

## Chapter 33

Yaz nearly choked on her tea. “You bluffed?” she wheezed, laughter spilling out of her like a waterfall. “You bluffed?!”

Frances was lounging on the little sofa in the corner of Yaz’s workroom, grinning like the cat that had not only got the cream but also framed the dog. “Oh, darling. Not entirely. I threatened with style.”

Yaz put her mug down before she dropped it. “I can’t...Who are you and what have you done to my mild-mannered movie star?”

“I buried her under a pile of contract clauses and bad men’s egos.” Frances stretched like a cat, pleased with herself. “He had it coming.”

Yaz doubled over, laughing again. “That check is so villainy! I love it!”

“Seven thousand bucks of poetic justice,” Frances said sweetly. “It was the most expensive middle finger I’ve ever delivered.”

Yaz wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, still giggling. “He probably needed a drink after that.”

“Oh, he tried. His hands were shaking too much to pour.”

They both laughed then, loud and unfiltered, the kind of laughter that came from knowing the tables had turned and the man in the suit was the one running scared now.

Yaz finally caught her breath and looked at her, her expression warm, half in awe. “I swear to God... You’re terrifying.”

Frances smirked and crossed her legs. “I’m learning from the best...Besides, you can be terrifying yourself”

Yaz shook her head, still laughing. “We’re gonna get ourselves arrested one day.”

“No,” Frances said rising up, her tone dropping to something softer, intimate. “We’re going to get what’s ours. Slowly. Smartly. Together.”

Yaz looked at her, really looked at her, then nodded.

There was a quiet between them then, the kind that didn't need to be filled. Frances walked over, cupped Yaz's face in her hands. "You have no idea how good it felt. To finally say no. To stop him. For you. For us."

Yaz whispered, "You're kind of my hero."

Frances kissed her forehead. "Only kind of?"

"Don't get cocky. I saw you fall over your own bag this morning."

They both laughed again, Yaz pulling her into a kiss.

Two women. Outmaneuvering a system built to crush them. One check and one bluff at a time.

Power didn't always come in noise and fury. Sometimes it came in silk gloves, quiet threats, and sharp smiles behind closed doors.

And together, they were unstoppable.

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Yaz stood in front of the mirror, giving herself one last glance. The pale green gown shimmered softly, each hand-stitched sequin catching the light, a work of art. Her art.

A flutter of nerves rose in her chest. For the first time, Frances wanted her to walk beside her, not hidden, not behind the scenes, but beside her. It wasn't something Yaz had anticipated. It was exciting... and quietly terrifying.

She exhaled, steadying herself.

Her thoughts drifted to the women who had walked versions of this same path long before her, those whose unwavering determination had carved space in a world that didn't want to see them. In her own way, Yaz felt like she was stepping into that legacy, if only just for a moment. She felt it in her chest like a quiet weight. And she felt grateful. Immensely grateful.

A little voice broke through Yaz's thoughts.

"You look like a fairy."

Yaz turned from the mirror to see Lily standing in the doorway, eyes wide, mouth slightly open in awe. Yaz smiled and reached out her hand. Lily ran to her, and Yaz scooped her up with ease, pressing a kiss on her soft cheek.

"One day," she said gently, "you'll be doing this. Walking with your mum down the carpet, stealing all the cameras for yourself."

Lily's face lit up. "Really?"

“You bet pet,” Yaz said, nodding solemnly. “But tonight, I’m just keeping a seat warm for you.”

“Can you take a picture?” Lily asked eagerly.

Yaz grinned. “I’ll see what I can do. But I promise there’ll be some lovely pictures of your mummy in the magazines.”

She gave Lily another kiss, then blew air onto her cheek, making a loud, silly farting noise. Lily squealed with laughter, her arms tightening around Yaz’s neck.

After a moment, Yaz gently set her down. “Alright, love. I need to go.”

