounds crazy....”

“It’s not crazy,” Helen interrupted gently. “What’s crazy is that you can’t have what everyone else takes for granted. The world’s mad, not you. But you’ll figure it out.”

“I hope so.” Frances sighed. “I know what I want. I just... don’t know how to get there... You know...people fall for each other...get married, have kids...Everyone's happy for them...I can’t have that”

Helen squeezed her hand again, her voice reassuring. “You don’t need all the answers right now, honey. Just let yourself be happy. You deserve it. The rest? It’ll come. Trust me.”

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Yaz rubbed her temples, the faint hum of the sewing machines coming down the hallway blending into a dull roar in her head. The air in the studio felt thick, and the relentless pressure of Eleanor’s deadlines loomed over every breath she took.

The clock on the wall mocked her with each passing minute. Four days left. She had already completed nine fittings today, each one revealing a new issue to correct. Yaz sighed heavily, clutching the notes for the latest alterations as she made her way to the wardrobe department. Her feet dragged with every step, and the hallway seemed longer than usual.

Her stomach growled, a sharp reminder that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. The dizziness hit her in waves now, making the edges of her vision blur. She paused, leaning against the cool wall to steady herself. A deep breath. Another. She couldn’t afford to collapse now.

The wardrobe department was a flurry of activity, racks of garments rolling by and fabric swatches scattered everywhere. The team was visibly exhausted, faces drawn and shoulders slumped, yet they pushed forward, determined to meet the impossible demands. Yaz caught sight of the lead seamstress and handed over the notes, explaining the necessary changes as succinctly as her foggy mind would allow.

“Yaz, are you okay?” the seamstress asked, concern flickering in her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Yaz replied, forcing a tired smile. “Just a long day.”

The seamstress didn’t look convinced but nodded. As Yaz turned to leave, the world tilted slightly again. She braced herself against the table, breathing deeply. Just a few more hours, she thought, pushing forward.

If she could just hold out a little longer, maybe tonight she could sneak in a few hours of sleep before tomorrow’s chaos.

Suddenly her vision narrowed, dark spots blooming as the buzzing sounds around her faded. She tried to steady herself against a nearby rack, but her legs buckled beneath her. Before she could process what was happening, the world tipped sideways, and everything went black.

When she came around, she was on the floor, surrounded by the concerned faces of her coworkers. The room felt too bright, and the distant hum of sewing machines slowly came back into focus. Someone was fanning her with a pattern sheet, while another gently dabbed her forehead with a damp cloth.

“Yaz, can you hear me?” The voice belonged to the lead seamstress, her tone calm but urgent.

Yaz blinked slowly, trying to find her voice. “I’m... I’m okay,” she mumbled, her throat dry.

“You fainted,” another woman said softly. “You’re overworking yourself.”

A hand appeared in front of her, holding a small square of chocolate. “Here, eat this. It’ll help,” the seamstress said kindly.

Yaz took it with trembling fingers, the sweetness melting on her tongue and reviving her slightly. The taste was comforting, grounding her in the present.

“You need to rest,” the lead seamstress insisted, helping her to sit down on one of the chairs “You can’t keep pushing like this.”

Yaz nodded weakly, feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her. She knew they were right, but the weight of the looming deadlines felt heavier than ever. Still, for

now, she let herself lean back, savoring the small kindness and the momentary reprieve.

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Yaz stood in her small office, hands deftly pinning the hem of a pale silk gown draped over a mannequin. The dim light from her desk lamp cast long shadows across the room. Each stitch, each adjustment felt like a battle against time, but she was determined to see it through. The soft knock on the open door broke her concentration, and she turned, needle in hand.

One of the seamstresses stood there, grinning mischievously and holding a plate piled with an assortment of snacks.

“I, uh, kind of stole some food from the set,” she admitted, eyes twinkling. “Figured you needed it more than the actors.”

Yaz chuckled, shaking her head. “You’re cheeky, you know that? But thank you.” Her voice softened as she took the plate, touched by the gesture. “This means a lot.”

The seamstress shrugged, smiling. “We all need to look out for each other, right?”

Before Yaz could reply, movement in the hallway caught her eye. A familiar figure appeared behind the seamstress. Frances, looking effortlessly poised in a sleek white coat. The seamstress greeted her casually, stepping aside to let her through.

