

Chapter 29

Frances wiped away the last traces of makeup, smoothing cream over her face with slow, practiced motions. The day had been long, her body aching for rest as she finally pulled back the covers and slipped into bed. She sighed, nestling into the mattress, letting the exhaustion sink in.

The phone on her bedside table buzzed insistently, shattering any hopes of sleep. Her first thought was Lily. Heart lurching, she grabbed it with urgency.

"Hello?"

"Hello, darling," came the unmistakable, smooth drawl of Victor.

Frances exhaled, her head dropping back against the pillow. Relief washing over her. "Victor, Jesus..."

"You should be calling on Him," he cut in. "Am I the only whore in this town who didn't know about this?"

She burst into laughter, pressing a hand to her forehead. "Victor...."

"I literally swallowed my cigarette, Frances. I have never sobered up faster in my life."

That did it, she was laughing so hard, she could barely breathe. Only Victor could turn something this serious into an absurdly dramatic monologue. And yet, despite the humor, guilt gnawed at her. She should have told him. Should have warned him. Victor had been by her side for years, her closest friend, and she'd just dropped this on him like a bomb. But in all the chaos she completely forgot.

"I really am sorry, honey," she said, voice muffled by her palm. "I'm disgusting, I know..."

"You could never be disgusting to me, darling," he said sweetly. Then, after a dramatic pause, "But you are a betraying little bitch."

"I deserve that."

"Damn right, you do. Now...." His voice perked up with excitement. "...since we've cleared that up, I need details. How? When? And why in God's name did you never tell me about this?"

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Mornings had changed for Yaz. Gone were the days of leisurely waking up and only worrying about herself. She was suddenly thrown into the role of a responsible parent. Now, she was up earlier, making sure Lily took her medication, brushed her teeth properly, and had help picking out her clothes. Yaz would brush Lily's hair before even thinking about getting herself ready for work. Evenings were just as busy, baths, another round of medication, and bedtime stories. Yet, to her surprise, she didn't mind. In fact, she loved every minute of it. The thought of it all coming to an end, of Lily having to return to school, left a dull ache in her chest.

"Are you going to be there?" Lily asked, perched on a chair, happily swiping at Yaz's makeup with her tiny fingers as Yaz carefully ran a brush through her hair.

"I'll have to work, love," Yaz said, smoothing out a tangle. "But we'll definitely see each other."

"What will I wear?"

"Your mum got you a beautiful dress... You'll see."

Lily considered this, then glanced up at Yaz with curious eyes. "Why don't you ever wear dresses?"

"I do sometimes," Yaz said, amused. "I just like trousers better."

"Why?"

"Dunno," Yaz admitted with a little shrug. "I just feel more comfortable i guess. I run around a lot at work, and sometimes I have to crawl on the floor pinning hems, doesn't really work well in a dress." She set the brush down and clipped a bow into Lily's hair. "There, all done."

Lily went quiet for a moment, waiting as Yaz was getting ready and playing with her bangles, slipping them onto her tiny wrists.

"Which one do you think looks better?" Yaz held up two shirts for her to choose between.

Lily gave it serious thought before pointing. "That one."

"Good choice," Yaz said, tossing it onto the bed.

"Can I go to the cake shop again?"

"I'm sure you can, but you'll have to ask Susan, pumpkin," Yaz said, adjusting her belt as she gave herself one last look in the mirror. "Right, breakfast time."

Lily hopped down from the chair, following Yaz down the hallway. Halfway there, she suddenly said, "I think you look really pretty in trousers."

Yaz grinned. "Thanks, love."

Lily giggled, skipping the rest of the way, and Yaz couldn't help but shake her head with a fond smile.

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The morning had started peacefully enough. Yaz carefully measured out Lily's medicine, her fingers steady from routine, dropping the tablets into a small dish before pouring a glass of water. Lily swung her feet under the chair, waiting patiently.

Then Susan stormed in, tossing a handful of tabloids that just got delivered onto the table with enough force that one nearly slid into Yaz's plate.

"Look at this...bastards," Susan snapped, her voice tight with frustration.

Yaz glanced at the covers, her stomach sinking. Bold headlines screamed scandal: *Frances Louise Secret Love Child*. Another claimed *Hidden Child sent to Elite Swiss Boarding School!*

A sick feeling settled in her chest. It had been bad enough as it is, but now the papers were making up entire soap operas.

"How long before one of these lies sticks?" Susan said

"This is getting out of hand," Yaz muttered, picking up one of the papers, flipping through the pages. "Why would they say she's in Switzerland?"

"Because she hasn't given them a statement," Susan grumbled, arms crossed. "So, they're filling in the gaps however they please."

