

Chapter 15

Monday morning was another whirlwind of a day for Yaz, who barely had time to catch her breath since returning from New York. Christmas was fast approaching, but between work at the studio and the preparations for the grand opening of her loft studio, her schedule was packed. As she hurried down the hallway of the studio for the meeting, she heard a familiar voice call her.

“Hey...you’re back!” Tim greeted her, stepping out from one of the fitting rooms.

“Heey...Yeah, back to reality,” she chuckled, still buzzing from her recent trip.

“Oh, stop it. I’m so jealous.” Tim rolled his eyes playfully. “How was it?”

“Amazing... honestly, the best holiday I’ve ever had,” she replied, smiling warmly at the memory.

“I need all the details. But I won’t keep you now, you look like you’re in a rush. Lunch?”

“Ah, sorry, not today. I’m having lunch with Frances.”

“Oh, are you now?” he teased, raising an eyebrow. “Well then, I guess I’ll just have to settle for second place.”

Yaz chuckled, “I guess. Tomorrow?”

“Sure thing, lovely. Go on, hurry up. You don’t want to keep the dragon waiting.”

Yaz laughed, "No, I don't... God, I can't wait for her to leave."

“Tell me about it. Hopefully, it won’t be much longer. Charlie’s coming back after Christmas, apparently.”

“Thank God,” Yaz sighed in relief. “Alright, I’ve gotta run. See you tomorrow.”

As she rushed down the corridor, she just made it in time for the morning meeting. The team had already gathered in the wardrobe department, Eleanor standing at the front, her expression stern as she waited for everyone to settle.

Eleanor cleared her throat as Yaz took her place. “Alright, team, listen up. I’ve just received word from the higher-ups. The deadline for all wardrobe pieces has been moved up.” She paused to let that sink in before continuing. “We need everything ready by the end of the first week of January. Shooting will start immediately after.”

A collective murmur rippled through the room, tension rising as the team absorbed the news. Yaz’s heart sank. With the holiday season approaching, this meant long hours and little to no break. Eleanor continued, her tone sharp, “I expect everyone to be on top of things. No delays. No excuses. This is a high-budget production, and we can’t afford any slip-ups.”

As Eleanor went over more specifics, Yaz’s mind drifted. She couldn’t help but wonder if this was Eleanor’s way of adding more pressure on her, trying to sabotage her work. Eleanor’s influence in the department meant she had control over the flow of

information, and any misstep could easily be blamed on Yaz, especially with this new, impossible deadline.

Yaz shook off her thoughts, refocusing as the meeting continued.

As the meeting came to an end, Eleanor's sharp footsteps echoed through the room as she exited, leaving a thick tension behind her. The moment the door closed, the murmur of quiet frustration bubbled up among the team. Yaz exchanged glances with a few of the seamstresses and tailors, all of whom looked as exasperated as she felt.

"How on earth are we supposed to get everything done by the first week of January?" one of the seamstresses muttered, folding her arms. "It's impossible. Especially with the holidays."

"Seriously, that's barely any time at all," another tailor added, shaking his head. "Not to mention all the fittings we still have to do."

Yaz stood up straighter, feeling the weight of their concerns. She shared them, but she couldn't afford to show doubt now. Not with Eleanor undoubtedly hoping she'd fail.

"I know it feels like a lot," Yaz began, her tone steady but determined, "but I believe we can pull it off. Eleanor's pushing us because she doesn't think we can do it. But I want to prove her wrong."

A few of them exchanged looks, uncertain. "Yaz, even if we work nonstop through Christmas, there's still the issue of materials and time. There's only so much we can do, and we're stretched thin as it is."

Yaz nodded, understanding their perspective. "I get that, trust me, I do. But we've faced tough deadlines before, and we've always pulled through. This time won't be any different." She glanced around the room, locking eyes with each of them. "We'll prioritize. We'll organize fittings better, streamline the processes. I'll stay as late as I need to make sure it's all coordinated. I'm confident we can do this."

A few murmurs of reluctant agreement followed, and the tension eased just slightly. One of the younger seamstresses spoke up. "You really think we can make Eleanor eat her words?"

Yaz grinned, a spark of determination lighting up her eyes. "Absolutely. We're going to show her exactly what this team is capable of."

A ripple of quiet laughter passed through the group, a small but important break from the tension. The room felt a bit lighter, despite the mountain of work ahead.

"Alright, let's get organized," Yaz said, clapping her hands together. "We've got this."

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At the other end of the studio Frances stood under the bright lights of the set, the energy around her light and playful. She had worked with this director before, and it was a relief to be back in such a familiar, welcoming environment. The cheerful mood spread through the entire crew, creating a relaxed but professional atmosphere. As she finished up a scene, she caught the director's eye and grinned, knowing he was about to give her feedback.

“Well, that was something, Frances,” he teased, his tone playful. “But I think you can turn up the charm a little more in the next take. Think you can manage that?”

Frances raised an eyebrow with a smirk. “Are you saying I’m not charming enough already?” she teased back, pretending to be offended.