“I hope you’re feeling better now,” the seamstress added, giving Yaz a pointed look. “Try not to faint again, yeah?”

Yaz rolled her eyes. “It was a one-off.”

Frances’s expression darkened, her eyes widened in concern. “Faint? What’s she talking about?” Her voice was sharp, concern etched into every syllable.

Yaz waved it off with a dismissive smile. “Nothing. Just a little dizzy earlier. It’s fine now.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” the seamstress interjected, hands on her hips. “She collapsed right in the middle of the wardrobe department. Scared us all half to death.”

Yaz sighed, shooting her a look. "I'm fine now, really."

The seamstress, satisfied she'd made her point, gave Frances a polite nod. "I'll leave you two to it. Don't work too hard, Yaz. Miss Louise," she greeted Frances with a nod and with that, she slipped out of the room.

Frances closed the door behind her softly, her expression a mixture of concern and quiet frustration as she turned toward Yaz.

"What?" Yaz asked, her voice light, playing innocent as she adjusted a hem on the mannequin in front of her.

"You fainted? Why didn't you call me?" Frances's voice was gentle but firm, her brows knitting together.

Yaz shrugged, rolling her eyes with a small, playful smile. "I didn't want to make a fuss. It's just been a long day, that's all."

Frances stepped forward, her worry evident. She took Yaz's hand, lacing their fingers together before gently pulling her close. Wrapping her arms around her, Frances pressed their bodies together in a grounding embrace. "Please take care of yourself," she whispered against Yaz's ear.

Yaz nodded, her eyes fluttering shut as she absorbed the warmth of the moment. "Mmm," she hummed softly.

"I mean it," Frances continued, her voice low but insistent. "If you'd called me, I would've brought you food. Please, next time...call me."

"Alright," Yaz murmured, resting her head against Frances's shoulder.

Frances leaned back slightly, tilting Yaz's face up with gentle fingers. "Promise," she pressed, her hazel eyes searching Yaz's.

Yaz chuckled, the sound soft and sweet. "I promise," she said, her gaze warm as it met Frances's.

Satisfied, Frances leaned in, capturing Yaz's lips in a soft, lingering kiss. Time seemed to slow, their connection deep and calming. When they finally pulled away, Frances brushed a stray strand of hair from Yaz's face, her touch tender.

"Just... be careful," Frances whispered, a small smile playing on her lips.

"I will," Yaz replied, feeling more grounded than she had all day.

"Come on...Sit down, love," Frances ordered softly. "Before you keel over again."

Yaz chuckled but complied, settling into the chair as Frances grabbed the plate from the desk and set it in front of her. "Eat" she ordered and perched herself on the edge of the desk, crossing her legs with a casual elegance that seemed effortless.

"So, you're my bodyguard now?" Yaz teased, stabbing a piece of food with a fork and eyeing Frances playfully.

Frances grinned. "Maybe. Someone's gotta keep an eye on you."

Yaz grinned "I just had a wobble, that's all."

"A wobble?" Frances echoed incredulously. "You passed out. That's not a wobble."

"Fine," Yaz conceded between bites. "Maybe it was more than a wobble." She grinned eyeing Frances perched on the edge of the desk. "So, what now? You planning to stand guard over me all night?"

Frances tilted her head, raising an eyebrow. "You should feel lucky. I'm excellent at guarding."

Yaz laughed softly before taking a bite. "Seriously, though, where are you headed after this?"

Frances's smile dimmed slightly as she straightened up. "Off to a meeting. Waiting to see if they approve my pay raise."

Yaz's brows lifted. "That's still up in the air?Thought it'd be a done deal by now."

“You’d think,” Frances muttered. “But they’re dragging their feet.”

"What the hell"

“Yeah,” Frances admitted, sighing. “I’ve been pushing for it. Guess we’ll see if they think I’m worth it.” She tried to sound lighthearted, but Yaz could hear the tension beneath her words.

“They’re daft if they say no.” Yaz’s voice was firm, her gaze steady. “You’re worth every penny.”

Frances smiled softly, reaching out to squeeze Yaz’s hand. “Thanks darling. Let’s hope they see it that way too.”

"And if they don't?"