Before Yaz could respond, Lily gasped excitedly, pointing at the front page of one of the

tabloids.

"Mummy!" she squealed, eyes lighting up.

Yaz reacted instantly, swiping the paper off the table before Lily could read any of the vile nonsense. Thinking fast, she turned it around and made a show of inspecting it.

"Oh yes," Yaz said, clearing her throat dramatically, "this one says, *Beautiful Movie Star and Her Lovely Daughter About to Have and Exiting Photoshoot!*"

Lily clapped her hands together. "Really?"

"Oh, absolutely," Yaz said with a completely straight face. She flicked her eyes up at Susan, who huffed out a quiet laugh despite her lingering frustration.

"What else does it say?" Lily asked eagerly.

"Oh, you know," Yaz continued, keeping her voice cheerful, "that everyone wants to know what your favorite cake is."

Lily giggled, clearly pleased with this version of events.

Susan shook her head, smirking as she picked up the remaining tabloids. "You should be a politician, love."

Yaz sighed, "This can't go on."

"I know," Susan murmured. "One more day and let's hope it shuts them up."

Yaz glanced at Lily, who was now busy stirring too much honey into her porridge, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing around her.

She suddenly looked up from her porridge, her eyes bright with an idea.

"Can I keep them please?" she asked, completely oblivious to the tension still lingering between Yaz and Susan.

Yaz hesitated, glancing at Susan. Susan, in turn, arched a brow before quickly stepping over to a drawer. She pulled it open and handed Yaz a pair of scissors.

"Sure you can sweetheart"

Yaz took the scissors with a smirk and turned to Lily. "Alright, but we'll have to do some careful snipping." She made an exaggerated show of positioning the blades, squinting like it was an important surgery.

Lily giggled, watching as Yaz carefully cut out the photographs, keeping only the images.

"There," Yaz said, handing them over like they were treasured keepsakes. "Your very own Mummy collection."

Lily beamed, taking them gently, smoothing the edges with her small fingers.

Meanwhile, Susan gathered up the rest of the shredded tabloids and briskly carried them to the bin. She lifted the lid, dumped the remains inside, and, just to be thorough, grabbed a bowl of potato peels from the counter and tossed them in on top. She pressed the lid down firmly, as if sealing away the nonsense forever.

Yaz chuckled. "That should do it."

Susan wiped her hands. "Can't say I've ever enjoyed destroying the press more."

Lily, blissfully unaware, happily sorted through her cutouts, humming to herself.

Yaz exhaled, shaking her head. "This is getting ridiculous."

Susan nodded grimly. "And it's only going to get worse."

"Well, on the bright side... at least they think she's in Switzerland," Yaz said, and that was it, both women erupted into laughter.

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Frances, still in her silk robe, stirred her coffee absentmindedly as she flipped through the newspapers. Then she saw the same infuriating headlines splashed across multiple pages.

Her jaw tightened as she skimmed the absurd speculations. With an irritated grunt, she tossed them across the table, watching as they slid and crumpled against the silver fruit bowl.

Reaching for her cigarette case, she tapped one out, placed it between her lips, and struck

a match. The first inhale helped steady her nerves.

Then she reached for the phone, dialing quickly. After two rings, her assistant's bright voice answered.

"Morning"

"Hy, I hope I didn't wake you up"

"Nope...having breakfast."

"I need you to take care of something for me." Frances exhaled a curl of smoke, her tone clipped but calm. "But it needs to be done by this afternoon. I don't care how much it costs."

A soft chuckle came from the other end of the line. "Well, you've said the magic words."

Frances raised an eyebrow. "What magic words?"

"No matter the cost."

That made Frances smirk. She leaned back in her chair, taking another drag. "That's what does it for you, huh?"

"Absolutely. Now I'm twice as motivated."

Both women laughed, the tension breaking, if only for a moment.

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The studio buzzed with the usual controlled chaos, seamstresses at their machines, fabric swatches scattered across tables, and sketches pinned up for last-minute alterations.

Yaz was finishing up a last preparations for fitting when Charlie appeared in the doorway, arms crossed, a knowing smirk tugging at his lips.

"You busy?"

"Always," Yaz grinned, brushing loose threads from her sleeves. "But I can make time for you."

Charlie stepped in, his presence always carrying the weight of authority, but today there was something else in his eyes, something good.

"You've got a new project," he said, watching her closely.

Yaz straightened, anticipation bubbling up. "Yeah?"

"A historical epic."

Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest. *No way*. "Not *the* historical epic?"

Charlie's smirk widened. "The very one."

Yaz gasped, clutching her hands together. "Charlie, are you kidding me?"

"Would I joke about this?" He chuckled, watching as she barely contained her excitement. "You earned it, Yaz. You've been putting in the work, proving yourself every step of the way. It's yours."

