

## Chapter 20

At 6 am the make-up department on set was a bustling hub of activity, a space humming with the rhythm of Hollywood glamour. The walls were painted a soft pastel pink, offset by large, circular lightbulbs surrounding the mirrors, casting a warm, golden glow. A row of stations lined one wall, each with a high-backed chair upholstered in cream vinyl, a small counter cluttered with make-up palettes, brushes, and jars of cold cream. Shelves held rows of powders, lipsticks, and a rainbow of eyeshadow tins, all neatly labeled. The faint scent of hairspray and face powder hung in the air.

Frances sat at one of the stations, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands, the warmth seeping into her fingers. She wore a silk robe, her hair partially pinned, ready to be styled. The make-up artist, a chatty woman named Clara, was arranging brushes with practiced ease, while the hairdresser, Carol, fussed over a set of hot rollers. Both women were in high spirits, their conversation bubbling over the hum of the room.

“Did you see him yesterday?” Clara said, her voice full of excitement. “I swear, that man could charm the stripes off a zebra. Absolutely gorgeous.”

Carol chimed in, laughing. “You mean Frances’s leading man? Oh, honey, he’s more than gorgeous. He’s a dream.”

Clara turned, a sly grin spreading across her face. “So, Frances,” she teased, leaning closer, “do you have a kissing scene with him?”

Frances took a sip of her coffee, her cheeks coloring slightly. “As a matter of fact, I do,” she admitted with a soft giggle.

Both women gasped in unison, clasping their hands dramatically making Frances laugh. “Lucky you!” Clara exclaimed, fanning herself with a powder puff. “I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat.”

Frances waved a hand, brushing it off with a laugh. “It’s not that glamorous, believe me...just part of a job,” she said lightly, though her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Part of the job?” Carol scoffed, setting down the hot rollers with a flourish. “I wish *my* job involved kissing handsome men. All I get is pin curls and comb-outs.” She winked, making Frances laugh.

“It’s not all kissing you know,” Frances laughed, setting her coffee down. “You should see the retakes.”

Clara leaned in, a glint in her eye. “They can give me as many retakes of kissing him as

they want.”

"She would purposely make a mistake to have a retake" Clara winked

Frances had a hard time containing her laughter as the makeup was being done "What if you have to kiss someone you don't like?" She winked cheeky

"Then I'd get it right the first time around" Carol laughed

Frances smiled, amused by their enthusiasm. She stayed until her make-up was done, soft rouge, perfectly arched brows, and lips painted in her signature shade of red. Carol added the finishing touches to her hair, styling it into elegant waves that framed her face.

As Frances stood to leave, she smoothed her robe and flashed them both a warm smile. "Thanks, ladies. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to go get dressed."

"Don't forget to tell us all about it later!" Clara called after her, earning another laugh as Frances disappeared through the doorway, leaving behind the lively chatter and clinking of make-up brushes.

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Yaz walked onto the set, tapping softly over the cables on the floor of the studio. The sprawling space was alive with activity, crews hustling, cameras being adjusted, and a soft hum of chatter weaving through the air. It was the kind of controlled chaos that made Yaz's heart race in excitement. She loved the world of film, loved the way everything seemed to shift and pulse with creativity, but today, the energy felt even more electric because she was there for Frances.

As she approached the set, a man in his late thirties, a lighting technician, caught sight of her. He gave her a quick, warm smile and a slight nod. Without a word, he motioned for her to stay quiet and out of the way, his finger pressed lightly to his lips. Yaz returned the smile, appreciative of the silent acknowledgment, and moved quietly to the side, where she could watch without intruding.

Frances was already in position. She stood just outside the circle of bright lights, dressed in a vintage 20s gown that hugged her slender figure, the fabric glistening under the soft glow of the lights. Her blonde hair was carefully styled in finger waves, her makeup flawless, but it was her expression that captivated Yaz most. Frances was deep in conversation with the director, her posture calm but confident, the kind of graceful power that only came from years of experience.

Yaz found a spot at the edge of the set, leaning slightly against a column as she watched. Her eyes never strayed far from Frances, but she could tell the atmosphere was tense, though not in an overt way. Frances's voice was soft but steady, like she was navigating a

calm storm.