"I'll put my foot down and threaten to leave"

"You would leave? Seriously?" Her eyes widened in shock

"Too right I would, and you're going with me, so don't look so panicked. Not like you're very appreciated here either."

Yaz chuckled stabbing a fork into another piece of meat. "Don’t know what you're talking about, they treat me like a queen."

Frances couldn’t help but laugh.

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Frances strode into the conference room, her head held high, blonde curls perfectly set. The room was cold, both in temperature and atmosphere. A group of executives sat at a long mahogany table, their expressions neutral, almost rehearsed. A cloud of cigarette smoke rose above their heads.

She smiled politely, though tension simmered beneath the surface. Taking her seat, she adjusted the hem of her tailored suit, a soft beige that exuded elegance.

“Thank you for coming, Frances,” Mr. Harmon, the head of production, began with a practiced smile. “We wanted to discuss your contract moving forward.”

Frances leaned forward, hands clasped. “I appreciate that. As I mentioned, I’d like to renegotiate my pay. Considering the last three pictures were box office successes, I believe an increase is warranted.”

There was a pause. The executives exchanged glances, and Mr. Harmon cleared his throat. “We value your contributions, Frances. Truly. But after reviewing the numbers, we’ve decided to maintain the current terms.”

The words hit her like a slap. She blinked, momentarily stunned, before narrowing her eyes. “Maintain? You’re telling me after bringing in record profits, you think I should be content with what I’m currently earning?”

“Frances,” Mr. Harmon placated, “it’s not about you. The industry is shifting. Budgets are tightening...”

“Oh spare me,” Frances cut in, her voice sharp. “Budgets are tightening, yet I see you greenlighting another lavish historical epic. You can afford grand sets and costumes, but not fair pay for the women fronting these films?”

The room grew tense. One of the executives shifted uncomfortably.

“We’re simply asking for patience,” Mr. Harmon said. “There are other factors—”

“Patience?” Frances echoed, her tone icy. “I’ve been patient. Patient while watching male counterparts earn double for half the work. Patient while being told to smile more, be more accommodating. Well, I’m done being patient.”

Silence hung heavy. Frances stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor.

“If this is how you treat loyalty and success, then perhaps I need to reconsider where I invest my talents.”

“Frances, let’s not be hasty,” Harmon interjected.

“No, Mr. Harmon. It’s not haste...it’s clarity,” she retorted, gathering her things. “When you’re ready to treat me as an equal, you know where to find me.”

With that, she walked out, marching down the long, polished hallway, her heels echoing against the marble floor. Her hands trembled slightly, a mixture of anger and adrenaline. She had barely made it halfway when she heard hurried footsteps behind her.

“Frances! Wait...please!” It was James Radcliffe, one of the junior executives. A decent man, or so she had thought.

She paused, exhaling sharply but not turning around. He caught up, slightly out of breath.

“Look,” James began, holding his hands up as if to show he meant no harm. “I know you’re upset. And I understand why. But please, just come back inside. Let’s talk this through.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Frances snapped, her voice low but seething. “They made their decision.”

“I know, but I’ll speak for you,” he insisted. “Let me advocate. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll do my best to push this through.”

Frances turned to face him, her eyes blazing. “Why should I trust you to do that? You sat there, silent, while they dismissed me.”

James sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I know. And I’m sorry. It’s politics in there. You know how it works. But I believe in you, Frances. I believe you deserve better. Let me try to fix this.”

She studied him, her gaze wary but softened by a glimmer of hope. “Why would you stick your neck out for me?”

“Cause you’ve earned it,” he said simply. “And frankly, this industry needs people like you who stand up for themselves. Just give me a chance.”

Frances hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Fine. But I’m not compromising on this, James. Not this time.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” he replied. “Wait here. I’ll go back in and see what I can do.”

As he turned to leave, Frances crossed her arms, her expression resolute but touched by his unexpected support. Her battle was far from over, but perhaps she had found an unexpected ally.

She leaned against the cool, tiled wall, her head tilted back, eyes closed. The cigarette in her hand trembled slightly as she took a long drag, trying to let the nicotine soothe her frayed nerves. The faint hum of the studio echoed around her, distant conversations and footsteps creating a backdrop to her turbulent thoughts.