She couldn't believe it. The film she had been quietly hoping for, dreaming about, was actually happening.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it with every fiber of her being.

Charlie gave a small nod, but then, his expression shifted ever so slightly, the air between them changing. He hesitated just long enough for Yaz to sense what was coming.

"So..." he said, leaning casually against the table, "I have to ask. Did you know?"

Yaz froze for half a second, but only half. Then, smoothly, she raised an eyebrow and said, "What do you think?"

Charlie let out a dry laugh, shaking his head. "I assumed that was the case."

There was another pause before he sighed, rubbing his neck. "Listen, Yaz. I'm telling you this as a friend...you've got to be careful."

Yaz's brow furrowed. "Careful about what?"

Charlie lowered his voice, keeping his words just between them. "Between you and me, some people in the studio aren't too happy about how close you are to Frances."

Yaz's stomach tightened, but she kept her expression neutral.

"Jealousy...Pretty much...and some more, " he admitted. "You know how it is. Frances is... well, Frances. People will find any reason to whisper." He met her gaze. "And I don't want to see you get hurt, Yaz."

She softened at that. Charlie wasn't the type to say things lightly, and she knew he meant well.

"I just..." he exhaled, choosing his words carefully. "I want people to respect you for your work. Because you're amazing at what you do. Not for anyone to think your success is because of a close friendship with Frances."

Yaz crossed her arms, nodding slowly. "I get it."

"Good," Charlie said. "Because you've got a hell of a career ahead of you, and I don't want anything or anyone getting in your way."

Yaz exhaled a deep breath. She hesitated for just a moment before saying, very simply, "I appreciate that... but I can't...."

Charlie held up a hand. "I'm not telling you that...and I'm not judging either...far from it" he said firmly. "I just want you to be aware and prepared."

Yaz glanced away, biting on her lips.

"I know you can hold your ground when you have to," Charlie continued, his voice steady. "I'm just giving you a heads-up so you're not caught off guard."

She looked back at him, the weight of his words settling in. Then, without thinking twice, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him in a quick, grateful hug.

"Thanks, Charlie," she murmured. "I really meant it."

He patted her back with a small chuckle. "Don't mention it kiddo. Now, get ready, tomorrow's meeting, you'll have all the details on your next project."

Yaz pulled back, giving him a determined nod. "I'll be there."

"Good." He shot her a wink as he turned to leave. "And Yaz, try to get some sleep tonight,

you look awful."

She let out a breathy laugh. "Cheers, mate... that's exactly what I needed to boost my self-esteem. Truly, I feel unstoppable now."

Shaking his head laughing he disappeared down the hall.

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The late afternoon Susan stirred a pot on the stove, the comforting scent of simmering stew filling the air. Across the table, Lily sat with her crayons, tongue poking out in concentration as she carefully colored in a drawing of a towering pink cake.

The phone rang, breaking the peaceful quiet. Wiping her hands on a tea towel, Susan grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Susan! Why didn't you tell me the delivery was today?" Debbie's voice crackled down the line, bewildered.

Susan frowned. "What delivery?"

"The massive one!" Debbie hissed. "There's a huge truck parked outside, and some guy's unloading a fridge, a display cabinet...hell, half a bakery's worth of equipment! What's going on?"

Susan blinked, her mind racing. "What?... Pass him on the phone...It must be a mistake"

A few seconds later, a gruff male voice came on the line. "Ma'am,"

"I think you got the wrong address" Susan said

"Just a moment please, let me check" He paused to check his clipboard. "No ma'am, it says 1233 Magnolia Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90015. Order placed by a Margaret Bennett. Everything's paid for, including installation."

Susan's breath hitched. For a moment, she thought she might drop the phone.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh..." she managed, her voice suddenly unsteady. "I see..."

The delivery man continued listing items, Industrial Stand Mixer, Double-Door Convection Oven, Refrigerated Cake Display Case, Marble Pastry Table, High-Capacity Dishwasher...."

But Susan barely heard him. Her knees went weak, and she instinctively leaned against the kitchen counter, gripping the edge as a wave of dizziness hit her. The sheer magnitude of what she was hearing was too much to process. Her vision blurred for a moment, and she thought she might actually pass out right there in the middle of her kitchen.

"Ma'am?" The delivery man's voice crackled through the receiver, pulling her back.

She swallowed hard, trying to steady her breath. "I—I'm here," she managed, though her voice came out faint. "Uh...yes, yes, that's fine. Just... set it all up. Thank you," she mumbled, still dazed.

The phone was passed back to Debbie, who was still waiting for an explanation.

"What's going on?"

