

## Chapter 24

The cabin was warm, the low hum of the small electric heater in the corner blending with the soft sounds of breathing. All three of them were nestled together under a thick duvet with an additional blanket layered over it, making the bed a cocoon of warmth. Lily, sound asleep, was nestled between them, her hand draped over Frances's shoulder while her face nuzzled into her mother's neck.

Yaz stirred as Lily kicked her lightly in her sleep, her small foot catching Yaz's leg under the blanket. Yaz opened her eyes with a soft yawn, glancing at her watch on the nightstand, it was still early, but she no longer felt like sleeping.

She carefully slid out of bed, her movements slow not to wake up the girls, then tucked the duvet snugly around both of them.

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Once dressed, she stepped outside, the crisp morning air instantly waking her up. Small puddles from the overnight rain glistened in shallow depressions along the stone pathway, catching the early morning sun like tiny mirrors. The golden rays painted the wooden chairs on the porches in a warm glow, and the entire row of huts looked bathed in tranquility.

The smell of wet soil mingled with the earthy aroma of pine and the faint scent of damp wood. Yaz took a deep breath, letting the crispness of the morning air wake her fully as she made her way between the rows of charming little huts.

The quiet was soothing, and the soft sound of birds chirping only added to the peaceful atmosphere.

As she walked, she noticed an older couple strolling by, smiling at her and wishing good morning as they passed. Taking the chance, she asked, "Morryng, excuse me, do you know if there's a store nearby? We're hoping to find some breakfast."

The couple stopped and exchanged a glance before the woman spoke. "Yes, there's a little general store just down the way," she said, gesturing toward the road leading out of the cabin area. "It's not far, just take a left at the end of the row, and you'll find it near the main road."

"Thank you so much, have a good day." Yaz replied, smiling at the couple before continuing on her way.

As Yaz reached the store, she felt a sense of charm in the simplicity of the place. The small

general store, tucked away on the edge of the motor court, had a wooden sign swinging gently in the morning breeze, its faded letters reading "Sunnydale Market" The building was modest, with a large front window showcasing a variety of goods from shelves inside. The windows were framed with flower boxes that had a few plants long bloomed away but their greenery brightened up the rustic storefront. The door creaked open as she stepped inside, greeted by the soft jingle of the bell above.

Inside, the store had an old-fashioned feel, the wooden floors creaking beneath her feet. Shelves lined the walls, filled with canned goods, jars of preserves, boxes of crackers, and the smell of fresh bread wafted from a small counter where loaves were stacked. A row of cold drinks in glass bottles sat in a refrigerated display. A rack near the counter held a variety of small trinkets and goods like postcards, socks, and some colorful items like hats and scarves. There was a small section with toys, and in one corner, a display of sunglasses, some with bright frames, perfect for a summer road trip.

Behind the counter, an older man, probably in his mid-sixties, looked up from a newspaper as Yaz entered. He offered a warm smile and a friendly greeting. "Morning, ma'am. What can I get for you today?"

Yaz returned his smile. "Good morning! I'm just grabbing a few things for breakfast, maybe some snacks for the road." She glanced around the store and began selecting items.

"You're a Brit?"

"Yes sir.... That obvious?" She chuckled

"You're a long way from home. Where from?"

"Sheffield sir"

"Sheffield," he repeated, leaning on the counter. His brow furrowed in thought. "That's one of the places that got hit bad during the war, isn't it? The bombings on the factories? It must've been scary. "

Yaz nodded, her smile fading slightly. "It was. I remember it well, I was 15 when the Blitz started. The air raid sirens, the bomb shelters, the fires... it was terrifying. My street was hit one night. We were lucky to survive, but a lot of people we knew didn't."

The man let out a low whistle, shaking his head. "Lord. I can't imagine livin' through somethin' like that as a kid."

"It changes you," Yaz admitted quietly. "But we didn't have a choice. We had to carry on."

He studied her for a moment, then sighed deeply. "My boy... he was over there during the war, stationed in Suffolk with the Air Corps. He used to write home about what you folks were goin' through, how tough you all were. Said he admired the way you Brits just kept

goin', no matter what."

Yaz tilted her head. "Really? That's kind of him to say."

The man's face clouded with sadness. "He didn't make it back, my boy. He went down in '44. They were on their way back from a mission over France when they got hit. Crashed into the Channel. Never found him or the rest of the crew. Just got a letter sayin' he died doin' his duty."

I'm so sorry," Yaz said softly, her hand instinctively reaching for the counter, as though she could offer some kind of tangible comfort.

The man sighed, giving her a sad but resolute smile. "Thanks, miss. He was doin' his duty, same as all those boys over there, yours included. Guess we all paid our price one way or another back then."

Yaz nodded, her throat tightening. "That's very true. We all lost someone or knew someone who did. It's something you carry with you forever."

"I do have a grandson though. Spitting image of his dad"

"That's nice." Yaz smiled

For a moment, the store was silent, the weight of their shared history hanging in the air. Then the man straightened up and cleared his throat. "Well, enough of that. What can I get ya? You didn't come in here to hear me talk your ear off."

Yaz managed a small smile, appreciating his attempt to shift the mood. "Some cheese and salami, if you have it."

"Got plenty of both," he said, "Helo yourself miss and give me a shout if you need me"

"Will do...thank you" Yaz smiled, but as she turned around the man's words still heavy in her mind. Even here, thousands of miles from Sheffield, the war had left its scars.

She picked up a dozen fresh eggs from the cooler, a loaf of freshly baked bread from the counter, and a bottle of milk from the dairy section. As she turned the corner, she spotted a jar of jam and decided it would be a perfect addition for Lily's breakfast. She picked out a jar of strawberry jam, its label faded but charming in its simplicity.

For the road, Yaz grabbed some cheese and ham to make sandwiches. She also picked up a few packs of crackers, some crisps and a few bottles of soda, perfect for snacking in the car. She couldn't resist a small tin of peanuts, too, something light and easy for their long drive and some pasta and Bolognese sauce which she thought would come in handy for the

dinner once they arrive to their destination.

Just before heading to the counter, her eyes caught a small display of sunglasses. She smiled to herself, picking out a pair of cute, pale pink sunglasses that seemed like they'd be perfect for Lily and added them to her pile together with a small coloring book as she noticed Lily loved drawing.