The director laughed. “Oh, you know you’ve got more charm than any of us here, I just wanna see that extra sparkle.”

With a mock-serious nod, Frances replied, “Challenge accepted, I will sparkle away.... You might regret this..”

The crew around them chuckled as the playful banter continued. The director gave her a wink before calling for the next take. The lightheartedness on set made Frances feel at ease, much needed in the midst of her otherwise busy, chaotic life.

She felt a wave of gratitude for this project, for the people around her, and for the chance to simply laugh and enjoy her work. The camera rolled again, and she threw herself into the scene with a renewed energy, fully enjoying the moment.

After wrapping up the take, Frances walked over to the director, leaning in with a smirk, “Was that sparkly enough for you? Or should I tone it down?”

The director chuckled, patting her on the shoulder. “Perfect, as always.”

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As soon as the director called for lunch, Frances practically bolted off the set, her heels clicking rapidly as she made her way toward

her changing room. She only had an hour to meet Yaz, and every minute counted. Inside, she quickly stripped off her costume, a stylish skirt and blouse, fighting the buttons in her rush. She swapped them for casual yet chic trousers and a black, tight jumper, throwing on a jacket to finish the look.

Her hands moved quickly through her hair, fixing it just enough to pass without raising suspicion. She gave herself a quick glance in the mirror, touching up her makeup, her eyes bright with anticipation. Her bag was slung over the chair, and in one swift motion, she grabbed it and dashed for the door.

In her hurry, she almost collided with the director as she rounded a corner.

“Whoa, slow down there doll!” he chuckled, sidestepping her at the last second.

"Oh my god...I'm so sorry!"

“What’s the rush? Who’s the lucky fella waiting?”

Frances flashed him a bright smile, playfully avoiding the question. “Wouldn’t you like to know!” she called over her shoulder as she continued rushing down the hallway, her heart racing more from excitement than from her sprint across the studio.

She slipped out the back entrance, making a beeline across the road to the small diner she and Yaz often frequented. It was their little escape from the busy schedule, familiar and cozy, perfect for moments like this.

She stepped into the diner, the warmth inside instantly soothing her after the brisk dash across the street. Frances scanned the

room, eyes searching until they landed on Yaz, sitting by the window with her sketchbook open, absorbed in whatever new design she was working on. Her outfit was striking, a vibrant red blouse complemented by a delicate cream silk scarf tied elegantly around her neck. Her luscious hair cascaded down her shoulders in soft, voluminous waves, pinned back on one side with a shining hair comb, catching the sunlight that streamed through the window. Frances paused, admiring her quietly, a smile tugging at her lips, before finally moving toward her.

As soon as Yaz spotted her, her eyes lit up, and she laughed, noticing Frances's flushed cheeks. Rising to greet her, Yaz opened her arms wide and pulled Frances into a long, tight hug. Frances melted into her embrace, savoring the warmth and familiar scent she had missed since New York. Neither wanted to let go.

"You're blushing!" Yaz teased, pulling back slightly to look at her. "What's got you all flustered, hun?"

Frances laughed, catching her breath. "I practically ran here," she grinned, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't have much time"

"Did you knock over anyone important again?" she giggled knowing how clumsy Frances gets when she's rushing.

Frances snorted, shaking her head. "Almost took out the director, but he survived."

Yaz laughed sitting down "I knew it...Well, I'm glad you made it in one piece. Now, how much time do we really have?"

Frances checked her watch, frowning playfully. "Not enough, as usual... but it'll do, about 40 minutes...I couldn't wait to see you."

Yaz smiled, her fingers lingering lightly on Frances's arm as they sat down together. "Me too, couldn't wait to get out...How's the shoot going? You look happy... busy, but happy."

Frances nodded enthusiastically. "It's been great. And with a director who actually gets me." She leaned in conspiratorially, her eyes twinkling. "It's like a breath of fresh air compared to my last project."

Yaz chuckled, sliding her sketchbook aside. "I'm glad...you deserve a bit of fun."

Frances leaned forward, resting her hand on top of Yaz's. "I missed you, though." She whispered, "It's strange going from three whole days together in New York to... this." She gestured vaguely, meaning the busyness of their separate lives.

Yaz smiled softly, her thumb brushing quickly over Frances's fingers before their hands separated. "Missed you too. But seeing you like this...glowing, honestly makes it worth it."

"You're always saying the sweetest things." she smiled

"Just being honest," Yaz replied, her eyes warm. "Eat your food honey, It's getting cold"

Frances took a bite of her burger, her eyes closing as she savored the taste "Mmmm....I needed this...I was starving" she carefully wiped the corner of her mouth with a tissue and leaned back in her seat, taking a sip of her drink and smiling at Yaz. "Enough about me. How was your day?"

Yaz let out a groan, rolling her eyes. "Ugh, Eleanor. She's been making everyone's life hell lately, specially mine. Today, she

moved up all the deadlines for the wardrobe...again. She's impossible. I swear she's doing it just to make things harder for me."