A sharp click of polished shoes caught her attention. Opening her eyes, she noticed a man approaching, tall, neatly dressed, with a familiar, pleasant face. As he neared, his expression shifted into a polite smile.

“Miss Louise,” he greeted softly. “Everything alright?”

Frances exhaled a cloud of smoke, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I’m fine, but thanks...Just need to pull myself together before I do something I might regret”

The man chuckled softly, unfazed. “Fair enough,” he replied, maintaining his calm demeanor. Before he could continue, the heavy oak door to the meeting room creaked open behind them.

“Frances?” James called from the doorway, his expression serious but encouraging.

Frances stubbed her cigarette in the tall ashtray tucked into the corner, her movements brisk and precise. Straightening her posture, she gave the man a curt nod before walking back toward the meeting room.

With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and stepped inside, ready to face whatever came next.

As she stepped back into the room, she immediately felt the tension thick in the air. The men around the long, polished table had shifted in their seats, their earlier confidence now tinged with unease. James, standing near the head of the table, gave her a reassuring nod, motioning toward the empty chair she had left.

Frances, however, didn’t sit. She stood tall, her gaze sweeping the room before landing squarely on James.

“Alright,” she said coolly. “Let’s hear it.”

James cleared his throat. “We’ve reconsidered some points,” he began carefully. “I can’t promise everything you asked for, but I’ve managed to negotiate a compromise.”

Frances folded her arms, arching a brow. “A compromise?”

“Yes,” James continued, his voice steady. “We agreed to a percentage of box office returns, though not the full amount you requested. Additionally, you’ll have more creative input on the next project.”

Murmurs rippled through the room, but Frances remained focused on James. “And the upfront salary?”

James hesitated. “They’re holding firm on that.”

A flicker of disappointment crossed her face, but she masked it quickly. “So, I’m expected to bring in record-breaking numbers with minimal backing?”

James met her gaze. “Frances, I know it’s not ideal, but it’s better than a flat no. It’s a step forward.”

Mr. Harmon interjected “Besides, not many actresses are offered a percentage of box office, you must know that.”

Frances took a deep breath, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. “Fine,” she said after a pause. “But understand this...if I’m putting my name and reputation on the line, I expect to be treated accordingly.”

The room fell silent, the weight of her words settling. James nodded. “Understood.”

Frances finally took her seat, her expression calm but resolute. The meeting resumed, the balance of power subtly shifted in her favor.

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Yaz was finishing a garment, a beautiful dress she was working on for days was finally completed. Intricate beading shined under a light as she was meticulously adjusting the fabric draped over a mannequin. A faint smile tugged at her lips despite the exhaustion etched across her face. The door to her office suddenly swung open, and Frances burst in, radiating energy.

"Hey beautiful" Frances beamed closing the door behind her.

Yaz blinked, confused but amused. "What's got into you?" she asked, tilting her head.

Frances strode over, grabbed Yaz's hand, and with a mischievous grin, pulled her into a spontaneous kiss. Yaz chuckled, her laughter bubbling up as Frances's enthusiasm proved infectious. "Did you win a raffle or something?" Yaz teased, raising an eyebrow.

Frances giggled, her eyes sparkling. "Not quite, but close enough! The meeting was... well, not perfect, but I've secured a percentage of the box office!"

"That's brilliant, love," Yaz said, her smile widening. "I can tell you're buzzing."

"I am! It's not everything I wanted, but it's a step forward. And it's more than most actresses ever get," Frances said, practically bouncing on her toes. "So, I've decided we're celebrating. Come on, let me take you out for dinner." Frances laced her fingers with hers, her other hand reaching for a strand of hair moving it gently from Yaz's face.

Yaz groaned playfully. "Franny, I can't. I've got way too much to do. This show's deadlines are brutal."

Frances pouted, her expression shifting to disappointment. "Please? Just a quick bite? Pick any place."

Yaz shook her head, laughing. "You're impossible. But no, really, I can't tonight."

Frances sighed but nodded, leaning in to give Yaz one more lingering kiss. "Fine. But I'm holding you to it another time. No excuses."

“Deal,” Yaz said, her cheeks still flushed as Frances turned to leave. As the door closed behind her, Yaz chuckled softly, shaking her head as she returned to her work.

