

## Chapter 16

That evening coming back from Frances, as Yaz stepped into the house, the warmth of home instantly enveloped her, yet her nerves fluttered in her chest. She found Susan comfortably nestled on the couch, a book resting on her lap, her reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose. Susan looked up and smiled warmly.

"You're back, I didn't expect you till later." Susan greeted her, marking the page with her finger. "How was your evening?"

Yaz hesitated for a split second, her mind racing about how to bring up the conversation she'd been rehearsing for the last hour. "It was nice, yeah," she managed, slipping off her coat and folding it over a chair. "You want some tea?"

"Tea sounds lovely," Susan replied, eyes twinkling as she returned her attention to her book.

Yaz busied herself in the kitchen, her thoughts a whirl of tangled emotions. She knew Susan would understand, at least she hoped, but this was different. Frances's situation was delicate, private matter, and this conversation wasn't the easiest one.

Her hands worked on autopilot as she boiled the water and prepared two mugs. Taking a deep breath, Yaz walked back into the living room, the warmth of the tea mugs in her hands giving her a sense of calm. Susan looked up from her book, setting it aside as Yaz handed her a cup.

"Thank you, darling," Susan said, her gaze softening as she

noticed Yaz's slightly tense expression. "You alright? You seem like there's something on your mind."

Yaz managed a small smile and settled into the chair opposite. "I'm fine... there's just something I'd like to talk to you about."

Susan's brow furrowed slightly with concern. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no... nothing's wrong. It's just... I have a favor to ask. But before that, I need to explain a few things." Yaz glanced down, trying to find the right words "I'd appreciate it if you could keep this between us. It's... personal and delicate, and I hope you'll understand."

Susan's hand found Yaz's, and she held it gently, giving her a reassuring smile. "You're worrying me a little, love. But whatever it is, you don't ever need to doubt me. Anything you say stays right here, between us. Don't be afraid, alright?"

Yaz felt her chest loosen as she nodded. "Thank you... really, I can't tell you how much that means."

"Of course, darling. There's no need to thank me. Now, what's on your mind? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, no, it's not me..." Yaz paused, steadying herself. "It's about Frances."

Susan's expression softened with curiosity. "Frances?"

Yaz placed her drink down, reaching for Susan's hand again. "There's no easy way of saying this...But here we go...See .... when Frances was seventeen, she had a little girl.... Her name's Lily."

"Oh?" Susan blinked, a flicker of surprise in her eyes. She took a steady breath but kept her face composed. "She had a baby at seventeen... she was just a kid herself."

"Well, she stayed pregnant at seventeen and....She was very young," Yaz nodded, feeling her heart race. "I can't go into all the details, I hope you understand...but please... I hope you won't judge her."

"I would never do that, Yaz." Susan's voice was soft, deeply empathetic. "Seventeen...My God...she was just a child herself."

Yaz nodded, her voice barely a whisper. "She didn't have an easy start in life either...It was horrible..."

Susan's eyes grew tender with understanding. "Oh... did someone...?"

"I can't say more about it... I'm so sorry...It's just not down to me to say it...I hope you understand?"

Susan shook her head gently. "No, darling, don't be sorry. I didn't mean to push. I just...Go on...I'm listening..."

Yaz swallowed, feeling Susan's support surround her. "Frances has kept Lily's existence private. She wants to keep her daughter out of the public eye. With her work and the studio's strict morality clause in her contract...the situation is just.... complicated."

Susan sighed, her heart clearly going out to Frances. "Of course. I understand. Single mothers... children born out of marriage... it's still such a cruel world for them. So where is this child now?"

"Frances has her in one of the best private schools for children

with her needs. It's a safe place, with everything she needs to be happy. Frances made sure of that."

Susan gave a quiet, approving nod. "That's good to know, at least that."

Yaz paused, her heart racing. "About the favor I wanted to ask..."

"Yes honey?"

"It's about Christmas. Frances has never spent a real Christmas with Lily. She just visits her at the home for a while, then goes back to her own life....To be honest, she hardly ever has any proper time with her, she can't take her to her own house, she can't take her anywhere...It's too risky...And it breaks my heart."

"That must be so hard. I can't imagine it to be honest."

"So... I was hoping that maybe... just this once, Lily could spend Christmas Eve here with us. I totally understand if it's too much to ask...or if you don't wanna get involved...I totally get it..."

Susan's response was immediate. "Of course she can. She's always welcome here."

"Really?" Yaz's eyes filled with tears, her breath catching as she felt an overwhelming rush of relief.

"Of course honey...What kind of a person would I be to say no to that"

"Oh my God" Yaz exhaled deeply and leaned forward, pulling Susan into a tight hug. "Thank you... thank you so much."

Susan held her close, her voice warm and comforting. "It's alright,

darling... Don't have to thank me. Frances means the world to you, and by the sound of it, this little girl does too."

Yaz pulled back, wiping her tears with a grateful smile. "She does. She's the sweetest... you'll see."

Susan's face brightened, a playful look crossing her face. "Sooo...It was Lily who's present you didn't finish?"

"Yees..." Yaz laughed, nodding. "That totally slipped up..." she giggled "She wanted a fairy dress from The Wizard of Oz. I was working on it for weeks...Wanna see it?"

Susan grinned. "Of course! But first I think you should go and call Frances. Tell her Lily's always welcome here. And we'll need to set up a room for her, won't we?"

"A room?" Yaz blinked, surprised.

"Well, we're not sending her back out on Christmas Eve, are we? Let's do it right. Breakfast and all, if she's comfortable with that of course."

Yaz chuckled, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. "She's gonna lose her mind when I tell her."

Susan tapped her knee with a warm smile. "Then go on, darling, make that call."

