

Chapter 17

With Lily peacefully tucked into bed, Frances lingered by the doorway, her heart still heavy but filled with gentle warmth. She brushed a tear from her cheek before making her way back to the living room, her gaze finding Yaz's across the room. Yaz stood up, crossing the space to wrap Frances in a soft, steady hug, her arms offering quiet reassurance.

"This is so hard," Frances murmured, her face buried in Yaz's shoulder.

"I know," Yaz replied softly, her voice a gentle murmur. "But it'll get easier... I promise. We'll figure it out." She gave Frances an extra squeeze, a quiet strength flowing through the embrace.

Susan, sitting nearby, offered a comforting smile. "Come on, sweetheart," she said, her voice warm. "Have a drink... I think you need one tonight."

"I do," Frances replied, managing a small, grateful smile as she wiped the last traces of tears from her eyes. She settled down on the sofa, her hand slipping into Yaz's, grounding herself in the warmth of her presence. Susan handed her a glass of wine, her eyes full of understanding and gentle encouragement.

In the quiet warmth of the living room, Frances sat with Susan and Yaz, still feeling the weight of the evening's emotions but grateful for the company. Her hand still rested in Yaz's as she took a sip of wine, the lingering tension softening just a bit.

Susan, kept her tone light but focused, clearly determined to find some solution. "You know, sweetheart, there's always an answer. We just have to think it through, one step at a time."

Frances gave a faint smile, grateful but skeptical. She felt as though her mind was caught in a tangled web of fears and unknowns. "If it were that simple," she said softly, "but it's... complicated."

"If you don't mind me asking, what would happen if you were to go public?"

"I were to go public, I'd be shunned, like Bergman. Studio would drop me like a hot potato and I'd be condemned by the public... And Lily's whole life would be plastered across the tabloids.."

Susan frowned thoughtfully. "What if... you presented her as adopted?"

Yaz interjected gently, "I don't think that'd work, Susan. She looks so much like Frances.. it wouldn't take long for people to connect the dots."

Susan nodded, her eyes flickering with understanding. "Well, we'll keep thinking on it. We won't let this go," she said, squeezing Frances's shoulder reassuringly. "Now, I'm off to bed. Goodnight, darlings."

"Good night Susan...And thank you for everything." Frances said, her hand reaching for Susan's giving it a warm squeeze

"Night, night" Yaz smiled

With a warm smile, she left them alone, closing the door softly behind her.

As the soft glow of the Christmas tree illuminated the cozy living room, the last of the evening's quiet settled in after Susan had gone to bed. The warmth of the Christmas lights and the gentle hum of the festive songs from the radio filled the space, casting a serene, intimate atmosphere. Yaz quietly got up and walked over to the Christmas tree, bending to reach for something hidden beneath its branches. She returned with a small box, wrapped in glimmering red paper, tied neatly with a soft green satin bow. As she handed it to Frances, her smile deepened.

"Merry Christmas, love," Yaz said, her voice gentle and warm.

Frances's eyes lit up, a radiant smile spreading across her face as she eagerly took the gift from Yaz. The anticipation danced in her chest, and she chuckled softly, still overcome by excitement.

"So we won't wait until the morning?" she asked, a teasing glint in her eye.

"Nope," Yaz replied with a playful wink. "Too personal."

Frances gasped lightly, a delighted laugh escaping her lips. "Aaaaah... is it?" she asked, feeling a twinge of curiosity bubbling inside her. "Alright then... I suppose you should open yours as well," she said, jumping up from the sofa, her excitement almost contagious. Reaching out she grabbed the box she'd been hiding for Yaz, handing it to her with the same gleam of affection. "Merry

Christmas my love"

Frances untied the bow and unwrapped the gift. Her eyes grew wide as she pulled out a delicate bracelet, adorned with a few carefully chosen charms, a heart engraved with the date of their first kiss, a small seashell and the flower. Frances gasped softly as she took in the beauty of the piece, her heart swelling with emotion.