Frances's smile faded slightly as her brows furrowed. "What's her problem?" She took another bite of her food, visibly annoyed but trying not to let it show too much.

"My completion," Yaz sighed, shaking her head. "I think she's just trying to make me look bad, honestly. But I'm hanging in there."

Frances gave her a soft, encouraging smile, "You'll get through it, darling. You're amazing at what you do, and she knows that. Don't let her get under your skin." She didn't want to add more fuel to the fire, though she was fuming inside.

Yaz nodded, taking in Frances's support, but then her tone softened as she prepared to shift the mood. "Actually, I was talking to Susan about everything... and she mentioned how much she'd love to have you over for Christmas."

Frances's eyes widened, lighting up in pure joy. "She really said that? Seriously?"

Yaz nodded then grinned teasingly, "Unless, of course, you have other plans?"

"Well, I was planning to be with my lover, but I suppose I could ditch them for Christmas with you two." Frances raised an eyebrow, dipping her chip into ketchup with a playful smirk.

Yaz burst into laughter. "Don't let me stop you!"

With an amused chuckle, Frances shook her head, her joy unmistakable. "Honestly, that sounds perfect. I'd love to spend Christmas with you and Susan. It'll be wonderful."

Yaz's face softened as she took a sip of her drink. "Well, then it's settled. Christmas with us. I never celebrated Christmas before...I'm excited."

"Oh..." Frances looked at her puzzled then it dawned on her "Oh my God...Of course you haven't...daaa...I'm so stupid"

"It's alright" Yaz laughed

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Yaz sat at her desk the next morning, engrossed in her work, when there was a soft knock at the door. She glanced up to see Gary, one of the senior tailors, standing in the doorway holding a piece of paper. His expression was polite, but she could tell something was bothering him.

"Morning, Miss Yaz," Gary greeted. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've got these instructions for cutting the coat, and something doesn't look quite right."

"Come on in," Yaz said, motioning for him to sit. "Let's see what you've got."

Gary handed her the notes, and as soon as Yaz looked them over, her brow furrowed. The handwriting was unfamiliar, definitely not hers. Keeping her tone calm, she asked, "Did you get these from my office, Henry?"

"Yes, ma'am. They were with the pile for that coat, on your desk like you said." he replied. "I didn't want to assume, but the

handwriting doesn't seem yours and the measurements seemed off, so I thought I'd better check if perhaps something got mixed up."

Yaz's heart sank. She knew immediately who was behind this, but she didn't want to jump to conclusions just yet. She nodded slowly and scanned the numbers again, confirming her suspicion. The measurements were off by several inches. If Gary had gone ahead with these, the coat would have been ruined.

"These aren't my notes," Yaz said, a trace of frustration creeping into her voice. "Not sure what happened there, but you were right to check. Thanks for bringing this to me."

Gary looked relieved as Yaz quickly corrected the instructions, writing out the proper measurements. She handed them back to him. "Here.... Everything should be fine now."

"Thanks, Miss Yaz," Gary said, standing up. "I'll get right on it." the man turned towards the door.

"Oh, Gary!"

"Yes ma'am?"

"From now on I'll make sure I give you everything in person.... We can't afford any mistakes at the moment. Thanks for bringing this up, I really appreciate it."

"Of course, ma'am."

As Gary left the room, Yaz leaned back in her chair, the weight of the situation sinking in, but she wasn't going to give Eleanor the satisfaction. She'd just have to stay one step ahead.

A knock at the door broke her focus, and when she looked up, a warm smile spread across her face.

"Are you busy?" Frances asked, peeking in with a playful glint in her eye.

"Not for you, I'm not," Yaz replied, chuckling.

"Good," Frances said with a grin, stepping in and closing the door behind her, locking it with an air of mischief.

Yaz leaned back in her chair, intrigued. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Miss Louise?"

Frances walked over, dragging her finger playfully along the desk's edge. "Well, I just finished work and... I'm terribly bored," she said, her voice dripping with mock seduction as she slowly made her way toward Yaz.

"Is that so?" Yaz chuckled, amused by Frances's dramatic flair.

Frances was clearly in a teasing mood. She slid into Yaz's lap, wrapping one arm around her shoulder, her fingers toying with a strand of Yaz's hair. "I have this incredibly dull dinner tonight," Frances sighed theatrically, batting her lashes. "And I thought maybe... just maybe... you'd like to join me?" She let her fingers glide down Yaz's cheek, over her neck, and then traced the opening of her blouse, sending a delightful shiver through Yaz.

Yaz laughed softly, wrapping her arms around Frances's waist. "As tempting as that sounds... I'm afraid I'll have to decline," she said, still smiling.

Frances blinked, feigning shock. "What could possibly be more important than me?" she asked, pouting like a disappointed child.

"I promised Susan we'd make Christmas cakes tonight," Yaz said, her voice apologetic but amused.