As Yaz got up, she stopped and turned back to Susan, leaning down to press a tender kiss to her cheek. "I love you. You can't know what this means to me... to both of us."

Susan cupped her face, her voice gentle. "Love you too, honey...." as Yaz was at the door of the living room Susan

suddenly jumped "Oh noo...I don't have a present for Lily..."

"I'm sure we can think of something" Yaz chuckled

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Early morning Frances's car rolled to a stop in front of Susan's house, the late December sun casting a gentle glow across the street. The air was cool but still carried a hint of warmth, reminding them it was Christmas Eve in Los Angeles. Yaz stood by door, a small bag in her hand, already impatiently waiting. As Frances parked, Susan stepped outside, a light cardigan draped over her shoulders.

Seeing Susan, Frances got out and walked toward her, her face softening. "Morning"

"Hi honey" Yaz smiled

"Morning Miss Frances" Susan greeted

"Pleaseeee, just Frances" she said shaking her head and without hesitation wrapped Susan in a surprise hug that was both grateful and deeply felt "Thank you...soooo much" Frances whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "This means the world to me. I'll never forget this kindness."

Susan gently pulled back, taking Frances's hands in hers. "There's no need to thank me honey" she replied warmly, looking into her eyes. "I can't wait to meet her."

Frances gave a grateful nod, holding back a surge of emotion, and Susan asked quietly, "So, what's the plan for today?"

"We're on our way to the school now to organize everything," Frances said with a soft smile. "I will arrange for her to be brought here around three and for them to pick her up tomorrow at noon."

Susan nodded, her own eyes glistening. "That's wonderful. We'll have everything ready " Susan smiled "I won't hold you up anymore...Shall we say two o'clock?"

"Perfect" Frances nodded "See you later Susan" she smiled, her hand lingering on Yaz's back for a moment as she guided her towards the car.

"See ya!" Yaz waived as she settled in the passenger seat.

As Frances turned onto the main road, her hand found Yaz's, gently bringing it to her lips in a tender kiss. She glanced at her briefly before returning her eyes on a road, her eyes filled with unspoken words and a mix of emotions she didn't know how to express out loud. Yaz felt the warmth of Frances's hand and the quiet weight of this small, powerful gesture, something so simple yet full of meaning.

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As they arrived at the school, the energy in the building was almost tangible. Children's excited voices filled the hallways as they made their way to the small backstage area. Frances scanned the room looking for Lily amongst the other children, her heart quickened at the sight of her daughter.

Lily was in full costume, a white robe adorned with delicate silver wings and a tinsel halo tilted slightly on her head. One of the teachers was brushing her hair when she spotted her mother.

"Mommy!" She yelled, her eyes lit up the moment she saw

Frances, and she bounded over, wrapping her arms around her mother in a tight hug.

"Hello sweetheart" Frances murmured squeezing her tightly. She held her close, kissing her forehead, her voice warm and soft. "Look at you, my beautiful angel. You look perfect."

Lily beamed and, to Yaz's surprise, turned and wrapped her arms around her too. "Did you come to see my play?"

"Course I did..."Yaz smiled, hugging her back gently, touched by the unexpected affection "You didn't really think I'll miss it, did you?"

"I get to sing tonight!" Lily said, her eyes shining towards her mother "I've been practicing!"

Frances tucked a stray curl under Lily's halo and smiled. "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. I can't wait to hear you."

Lily looked up at Frances, her expression falling as she touched the crooked halo on her head. "Mummy, Judy broke my halo," she murmured, sadness creeping into her voice.

Frances gently tucked a stray curl behind her ear and took a closer look trying to straighten it up, but then realised she's making it worse. "Oh, baby, that's not very nice. Why would she do that?"

"Because she's mad at me"

"Why is mad at you darling?"

Lily sighed. "Because she wanted to be an angel too. But the teacher said she had to be a shepherd, and she didn't want to



dress like a boy. So, she got mad at me...and then she broke it. The teacher sent her to the corner.... But now everyone will laugh"

Frances shared a look with Yaz, who had been watching quietly. "You know," she said, her voice warm, "I don't think anyone will notice, we didn't." She shrugged

Yaz nodded with a gentle smile. "Nope...I didn't notice at all...You're way too dazzling to need a perfect halo."

Lily tilted her head, her eyes brightening. "Really?"

"Absolutely," Frances said, giving her a playful tickle that made her giggle. She kissed her cheek, feeling Lily's laughter vibrate against her. "Wanna know a secret?"

Lily nodded intrigued

"Once I had a broken dress, and there was no time to repair it. Sooo...I got up there and did my lines as usual, cause that's what you do when you're an actress, just need to work around it. And guess what? Nobody knew...nobody noticed, and I still got my award. And you're such a good little actress, you don't even need a halo to shine." she tapped the tip of her nose playfully

Lily's smile returned, and she nestled closer to her mother, reassured and ready for her big moment.

Just then, Lily's teacher started gathering the children. She approached with a polite smile.

"Good morning, Miss Louise," she greeted warmly, extending a hand. "It's lovely to see you here. Lily's been so excited to have you in the audience today."

Frances returned the handshake with a grateful smile. "Thank you. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

The teacher nodded, glancing at Lily fondly. "She's been a little star in rehearsals, and she's so thrilled to show you everything she's worked on."

"She's very excited. I can't wait to see it. You've done a wonderful job as always"

"I hopw you enjoy yourselves" She gave Lily a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Ready, Lily?"

Lily nodded, giving one last wave to her mother and Yaz before following her classmates.

"Break a leg darling" Frances said sending her a kiss

"Oh bless" Yaz smiled "She'll be lucky if that halo don't drop off"

"I knooooow" Frances giggled

As they found their seats in the audience the lights dimmed and children began filing onto the stage in their costumes, ready to perform. Frances couldn't take her eyes off Lily, her heart full.