"I, um... thought they were coming next week," Susan bluffed, her voice shaky but holding. "Just... keep an eye on things, alright?"

"Alright..." Debbie sounded suspicious but let it go. "See you later, then."

As the call ended, Susan leaned against the counter, trying to steady her breathing. The realization hit her fully, and a soft, overwhelmed laugh escaped her lips. She covered her mouth, eyes stinging with tears, not from sadness, but something far warmer.

She glanced at Lily, still lost in her drawing, blissfully unaware of the life-changing kindness that had just unfolded.

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That afternoon, Frances had to face another friend, one who had stood by her through every triumph and every heartbreak, the one who had been her shoulder to cry on more times than she could count. And, somehow, this conversation made her more nervous than the one with Victor.

Helen, fresh from her trip to Paris, had only just caught up with the news. Despite her

packed schedule, she had made time to see Frances. But keeping up the act, even in front of someone so dear to her, was going to be an exhausting performance.

Frances spotted the car pulling up outside, then the muffled sound of voices in the hallway. She paced the living room, cracking her knuckles, trying to shake off the unease coiling in her stomach. A moment later, the double doors slid open, and Helen stepped inside, followed by Betty.

She didn't look angry. She didn't look hurt. But then again, they were both actresses—perfectly trained to keep their true emotions hidden when needed.

"Hello, darling," Helen said softly, her expression filled with warmth and understanding. The tenderness in her voice caught Frances off guard. Before she could respond, Helen closed the distance between them and pulled her into a tight embrace.

Frances exhaled, relaxing into the hug. "Hi, hun... Thank you for coming. I know you're crazy busy."

Helen pulled back, her palm resting gently against Frances's cheek. "Always," she said with a small, reassuring smile.

"Could I offer you something to drink, Miss?" Betty asked politely.

Frances gestured toward the bar cart. "I've got some scotch here, if you want."

Helen's lips curled into an approving smile. "That sounds perfect. Thank you."

"Would that be all, ma'am?" Betty turned to Frances.

"Yes, thank you," Frances said, before finally allowing herself to exhale.

Betty excused herself, leaving the two women alone. Helen took a sip of her scotch, sighing in appreciation before settling back into the plush armchair across from Frances.

"You would've loved Paris this time," she said, swirling the amber liquid in her glass. "The city was buzzing. I met Marc for dinner one evening, he asked about you, of course. And the fashion! Darling, you'd have lost your mind. Dior is doing things that make even my head spin."

Frances let out a small chuckle, grateful for the momentary distraction. "I should've stowed away in your luggage."

"You should have," Helen agreed with a smirk. "I brought you something, by the way, just a little something, but it screamed you." She took a little present out of the bag

When Frances opened it was a gorgeous scarf "That's gorgeous...Thank you darling. You really didn't have to"

"Oh I did..."

Frances smiled, though the weight in her chest hadn't lifted. She knew why Helen was really here. And as much as she wanted to keep talking about Paris and Dior and anything else that didn't lead them to this conversation, she couldn't avoid it forever.

She took a steadying breath and leaned forward, setting her glass down on the coffee table. "Helen, about..."

But before she could even finish, Helen held up a hand, stopping her in her tracks.

Frances swallowed hard.

Helen's expression softened, but her voice was firm. "Before we go any further, I need you to answer one question. And I need you to be honest with me, Frances."

Frances's throat tightened.

Helen leaned forward, eyes locked onto hers. "Is the child yours?"

The room fell into silence.

Frances felt cornered, the walls closing in, her heart hammering against her ribs. She had been bracing for this, and yet, now that the moment had arrived, she wasn't ready.

Helen's gaze never wavered. She wasn't angry, not yet. But she was determined, and Frances knew that whatever she said next would change everything between them.

She could lie. She had already lied to the world. She could spin another tale, protect herself, protect her career, keep everything neat and controlled.

Or...

She could tell the truth. And deal with whatever came next.

Frances exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of the moment settle over her.

She met Helen's eyes.

"Yes," she said. "She's mine."

Helen's face softened, but there was something else behind her eyes, something sharp, perceptive. She was a smart woman, and not much could be hidden from her.

She reached across the small space between them and took Frances's hand in hers, her touch warm, steady. For a moment, she just held it, her thumb tracing small, thoughtful circles over Frances's skin.

Then, in a voice quiet but firm, she said something that punched a hole straight through Frances's stomach.

"I've known you too long, darling," Helen murmured. "And I know you well enough to say with absolute certainty that this child is not the product of some affair or a summer fling." She paused, watching Frances closely. "Because I know you're not into men."

Frances flinched.

Her breath hitched, and she gripped Helen's hand just a little tighter.

"So," Helen continued, her voice gentle but unyielding, "this must be something else. Something you don't even want to say out loud."