"Oh my god, Yaz..." she whispered, eyes glistening as her fingers gently sifted over the charms. "Is this... is this the beach house where we..." She looked up, locking eyes with Yaz, the question hanging between them "And... Lily.." her finger brushed over beautifully crafted lily flower.

"Mmm," Yaz nodded, her voice filled with affection. "Now you can add your own."

Frances's heart skipped a beat as she gazed at the bracelet, overwhelmed by the significance behind each charm. "That's absolutely gorgeous, darling. I love it... put it on," she said, holding out her wrist eagerly.

As Yaz gently clasped the bracelet around her wrist, Frances leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her lips, savoring the closeness of the moment.

Yaz opened her own present, revealing a sleek, elegant watch with a thin leather strap. Its simple design was timeless, the delicate hands ticking quietly, but what truly took her breath away was the engraving on the back: *Always fly, darling... F.* Tears welled in her eyes as she looked up at Frances, touched beyond

words.

Frances, with her characteristic warmth, reached out to take Yaz's hand in hers, a knowing smile on her lips.

"I don't know what to say..." Yaz started, voice thick with emotion. "You got me the dress already ... and now this..."

"That was just a warm-up present," Frances teased, tenderness in her tone as she helped her fasten the watch, her fingers brushing against Yaz's skin.

No more words were necessary. Instead, their fingers intertwined, playing together with a quiet gentleness, their connection deeper than anything they could express.

After exchanging one more soft kiss they lay back on the sofa Yaz pulled Frances down beside her. As she leaned into her, Yaz's arm wrapped protectively around her, and Frances let out a long, quiet breath, melting into the comfort of her embrace.

Yaz's lips pressed a lingering kiss to her head, her voice a soft murmur. "You know...that thing that Susan said...about Lily...Maybe there's a way," she said thoughtfully, brushing her fingers down Frances's arm. "If we can figure this out, it might even give your father one less thing to hold over you...Maybe give you a chance to finally get rid of him."

Frances looked up at her, her eyes shimmering with emotion. "I'll give it some thought love," she whispered. "But if I take that chance... it has to be worth it. I can't lose my carrier honey...I need money, and Lily deserves a nice life, not one haunted by the

press or whispers in the dark.”

Yaz nodded, her hand resting against Frances’s cheek, her gaze unwavering. “That goes without saying...But whatever you decide, I’m with you. I’ll fight beside you Franny, every step of the way...I promise.”

Frances’s heart swelled, her eyes filling with tears she could barely hold back. She had never imagined she’d have someone standing beside her like this, loving her so fiercely. Reaching up, she closed the space between them, their lips meeting in a gentle, tender kiss, the promise of a future woven into the warmth of their embrace.

"I wanna be with you forever" Frances whispered into her lips

"That also goes without saying" Yaz smiled gently lacing their fingers together holding her tightly.

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Frances slipped quietly back into the bedroom, moving with care as she changed into her silky pajamas. The soft fabric glided over her skin, and, with a calm breath, she lifted the covers and slid underneath, easing into the warmth beside her daughter. As she settled in, the reality washed over her, this closeness she hadn’t felt in nine years, this chance to hold her little girl. Her heart swelled, so full it felt on the edge of breaking.

Lily stirred slightly, blinking in the dim light, her eyes flickering open and searching for a moment, disoriented.

Frances whispered softly, "It's just me, sweetheart. Go back to sleep."

Instantly, Lily's tiny body relaxed, her little arms reaching out, pulling herself close to her mother as she nestled in. Frances held her, feeling the small but certain weight of her in her arms, her warmth soaking into her skin. She kissed the top of Lily's head, breathing in her scent, soft, sweet, and innocent, with hints of soap and the faint smell of crayons and the day's adventures. It was a fragrance only a mother would know, and she felt it filling the corners of her heart that had ached with longing for so long.