Yaz leaned over, whispering softly, "I can't believe how alike you two look. She has your eyes, your smile..."

Frances's eyes misted. "Thank you for being here" she murmured, her hand finding Yaz's in a dark squeezing it tight.

"And where else would I be if not here?" Yaz whispered back, her own voice thick with emotion as her thumb brushed gently over

Frances's hand.

They fell silent, both caught up in the moment as the children started singing, their young voices filling the hall with a pure, joyful sound.

Suddenly, Lily's halo slipped from her head and tumbled to the floor. She paused, looking momentarily lost, and Frances's breath caught as their eyes met across the room. After a brief heartbeat, Lily steadied herself, and bravely stepped forward, her voice joining the chorus once again. Frances's heart swelled with pride as Lily continued, her courage shining brighter than any halo ever could.

After the play, they went backstage to find Lily, who was practically glowing with excitement as she rushed back to Frances.

"Did you like it, Mommy? Did I sing okay?" Lily looked up at her with excitement.

Frances hugged her tightly. "You were wonderful, darling. I'm so proud of you." she said kissing her cheek, her voice soft

"Thank you, Mommy!" Lily said, eyes bright with joy.

"A proper actress, just like your mum" Yaz smiled

As she helped her change, Frances knelt down to meet her daughter's gaze. "Lily darling...How would you feel about coming to visit Yaz's home today? We could spend a special Christmas together...you, me.... Yaz...have cakes and you get to meet Susan, Yaz's friend."

Lily looked a bit surprised at first, her eyes darting between Frances and Yaz. Then, a broad smile broke across her face.

“Really? I can stay with you?”

“Mmmm...if you'd like that.” Frances nodded, stroking her hair. “Your teacher will bring you to me, and you’ll spend the night with me. Would you like that darling? I'm not gonna get upset if rather stay with your friends.”

A thoughtful look crossed Lily’s face. “Will Santa know where I am?”

Frances exchanged a soft smile with Yaz, then brushed her daughter’s cheek. “Santa always knows where to find you, darling. He’ll never miss you.”

"Alright" she nodded with a huge smile "And I stay with you till tomorrow?"

"Yes sweetie pie...the whole night." Frances tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and pulled her in hugging her tight "I love you...so much...We'll have great time, you'll see."

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The spare bedroom was small but charming, with soft cream walls and a large window draped with sheer curtains that let in a soft afternoon light. Susan had taken great care of the space, dressing the bed in fresh, white linens. Her and Yaz folded a soft wool blanket in a warm shade of rose at the bottom, perfect for keeping out the winter chill.

Susan ran her hand over the blankets, adjusting them once more, an anxious look crossing her face. "I just want them both to be comfortable here," she murmured.

Yaz reached out to squeeze her shoulder gently. "It's perfect. Frances is so excited to have Lily here, she wouldn't notice if she was sleeping on a pile of coats." She chuckled, hoping to ease her friend's nerves.

"It'll be nice, having a child around for Christmas," Susan replied, her voice soft with nostalgia.

Yaz felt an ache in her chest at the weight of those words. She wrapped an arm around Susan, pulling her into a warm hug.

"Thank you, for everything," she said, her voice thick with gratitude. "You've been so supportive, not just for me but for Frances too. It means more than you know."

Susan smiled, returning the hug tightly. "You don't need to thank me, darling. This house could use some new laughter."

"Talking about that, let's get ready"

"Yes, I just need to check the turkey"

As Susan stepped out to prepare for the evening, Yaz took a moment to gather her thoughts and get ready. She stepped into the shower, letting the warm water wash away the remnants of the long day. After quickly drying off, she carefully applied her makeup. Unlike Frances bold look, Yaz's makeup was more subtle, accentuating her features with a light touch that highlighted her natural beauty. She put the lipstick down and reached for a pair of emerald green trousers waiting on the bed and paired them with a soft cream blouse that flowed gently around her waist. Over it, she added a cozy light cardigan in the same deep green hue, partially buttoning it at the front creating an elegant yet simple look perfect for the evening ahead.

Yaz adorned herself with a pair of gold earrings, each set with a vibrant green stone, a cherished gift from her nanny that always brought her comfort. She finished the look by fastening a delicate gold bangle on her wrist, a graduation present from her father, a reminder of his pride in her accomplishments.

As she looked in the mirror, a wave of excitement washed over her at the thought of spending Christmas Eve with Frances, Lily and Susan. Yet, as the thrill of the evening settled in, a twinge of loneliness crept in. Her thoughts turned to her own family, who although had never celebrated Christmas, it was moments like this that made her miss them. She missed her culture, the little traditions, the laughter, the warmth of being together. As much as she loved her life, she missed England dearly.

But she brushed those feelings aside, reminding herself that family could take many forms. Tonight, she would create new memories, and the presence of Frances and Lily would fill her heart with the joy she longed for. With one last look in the mirror and a soft smile, she felt ready for the night ahead, embracing the hope and love that awaited her.

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Frances stood in front of her vanity adjusting a belt buckle. She opted for something simple but elegant, black trousers and red cashmere jumper. She reached for a pair of small pearl earrings adding a hint of elegance without drawing too much attention, just what she wanted.

Satisfied with her look, she fixed her blonde curls and gave a final touch to her coral lipstick then picked up a small black bag and her keys and reached for the black coat draped across her bed, slipping it on with ease. On her way out, she stopped in the kitchen, where a bottle of champagne was waiting on the counter,

adorned with a large red bow. She picked it up, ready for the celebration ahead, and stepped outside, her heels clicking softly as she approached her car.