Frances's throat tightened, her eyes burning as the tears welled up faster than she could stop them. She blinked, but they spilled over anyway, rolling down her cheeks in silent tracks.

Helen sighed, her expression pained, and without another word, she pulled Frances into a hug, holding her close. "That's all I needed to know," she whispered. "And nothing else matters."

Frances let out a trembling breath, her fingers digging into Helen's back as she held onto her.

After a moment, she pulled away just enough to look Helen in the eye. "I'm sorry," she choked out. "For keeping it quiet. For not telling you. I... I should have..."

"Darling," Helen interrupted softly, shaking her head. "There's nothing to forgive. God knows I'd probably do the same."

Frances swallowed hard, searching Helen's face for any trace of hurt, but there was none. Only understanding. Only love.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Frances felt like she could breathe.

After some time, Frances calmed down enough to wipe away the last of her tears and sit back, exhaling a shaky breath.

Helen gave her a moment to collect herself before leaning forward, her voice softer but laced with curiosity. "I have to ask darling...Where the hell does your brother come into all of this?"

Frances exhaled heavily, rubbing her temples. "Oh, darling... It's a right mess." She let out a humorless chuckle. "I might as well spill it all now."

Helen waited, her brows knitting together in concern.

"My father's been blackmailing me for years," Frances admitted, her voice tight. "Threatening to expose Lily to the public."

Helen's glass froze halfway to her lips. "What?" she breathed. "Your dad?"

Frances let out a dry, bitter laugh. "Yeah. And I paid. I kept paying and paying because I couldn't let Lily get ripped apart by the press. I had to protect her, and I needed the money to do it. If I lost my job, what was I supposed to do? Sling hash at some roadside diner?"

She shook her head, jaw tightening. "I gave him every damn cent he wanted, but it was never enough. He just kept coming back for more. And this last time? He asked for an impossible amount. So, I had two choices. . let him drain me dry, or stop him myself... by exposing my own daughter before he could."

Helen set her glass down with a quiet clink. "And if you exposed her as your own..."

Frances gave a hollow laugh. "The studio would've cut me loose. No safety net. No protection. Not damn money."

"Jesus, Frances..." Helen exhaled, shaking her head. She took another sip of her drink,

processing everything. After a long pause, she leaned back, swirling the amber liquid in her glass. "You know," she said slowly, "this is actually an ingenious move. It gets you out of that damn morality clause without raising any eyebrows." A small smirk played on her lips. "I must say, you've got some real nerve."

Frances let out a weary chuckle. "It was actually Yaz's idea...She's the brains behind it."

"No way!" Helen's face lit up. "Well, that girl missed her calling...she should've been a publicist."

Frances smiled, shaking her head. "And she'd be damn good at it."

Helen raised an eyebrow. "Now it all makes sense. The studio gets their explanation, the papers get their juicy story, the public loses their reason to dig... and you?" She tilted her glass toward Frances. "You get to keep your career and your kid. It's fucking brilliant."

Frances sighed, running a hand through her hair. "That's the hope. More than anything, I just want them to leave Lily alone. She doesn't deserve any of this and I feel sick I'm having to use her as a pawn in all of this."

Helen's expression softened as she set her drink aside. "I won't lie to you, darling. This won't blow over overnight. The press will pick it apart....some will believe it, some won't....but eventually, something shinier will come along." She gave Frances a reassuring smile. "Give it time. It'll settle."

Frances let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging. "God, I hope you're right."

Helen smirked. "I usually am." Then her face grew serious again. "But have you thought about the long term? You can't keep this going forever. Sooner or later, your kid is gonna ask questions."

Frances swallowed hard, her fingers tightening around her glass. "That's something I'm painfully aware of." She sighed. "But my contract with the studio runs out in a year. Once that's done, I'll have more control over my life, over our lives. For now, this is just a temporary fix."

Helen nodded slowly, watching her with an understanding gaze.

"I wanna show you something" Frances got up from her seat, walking over to the sideboard. She reached into a drawer, rummaging for a moment before pulling something out. Turning back to Helen, she hesitated briefly, then handed it over.

Helen took the photograph, her eyes immediately widening in delight. "Oh, Frances..." Her lips parted into a warm smile as she studied the little girl in the picture. "She's beautiful."

Frances sat back down, watching Helen's reaction closely.

Helen tilted the photo slightly, her brows lifting. "And an absolute spitting image of you." She glanced up, her expression full of understanding now. "Well, that explains it. There's no way you could've just said you adopted her. No one would buy that for a second."

Frances chuckled, rubbing her fingers over her lips. "That's exactly what Yaz said. The moment people would see her, they'd start putting things together."