“I’m not sure this works,” Frances was saying, her gaze fixed on the director. “The light, it’s too harsh for this scene. We’re trying to convey something delicate here, something intimate. This isn’t the right mood.”

The director, an older man with a thick neck and sharp features, raised his brow at her. He was holding a clipboard, the corner of his mouth twitching in annoyance, though he seemed more puzzled than angry.

“I disagree. This angle is the best for the shot, Frances.” he said, his voice carrying that authoritative edge that came with years of directing.

Frances tilted her head slightly, her fingers brushing her lips thoughtfully. She took a small step closer, studying the light as if it were a puzzle piece she was carefully considering. “No, the light...it’s too direct. We need something softer, something that’ll add depth to the scene, not just illuminate it. The light’s making me look too... stark. We’re not selling a look, we’re telling a story here.”

The director hesitated, his eyes flicking to the crew members. A slight crease formed between his brows as he chewed over her words. It wasn’t often anyone challenged him so directly, but there was something about Frances, something in the way she spoke and understood how to navigate the set. Over the years of working together, he came to deeply respect her opinion.

After a long moment of silence, the director let out a quiet sigh and waved his hand, signaling to the crew to make adjustments. “Alright, let’s soften the light. But we’re keeping the angle. Let’s see how it plays.”

Frances nodded, her lips curling into a small, satisfied smile. “Thank you,” she said, her voice soft but filled with quiet strength.

Yaz watched as the tension that had built up in the brief exchange dissolved, and the crew set to work, adjusting the lights to the new specifications. The director stepped back, a small frown still on his face but not pushed to an argument. The compromise was clear, Frances had made her point, and though the director didn’t seem entirely happy with the change, he had conceded, letting her have the final say. It wasn’t an argument, but a quiet power struggle that ended in mutual respect.

The lights shifted, casting a softer glow over Frances. She stepped back into position, the atmosphere now perfectly matching the mood she had envisioned. The scene was ready to roll.

Yaz couldn’t help the quiet admiration swelling inside her. She knew that Frances wasn’t just a beautiful face on screen, she was someone who knew how to stand her ground, to

challenge, and to bring her vision to life, even in the midst of a room full of people who thought they knew better.

Yaz's heart swelled with pride as she watched, her eyes never leaving her, the woman she loved, the woman who could make the world bend to her will with nothing more than a quiet, determined word.

As the final take was called, the atmosphere on set shifted from intense focus to a brief, collective exhale. Frances held her pose for a moment longer, ensuring everything was just as it should be before the director gave his approving nod. She let out a small, relieved breath and turned to the director, who was already marking notes on his clipboard.

"That was perfect," he said, his voice no longer tense, but genuinely satisfied. "The lighting looks incredible now. You were right about that softness, it really worked. Great job."

Frances smiled, her usual elegance returning, but with a note of pride. "Thank you," she said graciously. "I'm glad we could find a compromise."

The director, his gruff exterior softening, nodded with a rare grin. "You make it easy."

A quiet moment of mutual respect passed between them before the director glanced over to the crew and raised his voice. "Alright, everyone, we're taking a break for lunch. One hour, then back to it!"

Frances watched as the crew scattered, some heading to the catering table, others simply stepping out for a breath of fresh air. Her eyes, however, caught sight of Yaz standing quietly at the edge of the set, watching with admiration, her eyes sparkling. A wave of warmth surged through Frances, and before she even thought about it, she was moving, her heels clicking on the floor as she hopped toward Yaz, her expression lighting up like a child who had just seen a long-lost friend.

Yaz couldn't help but smile at the sight of Frances approaching, the energy in her steps as vibrant as ever. The moment their eyes met, Frances's grin only widened, her joy palpable.

"Hello darling!" She chimed placing a gentle kiss to her cheek

"You were amazing,"

"Why thank you honey."

Before she could say anything, Frances, almost bubbling with energy, leaned in closer to Yaz, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "You know," she whispered, her lips brushing slightly against Yaz's ear, "we've got an hour. Why don't we grab some food and go somewhere quiet? I'd much rather spend this time with you."

Yaz felt a thrill run through her at the suggestion, a soft, excited laugh escaping her as she

nodded eagerly. "Okay..."