Yaz turned to the man behind the counter and placed her basket on it, giving him a friendly nod. "Here we go..."

He slowly put everything through the register leaving the little sunglasses for last. "Anything else for you today?"

Yaz shook her head, smiling. "No, I think this will do for now. Thank you so much."

"Three dollars and eighty-eight cents miss, oh and this is on the house" he handed her the sunglasses

"Oh my god, that's so sweet of you. Thank you so much...Oh, one more thing...Do you happen to have a pen I could borrow? I'd like to post these" she showed a pair of postcards

"Yeah, we shore do..."

She wrote postcards for her parents, Susan and her friend from back home then packed up all her stuff and smiled on her way out "Have a nice day sir."

"You too miss. I hope I see you again"

"You will, we're gonna stay here again on a way back"

"Looking forward to that. Where is it that you're heading if you don't mind me asking?"

"Cannon Beach"

"Long way to go then. Take care on the road!"

"Will do, bye"

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The morning light filtered in through the small windows of the hut, casting a soft glow over the kitchenette. The smell of freshly made eggs and toast filled the air. At the table, Lily sat with a slice of toast in her hand. She took a big bite, her cheeks puffing out as she chewed happily, a content smile on her face. Her pink sunglasses, a new addition to her outfit, rested playfully on top of her head, even though they were inside.

Frances sat beside her, sipping her coffee, a fond look on her face as she watched her daughter enjoy her breakfast.

Yaz was at the stove finishing the eggs "They're done" she said flipping them carefully onto the plates.

Lily tried to concentrate on her coloring book, the crayons scattered across the table. But each time she reached for another one, a smear of jam would end up on the page, and Frances gently moved it out of her reach.

"Careful, darling," Frances said with a smile, "You're getting jam all over your book." She swiped the book away from Lily's grasp.

"Noo!" Lily protested, her brows furrowing as she tried to snatch it from Frances, but her mother was faster so she pouted in discontent

"You'll get it back after you finish that and wash your hands" Frances insisted leaving the book on the bed

"You don't understand her art form" Yaz giggled winking at Lily

Lily let out a small giggle, wiping her sticky hands on her napkin.

"I can see you two ganging up on me" Frances she said, brushing a strand of hair from Lily's face clipping it with a pale blue bow, before it ends up smeared in strawberry jam as well.

"Honey, I was thinking something..." Yaz said as she sat at the table, her voice tinged with worry

"Yes darling?"

"We've still got almost 10 hours of driving ahead of us today. You sure you're okay with that? I mean, you're not getting too tired, are you?"

"Nooo..." Frances waved off her concern with a casual shrug, her fingers tapping lightly on the edge of her coffee mug. "I'll be fine...I was tired but not to a point I was falling asleep at the wheel...It's now eight...If we leave by nine we'll be there by eight...tops..." she said with a reassuring smile.

"It's not about that...I just don't want you forcing yourself"

"I'm not..." she shook her head reassuringly "I tell you what...if I see I'm getting too tired we'll stop off for the night somewhere."

"Alright...if you say so" Yaz didn't look entirely convinced but decided to let it go, though

she still held a slight furrow in her brow. She couldn't help but worry, especially with how tired Frances had been looking the day before.

Lily, oblivious to their conversation, happily licked the jam off her fingers, her face beaming as she reached for another slice of toast.

Frances leaned over and placed a hand on Yaz's, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Hey...Don't worry okay... I'm not pushing myself ...I promise" Her tone was light, but there was an underlying assurance that calmed Yaz's nerves.

Yaz gave a small nod, squeezing Frances's hand back before pulling away to finish her breakfast. "Alright, just making sure," she said with a soft smile, though her mind lingered on the journey ahead.

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The car hummed steadily along the road, the sun casting long shadows across the vast stretches of countryside. It was a beautiful, sunny day, making the journey feel much more pleasant. They were already a few hours into the drive, and the sandwiches Yaz had prepared were a welcome treat.

"Here you go, hun," Yaz said, leaning forward to hand Frances a neatly wrapped sandwich. Frances carefully took it with one hand, keeping the other on the wheel, her eyes scanning the road ahead.

"Thanks," Frances murmured, glancing at the fuel gauge. Her brows furrowed slightly as she noticed it was getting low. "I need to stop for gas soon... Darling, can you check how far we are from the next gas station?"

"Here you go, pumpkin," Yaz said, passing a sandwich to Lily, who accepted it with a happy grin. "Yep, give me a second," Yaz added, wiping her hands on the napkin before reaching for the map, her fingers tracing the route.

"We just passed the turnoff for Woodburn...Salem's only about five miles ahead now," Frances said, keeping her eyes on the road.

"Got it... there's a petrol station not far from here... maybe five minutes... I think," Yaz replied, squinting at the map for a moment before glancing up.

"Perfect, thank you, darling." Frances chuckled, shaking her head slightly. "I still get confused when you call it a petrol station."

"You blow my mind with gas station," Yaz lifted an eyebrow with a smirk as she settled back in her seat.

"Can I have some soda, please?" Lily interrupted, her voice bright with anticipation.

"Sure, honey," Yaz said, reaching into the bag with all their snacks, her hands busy as she pulled out a cold can.

"Can I have one as well?" Frances added with a playful smile.

"Yep... I'm officially the food dealer," Yaz said, handing them both a drink with a wink.

"And traffic control tower," Frances laughed.

"More like your copilot," Yaz grinned, her gaze flicking back to Frances.

"You know... I should really teach you how to drive."

"Are you having a death wish?" Yaz giggled, her tone light but amused.

"Seriously, it's not that hard darling..." Frances pressed, raising an eyebrow.

"I'll take your word for it," Yaz replied with a smirk.

"Can you teach me how to drive?" Lily asked, leaning between the seats, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Absolutely, baby," Frances answered, turning to plant a short, affectionate kiss on Lily's cheek, chuckling as she did.

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Soon, Frances spotted a petrol station ahead, its bright red and white sign standing out against the clear blue sky.

"Here we go girls" Frances announced slowing down the car

"Finally, my legs a numb" Yaz said, looking forward to stretching a bit.

The station was modest, with a single pump island under a metal awning. A small convenience store and a separate restroom building stood nearby, surrounded by a few cars. Frances pulled the car up to the pump, turning off the engine.