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The ticking of the wall clock was the only sound filling Yaz’s small office. The heavy wooden desk was cluttered with scraps of fabric, loose sketches, and a coffee cup long since gone cold. She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples as the ache in her head grew sharper. The final dress lay draped across the mannequin in the corner, completed at last. The schedule miraculously met—but Yaz didn’t feel triumphant.

Her eyes flicked to the clock again. 8:47 p.m. Frances would be waiting for her, expecting her to finally come over after days of missed lunches and canceled dinners. Since returning from New York, they had barely seen each other. Frances’s packed filming schedule and Yaz’s relentless deadlines had stolen any chance of quality time together.

Yaz sighed, staring down at the polished wood of her desk. A sense of guilt gnawed at her. She missed Frances terribly, the way her smile lit up a room, the sound of her laugh, the warm reassurance of her presence. Frances’s house was only a 20-minute drive away, but Yaz could barely summon the energy to stand.

She stood and walked to the window, gazing out at the darkened city. The streetlights cast faint halos over the pavement, and the occasional car rumbled past. She could see her reflection in the glass, her shoulders slumped, the shadows under her eyes darker than ever.

A soft knock at the door broke her thoughts. She turned, surprised to see one of the janitors peering in.

“Still here, Miss Khan?” he asked kindly.

“Yes, finishing up,” she replied, managing a small smile.

“Well, don’t work too late, good night.” he said before retreating.

"Night"

Yaz sighed again, turning back to the room. Her coat hung neatly on the back of the chair, waiting. She'd intended to leave an hour ago, but the weight of everything had kept her planted in place. Her gaze shifted to the neatly folded invitation sample to her loft studio opening on the corner of her desk. The date had already been pushed back twice and every time she delayed, it felt like her dream was slipping further away. Yaz rubbed her temples, the weight of disappointment bearing down on her.

She sank back into her chair, staring at the papers scattered in front of her. A small, framed photograph sat on the corner of her desk, her and Frances in New York, both grinning and happy. Yaz traced the edge of the frame with her finger, feeling the ache of longing settle deep in her chest.

Finally, she stood and began gathering her things. She wasn't sure how she'd find the energy, but she knew she couldn't bear to cancel on Frances again. Not tonight.

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The cab rolled to a stop in front of Frances's house, its headlights briefly illuminating the iron gate and neatly trimmed hedges. Yaz paid the driver, her hands fumbling slightly as she counted the bills. The weight of exhaustion pressed heavily on her, but the sight of the warmly lit windows ahead gave her a flicker of comfort.

She hadn't meant for it to go this long without seeing Frances properly. Between the pressures of work and the chaos of trying to launch her studio, the days had blurred together. She felt a pang of guilt for all the missed moments, all the dinners that had to be postponed. But tonight, finally, she was here.

Pulling her coat tighter around her, Yaz stepped out into the crisp evening air. She hesitated for a moment, her feet planted on the stone pathway. What if Frances was annoyed with her for being so distant? She wouldn't blame her. With a deep breath, she pushed the thought aside and walked up to the front door, her heels clicking softly on the stone path.

The door swung open just as Yaz raised her hand to knock, and there stood Frances, dressed casually, a soft smile immediately spreading across her face. She

looked as though she had been waiting for this moment, her eyes bright and welcoming.

“Darling,” Frances breathed, her voice warm with relief. “You came.”

Yaz smiled, a genuine, tired smile, and stepped over the threshold, feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her the second she crossed the door. “I’m sorry, I’m so late,” she said quietly, her gaze briefly lowering. “I didn’t want to keep cancelling.”

Frances reached out, brushing a hand against Yaz’s cheek in a silent reassurance. “Don’t apologize,” she said softly, pulling her into a hug that was all warmth and familiarity. “I know you’ve been working hard. I’ve missed you though. A lot.”

Yaz nodded against her shoulder, feeling the weight of the last few weeks lift just slightly in Frances’s embrace. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d missed her until that moment.

“I’ve missed you too,” Yaz murmured, pulling back slightly to look at Frances, her fingers resting lightly on her arms.