Frances's grin widened as she practically bounced off her feet, grabbing Yaz's hand with a playfulness that made Yaz's chest tighten.

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Frances giggled like a schoolgirl as she handed Yaz the plate of food, carefully locking the door of her changing room behind them. They were sneaking around the studio, like mischievous kids who had decided to skip class. Yaz placed the plate on Frances's makeup table, pushing aside lipsticks and eyeshadows that were scattered across the surface. The mess always made Yaz twitch a little, she liked things neat and tidy, but Frances thrived in her creative chaos.

"I missed you," Frances murmured as she wrapped her arms around Yaz, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck sending a shiver down her spine.

"You saw me this morning," Yaz teased, chuckling as she leaned into the embrace.

"Are you tryin' to tell me you didn't miss me?" Frances pouted dramatically, feigning disappointment.

Yaz turned in her arms, sliding her hands over her shoulders and pulling herself closer. "Hmm... Let me think..." she smirked before leaning in for a kiss. The first kiss quickly deepened, turning into a series of kisses, each one more lingering than the last. Frances's hands slid around Yaz's waist, pulling her even closer. She whimpered, gently pushing Yaz toward the table behind her, her lips never leaving hers.

They fell into each other, caught up in a passionate moment, their breaths mixing as they finally pulled apart.

Yaz stroked Frances's cheek with her thumb, her voice soft. "Yeah... I missed you terribly," she whispered with a chuckle.

Frances gave her a playful squeeze. "Come to mine, spend the night..." she whispered, tucking a stray curl behind Yaz's ear. "I need you with me,"

"I can't, honey... I've got tons of work," Yaz replied quietly, watching as Frances's bottom lip started to tremble, her eyes full of unspoken longing. "But you can come to the studio," she added quickly, before Frances could protest.

"Alright," Frances said with a sudden burst of joy, her face lighting up. "I'm sorry... I don't mean to be so clingy... I know you've got your work..."

Yaz cupped her face, smiling softly. "I want you to be clingy," she said, her tone firm but

affectionate.

"You do?" Frances asked, her voice soft with surprise

"Yeah...I do...Don't stop... Please." She grabbed Frances's hands, swinging them between them playfully. "It's cute. Besides...it does wonders for my ego," she added with a grin.

"Hey! You little stinker!" Frances frowned in mock outrage. "Since when did you get so sassy?"

Yaz winked, laughing as she pulled her hand "Come on, you... Let's eat before I have another wobble," she teased, her laughter echoing around the room.

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Helen's dressing room was cramped but carried a touch of luxury. The vanity mirror glowed with a ring of lightbulbs, casting her sharp features in a soft halo. Costumes hung carelessly on a rack in the corner, and a chaise lounge sat in disarray, piled with gloves and scarves. She sat at the mirror, furiously reapplying her lipstick, still in costume from the last take. Her lips pressed into a tight line as she muttered under her breath.

The door flew open without so much as a knock, slamming against the wall. Peter Hawthorne, the director, stormed inside, his face as red as the scarf Helen had tossed onto the floor.

"What the hell was that out there?" Peter snapped, his voice echoing off the walls. "You're supposed to *seduce* him, not stomp around like a lumberjack!"

Helen spun around, the lipstick still in her hand. "And you're supposed to direct, not bark orders like a drill sergeant!" she shot back, her voice dripping with venom. "I told you before, the blocking makes no sense. Why would my character even do that. You're making me into an airhead"

Peter jabbed a finger in her direction. "You're not here to rewrite the script, Helen."

"Meee?...You're the one who changed the damn script, not me...and it makes no sense. I'm not making an idiot out of myself. "

"You're here to do your job. Follow the goddamn blocking, or I'll find someone who will!"

Helen got up taking a step forward, her heels clicking against the wooden floor. "Go ahead, Peter. But good luck finding someone who can sing, dance and make your half-baked ideas look even remotely believable."

Peter's face darkened as the tension in the room thickened. He took a step closer, the space between them charged with animosity.

“You know what your problem is?” Peter hissed. “You think you’re smarter than everyone else. You think you can just steamroll over the script, the crew, and me. But let me tell you something, you’re not the only star in this town.”