Lily looked up at her with wide, sleepy eyes, still smiling. Yaz reached out, straightened the bow in her hair, and gave her one more look, half promise, half prayer before heading for the door.

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The car slid away from the curb, its engine a low hum beneath her. Yaz sat perfectly still, her hands folded over her lap, fingers laced so tightly they’d gone cold. The pale green of her gown shimmered faintly with each passing streetlight, but her thoughts didn’t linger on the beauty of her work. Not now.

Frances had sent a car for her, a sleek black thing with smooth leather seats and a driver in a crisp suit who greeted her with a polite nod and said almost nothing. It should have felt glamorous. It didn’t.

The city blurred past her window, the glass fogging faintly as she exhaled. She tried to slow her breathing, but it caught in her chest. Nerves. Fear. Pride. All tangled.

A part of her, some old, stubborn part wanted to scream at the driver to turn around. Take her home. She didn’t need this. Didn’t want to be stared at, whispered about, dissected in hushed tones or bold headlines. Not when every step she took would be a step someone thought she didn’t deserve to take.

But another part of her... the part shaped by late nights sewing under the flickering light in her workshop, the part that had watched Frances shine under the weight of expectation and still walk with grace... that part wanted to hold her chin up, to own the moment like she’d earned it. Because she had.

Still, uncertainty gnawed at her.

She clenched her jaw, swallowed hard, and looked down at her hands. The nails were done soft, elegant nude. She forced herself to release her grip and smoothed the skirt of her dress, letting her fingers brush the beadwork. Her hands had made this. Her hands. And that mattered.

The car turned a corner towards Frances’s house. She could feel the distance closing in.

She shifted slightly in her seat, lifting her chin, though her chest still fluttered with nerves. There was no backing out now. And maybe that was a good thing.

Because even if tonight wasn't easy, it was hers in some way.

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The car glided smoothly through the Los Angeles night, the city outside lit up like a jewel box. Inside, the world was quieter, more intimate. Yaz sat beside Frances, her gown pooled elegantly around her legs, hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Frances looked over sensing anxiety in her "You're gonna snap your fingers clean off if you keep squeezing them like that," she said gently, reaching across the seat to take Yaz's hand in hers.

Yaz let out a shaky breath and managed a small smile. "That obvious?"

"You're like a kettle about to whistle," Frances said, squeezing her hand softly. "It's just nerves. First time's the worst. After that it's all just... noise."

Yaz gave a dry laugh, more from tension than amusement. "Noise with flashing lights and people shouting and cameras right in your face in front of a whole world?"

Frances chuckled, thumb brushing over the back of Yaz's hand. "Exactly that. Which is why you're not gonna look at the flashing lights. You're gonna look at me."

Yaz exhaled, still staring ahead. "And if someone asks me something?"

"You smile. Or nod. Or say something vague and clever. And if all else fails, I'll talk. Let me handle the circus. You just stand next to me and look like the brilliant woman you are."

Yaz turned her head to her, eyes softening. "You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy," Frances said. "It only feels big because it's new. But once we're inside? Same velvet seats. Same boring speeches. Same champagne."

Yaz snorted. "That's comforting."

She leaned her head back against the seat and took a deep breath. "You know, I could fake a terrible cough and tell them I'm contagious."

Frances shook her head rolling her eyes playfully.

Yaz grinned. “Or you could say I got food poisoning. From bad shrimp. Really tragic. Happens all the time.”

Frances laughed now, eyes crinkling as she looked at her. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I know.” Yaz sighed. “But I reserve the right to make dramatic exits if needed.”

Frances lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of Yaz’s fingers. “Fair enough. But you won’t need to. You’re gonna be fine. And tomorrow, I’m buying you pie.”

Yaz raised an eyebrow. “Only if it’s the cherry one.”

Frances smirked. “Done. But just remember, at the end of a day, we’re just business partners.”

Yaz snorted. “Oh yes. That’s exactly what this feels like. Purely professional.”