With the champagne resting on the passenger seat, Frances settled in behind the wheel. The trunk was already packed with carefully wrapped presents and a small overnight bag with essentials. Though she'd spent much of the day anxiously preparing, an unexpected calm washed over her as she turned the key, and the engine purred to life. As the gates slowly opened, she took a deep breath. Leaving her home, she watched in the rearview mirror as the gates closed, sealing the familiar world behind her and opening the way for a Christmas unlike any she'd had before.

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As Susan lifted the roasting pan, Yaz held onto the other end, eyebrows raised as they balanced the hefty turkey together.

"Careful, Yaz," Susan warned, eyes twinkling as they managed to set the bird on the counter.

"Blimey Susan! How big is this bird?" Yaz teased, catching her breath.

Susan chuckled, waving a towel over turkey with satisfaction. "A twenty-pounder! ...Now let's keep it warm," Susan said, layering the turkey in parchment and tucking a towel over it. "Next up, the dinner rolls!"

"It'll be turkey sandwiches for a week!" Yaz grinned

"Well, I guess I'll just have to send Frances home with some

leftovers," Susan half-joked. "She's so thin, sometimes I worry she lives on coffee alone."

"She's curvy on all the right places I'll have you know" Yaz grinned

Susan gave her a look, raising her eyebrows. "Oh, is that so? I'll take your word on it," she teased, giving Yaz a playful nudge. Then, glancing around the kitchen, her eyes narrowed. "Now, where did I put the cranberry sauce?"

Yaz pointed across the counter, chuckling. "It's right there, Susan. You're running around like a headless chicken. Everything's perfect, I promise."

"Not quite perfect," Susan sighed with a soft smile, glancing toward a photo of her family on the wall. Her eyes lingered on it for a moment before making herself busy with rolls. The warmth in the room mixed with a tinge of melancholy.

Yaz set down the potato masher, stepping closer to Susan and slipping her arms around her shoulders. She rested her head gently against Susan's, a soft smile on her lips. "Love ya," she whispered warmly.

Susan smiled, brushing a tear from her cheek as she squeezed Yaz's hand. "Love you too, dear. Now, get back to those potatoes! She'll be here any minute."

Just then, the sound of a car horn outside made them both jump.

"Speak of the devil" Susan chuckled "Could you..."

"Yap...sure" Yaz darted out of the kitchen leaving Susan with a soft chuckle



She rushed to the door, grinning as she spotted Frances by the car, juggling a large box wrapped in a shiny paper. Frances caught sight of her and gave a cheerful wave.

"Hello darling!" she called, leaning in to give Yaz a quick peck on the cheek before glancing at the overpacked trunk.

Yaz's eyes widened. "What on earth did you bring?"

Frances laughed. "A dollhouse for Lily! And... well, a few other things."

"That's an understatement!" Yaz's mouth dropped open. "You know there are only four of us, right?"

Frances winked, shutting the car door with her hip.

As Frances stepped inside, she quickly peeked into the kitchen, her face lighting up with a bright smile. "Hi! Something smells absolutely divine!"

"Hello, sweetie," Susan replied warmly.

"I'll be right back, I just need to grab some stuff from the car," Frances said, gesturing toward the door.

"Sure thing, honey! Make yourself at home," Susan encouraged.

"I just might take you up on that," Frances winked before disappearing outside again.

In the driveway, she spotted Yaz, who was balancing her bag over one shoulder while clutching a bakery box adorned with a familiar logo.

“Here, let me take that, darling. They have go in the fridge,” Frances said, reaching for the box.

“Did you really buy cakes?” Yaz asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

“It’s Christmas! Of course, I bought cakes!” Frances replied, grinning.

“Susan literally owns a cake store, you know. We’ve got enough to feed the whole US army!”

“Oh....I forgot.... Oh well” she waved her hand dismissively. “Never mind that now.” She rushed back inside quickly, settling the box down on the table, noting the puzzled look on Susan’s face. “I knooooow... I forgot!” she called out before slipping back out the door again leaving Susan laughing.

"Well, I suppose those can go to Lily’s school" Susan remarked picking up the box

After the last of the bags were finally unloaded from the car and brought into the house, Yaz closed the door with her back, letting out a satisfied huff. A wide smile broke across her face as she caught Frances’s gaze, and in a spontaneous moment, she reached out, pulling her in for a quick kiss, an innocent, stolen peck on the lips.

Frances’s eyes widened in surprise "Careful" she whispered chuckling, and playfully scolding her pointing a finger at her

"Alright, come on, let me show you to your room," Yaz said with a mischievous giggle. "Susan!!" she called out. "I’ll take Franny to her room!"

"Alright, darling... Could you two set the table afterward?" Susan replied from the kitchen.

"Sure thing... No problem!" Yaz chirped, her excitement palpable as she grabbed Frances's hand pulling away.

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As Frances carefully unpacked her things, she laid a neatly pressed nightgown on the bed, one of many Christmas gifts she had brought for Lily. Her face softened, but a flicker of worry appeared as she smoothed out the fabric. Yaz, noticing the sudden change in her mood, quietly stepped closer.

"What's wrong, darling?" Yaz asked gently.

Frances took a deep breath and turned, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm terrified."

Yaz's brow furrowed, and she reached out, lacing her fingers with Frances's, pulling her close. "Of what, honey?"

Frances looked down, her voice unsteady. "Yaz... what if I don't wanna let her go?"

With tenderness, Yaz reached up, tucking a loose curl behind Frances's ear. "And what if you're not meant to?" she whispered, a warmth in her gaze.

Frances closed her eyes, drawing a steadying breath. "It's not that easy, love."

"No, it's not," Yaz replied, giving her hand a gentle squeeze and pulling her into an embrace. "But we'll find a way."

Just then, Susan's voice floated down the hall. "Yaz! I need your help!"

"Coming!" Yaz called back, then turned her focus back to Frances, her touch lingering.