Helen’s eyes narrowed as she closed the gap between them, practically toe-to-toe now. “And you think you’re the only director? You think this is the only studio I can work for? Think again! You think screaming at people makes you a goddamn genius? If I gave a wooden performance out there, it’s because you sucked the bloody life out of it!”

Peter glared at her, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. He finally threw his hands up in exasperation and turned for the door. “I don’t have time for your tantrums,” he barked over his shoulder. “Fix your attitude, or I’ll fix it for you.”

The door slammed behind him. Helen stood frozen for a moment, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Then, with a frustrated yell, she grabbed the crystal glass sitting on her vanity. Whiskey sloshed over the rim as she hurled it at the door. The glass shattered with a deafening crash, whiskey spraying across the floorboards.

The door creaked open again, just as the last shard of glass hit the ground.

"Son of a bitch" Helen yelled "Asshole" she added for good measure

Yaz stood in the doorway, her eyes wide. “Good timing, or bad timing?” she asked, carefully stepping over the broken glass.

Helen waved a dismissive hand. “Depends. Are you here to fix my life, or just to witness the disaster?”

Yaz hesitated before stepping fully inside, avoiding the shards scattered across the floor. “Neither,” she said, crouching down to pick up a large piece of glass. “But I’d settle for keeping you from cutting your feet.” She was used to studio drama by now, all the yelling and meltdowns. It didn’t faze her anymore.

Helen collapsed onto the chaise lounge, her fiery demeanor giving way to exhaustion. Her shoulders slumped as she pressed a hand to her temple.

“Do you ever feel like this whole business is just one long fight to be taken seriously?” Helen asked softly.

Yaz set the glass shard down on the vanity and handed Helen a tissue. “Every day,” she said simply. “But throwing glasses at doors might not be the best way to win that fight.”

Helen let out a bitter laugh, dabbing at her eyes with the tissue. “Stick around, honey,” she said, her voice lightening slightly. “You might learn something, or end up breaking a glass yourself.”

Yaz smiled faintly and began gathering the rest of the broken pieces. Helen joined her and together, they worked in silence, the dressing room slowly regaining its former order.

Helen stood up. Now as she had regained her composure, she straightened her skirt and turned to Yaz with a grateful smile. "Thanks for that honey...and sorry for that meltdown."

"No worries" Yaz chuckled "Now we got that out of the way, can we try on a dress?"

"Yeah, sure." she laughed

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Helen stood in front of the mirror, her body still tense from the confrontation, but her breathing slowing. The aftershocks of the argument with Peter were fading as she leaned into the quiet of the room. Yaz set to work on Helen's costume, carefully adjusting the fabric and making notes on the repairs needed.

Helen let out a long, quiet breath. The silence lingered for a moment before she broke it.

"So..." Helen started, her voice quieter now, with a slight smirk tugging at her lips. "Frances told me about you two." she said without an ounce of hesitation.

Yaz froze for a brief second, her fingers stalling on the fabric as her heart gave an involuntary flutter. She looked up at Helen, her cheeks turning a soft pink. She smiled shyly, unsure how much Frances had shared, but suddenly a little nervous. "Oh?" she replied, her voice gentle.

Helen leaned in just a bit closer, playful smile tugging on her lips "I'm happy for you two, you know? You make sense together."

Yaz's smile widened at the warmth in Helen's voice, though a flicker of curiosity crept into her. "Thanks, that means a lot," she said softly, her hands now working to pin the hem of the dress with more focus than necessary. "Could you just turn a little please?"

Helen shifted, watching Yaz in the mirror with a quiet, almost thoughtful expression. "She said you two are really happy together. She's beaming"

A small smile tugged on Yaz's lips "We are" she said quietly

"I'm glad...You know... Frances ... she's strong. But there's this gentleness about her that I don't think many people see. She's not the type to let people in easily, but when she does..." She paused, her lips twitching, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "Anyways... She deserves someone who can handle all that, you know?" Helen sighed, her fingers adjusting the cleavage of the garment as she continued "She's been through a lot more than anyone knows," she said with a soft but resolute tone.



Yaz continued her task, trying to keep a level of professionalism, not to letting her curiosity get the best of her, but she couldn't help herself. "What do you mean?" She asked sheepishly

Frances never talked about her past love life, at least not in detail. She spoke only in fragments and Yaz knew there was more hidden beneath the surface.