Frances exaggerated a sigh, her bottom lip jutting out. "So I have to go alone?" She glanced down, fingers now fiddling with the buttons of Yaz's shirt.

Yaz gently lifted her chin, making their eyes meet. "I'll make it up to you this weekend," she promised with a grin.

"You better," Frances replied with a soft smile, leaning in for a soft kiss. She lingered a moment before pulling back, her eyes full of warmth.

Yaz gave her a squeeze. "I'm sure you'll have a nice time."

Frances pouted playfully as she got up and walked toward the door. "Hmph," she teased, pretending to be upset "Those cakes better be worth it" she added as she slipped out, leaving Yaz with a soft chuckle.

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That afternoon Frances arrived home earlier than expected, feeling the familiar weight of her long day at the studio fall away as she stepped inside. She noticed Betty's coat and bag by the door. Her call for her went unanswered so shrugging it off, Frances figured Betty must be busy somewhere in the house. She had hoped for a quick chat, maybe share a cup of coffee before she had to get ready for dinner with the director and producer.

Kicking off her uncomfortable heels, she felt instant relief as her bare feet touched the cool floor. Heading to the kitchen, Frances poured herself a glass of juice and set percolator to make herself

some fresh coffee savoring the moment of quiet before the evening's obligations.

Drink in hand, she made her way toward her office. But as she opened the door, she jumped, startled to see Betty standing by her desk. Equally startled, Betty fumbled nervously, but before she could explain, Frances cut her off, her tone sharp.

“Why are you in here, Betty? You know this room is off-limits. I made that perfectly clear.”

Betty stammered, her face flushed. “I-I’m sorry, Miss Frances. I heard the window banging from the wind. I came in to close it, and I shut the door behind me because of the draft.”

Frances stood there, skeptical, eyeing Betty closely. She was pretty sure the window was shut and there was something about her explanation that just didn’t sit right. Betty, sensing the tension, hurriedly apologized again.

“I’m so sorry for trespassing. I didn’t mean any harm ma'am. I’ll get out of your way.”

With that, Betty rushed out of the room, leaving Frances confused, uneasy, and more than a little unsettled by the whole encounter. Something about the situation didn’t add up, and the discomfort lingered, her eyes scanning the room as an uneasy feeling settled in. She checked her desk first, making sure nothing seemed out of place. The papers were exactly where she had left them, and nothing seemed disturbed on the surface. Still, there was an unsettling feeling she couldn't quite shake. She had never thought it necessary to lock the office before, trusting Betty implicitly, yet now she found herself second-guessing that decision.

Deciding not to dwell on it, Frances locked the door firmly behind her and walked briskly down the hall back to the kitchen where she retrieved her bag. She pulled it open, fishing out her keys, and added the small key for her office to the key chain. It wouldn't happen again.

Betty was tidying up the dishes, her eyes flicked toward the keys before she quickly looked away, focusing on her task. The tension in the room lingered, unspoken but palpable.

"I've got a dinner tonight," Frances said casually, trying to dispel the awkwardness. "I won't need any more help, so feel free to go home."

Betty, who had been arranging plates in the cabinet, nodded. "Alright, Miss Frances. I'll finish up here and see myself out. Would you like me to run you a bath?"

"No, thank you, that won't be necessary."

Betty nodded putting a last plate in the kitchen cupboard. "Well, that's it then then...Have a nice evening."

"Thank you, you too Betty"

As Betty left, Frances pushed herself away from the counter, releasing a soft sigh. Fatigue weighed on her, and the thought of dressing up and heading out again felt more daunting than ever. Curling up on the sofa with a good book sounded far more appealing, with nothing but the turn of pages to keep her company, was calling to her more than the lively restaurant scene ever could.

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That evening Susan's kitchen was filled with the warm, inviting smell of freshly baked cookies, the air thick with the scent of cinnamon and vanilla. With Christmas just days away, she and Yaz had decided to have a cake-making evening. The counters were cluttered with bowls of ingredients, baking tools, and bags of flour, and the radio hummed softly in the background, playing holiday tunes.

Yaz, never quite the expert in baking, stood next to Susan, her apron already dusted with flour. Susan, in her element, was explaining every step with the kind of patience only someone truly in love with the process could muster.

"Okay, now gently fold the flour into the batter," Susan said, demonstrating with a smooth flick of her wrist. Yaz tried to copy her movements but ended up with a cloud of flour in the air, making them both burst into laughter.

"I'm hopeless at this!" Yaz giggled, wiping flour off her face.

"You're doing fine," Susan reassured her with a grin. " Besides, it's all about having fun.... I'm so excited..." Susan said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Tomorrow we can put up the Christmas tree."

"Yeah, why not. Though I'll be late from work... I have to go shopping and pop into the workshop later on," Yaz replied, smiling as she continued mixing.

"That's alright, I'll wait for you."

"Alright then," Yaz said with a grin, but a small frown crept across her face. "I still didn't get anything for Frances."