Helen nodded, still admiring the photograph. "She has your eyes. And that little nose...God, darling, she's all you."

Frances swallowed hard, her heart swelling at the words. She wasn't sure why but hearing it from Helen made it feel even more real.

As the conversation wound down, Helen stood up, smoothing down the hem of her dress. "Alright darling, I should get going," Helen said, her voice gentle but full of affection.

"I'm really glad you came." Frances smiled and followed, she stepped forward, her arms open, ready to embrace her.

Helen didn't hesitate. She closed the distance between them, pulling Frances into a tight hug.

"Thank you," Frances whispered into Helen's ear, her voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what I'd do without you. You mean the world to me, you know that?" Her arms tightened around her friend, not wanting to let go. "I don't say it enough... but I appreciate everything you do for me. You're one of few people who never let me down."

Helen pulled back slightly, her smile wide, her eyes gleaming with love and tenderness. "I'm your friend, that's what I'm here for," she said softly, brushing a strand of hair from Frances's face. "Besides...No one else in the world could handle you like I do," she teased with a wink, her voice light but warm.

Frances laughed softly, the sound sweet and light compared to the heaviness that had been there just moments before.

"Take care of yourself, alright?" Helen said, her tone more serious now, filled with concern. "And remember, I'm only a phone call away. Always."

"Same here...Thank you darling," Frances whispered

Helen smiled, her eyes twinkling with that same infectious energy that had always made her so special to Frances. "Anytime," she said. With one final squeeze of her hand, she pulled away and headed for the door.

As the door clicked shut behind Helen, Frances leaned against it for a moment, letting out a shaky breath.

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As evening settled in, Frances picked up the phone and dialed Susan's house. Leaning against the edge of her desk, she twirled the phone cord around her fingers, listening to the steady rings.

"Hi, it's me" Frances chimed on the other end

"Frances Louise Bennett, you nearly gave me a heart attack today!" Susan's voice came through, warm but carrying an unmistakable exasperation.

Frances grinned, already knowing exactly what she was about to get scolded for. "Oh? And here I thought I was doing something nice."

Susan let out a sharp scoff. "Nice? Honey, you practically restocked my whole damn bakery! Do you have any idea how close I came to faintin' when I saw your name on that invoice?"

Frances chuckled, shaking her head. "Well, that wouldn't do at all. Who'd bake all those beautiful cakes then?"

Susan sighed, but Frances could hear the laughter behind it. "Be serious, now. Why are you spending all this money on me?"

Frances hesitated for just a moment before answering, her voice softer. "Because isn't that what family does?"

The other end of the line went quiet.

Frances took a deep breath, speaking from the heart. "A year ago, it was just me and Lily. Alone. I didn't think I had anyone. And then somehow, life brought me here, to you, to Yaz, to this whole... thing I never even knew I needed. I don't know if I ever had something like this before, or if I just forgot what it feels like." She swallowed hard, steadying her voice. "But now I do. And I want to do what family does, take care of each other."

A long pause stretched between them, the only sound the faint crackle of the telephone line. When Susan finally spoke, her voice was soft, filled with emotion.

"You really are somethin', you know that?" A beat of silence. Then, with a teasing lilt, "Well, next time, just tell me you love me. It'll be enough."

Frances smiled, warmth filling her chest. "Deal."

Susan sniffed, trying to compose herself. "Alright, alright, before you get me bawling all over again... what's the plan for tomorrow?"

Frances exhaled, steadying herself. "I'll send the driver to pick you and Lily up in the morning. I'd come myself, but I can't risk being followed."

Susan let out a small chuckle. "I'm surprised they haven't tracked me down yet."

Frances smirked. "Yaz has been slipping in and out of that back entrance like a pro. I swear, she's got a second career waiting as a getaway driver."

Susan laughed, then lowered her voice. "You nervous?"

Frances sighed, rubbing her temple. "I've had a knot in my stomach all day. But I'll be fine. The studio's handling everything...they picked the reporters, pre-approved all the questions... Nothing's gonna slip through the cracks."

Susan scoffed. "Well, they sure ain't leaving anything to chance, are they?"

Frances huffed a dry laugh. "Nope. They've got too much money riding on me. They need this to go off without a hitch." Her voice softened. "I just worry about Lily. I don't want this to be too much for her."

Susan's voice warmed. "Oh, honey, she's gonna be just fine. She's been talking about it nonstop. She's so excited. And besides, she'll have you there. That's all she needs."

Before Frances could respond, the sound of little feet padding across the floor echoed through the receiver, followed by a bright, eager voice.

"Is that Mummy?"

Frances's breath hitched, her heart swelling at the sound of her daughter's voice.