Listening to Lily's gentle, even breathing, Frances could feel every rise and fall, the rhythmic proof of her child's life beside her. She brushed her fingers over Lily's hair, smoothing it back tenderly, marveling at the feel of it, so fine and soft between her fingertips. Each small breath Lily took felt like a quiet miracle. Her own tears welled up again, but this time, they were tears of gratitude, of a love so profound it felt like it would overflow. She held Lily a little tighter, letting the steady beat of her daughter's heartbeat calm her.

With Lily cradled in her arms, Frances closed her eyes, letting the peace of the moment sink in as she whispered a silent promise to protect her. Finally, lulled by her daughter's warmth and the quiet of the night, she drifted into a deep, restful sleep, her heart finally, blissfully at ease.

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As the soft morning light seeped through the curtains, Frances stirred, feeling the warmth of her daughter beside her. She looked

over to see Lily's peaceful face, her little breaths steady and gentle, the rise and fall of her chest still in rhythm with sleep. The magic of the previous night settled warmly in her chest, and for a moment, Frances felt herself simply savoring this rare sight, the simplicity of her daughter asleep, safe and close.

She leaned over brushing her fingers gently through Lily's hair. "Lily...wakie wakie, sweetheart," she whispered, her voice warm and soft.

Lily stirred, her eyelids fluttering as she blinked awake. For a brief moment, her face showed a flicker of confusion as she took in her surroundings. But then her eyes landed on Frances, and a spark of recognition lit up her face, blossoming into a bright smile.

"Santa came," Frances whispered, her own face lighting up with the excitement.

Lily's eyes widened, brightening instantly with joy. She scrambled upright, her energy building as the sleepiness began to fall away. Frances wrapped her arms around her, pulling her in for a tight squeeze. "Merry Christmas, my darling," she murmured, kissing her head.

"Merry Christmas, Mummy!" Lily beamed, her voice bubbling with excitement "Can I open presents?"

"Yap!" Frances set her down, then took her hand, their fingers entwined. With a playful grin, she whispered, "Come on, let's go see what he left for you!"

Lily's laughter filled the air as they made their way to the living

room together, their footsteps light and quick. Frances's heart soared, her own laughter mingling with her daughter's as they dashed forward, hand in hand.

As they stepped into the cozy living room, the warmth of the Christmas morning embraced them, and Susan's cheerful voice rang out from the doorway. Still wrapped in her dressing gown with curlers in her hair.

"Merry Christmas!" she said, her face lighting up with genuine happiness.

"Merry Christmas, Susan," Frances replied with a smile that reached her eyes, her heart swelling at the joy of the morning.

Lily beamed, practically running to her as she threw herself into Susan's arms for a tight hug. "Merry Christmas"

Susan laughed, holding her close "Did you have a nice sleep sweetie?"

She nodded excited "Mummy slept with me"

"I know, nice ha?" Susan glanced towards Frances who smiled happily

The sight of Lily's growing confidence filled Frances with a quiet sense of peace. In such a short time, from the shy, uncertain girl, Lily had blossomed into someone who felt truly at home here. It was a small miracle, one that warmed Frances in ways she hadn't known she needed.

“Morning!” Yaz greeted, walking in with a tray filled with steaming mugs of coffee. Still in her pajamas, her hair falling over her shoulders “Merry Christmas, everyone! Hey, who’s got presents to open?”

Lily’s eyes widened, her excitement bubbling over. “Santa came... He found me...And he ate all the cookies, look” she said, practically glowing with the magic of the moment.

“See...told you he's gonna find you!” Yaz grinned, setting the tray down. “Did you really think he wouldn’t?” She walked over to Frances, handing her a hot drink with a soft smile. “Merry Christmas hun.”

“Merry Christmas, darling,” Frances replied, her voice full of warmth and affection, her eyes shining with the love. She sat on the floor by the tree, looking relaxed and happy, her face soft without makeup, as she sipped from a steaming mug.