"Well, you left that a bit late" Susan chuckled

"I knooooow...I have no idea what to get her... I also need to finish a present for Lily," Yaz slipped, unaware.

Susan paused mid-motion. "Who's Lily?"

Yaz blinked, confused for a moment before realizing her mistake. Her heart sank.

"What?..." Yaz stammered, then quickly covered, "Oh, I meant Laura... She's running the Wardrobe Department. Anyway, what on earth do I get for Frances?"

Susan narrowed her eyes slightly "Well, she's got just about everything... It'll have to be something thoughtful, something special."

"Yeah, but what? She's hard to shop for."

Susan chuckled. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Oh, yeah smarty pants...And what did you get her?" Yaz raised an eyebrow

"Nothing yet...I have to go shopping tomorrow...." Susan burst out laughing

Her face glowed with a kind of joy she hadn't felt in years. For so long, she had spent Christmases alone, but this year was different. With Yaz by her side and the promise of Frances joining them, it finally felt like she will have a proper Christmas again, filled with happiness and companionship she thought she'd lost forever.

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Frances returned home late that evening, her body aching from the long day. Though the dinner had been pleasant, exhaustion weighed heavily on her, and all she wanted was to collapse into bed. With an early call time at the studio the next morning, sleep was desperately calling her. But before she could allow herself to unwind, there was one last thing she needed to take care of.

She was sitting at her desk, the soft glow of the lamp casting long shadows across the room as she stared down at the Christmas card in front of her. Her hand hovered over the blank space inside the card, emotions swirling but held tightly in check.

With a steadying breath, she began to write, her hand moving carefully across the card. **Wishing you and your family a Merry Christmas. May the season bring you warmth and happiness. I hope Billy likes his present. Maggie**

She paused, her breath catching in her throat as she stared at the name she used for herself, it felt so distant. The words felt formal, almost detached, but it was all she could manage. Any more, and it would feel like an invasion of the walls they'd both built over the years. The distance between them, both in years and affection, made the task harder than she'd anticipated.

She closed the card, her fingers lingering over the paper for a moment, before slipping it into an envelope. Her brother's name was written clearly on the front, and she placed it on top of the beautifully wrapped box beside her, tied with a neat red bow. It was a modest gift, something thoughtful yet impersonal, just like the words inside the card.

Frances stood and sighed her gaze heavy on the package. She wanted to say more but couldn't bring herself to do it. Tomorrow, the box would be sent, an attempt to bridge a gap she wasn't sure

could ever be crossed. But for tonight, all she had was the distant, formal gesture of a card and a gift.

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It was Wednesday, only three days before Christmas eve, Yaz walked into the props department with a bounce in her step, excitement buzzing inside her. She had been waiting for this moment for weeks, ever since she made the special request. As she entered, a young man named George, one of the prop makers, looked up from his workbench and smiled.

"Hey, Yaz!" he called out, wiping his hands on a rag.

Yaz's eyes widened with anticipation. "Is it ready? Oh, please tell me it's ready!"

"Yap" George chuckled and reached under the table, pulling out a carefully wrapped box. "I really hope it's exactly what you wanted. We had to get creative with the materials, but I think it turned out pretty well."

Her heart raced as he opened the box, revealing a tiny, intricately detailed crown and a shimmering fairy wand. The crown sparkled, delicate yet magical, with tiny stones embedded in the design. The wand was just as mesmerizing, with a star at the top, crafted to perfection.

"Oh, my god, George... it's absolutely beautiful," Yaz breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. She reached out to touch the crown gently, her fingers trembling. "I don't even know what to say. This is beyond perfect. You're amazing."

He grinned, clearly pleased with her reaction. "I'm glad you like it. I figured it had to be just right, can't disappoint a kid for Christmas, can I?"

Yaz laughed softly, still staring at the props in awe. "She's gonna lose her mind when she sees this. You've made a little girl's dream come true. Thank you so much. I can't believe how perfect it is."

"Well," George said with a modest shrug, "I've made a lot of things for the movies, but making something for a kid's Christmas? That's special. She's gonna be one happy little girl."

Yaz smiled warmly at him, her heart full. "You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you again."

George gave her a nod, watching her carefully place the items back in the box. "Happy to help. You better tell me if she liked it. I'm dying to know."

"You bet," Yaz said, her eyes still shining as she picked up the box. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, kiddo," George replied with a warm smile.

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Yaz rushed out of the studio, her feet quickening with each step as she waved down a taxi. Time was running short, and she still hadn't found the perfect Christmas gift for Frances. At least she managed to send out all the Christmas cards in time. The cab pulled up, and Yaz slid into the back seat, giving the driver directions to *The May Company* on Wilshire Boulevard. Her heart raced with anticipation, but a sense of dread lingered as well, she had so little time left.

The store buzzed with holiday shoppers, and the atmosphere was thick with the excitement of last-minute gift-hunters. Yaz made her way inside, immediately feeling overwhelmed by the endless choices in every department. Dresses, perfumes, silk scarves, everything seemed like an option, yet nothing felt quite right. Frances deserved something more personal, something that could express what words often failed to say.