"I'm gonna pop into the store" Yaz said

"Alright darling"

"Can I go?" Lily asked

"I don't know... let me think..." Yaz frowned pretending giving it a thought "Course you can silly" she suddenly laughed giving her a tickle when she saw her expression full of anticipation

"Lily darling..." Frances turned in her seat "If you need to go to ladies room, you should go now. We won't stop for a while again"

"Alright" she nodded happily sliding across the seat following Yaz

Stepping out of the car, Frances brushed her windswept curls from her face. The scent of gasoline lingered faintly in the air, mingling with the crisp, chilly wind that rustled the surrounding trees.

The attendant, a young man in his early twenties, straightened from his task and stared, his eyes widening slightly as they fell on the gleaming chrome and iconic tailfins. He couldn't help but let out a quiet breath, visibly impressed by the car's presence.

As Frances moved toward him, adjusting her sunglasses, the attendant's breath caught. He knew that look, that poise, but with the glasses on, he couldn't be sure.

"Afternoon, ma'am," he greeted her, managing to keep his voice steady, though his grin betrayed his excitement. "Can I fill her up for you?"

Frances gave him a polite but warm smile. "Yes, please. Fill the tank all the way. She's been running a bit low."

"Of course, ma'am," the attendant replied, his eyes still flicking to her face as he walked to the fuel pump. He couldn't help but grin wider, his mind racing with the thought that she might be a famous starlet, but he wasn't entirely sure.

Just as he started pumping the fuel, a younger attendant appeared, with a mop in one hand and a metal bucket in the other. "Ma'am, would you like us to wash the windows while we're at it?" he asked, trying to sound casual but clearly eager.

"That would be lovely, thank you,"

As the young man moved to begin washing the windows, Frances stepped a few paces away from the car, allowing herself a moment to relax. She reached into her bag and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with a practiced flick.

The wind nipped at her cheeks, and she shivered slightly. Her gaze drifting across the open countryside, taking in the peacefulness of the scene.

The two attendants exchanged glances, their eyes bright with the shared possibility. The younger boy, who had been washing the windows, subtly nodded toward Frances. The older one grinned clearly excited. Their youthful enthusiasm barely contained. Both boys were trying to play it cool, but there was no denying the thrill of possibly being in the



presence of someone whose face they'd seen on the silver screen and whose photos hung on their bedroom walls.

Frances remained blissfully unaware, lost in her quiet moment, savoring the calm and the brief respite before the long journey continued.

The boy finished filling the tank and took a step back, wiping his hands on his uniform as he looked up at Frances. He couldn't help but stare for a moment longer than necessary.

Frances flicked her cigarette onto the ground, pressing it with a tip of her shoe with practiced ease, then gracefully made her way over to the attendants.

"Five dollars, ma'am," the boy said, his voice slightly tinged with awe.

Frances smiled warmly, reaching into her wallet and handing him six dollars "Thank you,"

His eyes widened in surprise, "You're welcome, ma'am. Thank you."

With a soft chuckle, she reached into her bag again, pulling out a single dollar bill and offering it to the younger boy. "Thank you for the window cleaning, they look much better." she said, her voice light.

The boy's eyes lit up as he took the money, his grin spreading across his face. "Thank you, ma'am."

She slid behind the wheel pulling her sunglasses up onto her head as she adjusted herself comfortably in the seat.

The older boy nudged the younger one excitedly, his heart racing as he finally saw her face clearly. But before they could share their excitement, and an older man from the car parked behind Frances's leaned out of his car window,

"Hey, kid!" he snapped, his voice rough with the frustration of waiting, "You workin' or I'm gonna serve myself? Ain't got all day!"

The boys jumped at the sudden interruption, their excitement faltering as the older man's words hung in the air.

By the time she paid for the petrol, Yaz and Lily were walking back from the restroom, their faces bright from the cool air. Yaz opened the back door for Lily, who climbed in with her usual chatter. "Mummy, can I have my book?" Lily asked.

"Of course, sweetheart," Frances replied, reaching for it as Yaz slipped into the passenger seat.

"Everything good?" Yaz asked, tucking her coat around her as she settled in.

Frances nodded, adjusting her sunglasses. "All set. Let's get back on the road.... We haven't got long to go"

With the tank full, the car warmed up, the trio was ready for the next stretch of their journey.

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As the car crested the final hill, Cannon Beach unfolded before them, framed by the late afternoon light. The town was quiet, its streets lined with weathered wooden buildings that exuded charm and warmth even in the chill of February. Small shops and cafes with shingled roofs and hand-painted signs advertised everything from fresh seafood to handmade crafts. Some were open for business and some closed for winter months. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, adding a faint, woodsy scent to the salty tang of the ocean breeze.

Frances slowed the car as they drove through the heart of town. The roads were damp from recent rain, glistening under the pale winter sun. To one side, they passed a general store with large windows displaying tins of coffee, jars of candy, and fishing gear. Next door, a cozy café boasted a painted sign that read "Hot Coffee & Homemade Pies."

"That looks cute," Yaz murmured, leaning closer to the window to catch a glimpse of the café's interior.

On the other side of the road, a bookstore displayed a rack of postcards near the entrance, the cards fluttering slightly in the wind. A wooden boardwalk led past a row of brightly painted benches, now empty in the off-season. Most of the storefronts were quiet, though a few couples and families strolled along the sidewalks, bundled against the crisp breeze.

Further down, they passed a small movie theater with a marquee advertising a film that had been popular over the holidays. Frances smiled at the sight, though her focus remained on the road as she navigated the narrow streets.

As they reached the edge of town, the view opened to reveal the beach itself. The vast expanse of sand stretched out before them, meeting the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean. Towering over the shoreline was Haystack Rock, its familiar silhouette framed against the horizon. The rock stood resolute, even as the wind whipped up the sea spray and sent whitecaps rolling toward the shore.

Lily stirred in the back seat, her eyes widening as she pressed her hands to the glass.

"Mama, look! Ocean!"

"Like it?"

"Yees" Lily nodded "Can we go to the beach?"

"Of course we can baby...You'll see the house is right next to it." Frances smiled and

glanced at Yaz, whose face lit up with awe.

"It's beautiful," Yaz said softly, her breath fogging the window slightly as she leaned closer to take it all in.