Frances raised a brow. “Strictly above board.”

Yaz looked down at their joined hands and then at Frances with a grin. “I’ll try not to look too lovingly businesslike out there.”

“Good,” Frances murmured, eyes shining. “Just keep close to me when we get out. You’re not alone...alright?”

And Yaz nodded. Still nervous, still uncertain, but anchored by the woman beside her.

And that made all the difference.

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The car rolled smoothly to a stop, the engine’s hum quieting in the excitement of the night. Yaz sat stiff in the plush seat, her fingers nervously twisting the edge of her gloves. She had known this moment was coming, but now that she was here, it felt like an avalanche of all her fears rushing forward.

The street outside was lined with well-dressed people, the crowd buzzing with anticipation. Flashbulbs flickered like a hundred tiny stars, each one snapping pictures in their direction. Behind the crowd, the grand theater loomed, a beacon of glamour and wealth. The red carpet stretched out ahead, like a river of opportunity, and yet, Yaz’s heart pounded in her chest, threatening to drown her.

Frances, ever the picture of calm, turned toward her, squeezing Yaz’s hand gently.

“It’s showtime, darling,” Frances said with a soft, reassuring smile. There was that familiar, almost playful glint in her eyes, as though she could see right through Yaz’s anxiety.

Before Yaz could respond, the car door was opened.

The instant Frances's heels hit the ground the blinding light of a thousand cameras hit them. She froze. For a split second, her legs wavered beneath her, her nerves swirling into a sickening, dizzying knot. The bright flashes made her feel as though the world had stopped moving, leaving her suspended in the most surreal moment of her life.

Frances stepped out first, her posture perfect, exuding confidence like the seasoned star she was. Her blonde curls bounced as she turned to face Yaz, her hand outstretched. With a deep breath, Yaz placed her hand in Frances's, letting her warmth guide her through the sea of flashing cameras and eager eyes.

Yaz stepped out of the car, and the flood of lights hit her like a force of nature. She blinked, momentarily blinded, but she forced herself to stand tall. Every instinct screamed at her to run, to hide, but she steadied herself.

The cameras clicked incessantly, flashing like a thousand jagged pieces of light. People shouted Frances! Mis Louise! Over here!

Yaz felt her heart skip a beat. Her legs felt like jelly, her throat dry. She swallowed the panic down. This was the moment. But she's not alone. Frances, with her poised elegance, glanced over her shoulder and offered a soft, knowing smile. It was like a calming hand on her back, reminding her to breathe.

The reporters closed in, eager to capture every moment, every detail.

Edward, Frances's new agent, appeared at her side just as she steps onto the carpet. He's sharp, polished, and every inch the professional, guiding them forward, offering brief instructions to photographers, and nudging them along the carefully curated route. He stood just behind them, almost a shadow, ready to handle any press that dares to veer off-script.

The PR manager, standing just inside the ropes, watched carefully. A quick glance at Frances and Yaz ensures the right moment to usher them along, directing the flow of questions and orchestrating the red carpet performance with perfect precision.

Yaz kept close to Frances, her dress shimmering in the light. She could feel her heart racing, but Frances was reassuring presence in the storm. As they pose together for the cameras, Yaz tries to keep her focus, but the flashing lights are blinding, and the questions are coming like rapid-fire.

The photographers snap pictures of Frances, but they don't miss Yaz either. She's right there, after all. The focus is split, a surprising moment for Yaz, who tries to hold her composure, but her cheeks flush under the barrage.

Frances, look this way!" a photographer shouted above the noise. "Gorgeous, give us that smile!"

Frances, obliged with a practiced, dazzling smile, her presence radiant under the relentless strobe of camera lights. She held herself like she was born on a red carpet, calm, poised, and every inch a star.

A reporter near the front leaned forward, voice lifted over the din. "Miss Louise, you're a vision tonight," he said warmly. He looked to be in his thirties, notebook and pen in hand, a press badge clipped to his lapel. "Can you tell us about your role in *The Girl Next Door*? It's a bit of a departure, isn't it?"