Frances smiled, though her eyes still held a trace of worry. "I'm alright... just a bit overwhelmed." She wrapped her arms around Yaz's neck, pulling her in for a soft kiss. "Go on, I'll be right there after I finish unpacking."

Yaz let her hands slide down Frances's arms, giving her one last look. "Don't be long," she whispered, warmth in her eyes.

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As Yaz stepped into the kitchen, Susan was busy juggling pots and trays, looking slightly flustered.

"Oh, perfect timing, Yaz! Can you help me shift this turkey? I need a bit more space here," Susan said, giving Yaz a grateful smile.

Yaz grinned, rolling up her sleeves. "Sure thing! Where do you need it?"

"Just over there, by the counter.... So, does she like her room?"

As they carefully balanced the roasting pan, a voice from the doorway made Susan jump.

"She loves it" Frances chimed in with a mischievous smile.

"Oh! You made me jump!" Susan laughed, catching her breath. Frances walked over and wrapped her in a warm hug.

“It’s perfect, Susan. Thank you, truly,” Frances said. She turned with a sparkle in her eye, reaching into one of her bags and pulled a bottle of champagne. “And I brought a little something for us to celebrate!”

Susan’s eyes lit up as she took the bottle. “Champagne! Now be careful, you’re gonna spoil me with that fancy stuff” she joked, looking for an opener. “Only one problem, I’m fresh out of champagne glasses!”

“Wine glasses will work just fine,” Frances winked.

After Susan popped the cork, they filled their glasses, with Yaz raising her Coke.

Susan held her glass high. “To new friendships,” she toasted warmly.

“And beyond!” Frances added, beaming.

They clinked glasses with a shared laugh, savoring the bubbles and cheer of the moment. Frances took a sip, smiling with contentment.

“So, what can I help with? Put me to work!” Frances said eagerly, looking around the kitchen.

“Why don’t you two set the table?” Susan suggested. “I’ll finish up here. And when’s the little one joining us?”

Frances glanced at her watch, her grin tinged with nerves. “Soon! About half an hour, I think.”

“Don’t worry,” Susan reassured her gently. “It might be the first

time, but I've got a feeling it won't be the last."

Frances gave a hopeful smile as she stood up, nodding. "I hope you're right," she said softly. With that, she and Yaz headed to the dining room.

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Frances and Yaz had just finished setting the table, placing the last touches on the festive scene when they heard Susan call from the kitchen.

"Frances, the car just pulled up, I think Lily's here!"

Frances's heart skipped, and before anyone could react, she was already heading for the door, barely able to contain her excitement. Outside, a sleek black Packard pulled up along the curb. One of the school nurses stepped out first, glancing around, followed by Lily. The little girl looked uncertain, clutching the nurse's hand tightly. But as her eyes found her mother, her face transformed, softening from uncertainty to pure joy.

Without hesitation, Lily let go of the nurse's hand and ran toward Frances, her little steps quickening until she practically launched herself into her mother's waiting arms. Frances scooped her up, wrapping her arms around Lily.

"Oh, my love," Frances whispered, her voice full of warmth and relief. She held Lily close for a few moments, savoring the reunion, then looked up at the nurse with gratitude.

"Thank you so much for bringing her," Frances said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "I know it was a bit out of the way for you."

The nurse smiled warmly. "It's our pleasure, Miss Louise. Lily had a good day, and she was very excited to see you."

Frances smiled and nodded, shifting her gaze back to her daughter. "I'll arrange for her to be picked up around noon tomorrow."

The nurse gave a reassuring nod, exchanging a warm goodbye with Frances before stepping back toward the car. Frances, still holding Lily close, walked back toward the house, feeling her worries soften in the warmth of her daughter's embrace.

As Frances walked back to the house with Lily nestled against her side, Susan stood in the hallway, her heart fluttering with anticipation. When she caught sight of the tiny girl, her breath caught in her throat. No taller than 3'4", Lily clung tightly to her mother, with her small frame seeming delicate and fragile she looked no older than six.

Dressed in a stunning deep red dress that fell just above her knees, Lily looked like a picture from a storybook. The fabric was soft, with a slight sheen that captured the light, complete with puffed sleeves and a little bow at the waist, giving her an innocent, angelic appearance.

As Susan took in the sight, she was struck by how much Lily resembled Frances. The girl's round face, delicate features and hazel eyes mirrored her mother's, with the blonde hair just little bit darker than Frances's framing her face. Even the way she tilted her head slightly, peeking up at Frances with wide, curious eyes, reminded Susan of Frances's own expressive demeanor.

"Oh my goodness, she looks so much like you" Susan smiled, her voice warm

Frances leaned down slightly, her voice gentle and reassuring.

“Lily darling, this is Susan,” she said softly. “She’s Yaz’s friend I told you about, and she’s so excited to meet you.”

Susan bent down to Lily’s height, her smile gentle and open. “Hello, Lily, I’m so happy to meet you.” she said in a kind voice, but Lily instinctively turned her head, pressing her face shyly into her mother’s side.

Frances chuckled, giving her daughter’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay, love. Susan’s very nice, and it’s her first time meeting you, too.” Glancing at Susan, she added, “She can be a little shy around new people. It’s her first time away from home. She just needs a little bit of time”

Susan’s smile softened with understanding. “Of course, it’s understandable” she said kindly, her tone as warm as ever. “It’s a lot of new things all at once, isn’t it? A bit scary. But I was wondering, Lily, would you like to help me in the kitchen? I need a special helper to put some cookies out on a tray. They’re almost ready to go!”

Lily looked up at her mother, uncertainty in her eyes. Frances smiled, stroking her daughter’s hair gently. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m right here. And Susan makes the best cookies.”