Frances pulled the car into a small lot near the beach, parking it next to a weathered wooden sign in front of one of many houses. They were simple and rustic, with cedar-shingled roofs and driftwood accents. Behind them, a row of narrow paths led directly to the sand.

"Well girls," Frances announced, stretching as she turned off the engine. "We made it."

"You made it." Yaz said "I still can't believe you drove all this way" her voice laced with admiration

"The landlord said the keys are in the flower pot next to the door" Frances said as she slipped out of her seat opening door for her daughter.

"It's so pretty" Yaz said looking around

Lily scrambled out of the car as soon as the door opened, her pink sunglasses sliding down her nose as she spun around to take in the scene.

"Honey...I don't think you need those" Frances chuckled

"It's a new fashion statement" Yaz giggled as they followed more slowly, the chill of the ocean breeze invigorating after the long drive. She slipped her arm through Frances's, her gaze fixed on the horizon. "It was worth the drive," she said.

Frances smiled, her eyes on Lily, who was already darting toward the edge of the lot to get a closer look at the beach. "Mmmmm." she murmured and leaned her head against Yaz's pulling her closer "Definitely"

The beach house sat perched on a slight rise overlooking the shore, its cedar shingles weathered silver-gray from years of salty winds. Large windows faced the ocean, offering an unobstructed view of the waves rolling onto the sandy expanse below. A wide porch stretched along the back, furnished with a few wooden chairs and a small table. Lily was already running up and down, exploring every detail.

Out of season, the surrounding area was wonderfully quiet, offering them complete privacy. The nearest houses were spaced far apart, their driveways empty and curtains drawn. The only sounds were the faint rustle of the wind through the dune grass and the rhythmic crash of waves against the shore.

As they stepped inside, a wave of warmth greeted them, the crackling fire in the stone fireplace filling the cozy living room with a golden glow. The stark contrast to the biting wind outside was immediate and Yaz sighed in appreciation, rubbing her hands together.

"Oh, this is nice," she said, stepping forward onto the braided rug that stretched across the polished wooden floor. A plush, overstuffed sofa sat invitingly nearby, draped with a thick woolen blanket, and two mismatched armchairs flanked the fireplace, adding to the homey charm.

Lily darted through the hallway toward the open doorway of the smaller bedroom, her excitement bubbling over. "Which one's mine?"

Frances chuckled "What do you think?"

Lily let out a delighted squeal as she peeked inside. "Ooooh, it's got flowers!" she called, running to the twin beds covered in soft floral quilts.

Yaz peered over, smiling. "Very sweet pumpkin. Someone's gonna enjoy herself." she agreed, before glancing into the bathroom. "Oh, I love these tiles!"

Frances, meanwhile, had stepped into Lily's room, her eyes landing on the kerosene heater tucked against the wall. "We got heaters in bedrooms!" She yelled giving it a once-over before turning it on. "We'll keep them going so it stays warm in here," she said, adjusting the settings.

Yaz leaned against the doorframe, "I really like it"

Frances smirked, brushing past her with a wink "That's the idea."

Yaz rolled her eyes playfully before heading toward the kitchen, where white cabinets and a farmhouse sink gave the space a rustic charm. A wooden dining table big enough for the three of them stood in the center, and on the counter sat a bowl of fresh fruit, a welcome gift from the property owners.

She picked up an apple, tossing it in her hand. "Well, they certainly made us feel at home."

"They really have...Its so charming, I love it."

"Mummy look...is that the beach?" Lily pressed her face against the glass

"Yes baby...you like it?" She smiled stepping behind her

"Can we go tomorrow?" She asked again, her eyes glistening with excitement looking up at Frances

Frances ruffled her hair. "That's the plan, peanut."

"She's never seen one, has she?" Yaz whispered

Frances nodded silently with a tinge of sadness in her eyes as her fingers brushed through her daughters hair then forced herself out of it with a big smile "Come on girls...Let's make ourselves at home"

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Outside, the rain drummed steadily against the roof, a soothing rhythm that made the house feel even cozier. The wind rattled the kitchen window slightly, and Yaz, who was busy preparing dinner, stepped over to close it, shutting out the chilly air. Inside, the warmth of the crackling fireplace filled the space, casting soft golden light against the wooden walls. The scent of home-cooked food mixed with the faint sweetness of the fresh fruit left for them on the counter.

In the meantime, Frances and Lily were having their own little moment. Clean and smelling like flower, Lily sat in front of the vanity, wrapped in her white pajamas with small red polka-dots, as Frances carefully ran a brush through her damp hair. The little girl's fingers explored the various bits and pieces scattered across the vanity table, her curiosity lighting up her face. She was examining lipsticks and putting fake eyelashes against her eyes making Frances giggle.

"What's that?" Lily pointed to a large, intricately decorated round box.

Frances smiled, "Blusher," she explained, picking it up. "It makes the cheeks look rosy... it smells really nice." She lifted the lid, holding it near Lily's face.

Lily inhaled deeply before grinning. "Can you put it on me?"

Frances chuckled, reaching for a soft powder brush and tapping it lightly into the blush. "Close your eyes," she instructed.

Lily tilted her chin up, eyes squeezing shut in excitement as Frances brushed a delicate touch of color onto her cheeks. "Alright," Frances said, setting the brush down, "you can have a look now."

Lily turned eagerly toward the mirror. Her eyes widened as she took in her reflection, a delighted gasp escaping her lips. "Waaaw... I look pretty!"

From behind her, Frances smiled warmly. "You always look pretty," she murmured, leaning down to wrap her arms around her daughter, pressing a lingering kiss to her cheek before playfully blowing air against it. Lily squealed with laughter, squirming in her seat.

When her giggles subsided, she looked up at Frances again, her expression hopeful. "Can you paint my nails like yours tomorrow?"

Frances smirked. "Alright... but just for around the house. Can't go out like that. Deal?" She held up an open palm.

“Deal!” Lily grinned, slapping Frances’s palm with a high five.

Frances stood up, gently ruffling her daughter’s hair. “Come on, let’s see if Yaz needs some help,” she said, taking Lily’s hand.

With their bond growing stronger every day, Frances felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the fire downstairs, it was something deeper, something she had craved for so long. And in moments like these, with Lily’s tiny hand in hers, she finally felt like she just might manage to be the kind of mother Lily deserved to have.