"You know... Frances wears her heart on her sleeve. Unfortunately people don't know how to handle that...So she got hurt really badly...quite a few times... but I think the last time just finished her off."

Yaz's heart skipped a beat, her hands stilled on the fabric as she looked down at the material, trying to mask her growing intrigue. "What happened?" she asked, before she could stop herself.

Helen hesitated, her expression flickering between guarded and vulnerable. She traced the edge of her sleeve with restless fingers, then let out a slow breath. "She met someone... thought it was the real thing. They were together for a while, and she truly believed she'd found someone who understood her, someone who wouldn't leave when things got tough."

"So what happened?" Yaz asked softly, her voice careful, almost hesitant. Her fingers stilled as she drove the pin through the fabric. Lifting her gaze to meet Helen's in the mirror, her voice dropped to a reassuring whisper. "I won't tell."

After a lingering silence, their eyes locked in an unspoken exchange. Yaz finally shifted her focus back to the dress, her fingers busy but her mind still curious. She didn't want to press, didn't want to risk breaking the fragile trust between them, no matter how much she yearned to know.

Then, unexpectedly, Helen's voice broke through, soft but deliberate, as if she'd made up her mind in that moment.

"They were together for a while, almost a year" Helen began, her tone carrying the weight of the memory. "Frances was over the moon. You could see it in everything...I never saw her smile so much...not genuine anyway. Then one day... nothing. She just got dumped out of nowhere...No explanation, no calls, no closure. Just gone." Her voice softened, tinged with something like wistfulness, as though she'd felt that kind of heartbreak herself.

Yaz frowned, her brows knitting together. "That's brutal," she said quietly, her voice filled with disbelief.

Helen nodded, her gaze distant. "Months later, Frances saw her in public. She just nodded as she passed by her, like they were mere acquaintances...like none of it had ever happened."

Yaz's breath hitched, the cruelty of it sinking in. "That's horrible," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

"It crushed Frances," Helen admitted, her voice dropping. "More than she ever lets on."

Yaz's chest tightened, emotions swirling inside her as she fought to keep her composure "Oh my god...Poor Franny...that's absolutely gross..." Yaz bit her lip, her mind racing "Who was it?"

Helen's eyes flickered away from Yaz, a hint of something fleeting crossing her face, but she quickly masked it with a smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I can't tell you that, Yaz," she said, her tone light, but there was a finality in it.

"I'm sorry," Yaz murmured quietly, her hands now almost absently continuing the repairs. "I didn't mean to push."

Helen glanced at her, a knowing look in her eyes, before she gave her a soft smile. "It's okay. I just wanted you to know... when Frances loves, she gives all of herself." She paused. "But I do hope she's finally found someone who will love her back the same way."

Yaz's heart gave a quiet flutter at the words. Her gaze softened, and she let out a small breath, looking up at Helen. "I'm not going anywhere," she said quietly, but firmly.

Helen's smile grew, warmer this time. "Good. Then maybe you'll be the one to show her that love doesn't have to hurt."

Yaz nodded, though her thoughts churned with emotion. She realized this conversation was unfolding with purpose. While it felt like she was carefully coaxing the story out of Helen, it was clear Helen had intended to share it from the very beginning. Yaz didn't mind, she sensed that Helen needed to speak these words as much as Yaz needed to hear them.

There was an unspoken understanding between them, a quiet bond. In a world that was often harsh and unforgiving, some things, like loyalty and love, were worth holding onto.

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Yaz finished the fitting and returned to her office, diving straight into her work. The room was quiet, save for the faint hum of the heater, when a sudden knock on the open door made her jump. She looked up, startled, and her eyes widened as she recognized the familiar figure standing there.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed, practically leaping from her chair. She crossed the room in a few quick strides and threw her arms around him in an uncharacteristically enthusiastic hug.

Charlie chuckled, hugging her back warmly. "Missed me that much, huh?" he teased, his

voice filled with amusement.

"Like crazy" Pulling back slightly, Yaz nodded, a bright smile on her face. "You have no idea. It's been chaos while you were gone. And Eleanor..." She rolled her eyes dramatically. "She's been making my life miserable."