Frances smiled and stepped back, letting Yaz in fully. “Come on in, I cooked something nice.... possibly.” she chirped haply

As the door clicked shut behind her, Yaz could feel the tension from her shoulders starting to melt away, knowing she was exactly where she needed to be.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d make it...But I cooked anyway.”

Yaz managed a weak smile as she stepped inside, shrugging off her coat. “I wasn’t sure either. But here I am... finally”

Frances took her coat and hung it on the rack, then turned back to Yaz, studying her closely. “You look like you’ve been through the wringer love.”

Yaz chuckled faintly. “That’s one way to put it.”

She glanced around the cozy living room, taking in the inviting glow of the lamps and soft cushions on the sofas. It felt worlds away from her cluttered office.

Frances stepped closer, gently placing her hands on Yaz's arms. "Sit down darling, relax. I'll get you something...tea, coffee?"

"Tea would be perfect," Yaz said, her voice barely above a whisper.

As Frances disappeared into the kitchen, Yaz sank onto the sofa, her body sinking gratefully into the cushions. She leaned her head back, closing her eyes for a moment.

When Frances returned, carrying a steaming mug, she set it down on the coffee table and perched beside Yaz. "You've been working yourself too hard again, haven't you?"

Yaz opened her eyes and sighed. "I couldn't let the deadlines slip. And with my studio opening delayed..." she sighed deeply "I'm just so fed up...I feel like it will never happen."

Frances reached for Yaz's hand, intertwining their fingers. "It will...You're this close...And I'm gonna do whatever I can to help you out...I promise...You've been carrying the world on your shoulders, darling. But it's done, you did it love."

Yaz looked at her, the weight in her chest easing slightly. "I know. I'm so sorry for neglecting you...I've just..."

"Been trying to be perfect," Frances finished for her with a knowing smile. "But you already are, to me. Even if you show up covered in loose threads and half asleep."

That drew a laugh from Yaz, soft but genuine. Frances leaned closer, brushing a strand of hair from Yaz's face. "Stay tonight. No work, no distractions. Just us."

Yaz nodded, feeling a warmth she hadn't felt in a while. "I'd like that."

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The soft glow of the dining room lamps added warmth to the intimate setting Frances had prepared. The table was elegantly set, but there was a casual air to it, just two plates, a bottle of wine, juice and the rich aroma of a home-cooked meal filling the room. Yaz sat down, the fatigue of the week melting away as she tasted

the warm, savory dish.

“This is heavenly,” Yaz murmured, savoring the bite. “Lately, even Susan’s meals have been stone cold by the time I get to them. I’d forgotten how nice it is to eat something... warm.”

Frances chuckled, pouring them both a drink. “Well, you deserve it. I’ve been watching you push yourself to the limit since New York. It’s time for a little indulgence.”

Yaz gave a small, tired smile, letting herself relax for the first time in days. “This is the most indulgent thing I’ve had in days. Thank you.”

As they continued eating, their conversation shifted to Yaz’s upcoming loft studio opening.

"I know this is over, but I still have my collection that’s been sitting there. Girls are great, but even they can't do everything..." Yaz expressed her worries, her voice tinged with exhaustion. Frances reached across the table, placing a reassuring hand over hers.

“Darling, you don’t need to do everything,” Frances said softly. “Let me handle the event planning, catering, invitations, everything. I already made some calls, and I have a perfect catering company, as it happens, they can squeeze you in just in time...I spoke with our girls, and they are putting together a list of some interesting people for the invites...You just focus on finishing your collection. I’ve got it all under control.”

Yaz blinked at her, the weight of her responsibilities momentarily lifting. “You’ve... planned it all already?”

Frances gave her a sly smile. “Well, I thought I be useful...Can't help you with sewing but I can still do my bit...Besides. You know me. I like to be prepared...”

Yaz chuckled, her shoulders relaxing further. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

“Impossible but efficient,” Frances quipped, raising her glass.

They clinked glasses, the tension in the room dissipating as Yaz leaned over just enough to place a gentle kiss on Frances’s lips "Love you my silly starlet"

"Love you too" Frances whispered and leaned back, her hazel eyes soft with affection. "You know, you should come to the set one day. I'd love for you to see how it all works."

"I'd like that," Yaz said thoughtfully. "It'd be fun to see you in action."