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The kitchen was filled with the comforting aroma of pasta simmering in rich, canned Bolognese sauce. The rain had eased into a soft drizzle outside, tapping gently against the windows, while inside, the glow from the overhead light made the small dining area feel even cozier.

Frances and Lily were setting the table. Lily enthusiastically placed forks and knives in a rather haphazard fashion. Frances corrected them with a smirk, ruffling Lily’s hair playfully as she went.

“I’ll pop to the store in the morning and fill up the fridge properly,” Frances said, adjusting the plates. “So, make a list darling.”

Yaz, standing by the stove as she stirred the sauce, glanced over her shoulder with a smirk. “Yes, ma’am,” she teased before her expression shifted into something more mischievous. “Oh...by the way, I called the studio.” She paused for dramatic effect. “Got five new orders...including a wedding gown.”

“What?” Frances, who had just set down a glass, whipped around, her face lighting up. “Are you serious?”

“Yap” Yaz chuckled, and before she could say another word, Frances darted behind her, grabbing her around the waist and swinging her off the ground. “I told you...I told you didn’t I?”

Yaz let out a surprised laugh. “Yes you did you silly sod!” she shrieked, giggling.

Lily was watching this whole interaction with narrowed eyes “I don’t understand?” she asked, clearly confused.

Frances grinned over Yaz’s shoulder, her arms still around her waist. “She’s gonna be rich,” she announced popping a surprise kiss to Yaz’s cheek, her hazel eyes twinkling.

“Don’t listen to her,” Yaz cut in laughing, shaking her head. “I sold some nice dresses today,

so I'm happy about it, that's all. Buuut I thought I take you two out for a meal tomorrow to celebrate, how's that?"

"Yes!..." Lily jumped excited "Can I have a burger?"

Frances burst out laughing burring her face into Yaz's shoulder.

"You can have whatever you want pumpkin" Yaz laughed

"C'mere peanut" Frances opened up her arms and Lily darted toward her. She picked her up in her arms kissing her cheek lovingly "I love you so much"

"Love you too" Lily smiled

"Come on, let's eat" she said putting her down.

Frances gave Yaz a wink before stepping back "Alright, let's eat before the chef gets mad at us."

Yaz huffed playfully. "Too late," she muttered with the grin on her face.

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Once Lily was fast asleep, Frances returned to the living room. Her bare feet padded softly against the wooden floor, peeking from beneath the hem of her flannel pajama bottoms. The only light came from the fireplace, casting a warm amber glow across the cozy space. Soft music drifted from the radio, mingling with the steady rhythm of rain tapping against the windows. Yaz looked up and smiled, handing her a glass of wine.

"Oh... thank you, darling," Frances said, pleasantly surprised. She leaned in, pressing a lingering kiss to Yaz's lips. "Where did you find this?"

"In a kitchen cupboard. I think some previous guests must've left it."

"Well, lucky for me." Frances smirked, raising her glass.

Yaz took a sip of her tea, then set it on the coffee table before reaching for Frances's hand and tugging her toward the sofa. They curled up together, savoring the peaceful moment after a long day. The fire crackled, its warmth sinking into their tired bodies, and the rain outside only made the space feel cozier. Frances let out a contented sigh, melting into Yaz's side, before turning her head to nuzzle into the curve of Yaz's neck with a quiet hum.

"Tired?" Yaz murmured, pressing a soft kiss to Frances's hair, her fingers tracing slow, lazy patterns over her arm.

"Mmm... I need to talk to you about something," Frances murmured.

“What’s wrong?” Yaz’s hand stilled, her brows drawing together in concern.

“Oh, nothing’s wrong, darling... actually, it’s quite good. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“Okaaaay... now you’ve lost me.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Frances said, her fingers absently trailing over the buttons of Yaz’s pajama top. “I just didn’t get around to it. You know last week when I met up with Andy...”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Well, he gave me a script. It’s good, Yaz. I really like it. I brought it with me, I’d like you to read it, tell me what you think. It’s a big-budget production, and it’s a lot of money.”

“Alright... so why do I hear a but in your voice?”

“There’s a big but,” Frances admitted, pouting slightly. “I think I’m going to have to turn it down.”

“What? Why?”

Frances sighed, rubbing her thumb over Yaz’s knuckles. “The filming... it’s three months on location. In Africa.”

Yaz’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I know, I know,” Frances groaned, tightening her grip on Yaz’s hand. “I don’t want to be away from you. Or Lily. Remember when I told you I’d have more say in my next project? I could use that to make sure you’re hired to work on my wardrobe. You could come with me as part of the crew.”

“To Africa?” Yaz said, still processing.

“Well, yes. But that’s only if you can... I know you have your own work, and I’d never ask you to put that on hold. I’d rather just turn it down. And then there’s Lily... I’ve just started to really turn the corner. I don’t wanna screw it up. I can’t disappear for three months...not now.... not ever. I know it sounds mad, but I want you both with me or I’m not taking it”

“When would filming start?”

“In June.”

Yaz was quiet for a long moment, her fingers brushing absently over Frances’s hand as she



thought.

"Please say something," Frances whispered, shifting to sit up. "You're scaring me. Are you upset with me?"

"What? Nooo..." Yaz frowned. "Don't be silly. Why would I be upset with you?" She shook her head with a small smile. "C'mere." She tugged Frances back into her arms, holding her close. "I'm just thinking," she murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I don't want you to miss out on it. But I don't want us all to be apart, either."

"I don't think I can pull this off."

"We'll figure something out."

"Yeah...Like what?"

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

Frances let out a small sigh before looking up with a smile. "Maybe I'll just pack you both in my suitcase."

Yaz chuckled. "You'd need a massive suitcase for that."

"I'll manage," Frances murmured, her grin softening as she reached out, fingers curling gently around the side of Yaz's neck, pulling her closer.

Their lips met in a soft, lingering kiss, one kiss following another, slow and tender, a quiet reassurance in the flickering glow of the fire. Frances sighed into it, sinking back against the plush cushions, warmth spreading through her as she melted beneath the woman she adored.

....