Yaz wandered through racks of clothing, her fingers brushing against cashmere sweaters and designer gloves. But her heart wasn't in it. She wished, not for the first time, that she'd had the time to make something by hand for Frances, something truly one-of-a-kind. Instead, she was here, looking for a store-bought gift that suddenly felt distant and impersonal.

Her eyes drifted to the jewelry department, and she hesitated for a moment before stepping closer. The glass counters sparkled under the warm lights, showcasing an array of gold necklaces, pearl earrings, and glittering brooches. It all looked too extravagant, too much like something Frances could easily buy herself. She wasn't sure what felt more awkward, the overly romantic pieces that almost seemed too intimate, or the plain ones that lacked any meaning.

Then finally one bracelet caught her eye, a charm bracelet with tiny silver pendants dangling delicately. It was personal without being overwhelming, a gift that could evolve over time. Yaz leaned closer, running her fingers lightly across the glass. It was simple, but filled with potential, and it felt like the perfect blend of thoughtful and elegant.

She stood by the counter, still gazing at the bracelet when a soft voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Can I help you, miss?" asked a friendly shop assistant, her eyes catching the sparkle of the bracelet Yaz was eyeing.

Yaz nodded and pointed behind the glass "Yes, I was wondering... could this be customized? With different charms I mean?"

The shop assistant smiled warmly, sensing the seriousness in Yaz's voice. "Of course. Let me show you what we can do."

She unlocked the glass case and gently lifted the bracelet from its display, placing it on the counter in front of Yaz. Then, she reached beneath the counter and pulled out a wooden box. When she opened it, Yaz's eyes widened. Inside were dozens of charms, each one gleaming in the light, tiny stars, hearts, initials, delicate silver and gold flowers, even a miniature Eiffel Tower.

"Feel free to take your time," the assistant said, her voice soft and patient. "You can mix and match, choose as many or as few as you like. Some people prefer to start with just one or two and add more later as they make new memories."

Yaz felt a flutter of excitement as she bent closer to examine the charms. She began picking through them, her fingers brushing against tiny ballet shoes, a clapperboard for film, and a vintage car. They were all beautiful, but she wasn't sure if any of them fit quite right. Then she spotted a small silver heart that wasn't too ornate, something simple but elegant.

"I think I'll start with this one," Yaz said, holding up the heart charm.

The shop assistant nodded approvingly. "A lovely choice. Would you like it engraved? We can add initials or a short message if you'd like."

Yaz smiled. "Yes, that would be great."

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Later that evening, Yaz sat alone in her workshop, the quiet hum of the music coming from the radio giving her tranquil atmosphere to focus. The soft glow of a lamp cast a warm light over her workspace, illuminating the tiny pink dress she was carefully working on. It was something close to her heart, a project that had taken on much more meaning than just a dress.

The delicate pink fabric felt like silk beneath her fingers as she carefully added the final touches, tiny, iridescent beads to the bodice. Each bead was sewn with precision, her hands moving slowly as if savoring the process. She had worked on it for weeks, dedicating late nights and stolen moments to it, knowing it had to be perfect.

The dress was a miniature replica of the fairy gown from *The Wizard of Oz*, the one Lily had asked for with her sparkling eyes.

With the last bead finally in place, Yaz sat back and let out a small sigh of contentment. She gently lifted the dress from her table, admiring the tiny sparkles that shimmered in the light. The soft pink tulle skirt was full, just like Lily had wanted, and the bodice, now adorned with the delicate beads, looked magical. It was perfect.

She carefully hung the dress on a small hanger, stepping back to take in the full view of her creation. It was more than just fabric and beads to her, it was a gift for a little girl who had come to mean so much to her.

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Yaz pushed open the door to her home, her body weary from a long day at the studio followed by the frantic rush of shopping. The weight of her exhaustion seemed to linger in the air, and she could feel her legs protesting with every step. But as soon as she stepped inside, the familiar warmth of her home enveloped her, instantly soothing her tired spirit.

The inviting aroma of a warm meal wafted from the kitchen, mingling with the crisp scent of a freshly cut Christmas tree that filled the living room. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight before her: boxes of Christmas decorations were scattered around, waiting eagerly to be unpacked.

“Surprise!” Susan called out, her smile radiant as she stood by the stove, stirring a pot filled with what smelled like a hearty stew. “I thought we could start decorating tonight!”

Yaz's heart swelled with gratitude as she glanced at the beautiful tree, delivered earlier by Mr. Thompson, their kind neighbor who often lent a helping hand. His generosity and Susan's efforts to create a festive atmosphere ignited a flicker of joy within her, pushing the exhaustion to the back of her mind.

“This looks amazing, Susan,” Yaz said, her voice soft with appreciation. She crossed the room, her mood lifting with each step as she inhaled the delightful blend of pine and spices. “I can't believe you did all this while I was gone.”