Charlie shook his head, laughing softly. "I can imagine. She's not exactly known for her warmth. But the project....it looks fantastic. You've done such a great job."

"The deadline was killer though, but the team was unbelievable. We all worked so hard."

"It looks amazing...I just saw it all."

Yaz motioning for him to sit while she perched on the edge of her desk. "So, what happened?" she asked, her tone softening. "You left so suddenly, and no one would say why."

Charlie's expression grew somber, and he exhaled slowly. "My mum," he said quietly. "She fell ill just before Christmas. It all happened so quickly... I had to go back to be with her."

Yaz's smile faded as understanding dawned. "Oh, Charlie," she said gently. "I'm so sorry."

He nodded, his gaze distant for a moment. "She passed away during the holidays. Peacefully, thankfully. But it's been... rough."

Yaz reached out, placing a comforting hand on his arm. "I wish I'd known. I would've sent something or..."

"You don't have to apologize," Charlie said, his voice kind but firm. "You've got enough on your plate without worrying about me."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of his loss settling over the room. Then Yaz offered a small, tentative smile. "Well, I'm glad you're back. It hasn't been the same without you."

Charlie smiled faintly, the warmth returning to his eyes. "Thanks, Yaz. That means a lot."

As the conversation softened, Yaz stood and moved around to the other side of her desk. "Oh, I almost forgot," she said, her voice tinged with anticipation. She pulled open the bottom drawer, rummaging through its contents with a focus that piqued Charlie's curiosity. After a moment, she produced a sleek, embossed envelope and held it out to him with a small smile.

Charlie took it, his eyebrows furrowing slightly as he took the invitation out. His expression quickly shifted to one of astonishment. "Wait a minute... What? An opening night? Is this yours?"

“Yap!” Yaz grinned, the pride she had been holding back now gleaming in her eyes.

Charlie blinked, then read the words aloud in a slow, deliberate tone. “Yaz’s Studio Boutique... Excuse me!...” he glanced at her then continued to read “...Where elegance meets individuality. Discover timeless capsule wardrobes and bespoke gowns, crafted with care for the modern, sophisticated woman.” He lifted his head, looking at her completely shocked. “Hello? Yaz, what is this? When did this happen?”

Yaz leaned against the desk, crossing her arms as a soft laugh escaped her. A hint of pride danced on her face. “It happened a couple of months ago, actually. Frances invested the money to get my little venture off the ground.”

“Frances Louise?”

“Mhm.” Yaz giggled, her cheeks warming. “We’re officially business partners.”

Charlie shook his head in disbelief, rereading the invitation as though it might change. “Yaz, this is incredible! I had no idea... I mean, I knew you were talented, but this?” He gestured at the card. “This is huge!”

“Thank you,” Yaz replied softly, her voice carrying a mix of humility and excitement. “It’s terrifying, to be honest. But Frances wouldn’t let me back out. She’s been my biggest cheerleader through all of it.”

“She loves your work,” Charlie said, grinning. “She’s always praising you. And now look at you, about to take over the world. I give it six months before you’re my boss.”

Yaz rolled her eyes playfully, shaking her head. “Hardly. I’m still figuring out how to run a business without losing my mind. But...” She paused, her gaze drifting to the window. “It feels good, you know? To finally put myself out there.”

Charlie smiled warmly, sliding the card back into its envelope and placing it gently on the desk. “You’re gonna be brilliant... I can feel it.”

Her grin widened, a spark of determination lighting up her face. “Let’s hope so. Otherwise, you’ll find me hiding under this desk in no time.”

Charlie chuckled. “You deserve every bit of this, Yaz. I’ll be there in a front row, cheering you on. Just don’t forget about us little people when you’re a big shot, alright?”

Yaz laughed, the sound light and relieved. “I could never forget you, Charlie. You’ve given me so much since I came here. Made me feel at home in this place, I can never forget that...I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

“Oh honey...C'mere girl!” he stepped forward opening his arms and pulled her into a warm

hug "You're crazy talented, and a hard worker...You deserve it sweetie"

The two shared a warm laugh, the heaviness of earlier replaced with a renewed sense of optimism for the future.