Frances carried the last of the shopping bags into the kitchen, setting them down on the wooden counter with a quiet exhale. The early morning chill still clung to her coat, but the warmth of the house and the crackling fire in the living room quickly chased it away. She had left before sunrise, slipping out while Yaz and Lily were still deep in sleep, determined to stock up the kitchen before the day properly began.

As she started unpacking, soft footsteps shuffled behind her. Yaz walked in, rubbing her eyes, her hair tousled from sleep. She let out a slow yawn, still shaking off the last traces of slumber.

"Morning"

"Oh, morning darling." Frances smiled

“What time is it?” she murmured groggily, leaning against the doorframe.

Frances glanced at the clock. “Just past half eight.”

Yaz blinked, another yawn slipping out as she stretched. “When did you get up?”

“Around seven.”

Yaz chuckled, shaking her head. “Now that’s determination.” She padded over to the counter, brushing a hand through her hair. “Thanks for doing that” she leaned in pressing a short kiss to her cheek “I’ll put it away.” she hummed in amusement as she started sorting through the groceries, but Frances was already turning toward the door.

“Got two more bags in the car,” she called over her shoulder. “I got stuff for pancakes!”

Yaz let out a playful groan. “Of course you did.”

The kitchen was quiet, save for the soft rustle of grocery bags as Yaz unpacked them. She moved with practiced ease, lining up cans, cartons, and fresh produce on the countertop. The early morning sun streamed through the window, casting a golden glow across the room.

Frances stepped in leaving bags on the table, her heels clicking faintly against the tiled floor. She paused for a moment, watching Yaz with a tender smile, before closing the distance between them. Wrapping her arms gently around Yaz’s waist and rested her chin on her shoulder, her warmth pressing against Yaz’s back.

Yaz paused, her hands still holding a loaf of bread. She smiled, leaning slightly into her embrace. “Where’s Lily?” she asked, her voice soft.

“Asleep,” Frances murmured into her neck, her voice low and melodic. “All the excitement from the trip wore her out.”

“She’ll be soon up and about” Yaz chuckled, setting the bread down and turning in her arms to face her. “That girl has more energy than both of us combined.” Her tone was affectionate, her gaze full of warmth.

Frances smiled, her hazel eyes soft as she studied Yaz’s face. Yaz reached up, her fingers gently tucking a stray strand of Frances’s hair behind her ear. “You know,” Yaz said quietly, her voice carrying a touch of wonder, “this feels... almost like a real family.”

Frances nodded, her own emotions mirrored in her eyes. “It does,” she whispered, leaning in to press a tender kiss to Yaz’s lips.

The moment stretched, warm and intimate, the world outside fading into insignificance as

their lips melted together. Yaz`s fingers tangling in Francese`s hair

But then—

“Mummy.”

The small voice broke through the stillness, startling them both. The two women pulled apart instantly, their expressions shifting from tender to horrified as they turned toward the doorway.

There stood Lily, her small frame silhouetted against the light from the hall. She tilted her head, her curious eyes flicking between the two women.

Frances`s heart raced, and she swallowed hard, trying to compose herself. “Morning, darling?” she mumbled, her voice shaky and uncertain, not entirely sure what Lily had seen or understood.

“I need to pee,” Lily said matter-of-factly, her tone innocent. “I don`t remember where the bathroom is.”

Frances exhaled sharply, relief mingling awkwardly with her lingering nerves. “Of course, sweetheart,” she said quickly, stepping forward and taking Lily`s hand. She glanced back at Yaz briefly, her expression, a mix of apology and embarrassment, before leading Lily out of the kitchen.

Yaz stood frozen for a moment, her cheeks burning as she rubbed the back of her neck. She could still feel the warmth of Frances`s touch, but now it was laced with a faint sense of horror.

In the hallway, Frances kept her tone light as she guided Lily to the bathroom. “Here we go, darling. Right through this door,” she said, her voice steady, though her thoughts were still racing.

As Lily stepped inside, Frances leaned against the doorframe, letting out a quiet sigh. For a brief moment, she allowed herself to smile at the absurdity of it all, before straightening up and putting on her best calm demeanor.

Back in the kitchen, Yaz shook her head with a rueful smile, already imagining how they`d laugh about this one day...just not today.

....

The scent of fresh toast and coffee filled the cozy kitchen as the three of them sat down for breakfast. The rain from last night had cleared, leaving a sunny peaceful morning outside. However, inside, an unusual distance had settled between Frances and Yaz. Ever since Lily had caught them kissing earlier, neither quite knew how to act around each other. They

were careful, avoiding lingering touches and stealing fewer glances than usual, as if unsure what Lily had thought about it.

But as Yaz sipped her tea and Frances buttered a slice of toast, Lily seemed completely unbothered, carrying on as usual, comfortably pushing herself onto Yaz's lap, holding out the drawing for her to admire. She excitedly turned to her, holding up her sketchbook.

"Look... I drew this before bed," she announced, flipping to a crayon drawing of a house on the beach with big sun in the corner of the drawing.

"That's really pretty" Yaz smiled. She glanced up at Frances, who was bringing over a plate of toast, both of them puzzled but relieved at Lily's relaxed demeanor.

Frances set the plate down. "Sweetheart, set your book aside so it doesn't get dirty."

Lily nodded happily and slipped off Yaz's lap, carrying her drawing to the living room. She carefully placed it on the coffee table before hurrying back to the table, climbing onto her chair without a second thought.

Frances handed her a small set of tablets and a glass. "Here, peanut. Take these."

Lily obediently took the medicine, washing it down with a sip of juice. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, then she turned to Yaz. "Do you wanna play dolls with me after breakfast?"

Frances smiled as she sipped her coffee. "You two go ahead. I need to take the car to the local mechanic."

Yaz frowned, setting her cup down. "What why? What's going on?"

"I think I might have a flat tire," Frances said, reaching for another slice of toast. "The car feels like it's leaning too much on one side. Just doesn't seem right."

Yaz's brows knitted together with concern. "You want us to go with you?"

Frances shook her head. "It's okay. I can handle it. Besides, you've got a playdate." She winked at Lily, who beamed in excitement.

Yaz let out a small sigh but nodded. "Alright... but call me if you need anything, yeah?"

Frances gave her a reassuring smile. "Of course, darling."

....

The sea breeze gently tugged at the blanket as Yaz sat cross-legged on the patio, surrounded by a small army of dolls, ribbons, and hairpins. Lily was intently brushing one doll's hair, her small hands surprisingly adept at the task. Yaz held another doll, awkwardly fumbling with a miniature comb.