Frances laughed, tipping her chin slightly. "It is! She's a little nosy, a little clumsy, but she's got heart," she replied, voice smooth, graceful. "It's been such a joy.... I've never laughed so much on set in my life."

Another reporter jumped in, tone light and teasing. "So is comedy your new calling?"

"Don't tempt me!" Frances grinned. "But yes, I loved it. I think audiences will too. I've always wanted to surprise people."

One reporter calls out. "Miss Louise! You look stunning tonight! Who are you wearing?"

Frances turned slightly, reaching for Yaz's hand without hesitation, her voice full of pride. "Well, who else but my dear friend and designer Yasmin Khan?" She turned, giving the cameras a better view of the woman beside her. "Isn't it just gorgeous?"

The flashes seemed to multiply in intensity, and Yaz couldn't help but smile shyly as the crowd murmured, some whispers of surprise and admiration floating through the air.

"I mean, really," Frances continued, her voice playful, "I'm just advertising my investment." She gave Yaz a wink, a wink that made Yaz's stomach flutter with something new, pride.

The reporters laughed softly, then one of them turned to Yaz, camera poised.

"Miss Khan," the reporter called out, "are you hoping to become a leading costume designer in Hollywood?"

Yaz's mouth went dry, but she managed to maintain her composure, taking a breath before responding with a smile. "Of course, that would be the dream. But for now, I'm just honored to be even a small part of this industry."

Another round of flashbulbs erupted, the clicking of the cameras somehow louder than the words spoken. Yaz, still processing everything, managed a smile, her nerves slightly easing. She caught Frances's eye again, and the woman beside her gave her a subtle nod, her expression warm and encouraging.

The PR manager gave a subtle nod to Edward, signaling that it's time to keep moving. Edward stepped forward, guiding Frances and Yaz gently down the carpet, past the final photo pit, and toward the theatre's entrance.

Yaz let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She's made it through the first wave of chaos. Now, just a few more steps and it's all over.

But as Frances continued to answer questions, Yaz found herself settling into the rhythm of the night. It wasn't so bad. Not as terrifying as she had imagined. Every now and then, the cameras would flash again, but she felt herself standing taller, just a little bit surer of herself.

And for the first time that evening, she truly felt like she belonged.

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As they finally moved past the flashing lights and stepped through the grand doors of the theatre, the world dimmed into something cooler, more cavernous. The noise of the crowd gave way to the hum of orchestral music playing softly in the background, the murmur of gathered guests echoing off high ceilings and polished marble floors.

Yaz's eyes adjusted, but the new setting brought a different kind of tension. She could feel it, not everywhere, but in the glance of a few women standing near the entrance to the main reception area. Their eyes flicked over her like an inspection, pausing just a moment too long. Polite smiles that didn't reach their eyes. A few leaned closer to whisper behind gloved hands. Nothing was said aloud, not directly, but Yaz had grown familiar with that look, the way some people took their time deciding whether someone like her belonged in a place like this.

She felt the heat rise up her chest. The nerves that had only just begun to settle on the carpet twisted again like a coil inside her. Frances, sensing the slight shift in Yaz's posture, moved a little closer but didn't say a word. She didn't have to.

Then, like a breath of fresh air through a tightly shut window, a warm voice called out across the room.

"Yasmin! Fran!"

Yaz turned toward the sound and instantly recognized the tall, elegant woman walking toward them, arms open, smile wide, Lillian Hartley.

"Oh, my darling, look at you," Lillian beamed, pulling Yaz into a gentle embrace. "You are absolutely radiant tonight. These gowns, my word, what a masterpiece."

"Thank you," Yaz managed, the tension in her chest easing as Lillian took her hands into hers warmly.



"And you my darling are shining" Lillian embraced Frances

Frances greeted her with an equally warm smile. "You look beautiful, Lil."