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The loft buzzed with energy, the golden afternoon light streaming through the tall windows casting a warm glow over the tables, fabrics and the machines. Her collection was nearly ready, but Yaz wasn't taking any chances. She stood by the ironing board, running the iron over a flowing satin dress, her brows furrowed in concentration as she was inspecting every detail before she draped it over the hanger.

With just five days until the opening, her nerves were stretched taut. A whirlwind of excitement and anxiety churned within her, each emotion taking its turn, one moment she was brimming with energy, and the next, teetering on the brink of tears.

Behind her, Frances was a whirlwind of enthusiasm, camera in hand. She darted from one angle to another, snapping photos with unrelenting energy.

"Hold still for a moment, darling " Frances called, crouching dramatically to frame her shot. "The way the light hits your face while you're hanging that dress...perfection."

Yaz glanced over her shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "Frances, I'm ironing. I don't think anyone's going to care about my face right now."

"Are you're kidding me!," Frances retorted, snapping another photo. "This is a *moment*. The artist in her natural habitat, mere days before the world sees her genius."

"Genius?" Yaz laughed, shaking her head as she carefully hung the freshly pressed gown. "You girl, have some serious case of rose colour spectacles"

Frances clutched her chest dramatically, the camera dangling from its strap. "How dare you question my sanity?"

"Oh, forgive me Miss Louise, I would never!" Yaz teased, picking up the blazer.

Frances smirked, clicking another shot. "I'll have you know, I'm creating a little portfolio booklet for your boutique."

"Portfolio booklet..? Babe...I'm not Coco Chanel" Yaz laughed, carefully smoothing the fabric. "Isn't that thing expensive honey?"

"For you, darling?" Frances quipped, leaning in kissing her neck. "The price is one date night. Dinner on the beach, candles, the works."

“Dinner and candles?” Yaz pretended to consider. “Sounds steep. I might have to think about it.” she said desperately trying not to laugh

Frances stepped closer, lowering the camera to the table. “Take your time, but just know that if you decline, you’ll miss out on the finest spaghetti bolognese in California.”

Yaz couldn’t help but laugh at this point. “Fine. You’ve twisted my arm. One candlelit dinner in exchange for your services.”

“Excellent decision.” Frances popped the kiss to her lips and picked up her camera again, this time aiming it at the rack of completed garments. “Stunning” she smiled taking a step back

Yaz paused, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “You really think people are gonna like them?”

Frances lowered the camera, her expression turning serious as she stepped behind her. Her arm wrapping around Yaz lovingly “I don’t think, darling.” she murmured in her ear “I *know*...If not I’ll buy them all myself” she chirped kissing her cheek

“That would be a business move of a century” Yaz burst out laughing.

She felt a warmth bloom in her chest as she returned to her work, the sound of Frances’s camera clicking again filling the air.

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The studio loft was bathed in the soft glow of a single desk lamp, casting gentle shadows across the room. The air, thick with the smell of fresh fabric and faint traces of steam from the iron, felt still and peaceful. The clinking of a hanger as Yaz carefully draped the last gown over the rack was the only sound that broke the quiet.

She stepped back, surveying her work, every detail in its place, each piece a testament to the hours of dedication she’d poured into this collection. The world outside felt distant, muffled by the high windows and the calm of the night. Her movements were slower now, more deliberate, as she tidied up, carefully folding her tools and putting away the remnants of her work.

The loft felt like a sanctuary, the weight of the world suspended for a moment. The hectic buzz of the opening was still few days away, but for now, she was savoring the stillness. Her heart raced with excitement, but there was peace in knowing the collection was finally complete.

She moved to the window, glancing out at the city below, its lights flickering like distant stars. A sense of contentment washed over her, her mind quieting as she took in the view. She allowed herself a small, private smile, a rare moment of calm before the storm.

She moved away from the window, her footsteps soft against the wooden floor as she walked through the quiet loft. She crossed the room reaching the bathroom door just as she heard the soft hum of running water.

Inside, Frances was standing at the sink, her back to the door as she gently dabbed a cotton pad over her face, removing the remnants of the day's makeup. The dim light from the small bathroom mirror cast a warm glow around her, softening her features. Yaz leaned against the doorframe, watching her for a moment in silence, the peacefulness of the scene making her heart swell. She didn't speak right away, content just to observe, the faint hum of the city outside blending with the quiet rhythm of Frances's movements.