“Just a little something to lift our spirits,” Susan replied, her eyes twinkling. “Now, sit down and eat! You look like you could use it.”

Yaz chuckled softly, grateful for her friend's thoughtfulness. She sank into a chair at the table, the warmth of the food and the

festive atmosphere wrapping around her like a cozy blanket. “I didn’t realize how much I needed this.”

As they shared a meal, laughter filled the air, and for the first time that day, Yaz felt the weight of her worries lighten. The anticipation of decorating the tree and celebrating the season together infused her with renewed energy.

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On the other side of the town Frances stepped into her home, her heart heavy as she closed the door behind her. The sight that greeted her was a stark contrast to the warmth she had longed for. A beautiful Christmas wreath adorned the door, its red and green colors vibrant against the pale wood, but it felt more like an obligation than a welcome.

As she walked into the living room, her breath caught in her throat. The space was transformed into a winter wonderland, a grand Christmas tree stood tall in the corner, twinkling with lights and adorned with ornaments that sparkled like stars. The scent of pine filled the air, a reminder of the season, but as beautiful as it was, the atmosphere felt cold and hollow.

Frances's eyes were drawn to the presents stacked neatly beneath the tree, their colorful wrapping paper reflecting the glow of the lights. For a moment, a flicker of joy sparked within her, but it quickly faded as she thought of her daughter. The image of Lily racing through the house on Christmas morning, her eyes wide with excitement as she tore into the gifts, filled Frances's mind.

Yet, that was not to be. Instead, the gifts would remain here, unwrapped and untouched until she takes them to the home, a poignant reminder of what was missing. The laughter and joy of family, the warmth of shared moments, those were the things

Frances craved most, especially during the holidays. She felt the familiar ache in her heart, the weight of her decisions bearing down on her.

As she stood there, enveloped in the silence of her beautifully decorated home, Frances realized that no amount of decorations could fill the void left by her daughter. She longed for the chaotic joy of family celebrations, for the noise and laughter that accompanied them. But here, in this silent house, the decorations seemed more like a masquerade than a celebration, a beautiful facade hiding the loneliness that echoed through the empty rooms.

Her gaze drifted from the presents to the small note resting atop the small table in the corner. She picked it up, her finger tracing the elegant script as she read the florist's message, her heart sinking further with each word. It was a note of congratulations for the holiday season, accompanied by the bill for their services. A knife twisted deeper in her heart.

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The warm glow of the lights filled the room as Yaz and Susan busily decorated the tree, laughter punctuating the cheerful Christmas tunes playing softly from the radio. The aroma of freshly baked cakes wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of pine, as the two women set to work.

“Look at this one!” Yaz exclaimed, holding up a shiny hand made ornament shaped like a snowman. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she examined each decoration, marveling at the memories they represented. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Susan, perched precariously on a ladder, glanced down with a grin. “You should see the ones I made as a kid. They were all

lopsided and painted with too much glitter. I thought I was a decorating genius!"

Yaz giggled, struggling to untangle a string of lights. "Well, you definitely got better with years!" She laughed. "This is so awesome, I always admired it from the outside."

"Then consider this your chance to dive into the magic!" Susan said, adjusting the lights on the tree. "Here, help me with the top!" She leaned back to get a better view.

"Careful!" Yaz said, reaching up to steady the wobbling ladder. "I don't want you ending up in a plaster cast for Christmas!"

"Just my luck, right?" Susan laughed, but she was determined. She reached out and managed to put the star on the top. Then quickly rushed down from the ladder grabbing the plug for the lights. "Okay, let's do this. On the count of three... five, four, three, two, one, zero!"

As Susan plugged in the lights, Yaz stepped back, her breath catching in her throat. The tree lit up in a dazzling display of colors, sparkling tinsel dancing in the glow.

"Wow," Yaz whispered, her eyes wide with amazement. "It's like a dream!"

"Just wait until we add the ornaments!" Susan said, her face beaming with pride. "And we need more cakes." she glanced at the empty plate.

After a while, they finished decorating and sank onto the couch, savoring the cookies they had made. Yaz took a bite and sighed happily. "This is perfect. I can't remember the last time I felt this... cozy."

Susan smiled warmly, the soft light illuminating her face. "I'm so happy you're here, you know."

"I'm happy to be here" Yaz smiled

Later that night, after Susan had gone to bed, Yaz slipped out of her room, drawn by the enchanting glow of the Christmas tree. She stood in the doorway, her heart swelling with warmth as she gazed at the colorful lights twinkling against the darkness.

Taking a deep breath, she placed a beautifully wrapped presents for Susan and Frances underneath the tree, stepping back to admire the scene. The lights reflected in her eyes, and a gentle smile spread across her face as she felt the magic of the season envelop her.

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Thursday evening arrived quickly, the day before Christmas, and both Frances and Yaz found themselves worn out from the long week behind them. Happy to finally be together again, they decided to spend a quiet evening in, making dinner and relishing in the simplicity of each other's company.