“You have to be gentle,” Lily instructed, her tone authoritative. “Like this.” She demonstrated, brushing the doll’s hair in smooth strokes.

Yaz nodded seriously, mimicking her. “Ah, of course. I see where I’ve gone wrong. I’ve been far too aggressive with poor…” She squinted at the doll in her hand. “What’s her name again?”

“Daisy,” Lily replied matter-of-factly.

“Right, Daisy. Apologies, Daisy. I promise to do better,” Yaz said, holding the doll up as if asking for forgiveness.

Lily giggled, handing Yaz a small hairpin. “Now we curl her hair.”

Yaz tilted her head, examining the pin. “Curl? Do you think she’d suit curls? I don’t want to ruin her vibe.”

Lily rolled her eyes with exaggerated patience. “Everyone suits curls. You just twist the hair like this and clip it in.”

“Ah, of course. You’re the expert,” Yaz said, twisting the doll’s hair with all the precision of a nervous apprentice.

They continued working in companionable silence for a moment, Yaz fully engrossed in the game, before Lily broke it with a question that caught Yaz completely off guard.

“Why did you kiss Mummy?”

Yaz froze, the doll in her hands suddenly feeling much heavier. “Wha? What do you mean?” she stammered, her eyes darting to Lily, who was still calmly brushing her doll’s hair.

“I saw you,” Lily said matter-of-factly.

“I didn’t kiss Mummy,” Yaz blurted out, her voice an octave higher than usual.

“Yes, you did,” Lily insisted, her tone casual but unwavering.

“No, I didn’t, just gave her a cuddle” Yaz replied weakly, realizing she sounded like a guilty teenager caught sneaking out.

Lily looked up at her, unimpressed. “I saw you.”

Realizing she was losing this battle, Yaz decided to switch tactics. She smirked, trying to deflect. “And what would you know about kissing anyway?”

Lily shrugged, still brushing the doll’s hair. “You kissed Mummy like Miss Swanson kisses Bobby McAlister.”

Yaz blinked. "Miss Swanson and... who?"

"Bobby McAlister. He cuts the grass."

"I see... And when exactly did you see Miss Swanson and Bobby kissing?"

"When we go to bed and I can't sleep, sometimes I see Bobby. He comes to the window and Miss Swanson kisses him."

"Right..." Yaz said slowly, processing this unexpected information. "Did you tell anyone about this?"

"Noooo," Lily replied, drawing out the word as if the idea was ridiculous. "It's a secret"

The two sat in silence for a moment as Lily handed Yaz another hairpin. Yaz fumbled with the doll's hair, still mulling over the bizarre revelation.

Then Lily spoke again, her tone quieter, more thoughtful. "Do you love Mummy?"

Yaz looked at her, startled by the shift in tone. She chose her words carefully. "I care about your Mummy very much."

Lily tilted her head, her blue eyes searching Yaz's face. "Is that why you kissed her?"

"Yes" Yaz smiled softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Sometimes, when you care about someone a lot, you do things like that to show them. Like hugs, or holding hands, or kisses."

Lily seemed to consider this, her small brows furrowing. "Does Mummy care about you too?"

"I think so," Yaz said gently, her heart squeezing a little at the honesty of the moment.

Lily nodded, satisfied for now, and turned her attention back to the dolls. "Okay. Next time, you should let me do your hair too. You'd look nice with curls."

Yaz laughed, the tension easing from her shoulders. "Deal."

....

The mechanic's shop was a modest, grease-streaked building tucked between a row of small businesses, the scent of oil and gasoline thick in the air. A faded sign hung above the entrance its lettering barely legible from years of exposure to the elements. Inside the open garage, tools clattered against metal, and the steady hum of work filled the space. One mechanic lay beneath a battered old Chevy, only his legs visible, while another rolled a heavy tire across the concrete floor. Their hands were black with grease, their sleeves pushed up, revealing sunburned forearms.

The sudden presence of a gleaming cream Cadillac breaking up the dust and rust of their usual clientele made both men pause. The car was pristine, its chrome details catching the light. It was the kind of vehicle they'd only seen in magazines or driving through big city streets, never parked outside their small-town garage. The man under the Chevy rolled out from beneath the car, wiping his hands on a rag as he eyed the driver stepping out.

Frances moved with effortless grace, adjusting the sunglasses and the scarf wrapped over her curled blonde hair. The slim gray dress hugged her figure, its hem skimming just past her knees, and a tailored black coat draped elegantly over her shoulders. The eyes of both mechanics followed her as she stepped forward, their expressions shifting from idle curiosity to something close to recognition.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice smooth and confident. "I was wondering if you boys could help me."

The younger mechanic glanced at his colleague, then back at her, his brow furrowing. Just like the boys at the petrol station the day before, they were pretty sure she was that famous starlet, but the dark glasses kept them from being completely certain. Before either could stumble over their words, an older man appeared from inside the shop, his overalls stained from years of work. He wiped his hands in a rag and gave her a polite nod.

"Morning, ma'am. What seems to be the trouble?"

Frances gave a polite smile and gestured toward her car. "I think I may have a flat tire. The car seems to be leaning a little too much to one side."

The older man nodded knowingly. "Could be you ran over something sharp. Let's take a look."

She stepped aside as he crouched by the front wheel, running a hand over the rubber before pressing down slightly. After a moment of inspection, he stood back up, wiping his hands.

"Looks like a small puncture," he said. "Shouldn't be too bad. Probably just needs a patch-up, nothing major."

Frances let out a relieved breath. "That's a relief. When do you think it could be done?"

The older man glanced back at his crew before giving her a reassuring nod. "Give us an hour, and we'll have you sorted."

Frances smiled. "That's fantastic. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

"There's a place around the corner" he pointed "You can have a coffee there"

"I think I might just do that." She smiled "I'll see you in an hour"

"Ma'am" the man nodded

As she turned, she could still feel the curious gazes of the younger mechanics on her, but her mind was already on a hot cup of coffee.

The younger mechanic wiped his hands on a grease-stained rag, eyes narrowing as he watched the sleek car outside the shop. He elbowed his coworker and leaned in toward his boss.