"As do you, as always," Lillian replied with a wink. Then, her expression softened just slightly as she touched Frances's arm. "And how is Lily, dear? I was horrified to hear what that ghoul of a reporter did. I've been thinking of you both ever since."

Frances's jaw tensed for a fraction of a second, then relaxed. "She's alright. Safe, happy, she's with Yaz at the moment till I get some things sorted. I'm taking no chances after that circus."

Lillian nodded solemnly. "Good. That was a disgrace. But I'm glad she's well. And we really must get our girls together soon. I'd love for Julia to meet her."

Frances laughed gently. "They'll either be fast friends or burn the house down...Or both" Frances laughed. Talking about her daughter so publicly was still a strange concept for her. The one that will take time to get used to. But even so, it brought a quiet sense of freedom.

Lillian turned back to Yaz, her smile warm and conspiratorial. "And you, I hear congratulations are in order. That big project you've landed? Frances says it's going to be the talk of the season."

Yaz's cheeks warmed, but her smile came easier now. "Thank you. It still feels a little unreal. I'm just one of many designers but I'm so chuffed to be working on something so massive."

"Well, don't ever doubt it, you've got talent and backbone. A rare combination in this town." She gave Yaz's arm a gentle squeeze. "You're exactly where you're meant to be."

Yaz's nerves, which had curled like tight wire beneath her skin just minutes before, finally began to settle. The glances no longer mattered, not with Frances beside her and a woman like Lillian so publicly in her corner.

"Come," Lillian said brightly. "Let's get a glass of champagne before the mob finds you again."

Frances chuckled. "Lead the way."

They strolled slowly toward the reception lounge, champagne flutes glinting under the chandeliers. Frances took her drink and leaned in toward Lillian with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"So," she murmured, "you'll never guess who I saw tripping over her hem outside Chasen's this week."

Lillian's brows lifted with interest. "Do tell."

Frances gave her a pointed look. “Estelle Cromwell. In broad daylight. Clutching a purse in one hand and her eleventh martini in the other.”

Yaz choked slightly on her drink, laughter bubbling out before she could stop it.

“No,” Lillian gasped, placing a hand dramatically over her heart. “Was it the silk Dior again? The one with the fur trim?”

Frances nodded solemnly. “Dragged it halfway across Sunset to the car. Poor thing looked like a flustered debutante on a skating rink.”

“I heard she’s trying to charm her way into that new Paramount contract,” Lillian added slyly. “She’s taken to dropping with pastries by their offices at lunchtime.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” Frances said, eyes wide with faux innocence.

Yaz let out another laugh, covering her mouth. “Blimey, you two are so naughty.”

Frances tilted her head, amused. “Oh, darling, don’t waste your sympathy.”

Lillian leaned in, a smile sharp as the diamonds on her wrist. “That woman’s wicked, sweetie. Rotten to the core. She’d have you thrown under the bus if she’d had the chance.”

Frances nodded, no trace of softness in her tone now. “She’s the kind of person who claws her way to the top with other people’s reputations crushed under her heels. Trust me, that little trip of hers? Long overdue.”

Lillian laughed, sipping her drink. “And besides, Estelle’s survived worse than a fall and a flirt. She’ll be just fine. But she does need to get someone to fix that hem.”

Frances grinned. “Maybe she should hire my designer.”

Lillian raised her glass toward Yaz. “Here’s to that.”

Yaz laughed, though she still wondered what the thing with pastries was all about.

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The crowd inside had thickened as more guests arrived, men in black tuxedos and slicked-back hair, women in silk and tulle and diamonds, all clustered in carefully arranged groups. The hum of conversation filled the air like the low thrum of bees. A string quartet tucked in the corner played softly beneath a giant chandelier that cast warm light across the marble floors.