Lily hesitated, then finally gave a small nod, extending her little hand to Susan. With a bright smile, Susan took her hand, leading her gently down the hallway toward the kitchen. Frances watched, her heart full as she saw her daughter take this first brave step.

As the front door clicked shut, Frances stood in the hallway for a moment, exhaling deeply to keep her emotions in check. Yaz, seeing the glimmer of tears in Frances's eyes, stepped close and



wrapped her arms around her in a comforting hug.

"You're more nervous than she is," Yaz teased gently, her voice warm with affection. "Take a breath. She's doing just fine."

Frances managed a soft smile, feeling the tension in her chest ease a little.

Yaz nodded toward the kitchen, where Susan and Lily's voices were softly drifting back to them. "Come on," she encouraged with a playful nudge. "We need to show her the tree. She'll love it."

Frances took a steadying breath, nodded, and followed Yaz toward the kitchen, a mixture of excitement and relief bubbling up inside her.

As they stepped into the kitchen, Frances's heart softened at the sight before her. There was Lily, carefully placing cookies on a tray with Susan's gentle guidance. A small, focused frown was etched on Lily's face as she arranged each cookie precisely, while Susan, in her element, encouraged her with warm, enthusiastic smiles.

When she spotted Yaz, she reached for a cookie and held it out, her eyes shining with pride. Yaz accepted it with a broad smile, taking an exaggerated bite. "Mmm, perfection," she declared, making Lily giggle.

Susan, who clearly knew her way around children, was effortlessly keeping Lily engaged, pointing out the array of holiday dishes spread across the counters. She leaned down and whispered something to Lily, then showed her the perfectly roasted turkey. "What do you think? Wanna help me carry some things to the table?"

Lily looked up at her mother, eyes filled with quiet excitement. Frances gave her a small nod of encouragement, and Lily took a bowl of vegetables from Susan's hands, carefully carrying it to the dining room table as Frances and Yaz followed, balancing trays and plates.

Once everything was in place, Frances crouched down to Lily's level. "Would you like to see the Christmas tree?"

Lily's eyes went wide, sparking with wonder as she nodded happily

As Frances led Lily from the dining room into the living room, Lily's eyes widened as she caught sight of Susan's Christmas tree. A tall, lush pine adorned with sparkling lights and a mix of traditional ornaments, each one telling a story. Frances bent down beside her, gently pointing to a delicate glass star. "Look" she whispered, "It's pretty, isn't it?" She continued, moving along the tree, introducing Lily to each unique decoration, a tiny red sleigh, a beautiful angel with tinsel wings and snowflakes adorned with glitter.

"What's that?" Lily pointed to a painted nutcracker

"It's a nutcracker, see his mouth moves so he can crack all the nuts, remember last year when we painted them?"

"I don't like him...he looks scary"

"He does a bit, doesn't he? Which one is your favorite?"

"That one" Lily pointed to an angel

"I thought it might be"

"Do you have a Christmas tree?"

For a split second, Frances's throat tightened. The question pierced her heart with a painful realization that her daughter had never seen her own mother's home, much less celebrated a holiday in it. She opened her mouth to answer, but her voice faltered, unsure of what to say.

Sensing the shift, Susan quickly intervened. She leaned down beside Lily, picking up a delicate glass snow globe from the chest of drawers. "Lily, come look at this! It's one of my favorites," she said brightly, turning the globe in her hands so that flakes of snow floated around a tiny Christmas village inside. Lily's face lit up with wonder, momentarily distracted as she took the globe in her hands. "It plays music as well...Let me show you."

Frances gave Susan a grateful smile, silently relieved. With the emotional moment smoothed over, she took a steadying breath, squeezing Yaz's hand for comfort as they watched Lily's awe. The night was unfolding with warmth, and for the first time, Frances allowed herself to imagine that perhaps this could become a tradition.

"Right...who's hungry?" Susan asked cheerfully

"Everyone" Yaz chuckled

"Come on darling, let's have something to eat" Frances stroke her daughter's hair gently

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The table was beautifully set with a nostalgic charm that felt both comforting and festive. Susan had laid out a classic, seasonal tablecloth with deep reds and greens, and simple, delicate candles sat in the center, casting a warm glow over the room. She

had adorned the table with modest holiday trinkets, a small bowl of pinecones, a sprig of holly, and vintage porcelain plates with intricate patterns. The silverware was polished to perfection, and a simple garland of evergreen branches trailed down the center, giving a hint of fresh, wintery scent.

As everyone took their seats, Susan began to carve the turkey, each slice tender and juicy, while Frances delicately cut it into smaller pieces on Lily's plate. Lily's eyes shifted to the vegetables with a slight frown, her tiny nose wrinkling at the sight of carrots and peas.

"I don't want these" she complained

Frances gently encouraged her, leaning in with a smile. "They are really nice sweetheart. Just a little bite?"

"Nooo" she shook her head

But it was Susan who offered a persuasive nudge. "Tell you what, Lily. If you try a bite, you can open one present early."

"That's right...Don't you wanna see what Yaz got you?" Frances encouraged

Instantly, Lily perked up, and with a bright, eager look, she picked up a small piece of carrot and popped it into her mouth.

"Well, that worked." Frances smiled, feeling a bittersweet pang as she realized just how many moments like this she had missed in her daughter's life. Visiting twice a month hadn't come close to building this connection.

They all dug into their plates, and Frances savored a bite, her eyes lighting up. "This is delicious!"

“Good, cause you’re taking some home,” Yaz teased.

“Oh, am I now?” Frances laughed, eyebrows raised.

“Absolutely! You don’t actually think Yaz and I can finish off this dinosaur on our own, do you?” Susan added, giving a playful smirk.

Yaz nudged Susan. “I’m pretty sure Susan combed the entire store for the biggest turkey they had.”