"Hey, boss... was that Frances Louise?" he asked, his voice tinged with curiosity.

The older man crouched by the front tire of a Cadillac, running a calloused hand along the rubber as he inspected it. He let out a short scoff without looking up. "Don't be a knucklehead. What the heck would Louise be doin' here this time of year?"

He slapped the tire and finally turned to the kid, fixing him with a hard stare. "I don't pay you to stand around flappin' your gums like a buncha old hens. Now quit jawin' and get back to work."

The younger mechanic huffed but grabbed his spanner, sneaking one last glance at the car outside before getting back to business.

.....

Frances stepped inside the house returning from the mechanic, shaking off the last bit of drizzle from her coat before hanging it up. The house was warm and filled with the faint scent of something sweet like hot chocolate. As she made her way to the kitchen, she was greeted by the sight of Yaz sitting on one of the chairs, her hair covered in a mess of brightly colored curlers, while Lily stood behind her, carefully rolling another strand into place.

"Hey girls. What've you been doin'?"

Lily's face lit up the moment she saw her mother. "Mummy!" she squealed, immediately abandoning her work to run over.

"Hello darling" Frances crouched down, hugging her tightly, "I see you two are busy"

"Look! I'm doing Yaz's hair!"

"I can see that" Frances's eyes flicked over Lily's shoulder to Yaz, and she simply couldn't help it. A bubble of laughter escaped her lips before she could stop it.

Yaz rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. "Oh, go on, get it out of your system."

Frances grinned. "Oh no, I think it looks just stunning, darling." She placed a hand dramatically over her heart. "I mean, the craftsmanship, the precision...You're really talented darling."



Lily giggled, clearly pleased with herself, while Yaz shook her head. "She's getting me ready for dinner."

"Of course," Frances nodded, lips twitching as she tried to keep a straight face. "You'll be the most glamorous woman there."

"What's with the car?"

"Flat tire..." Frances said leaving her bag in the counter, trying her hardest to keep the straight face as one of the curlers was hanging half down Yaz's forehead "They fixed it so we're as good as new" she let out a burst of laughter turning towards the window so Lily doesn't see.

"Just one more and you're done" Lily said concentrating on last curler

....

After putting Lily for an afternoon nap Frances walked into the bedroom, where Yaz was now pulling the curlers from her hair, letting out a dramatic sigh as each one left her hair looking wilder than before. Frances leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching with amusement.

"I just put Lily down for a nap," she announced. "She'll be out for a bit before we head out." She smirked. "So... this was the grand vision, then?"

Yaz turned to face her, pulling out another curler with a smirk of her own. "Oh, shut up. I'll have to wash it before we go."

Frances chuckled, stepping further into the room. She was about to tease her again when Yaz's expression shifted slightly.

"By the way," Yaz said, shaking out her hair, "Lily asked me about us kissing."

Frances's smile faltered. "She what?"

Yaz nodded. "She just came out with it. Asked me why I'm kissing you."

Frances sat down on the edge of the bed, looking like she was trying not to panic. "Is she upset?"

"No... She was fine," Yaz assured her. "She wasn't upset or anything. Just curious."

Frances exhaled, pressing her fingers to her forehead. "I should talk to her about it... but not today. I don't think I can handle it."

Yaz gave her a small smile. "No rush. She put me through a right interrogation. I was trying to act dumb but that didn't go well. She's not confused or anything, just figuring things out."

Frances let out a breath before flopping onto the bed dramatically. "Between the car and this, I need a drink."

....

The girls were getting ready for the evening out. Frances turned to Lily, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, her little legs swinging back and forth with anticipation. "Alright, sweetheart, red or blue?" she asked, holding each dress out for her daughter to choose.

Lily studied them with a serious expression. After a moment of deep contemplation, she pointed decisively. "Red!"

"Good choice," Frances smiled, setting the blue dress aside and helping Lily into the red one. As she adjusted the fabric and smoothed it down, Lily suddenly asked,

"Do you like kissing Yaz?"

Frances froze for a split second before quickly regaining her composure. "Yes," she admitted, fastening the buttons at the back. "Very much so." At this point she felt she owed her honesty.

Lily hummed, seemingly unbothered. After a moment of silence, Frances hesitated before asking, "Do you mind me kissing her?"

"No" Lily shook her head. "She said she likes kissing you too."

Frances couldn't help but smile. "Yes, she does," she said softly, pressing a kiss to Lily's cheek before zipping up the dress. Then she took a breath, gathering her thoughts. "Sweetheart... can I ask you for a big favor?"

Lily nodded eagerly.

Frances sat on the edge of the bed and gently pulled Lily into her lap, brushing a stray strand of hair from her forehead.

"Do you think you could keep a secret? You know...about me and Yaz kissing"

"Why?" she asked confused, her little brows knitting together

"You see, darling, sometimes a girl loves a boy and they like kissing. But sometimes a girl loves a girl, or a boy loves another boy, and they love kissing too. And that's perfectly fine. But..." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Some people don't like it when girls kiss girls like that... on the lips. Or boys kiss boys. And they can be very nasty about it..."

Lily frowned, her face scrunching in confusion. "Why?"

Frances sighed, running her fingers through Lily's soft hair. "I don't know, baby," she said

quietly. "But I wouldn't want those people to be nasty to me or Yaz, or to make trouble for us. So, I'd really appreciate it if you could keep this a secret... just between us. You know, like Miss Swanson and Bobby."

Lily thought about it, then nodded solemnly. "Okay."

Frances let out a breath of relief and pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you, baby," she whispered, kissing her cheek. "This means a lot to me."

Lily wriggled slightly, then looked up with big, innocent eyes. "Are you gonna get married?"

Frances's heart clenched at the question. She gazed at her daughter with so much love, yet with a weight she couldn't quite hide. "I would love to," she admitted, voice soft, "but no, baby. We can't. It's not allowed...Only boy and a girl can get married."

Before Lily could ask anything more, Yaz appeared in the doorway, dressed and ready. She smiled as she stepped inside. "Ready, my ladies?"

"Yes!" Lily jumped off Frances's lap and ran straight to Yaz, grabbing her hand eagerly.

Frances watched them, her heart full, yet aching with unspoken thoughts. But for now, she smiled, shaking off the heaviness. Tonight was about them, about being together. And that was enough.

....