Yaz found herself walking more confidently now, shoulders squared, her hand still gently hooked in Frances’s. She smiled as she spotted a few familiar faces, not friends exactly, but faces she’d come to recognize from her side of industry. The difference was stark. Just a year ago,

she'd stood at Frances's side like a guest in someone else's dream, unsure of how to stand, what to say, worried about her accent or her dress or whether someone would ask her who she was and what she was doing there.

Now, as a woman wearing one of her own designs, with her name floating around about a new production she'd been approached for, Yaz felt... not entirely at ease, perhaps, but steady. Belonging.

A woman in a dark green gown stepped forward with a bright smile and kissed Frances's cheek. "Darling, I have to tell you, the fittings on this shoot were a dream."

Frances beamed. "You were brilliant as always, Elaine. I never doubted for a second."

Elaine's eyes turned to Yaz with friendly interest. "And you...I've heard the buzz, your work is stunning."

Yaz flushed lightly, offering her hand. "Thank you. I've admired your costume work for a long time, so that means a lot."

Elaine grinned. "Well, I suppose I'd better start being nice to you before you take all my jobs."

Frances laughed at that, and after a few more pleasantries, they moved through the crowd again.

Near one of the grand marble pillars, Frances was pulled into conversation with the director and producer, both silver-haired, both slick with charm. Frances turned toward Yaz with ease, drawing her closer. "This is my very special friend and business partner, Yasmin Khan, she's the genius behind the dress, and quite possibly the best eye I've seen in years."

The men nodded politely, smiling, and Yaz exchanged a few short lines of conversation with them.

But her attention wavered as she glanced over Frances's shoulder, her eyes catching on a familiar profile across the lobby. For a second, she blinked, unsure if she was seeing things. Then her breath caught.

"No way" Yaz whispered, her voice rising with surprise. "Franny," she said, tugging gently at her hand. "I think I see someone you should meet."

Frances arched a brow, amused. "Do tell."

Yaz slipped her hand into Frances's and wove through the throng of guests, her heart picking up speed.

Standing near the bar was a tall, poised woman in a smart charcoal-grey evening dress, her dark hair swept into a low chignon streaked with soft silver. She had an effortlessly sharp air, graceful, polished and as Yaz drew closer, she couldn't contain herself.

“Professor Sands?” Yaz called, almost breathless.

The woman turned and the warmth that bloomed across her face was instant and unmistakable.

“Yaz!” she exclaimed, her voice rich and unmistakably British. “Good heavens, what on earth are you doing here?”

Yaz laughed as she threw her arms around her former teacher. “Me? What about you? I didn’t even know you were in town!”

“I’ve only just arrived, consulting on the film adaptation of Saints and Sinners. I’m helping wrangle the stage work into something remotely manageable for screen,” Miriam said, pulling back to look Yaz over. “But more to the point, look at you! You look absolutely magnificent.”

They embraced warmly, and then Yaz stepped aside. “Miriam, may I introduce Frances Louise? My best friend and a business partner, Franny this is Miriam Sands, one of my professors back in London.”

Miriam’s eyes twinkled. “A pleasure, Miss Louise.

Frances smiled, surprised and a little charmed. “Likewise. Yaz never mentioned she had such accomplished teachers.”

"Miriam taught me costume history and design. If not for her, I probably would’ve stayed making skirts out of curtain fabric and calling it couture.” Yaz flushed with delight. “I can’t believe this... I was just telling someone recently how much I missed working with you!”

“Well, you’ve clearly landed on your feet,” Miriam said, eyes sparkling as she looked Yaz up and down.

Frances chuckled “Well, now I understand where her brilliance comes from.”

“Oh no,” Miriam said, waving a hand. “That’s all hers. I just nudged the door open, she ran through it.”

The three of them stood talking for several minutes, slipping into an easy rhythm of conversation exchanging stories about theatre versus film, British weather, and mutual acquaintances

Frances, listening in with amusement, glanced sideways at Yaz, who stood taller, glowing with something quiet and earned.

And this time, Yaz was the one leading her through the room.

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