Susan chuckled, “I might’ve done! And then, when I got home, I thought, ‘Damn...How am I gonna fit this in the oven?’

Yaz grinned, leaning in. “Oh, she used her foot to wedge it in.”

Susan nudged her back, laughing. “I did not!”

Frances burst out laughing. “Well, that’s still better than my first Christmas turkey attempt. It tasted like the bottom of a shoe!”

Yaz raised an eyebrow. “Sooo...how exactly do you know what the bottom of a shoe tastes like, Franny?”

“Oh, shut up!” Frances grabbed a napkin and swatted Yaz, laughing so hard her eyes watered.

From across the table, Lily looked up, wide-eyed. “Mummy, why did you eat a shoe?” she asked, voice full of concern.

The table erupted into laughter, and Frances hid her face in her hands, trying to catch her breath. “I didn’t eat the shoe, darling,” she managed to say through giggles.

“She tried, but it was too tough to chew.” Yaz added

Susan tried her best to keep a straight face as she explained to Lily, “Sweetheart, they’re just joking around. Your mummy didn’t actually eat a shoe.”

Frances wiped a tear from her eye, still laughing. “How did we even get here?”

Frances laughed kissing her daughter’s head, feeling the warmth and joy filling the room. For once, she felt completely at ease.

Then Susan asked, “Frances, where do you usually spend Christmas Eve?”

Frances hesitated, her voice softening. “I visit Lily...and then, well, I go home.”

“By yourself?” Susan asked, her tone laced with empathy.

Frances nodded, taking another small bite.

Susan’s expression softened. She knew how hard it was to spend the holidays alone, having spent many Christmases that way herself, watching the world celebrate from behind her own walls. There was a special loneliness in spending a holiday with only the faint hum of the television for company.

She reached over and placed a gentle hand on Frances’s arm. “Well, from now on, you’re always welcome here.”

Frances’s eyes brightened. “Thank you, Susan. That’s very kind of you. I’d love to join you.”

They exchanged warm smiles, and Frances felt a rare sense of

belonging and connection she hadn't experienced in years. Across the table Yaz glanced at her, her heart full seeing her so happy..

The conversation grew quiet, and then Susan spoke up, looking at Frances with a gentle, knowing expression. "If you don't mind me asking, how long has Lily been staying in a dorm?"

Frances shifted, hesitant but honest. "She changed few places with years. As I got played more, I wanted her to be in a better place. But she's been living in a home since she was two years old. With my work at the time, it was better for her that way, I couldn't possibly give her the care she needed."

For a moment a heavy silence filled the room, laden with unspoken emotions and an uneasy vulnerability lingering in Frances's heart. The weight of potential judgment gnawed at her, leaving her thoughts tangled in a quiet, anxious haze. But Susan soon broke the silence, her voice gentle and filled with understanding.

"Well, Maybe...it's time for a change. You could take Lily on a holiday, somewhere new and far from prying eyes."

"She's right." Yaz added "If you take her abroad nobody's gonna know"

Frances's gaze softened as she probably for the first time in her life considered it, glancing over at Lily, who was happily engrossed with the snow globe, contentedly eating her vegetables. "Maybe it could work," she murmured tucking strand of hair behind Lily's ear, a glimmer of hope brightening her voice.

Susan's words lingered in the air, and she continued, "You're always welcome to bring her here, anytime. My house is open to you both."

"That's so sweet Susan...I don't know what to say...But I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Nonsense, how could possibly intrude. I'd love having her around. She'd bring life back to this old place, you know?" There was a hint of sadness in her voice. "I miss having a child around," she said quietly, and Frances realized just how deeply Susan was offering not only support but an invitation to share in the joys of parenting Lily.

Yaz's voice joined in with quiet conviction. "I think it's great idea. Maybe it's time to start changing things. I think it would mean so much to both of you"

Frances hesitated. "I don't know...I'm just worried it's gonna blow up in my face. If press finds out they'd be all over her...I can't take that risk."

As Susan looked at Frances, her expression softened with a steady wisdom. "You can't keep her under glass, Frances. Someday, you might not be there, and Lily will need to find her own way in the world. She's bright, and even with her challenges, I truly believe she could learn a trade, cake-making, sewing, something creative, something she can take pride in." Susan's gaze shifted to Yaz, who nodded in agreement, supporting her. "I'm sorry if I'm being too forward. It's your decision, after all. It's just...kids grow so quickly."

Frances took a deep breath, absorbing her words. "Please, don't apologize. I've been handling all of this on my own for so long...it hasn't been easy. I'm trying to make the best decisions, but maybe I needed to hear this from someone else."

Yaz leaned closer, her voice gentle and full of warmth. "I know it's



complicated, but we can take baby steps.... We'll figure it out together."

Susan gave a small, encouraging smile. "Exactly. I just hate seeing you two being held hostages by the tabloids. Lily needs her mother, and you need her by your side." She then lifted her glass with a determined expression. "Now, let's have a toast."

Frances handed Lily her own glass of juice, nudging her gently. "Would you like to make a toast, sweetheart?"

Lily's face lit up with excitement as she held up her glass, her eyes bright with joy as she watched Frances. "Just hold it up like this, and do what we do," Frances whispered with a smile.

Susan rose with a heartfelt smile. "May this holiday season bring us joy, peace, and memories to treasure. Here's to health, happiness, family, and the feeling of being home, in our hearts and in spirit." Her eyes briefly glanced at a family photo nearby. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Yaz and Frances echoed warmly, clinking their glasses together. Lily, delighted by the tradition, went around the table, clinking her glass with everyone else's, giggling as she repeated, "Cheers!" each time.

Watching Lily's unfiltered joy, Frances felt a sudden, unfamiliar feeling settle in her heart, a glimpse of a life that felt both new and deeply familiar. She had spent so long trying to protect and secure her daughter's future that she had rarely imagined a world where Lily could have her own passions, her own dreams, her own independence pass the financial security she was trying to provide.