“Lily, you won’t believe what I saw last night!” Susan began, her eyes widening in astonishment as she knelt down beside her. “I was just dozing off when I heard some footsteps, rig there in a hallway... and then some jingle bells outside the window!” She leaned closely, her voice hushed as if sharing a precious secret. “So, I peeked out from my room...and there he was! Santa himself, putting presents under the tree.”

Lily gasped, her eyes like saucers as she absorbed every word. Frances, hiding a smile behind her hand, glanced at Yaz, knowing full well that Susan had been up early that morning, sneaking gifts under the tree and eating cookies just as they’d planned.

"You saw him?" Lily whispered, her face glowing with wonder

"I did!" Susan nodded with a serious expression.

"Aaand?" Lily asked excited

"He heard me, turned around and winked at me before he vanished. Just puff, like magic." Susan finished with a playful flourish of her hands. "He left that big box for you"

Lily squealed with excitement, practically bouncing in place as she took in the sight of the gifts, her eyes settling on a big, beautifully wrapped box. Frances urged her gently, "Go on, see what he left for you."

As Lily unwrapped her gift and pulled away the paper, her eyes widened at the sight of the beautiful doll pram. Painted a soft pastel pink with creamy white accents, the pram had a glossy finish that gleamed under the light. Its little wheels were smooth with silver spokes that sparkled, and a delicate handle with a shiny, pearly grip, perfect for her small hands.

The pram's hood was quilted and decorated with tiny ribbons on the side.

"Mummy! It's a buggy" she squealed

"Oh my god...Look at that" Susan said excited

"It's proper pram you got there" Yaz smiled

"I remember you mentioned something about it" Frances

pretended

Lily nodded excited "And I wrote a letter, remember?...Miss Grant posted it"

"Oh, yeah. She did, didn't she?" Frances played along "Is it like the one you wanted?"

"Yes!"

"That's not all, Lily," Yaz said, sliding over a smaller box. "This one's from Susan"

Inside was a fun board game and a handful of candies. Lily gasped, barely able to contain her excitement.

"And look, there's even a storybook about farm animals!" she said, holding up the Christmas annual with gleaming eyes.

The room filled with laughter and chatter, everyone opening their presents and watching as Lily moved from one gift to the next, her excitement contagious as she arranged her dollhouse, rolled the pram all over the living room and thumbed through the pages of her new book.

Frances slipped quietly into the kitchen, where Susan was already bustling around preparing breakfast. She reached into her bag, pulling out a small amber bottle, the label slightly faded, and asked Susan if she had a spoon pulling out a few other pill bottles and containers. Susan handed her one, watching as Frances carefully measured all the doses.

"Is that all for Lily?" Susan asked gently, noticing Frances

Frances nodded, her expression soft but serious. "Yes. This one's for her epilepsy. It helps to control her seizures, but it can make her drowsy and...well, it sometimes slows down her thinking" She glanced down, her voice low and filled with a mix of concern and tenderness. "And these..." she added, showing Susan the other bottles. "She has some kidney issues then these are her vitamins, iron..." she continued counting for other medicines.

Susan's face fell with sympathy, and she shook her head slightly, her heart aching "That poor child...that's a lot for her, isn't it?"

Frances offered a faint smile, appreciating Susan's understanding. "Yes, it is," she agreed softly. "But...these are better than what she was on before. Those really affected her balance and speech...So I'm pleased...It's hard on her, but she manages well... better than anyone else would."

Susan reached over and placed a comforting hand on Frances's shoulder. "You're doing a wonderful job."

"Could be better"

"I doubt that"

Touched by Susan's kindness, Frances gave a small nod of gratitude, her heart a little lighter, knowing she had someone else who understood.

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The day drifted slowly into the afternoon, the festive air now subdued as the time for goodbyes drew closer. Lily, dressed neatly, stood by the door leaning on her mother, her presents stacked beside her, waiting to be taken back to school. Frances's heart felt unbearably heavy as her fingers sifted through her daughter's hair, and she fought hard to keep her emotions in check. Her mind spinning with the memories of the warmth they'd shared over the holiday, and the ache of parting that seemed more painful than ever.