Frances glanced over her shoulder, her lips curling into a small, knowing smile. "Finished?" she asked, her voice warm but tired, the faintest hint of exhaustion creeping through.

Yaz nodded "I need a shower."

"Go ahead darling, I'm almost done"

"Mmmm...in a minute" she sighed

Her gaze soft as she watched Frances slowly removing the layers of her makeup revealing the woman beneath. It was a face belonging to Yaz, stripped of the world's expectations and untouched by artifice. There was an intimacy in this moment, a quiet tenderness in the unmasking.

This was Frances's truest self, kind, gentle, and undeniably human. The faint lines at the corners of her eyes spoke of a life lived with both joy and hardship, an ever-present trace of pain that lingered no matter how brightly she smiled. Yaz's chest tightened with affection. All she wanted was to kiss it all away, to remind Frances of the love and safety that surrounded her here, away from the world.

Frances's eyes caught hers in the mirror, and she smiled gently as she smoothed cream onto her hands. Yaz stepped forward, sliding her arms around her waist. Her lips pressed a long, lingering kiss to the bare skin of her shoulder, the warmth of the gesture saying all the words she couldn't.

"You're exhausted, darling..." Frances murmured, placing her hands over Yaz's intertwining their fingers.

"I'm so tired," Yaz chuckled, her voice muffled as she nuzzled against Frances's shoulder. "I just spent fifteen minutes trying to separate two pins I thought were glued together, only to realize I was seeing double."

Frances laughed softly, her fingers tracing soothingly over Yaz's.

"And then," Yaz continued, her tone half-amused, half-exasperated, "I started wondering why the hell I even cared when I have, like, 700 pins. I think my brain is officially fried."

Frances chuckled softly, turning in her arms pressing a tender kiss to her lips. "Come on darling. Take a shower and let's lie down before we both fall asleep right here."

Yaz nodded sleepily, slowly pulling away.

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The warm water cascaded over Yaz's body, the soothing steam filling the shower as she leaned her head back, letting the heat ease the tension in her muscles. Her body felt heavy, drained from the intensity of the past weeks, but there was a contentment in the weariness, finally, she could relax. She let the water slide down her back, closing her eyes for a moment and breathing deeply, allowing herself to simply be.

The soft hum of the water against the tiles was calming, and for the first time in what felt like forever, she didn't have to think about the deadlines, collections, costumes or the opening night. It was a relief to know that the next few days would be about small things, flowers, decorations, catering, and allowing herself to simply enjoy the space she had created.

After a long while, she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, the cool air hitting her skin as she grabbed a towel to dry off then reached for her dressing gown. The silky material was cool and comforting as it slid over her bare form, a brief respite from the demands of the world outside.

She moved to the mirror, applying a light layer of cream to her face, letting the soothing scent of it calm her further. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she let her hair loose, the damp strands falling freely down her shoulders in soft waves.

As she stepped out of the bathroom, her gaze found Frances sitting on the sofa, engrossed in the process of removing a film from the camera and replacing it with a new roll. Her focus was entirely on the task at hand as she made the final adjustments.

"Hey honey" Yaz said quietly

Frances smiled brightly, snapping a photo of her almost instinctively.

Yaz laughed, a little self-conscious, raising her hands in mock protest. "Nooo...I look knackered, ...Hardly attractive." she laughed as Frances reached out, tugging her closer, her fingers lacing through Yaz's

Frances grinned mischievously as she pulled Yaz into her, draping herself over her back. "You always look attractive," she whispered, her lips grazing the curve of Yaz's neck, sending a shiver down her spine as she nudged her toward the stairs.



Yaz rolled her eyes, bursting into laughter. "You're gonna say anything to get me to bed," she giggled, letting herself be guided by Frances up the stairs.

"Absolutely," Frances laughed bubbling up as she didn't let go. Her hand slipping playfully under Yaz's dressing gown.

Yaz squealed, her laughter filling the room as she jumped slightly at the unexpected touch. "Your hands are cold!" she shrieked, trying to pull away but only succeeding in making them both laugh harder.

"I'll warm you up," Frances teased, her tone a low murmur, playful as she kept leading them up the stairs, their laughter echoing through the quiet.

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