Frances stood at the sink in her kitchen, meticulously washing each lettuce leaf, while Yaz chopped tomatoes at the counter beside her. The kitchen was peaceful, with only the soft sounds of water running and the rhythmic thud of the knife meeting the cutting board filling the air. Yaz had felt the weight of a question pressing on her for days, and finally, as she gathered her courage, she spoke up.

"Franny?" Yaz's voice was gentle but hesitant.

“Yes, darling?” Frances responded, her focus still on the salad in front of her.

Yaz paused, searching for the right words. “Have you ever spent Christmas with Lily?”

Frances’s hands stopped moving under the running water, and for a moment, she stayed still. “I spend every Christmas with her,” she said softly. “I go visit, and we spend most of the day together. They always put on a little play for the kids, it’s... nice. It’s tomorrow...you could come this year, if you’d like.”

“I’d love that,” Yaz replied, but her eyes remained on Frances’s back. “But I meant... a real Christmas. You know, waking up together, opening presents in the morning, just the two of you.”

Frances let out a deep sigh, the weight of Yaz’s words evident. “No... I can’t darling. It’s too risky.”

Yaz set the knife down, her brow furrowed with concern and tenderness. “I had an idea.”

Frances walked over, setting the washed salad next to Yaz, and kissed her cheek. “What kind of idea sweetie?” she asked, intrigued.

Yaz hesitated but pressed on. “What if we brought Lily here? To Susan’s place, for Christmas.”

Frances froze, her expression darkening. “What?”

“I could talk to Susan,” Yaz continued gently, “ask if she could ...”

“No,” Frances cut her off, her voice firm. “Forget it, Yaz. I can’t

risk that”

Yaz sighed, knowing the conversation wasn't going to be easy, but she wasn't ready to let it go. “Franny, just hear me out...Pleaseeee hun.”

Frances pursed her lips, reluctant but willing to listen. “Alright, I’m listening.”

"I know this is hard," Yaz began gently, her eyes full of compassion. "And I get it, keeping Lily hidden is your top priority. I really do understand. But if there's anyone who could truly get what you're going through, it's Susan. She'd give anything just to have one Christmas with her daughter... just one. She's not going to betray you or sell your story to the tabloids." Yaz paused, searching Frances's face for a sign she was getting through. "Think about it, she's been keeping our secret all this time."

Frances sighed heavily, her voice soft but firm. "I know, darling, but Lily is my world. She's more important than people finding out I'm sleeping with a woman."

"I knooooow," Yaz dragged out the word, reaching for Frances's hand, intertwining their fingers. "But you're so fearsly protective of her that you're not letting yourself spend real time with her either."

Frances's resolve began to falter, her eyes misting with unshed tears. Yaz's words hit hard, and she knew they were true. Frances squeezed Yaz's hand, her silence speaking volumes.

"It's just one day, Franny," Yaz continued softly. "You could have her brought over... Nobody would ever connect it to you. Even if someone in some wild scenario did see a kid at Susan's, they'd think she was there for Susan." Yaz stopped, her eyes locked on Frances, hoping the words would break through.

Frances turned away, her back to Yaz, staring at the counter, lost in the swirl of emotions she was struggling to sort through.

"For god's sake Franny...do it for Lily," Yaz urged, her voice barely a whisper. "She deserves to feel that magic, with her mum by her side not in some home surrounded with strangers...You keep saying how you want us to be free, to be ourselves and yet we are everything but..."

Frances's resolve finally cracked. "Alright," she whispered, her voice breaking.

"What?"

She turned toward Yaz, beginning to say, "Alright, but under one..."

Before she could finish, Yaz threw her arms around Frances, pulling her into a tight embrace. "Really?" she gasped, filled with joy, not needing to hear the rest for now.

"Yes really" Frances said, letting out a soft smile, tears now freely rolling down her cheeks. "But only if you promise me something darling."

"Anything" Yaz pulled back with a smile

"This is important Yaz!"

"I knooooow"

"You got to explain to Susan how important it is to me to protect Lily...And please don't mention..."

"Yes of course...That goes without saying." Yaz agreed, her voice full of warmth as she pulled her closer. "Don't worry about it, I'll chose my words carefully, okay?"

Tears welled up in Frances's eyes, spilling down her cheeks as she let out a shaky breath, struggling to blink them away. Yaz gently cupped her face, her thumb brushing softly right by her ear. "Hey, it's alright, love. Small steps, okay? We'll figure it out, I promise."

Frances inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. "I love you," she whispered, her voice full of emotion

"Love you too," Yaz whispered back, her voice soothing.

She pulled Yaz into a kiss that felt almost desperate, clinging to her for comfort. "You have no idea what this means to me." she said into her lips

"But I do...You have no idea what took for me to say it" she smiled softly "Come on now, cheer up..." she said tucking a strand of hair behind her ear "We're going to have a beautiful Christmas together....Right?"

"Mmmm" Frances nodded, still emotional, before leaning in for another kiss, this time slower, more tender, filled with all the words she couldn't quite say at the moment.

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