Yaz stood nearby, arms crossed as she leaned against the wall, her gaze shifting from Frances to Lily, her expression taut with a mixture of sadness and frustration wishing with all her heart that this didn't have to be their reality. Susan, too, felt the somberness of the moment, sensing the heartbreak in Frances's restrained expression.

Finally, a black car pulled up along the curb, and a quiet hush settled over the room.

"They're here" Susan said with a sigh opening the door slightly

"Darling..." Frances said, her voice barely audible "You should say goodbye to Yaz and Susan sweetie"

Lily walked to Susan, embracing her tightly, her small voice muffled as she whispered "Can we make cakes next time?"

"Of course we can sweetie..." Susan held her tears back "I'll teach you how to make muffins, how's that?"

Lily nodded as Susan placed a long kiss to the side of her head then she turned to Yaz, who knelt down to meet her, pulling her into a gentle hug, her own sadness tempered by the need to be strong for both Frances and Lily

"Promise to come to school again"

"Course I will" Yaz frowned "Hey...we're friends now, can't get rid of me that easy...Don't be sad pumpkin...Come ooon...you get to show all your mates all this great stuff you got for Christmas....That's gonna be fun, right?" she tapped the tip of Lily's nose playfully making her smile

Taking her mother's hand, her gaze flicked back to Frances, her lower lip quivering. "I don't want to leave yet," she murmured, her voice so quiet it was barely audible.

"I know, sweetheart," Frances said, her voice soft and soothing. "I promise we'll do this again. Don't cry." She pulled Lily into a warm embrace, feeling her daughter's small frame shake with quiet sobs.

"Promise?" Lily asked, looking up with wide, pleading eyes.

Frances managed a smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Cross my heart," she said, making a small, playful gesture with her hand. Lily's lips twitched into a hesitant smile, and Frances took her hand again, guiding her towards the waiting car.

The school nurse greeted them with a bright smile, but Lily clung to Frances's hand, her reluctance visible in her downcast eyes. "Merry Christmas, Miss Louise. I hope you had a nice time."

Merry Christmas,” Frances replied, forcing a smile. “We had a wonderful time, thank you. Lily has some Christmas presents she’d like to take back with her.”

"Yes of course ma'am"

As Frances gestured to the gifts, a sudden thought seemed to strike Lily. She tugged on her mother’s arm, her eyes lighting up with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. “Mommy,” she said, almost shyly.

"Yes darling?"

“Can you take my dollhouse to your house? I can play with it there when I come to stay with you.”

Frances was caught off guard by the innocent request. For a brief moment, she hesitated, her emotions tumbling over one another. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she nodded, “Alright, darling,” she said softly. “I’ll take it with me.”

Turning to the nurse, Frances’s voice wavered slightly. “Let’s leave the dollhouse here with me then. You can take the rest back to school.”

“Of course, Miss Louise,” the nurse said with a nod.

While the driver and a nurse went to the house to get Lily’s presents, Frances knelt down, gathering Lily into her arms for one last hug. She held her daughter close, feeling the softness of her hair against her cheek, and pressed a gentle kiss to Lily’s

forehead. "Don't be sad...I love you, soooo much." she said pulling every ounce of strength to hold back her tears

"Love you too, Mommy," Lily said, her voice cracking with emotion.

The nurse gave a gentle nudge, ushering Lily toward the car. "Thank you, Ms. Louise. We'll see you again soon," she said kindly.

Reluctant, Lily took the nurses hand and with a final waive stepped into the car.

Frances watched as the car turned the corner and disappeared from sight, her hand hovering over her lips, barely holding in the sob building within her. She felt Yaz's arm around her shoulder, warm and grounding, as they headed back inside. Once the door shut behind them, Frances could no longer keep her tears at bay.

"Oh, Yaz..." she whispered, her voice breaking.

Yaz pulled her close, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead as Frances's sobs filled the quiet room. "I know, love. I know," she murmured, holding her as tightly as she could.

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