As she looked around at Susan and Yaz, Frances felt hope bloom

quietly in her heart.

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After dinner, Frances and Yaz began clearing the table, gathering plates and stacking them as they moved toward the kitchen. Susan tried to wave them off, insisting she could handle it herself, but they shooed her back to the table to keep Lily company, exchanging amused smiles at Susan's lighthearted protests.

In the kitchen, they set to work, falling into an easy rhythm. Frances scrubbed each plate while Yaz dried, the quiet sounds of running water and clinking dishes filling the space. As Frances placed the last dish on the drying rack, Yaz moved in behind her brushing her hands softly down Frances's arms, sending a gentle warmth through her.

"Happy?" Yaz's voice was a soft murmur, her eyes searching.

Frances felt a smile spread across her face as she glanced over her shoulder, her gaze meeting Yaz's. "Over the moon," she whispered, letting her hand rest over Yaz's for a moment, the touch gentle and fleeting.

Yaz pressed a lingering kiss to her temple. For that small, quiet moment, the world outside faded away, and it was just the two of them, wrapped in a private warmth they didn't dare let Susan see.

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They returned to the living room, where Susan and Lily sat together on the floor, their heads bent over a book. Susan was pointing out different characters, her voice lively and animated. Lily giggled, utterly absorbed, and the sight made Frances's heart

swell with gratitude.

Frances stepped forward with a smile. "Well, since someone finished all her vegetables, how about we open just one present tonight?"

Lily's face brightened, and she glanced excitedly at the small pile of gifts under the Christmas tree. Frances knelt beside her, letting her pick, and Lily's eyes settled on a large, beautifully wrapped box.

"Oh, this one's special," Frances said with a wink, knowing the gift was from Yaz.

As Lily eagerly tore at the paper, with Frances helping her, the contents of the box began to reveal themselves. A soft gasp escaped both of them when they saw what was inside, a shimmering pink gown Yaz has made for her complete with a sparkly crown, and a magic wand crafted perfectly by the studio's prop team.

Lily's jaw dropped in awe. "It's just like in the movie!" she squealed, her voice almost a whisper. "Thank you, thank you, Auntie Yaz!" She practically threw herself into Yaz's arms, hugging her tight.

Yaz laughed, gently brushing a strand of hair back from Lily's face. "You're very welcome, princess."

"My God darling...It's absolutely gorgeous" Frances smiled, her eyes sparkling with gratitude and awe "And how did you?...The crown and..."

"Props department" Yaz grinned haply

"Would you look at that," Susan said "Someone's gonna be the prettiest fairy"

Lily looked up at Frances with pleading eyes. "Can I put it on, Mommy?"

Frances smiled, her own eyes growing misty. "Of course, sweetheart. Let's get you all dressed up."

A few moments later, Lily re-emerged, dressed in the pink gown with the crown slightly tilted on her head and the wand clutched tightly in her hand.

"Waaw...look at her" Yaz smiled "Give us a little twirl.

Lily did a little twirl, grinning from ear to ear waiving her wand. She waved it with all the flair her tiny hands could muster, and everyone clapped, playing along.

Susan clapped her hands together, her eyes twinkling. "Oh my goodness, I've never seen such a magical Glinda! You look beautiful, darling."

Lily beamed, shyly tucking herself into Frances's side.

Frances leaned down, placing a gentle kiss on Lily's head. "You look just like a real fairy."

They all gathered around the table for dessert, each sipping wine or nibbling on treats, while Lily entertained herself, pretending to cast spells and twirling around in her new dress.

As they chatted and shared stories, Lily remained in her world of magic and fairy tales, happily playing around them. Frances glanced around the room at her friends and daughter, feeling an

unfamiliar joy and gratitude swell within her. This night was everything she hadn't known she wanted, a precious memory she'd hold close forever.

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With cookies and milk carefully left out for Santa, Lily gave everyone a sleepy but excited goodnight, hugging Susan and Yaz before turning to Frances. She took her mother's hand, her small fingers fitting perfectly in Frances's, and together they made their way to the guest room.

In the soft light of the bedroom, Frances helped Lily into her nightgown, feeling her heart swell as she pulled the covers up to tuck her in. Just as she smoothed the duvet, Lily looked up at her with wide, hopeful eyes. "Mommy, could you finish the story that Auntie Susan started?"

The request caught Frances off guard. For a moment, she couldn't respond, just staring at her daughter, who waited so trustingly. This was a moment she'd imagined countless times but had never experienced. Swallowing a sudden lump in her throat, Frances managed a soft, "Of course, sweetheart."

Lily scooted over, lifting the blanket, her unspoken invitation for Frances to lie beside her clear. Frances's eyes filled with tears as she lay down, carefully positioning herself so that Lily could rest her head on her chest. She felt the warm weight of her daughter settle against her, and her heart ached with the thought that this time together was fleeting.

With the book in one hand, she gently wrapped her other arm around Lily, feeling her daughter's small fingers wrap around her own as she began to read. Frances's voice softened, carrying them both into the world of the story, her heart full as she felt Lily

relax, her breathing evening out.

Before long, Lily drifted off to sleep, her tiny hand still curled around Frances's fingers. Frances set the book aside and gazed down at her, a tender smile breaking through even as her tears fell. She brushed a hand gently over Lily's hair, pressing a kiss to her forehead, knowing that come morning, they'd have to say goodbye.

But for now, in this peaceful, precious moment, Frances allowed herself to hold on, memorizing every detail of her daughter's face, her touch, the warmth of her. She lay there, whispering a quiet promise to cherish every moment they had together, knowing that in her heart, she would carry this night forever.

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