"Yes she is...let me say goodbye to her and I'll pass her over" Susan chuckled. "She's been waiting all evening to talk to you. Yaz was just giving her a bath, but I better hand the phone over before she bursts."

Frances smiled, her voice warm. "Alright... Well, I'll see you both tomorrow, okay?"

Susan softened. "See you tomorrow, sweetheart. And hey...try to get some rest."

Frances let out a small, tired laugh. "You, too."

As Susan passed the phone to Lily, Frances braced herself, knowing whatever weight she was carrying would disappear the moment she heard her little girl's voice.

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The morning rush of the studio was in full swing, voices echoing through the hallways, the shuffle of scripts, the hurried steps of assistants weaving through the chaos. Yaz had just left the usual morning meeting when she spotted Frances standing outside, waiting for her.

She didn't say a word, just met Yaz's eyes and gave the smallest nod toward the hallway. That was all it took. Yaz fell into step beside her, the noise of the studio fading as they made their way to Frances's dressing room.

As soon as she closed the door behind them, she felt Frances press against her back, gentle, warm and familiar. Her arms wrapped around her, and she rested her head against Yaz's shoulder, exhaling a shaky breath.

Yaz let out a soft sigh, palming her hands over Frances's, lacing their fingers together against her stomach "Nervous?"

"I feel like I'm gonna puke," Frances admitted, her voice muffled against Yaz's shoulder.

Yaz turned in her arms, pulling her in and guiding her toward the makeup table.

"C'mere" Sitting down, she tugged Frances onto her lap, wrapping her arms around her. She pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder. "Tell me."

Frances let her head tip forward, playing with the hem of Yaz's sleeve. "I don't know... Everything. Lily, the reporters, my dad, facing all my friends, having all these arguments with the studio. It's been like a rollercoaster lately. I feel like I haven't taken a breath in days." She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding "I just want it to be over. I want things to go back to normal...How it was."

Yaz chuckled, brushing her fingers along Frances's spine. "Do you really want things to go back to how they were?"

Frances giggled, tilting her head back to look at her. "No. Not exactly..."

Yaz smirked. "So, what do you want, then?"

Frances's eyes sparkled with something playful, something soft. "I want us to get married," she said cheekily. "And then go on a safari in Africa. Lily would love all the animals, and you and I could just sit and watch the sunrise together."

Yaz laughed, shaking her head. "I wouldn't complain about that one bit." She tucked a loose curl behind Frances's ear, tilting her chin up. "But let's keep it real for now, huh?"

Frances sighed dramatically. "Fine. But one day."

"One day," Yaz promised, pressing a kiss to her lips.

....

The car rolled to a stop at the back of the building, right by a small side entrance. Frances was already waiting, leaning casually against the wall, chatting with one of her coworkers. A half-drunk coffee cup dangled from her fingers, and a cigarette burned between her lips as she took one long puff. When she spotted the car, she flashed a quick smile, set the coffee on the windowsill, and stubbed out the cigarette on the ground before hurrying toward them.

As Susan stepped out first, her face lit up in a wide, welcoming grin, like she was seeing an old friend she hadn't met in ages.

"Hello, honey," she greeted warmly, her voice filled with affection.

Before anyone could respond, there was a small, excited blur zipping past Susan. Lily, with her usual boundless energy, bolted out of the car and onto the pavement.

"Mummy!" she cried, her little feet pounding against the ground as she rushed toward Frances.

Frances didn't say a word, just beamed and opened her arms. Lily collided with her so fiercely that Frances stumbled back a step.

"God, I missed you," Frances sighed, holding Lily tightly, her arms wrapping around the girl in an unspoken rush of love.

"I saw a horse!" Lily announced, her voice filled with excitement as she clung to Frances's neck.

"Did you now?" Frances laughed, gently putting Lily down. "You're a little whirlwind, aren't you?"

Lily giggled, her arms still tightly wrapped around Frances's legs as she bounced on her toes.

Frances turned toward Susan with a warm smile. "Hello, Susan..." she greeted, stepping forward to give her a gentle hug.

"Hey, honey," Susan murmured softly, pulling back just enough to look at her. She cupped Frances's cheek, her touch tender. "You look tired, sweetie."

Frances chuckled, the exhaustion clear in her eyes. "I'm exhausted... It's been a rough week."

Susan nodded sympathetically. "Well, how about a Sunday lunch at my place? I'll make your favorite soup. Can you sneak out without being followed?"

Frances's smile softened. "That would be wonderful. I'll definitely try."

Lily tugged on Frances's hand, her eyes wide with curiosity. "Mummy... Where's Yaz?"

"She's working, darling. But we'll go see her soon, okay?"

Susan raised an eyebrow. "So, what's the plan for now?"