Frances's expression brightened. "Also...there's another thing I wanted to talk to you about..." she continued stabbing a fork into another piece of food "Now that I'll have more creative freedom with my next projects, I would like you to be involved when it comes to my wardrobe. I'll finally get to choose who I work with, and who better than my very own designer?"

Yaz laughed, her cheeks warming at the compliment. "You're serious?"

"Completely," Frances replied with a wink. "You have an eye for detail that's unmatched...You also know my body better anyone" Frances smirked mischievously.

Yaz burst out laughing "Cheeky"

"And besides, I like the idea of carrying a little piece of you with me when I'm on set."

Yaz reached for Frances's hand again, squeezing it. "You're too good to me."

"Not at all," Frances said, her voice soft. "You're worth every bit of it."

As Yaz reached across the table, her fingers brushed lightly over the charm bracelet she had given Frances for Christmas. A soft smile touched her lips as her gaze settled on the newest addition, a tiny Statue of Liberty charm gleaming under the dining room light.

"You've added another charm," Yaz said, her voice warm with curiosity as she turned the bracelet gently in her hand.

Frances's eyes followed Yaz's gesture, her lips curving into a tender smile. "It felt right to have something to remind me of New York. That trip meant a lot to me...to us."

Yaz studied the intricate little statue, the memory of their time in New York flooding back. The bustling streets, the stolen moments and the weight of everything they had navigated together felt etched into that charm.

“It’s perfect,” Yaz said softly, her thumb brushing over the charm.

Frances gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “It’s not just the trip... It’s a reminder of how you were my anchor through it all.”

Yaz felt a flicker of emotion rise in her chest, her weariness momentarily forgotten. She looked up at Frances, her heart swelling with gratitude for this quiet but powerful love between them.

“You really know how to make me soppy.” Yaz said with a laugh, her tone light but her eyes shining as her thumb brushed over Frances’s hand.

Frances winked, her playful demeanor returning. “What can I say? I have a knack for it.”

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As the soft crackle of the record filled the room with mellow music, Frances settled into the sofa, pulling Yaz gently to lean against her. She wrapped her arms around her, holding her close, her fingers tracing slow, lazy lines down Yaz’s arm. She pressed a kiss to the top of her head, her lips lingering for a moment before she spoke, her voice low and tender.

“I spoke with Lily on the phone today,” Frances began. “She asked about you.”

Yaz tilted her head slightly, listening, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

“She misses you,” Frances continued, a smile tugging at her lips.

“I miss her too” Yaz whispered

“I was thinking... once the studio’s open, and this madness settles down, we could take a weekend. Just the three of us. Go somewhere quiet.”

Yaz looked up at her, surprised but curious. “You’ve been thinking about this?”

Frances nodded, her hazel eyes soft. “After Christmas, and after what you and Susan said... I’ve had a word with myself... you’re both right. I need to spend more time with Lily.” She paused, her hand gently cupping Yaz’s cheek. “But I don’t want to do it alone. I want us to do it together, if you’re willing. As a family.”

The weight of her words, so heavy with hope and vulnerability, left Yaz momentarily speechless. Family. In their world, it was an impossible dream, yet here Frances was, offering it to her as something they could build together.

Yaz’s throat tightened as she searched Frances’s eyes, finding nothing but sincerity and love. “Franny” she whispered, her voice catching.

Frances smiled gently, her thumb brushing over Yaz’s cheek. “I would like us to be a family,” she said softly, the words almost a prayer “If you’d want that”

Tears pricked Yaz’s eyes as she nodded, her heart full. “I’d like that too,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Their lips met in a kiss filled with unspoken promises, love pouring into every touch. When they parted, Yaz nestled back into Frances’s arms, the weight of the day melting away in the warmth of her embrace.

As Frances held her, she felt Yaz’s breathing even out, exhaustion finally claiming her. Frances smiled, brushing a stray curl from Yaz’s face before reaching for the book on the side table. She opened it, her fingers still tracing soft patterns on Yaz’s arm as she read, the world around them quiet and safe.

For a moment, she let herself imagine that this was their life, that every evening could be like this. It was a dream, perhaps, but one she was determined to fight for. As Yaz stirred slightly in her sleep, Frances kissed the top of her head again, whispering into the stillness, “We’ll make it work. We’ll make it ours.”

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