Frances looped her arm through Susan's as they started walking toward the building. "We've got about two hours before we need to hit makeup," she said, her voice low and easy, "so I thought I'd give you a little private tour. Then we can grab some lunch. It's gonna be a long day for Lily, too."

"Sounds perfect," Susan agreed, her tone light, but there was a warmth in her smile.

And with that, they moved into the building, the hum of excitement and the day's challenges ahead just beginning to unfold.

....

Frances led them deeper into the heart of the studio. Crew members hurried past, carrying props or flipping through scripts. Nearly every pair of eyes landed on Lily, who clung to her mother's hand, her gaze darting around as she took everything in. The confidence she had outside wavered slightly under all the attention.

"Oh, so this must be the famous little girl," one of the hairdressers called out as he passed, offering a warm smile.

"She sure is," Frances replied, squeezing Lily's hand reassuringly. Lily ducked her head shyly but then peeked up at Frances. "She's a bit shy"

"It's my nose...All the kids are scared of it" he said making Frances and Susan laugh "Well, I won't keep you...Have fun ladies"

"Thank you" Frances said

As they walked, Frances leaned down slightly. "How about a little tour before we go see Yaz?"

Lily's eyes brightened. "Like where?"

"Well," Frances said, leading them toward a large set of double doors, "I thought we'd start here." She pushed them open, revealing the vast soundstage inside.

Susan inhaled sharply. "My word."

The set was a sight to behold, an entire street built inside the warehouse-sized room, complete with storefronts, streetlights, and even a faux cobblestone road. It looked so real, yet as Susan glanced around, she noticed missing walls and scaffolding just beyond the

camera's reach.

Lily's mouth dropped open. "It's a whole town inside a building!"

"Sure is," Frances said. "This is where the magic happens. The outside looks real on film, but see over there?" She pointed toward a shop front with nothing but empty space behind it. "That's all there is. Just a façade."

Lily, ever curious, ran ahead and peeked behind a door, expecting another room. Instead, she gasped. "It's just wood!"

Frances chuckled. "Not quite what you expected, huh?"

Susan shook her head, still taking everything in. "It's incredible how they make it all seem so real."

Frances grinned. "That's Hollywood for you. This one is still being built.."

"So this isn't finished?" Susan asked surprised

"No...they still need to finish some stores and bring in the cars" Frances laughed

"My god"

"Mummy...Look a toy store" Lily pointed

.....

Frances led them further into the studio. They stopped by the prop room, where shelves were stacked with everything from old typewriters to swords and delicate glassware.

An older gentleman sat behind a large wooden desk, pen in hand, carefully jotting something down in a thick ledger. At the sound of footsteps, he lifted his head, adjusting his glasses as he took in the unexpected visitors.

"Morning, Miss," he greeted with a small nod. "Didn't expect to see you here this early."

Frances offered a warm smile. "Morning. Hope you don't mind, I brought my daughter and a friend along for a little tour."

The man leaned back slightly, glancing at Lily, then Susan, before gesturing behind him with a casual wave of his hand.

“Mind? Not one bit, ma’am. Go right ahead, knock yourself out.”

As they stepped further inside, the distinct scent of aged wood, paint, and fabric filled the air a rich, musty mix of sawdust, varnish, and something faintly metallic. It was the unmistakable smell of a space where things were built, repainted, repurposed, a place full of stories waiting to be told.

Susan took a slow look around, her eyes widening with fascination. “My goodness,” she murmured, running a hand lightly over the surface of an ornately carved chair. “It all looks so different up close.”

Frances grinned, watching her take it all in. “It’s a bit of a magic trick, isn’t it? In the movies, everything looks so polished and grand, but here... you can see the seams.”

Susan shook her head, marveling at a row of painted columns leaning against the far wall. “I swear, I’ve seen these in a dozen different films. They look like real stone on screen, but up close...” She tapped her knuckles against one. “It’s just wood.”

“Exactly,” Frances said with a chuckle. “A little paint, some clever lighting, and suddenly, you’re in ancient Rome.”

While Susan admired the craftsmanship, Lily had an entirely different reaction. To her, this wasn’t a storeroom, it was a treasure trove. Her small hands hovered over an oversized goblet, a gleaming toy sword, a velvet cape draped over a chair. She gasped at a giant stuffed horse, standing proudly in the corner.

“Mummy,” she whispered in awe, tugging at Frances’s sleeve. “Is this a toy shop?”

Frances laughed, crouching beside her. “Not quite, sweetheart. These are all props, they help tell stories in the movies.”

Lily’s eyes sparkled as she took it all in. “It looks like a toy shop.”

Frances pressed a kiss to her temple. “I guess to you, it does.”

Lily took a step forward, utterly mesmerized, her hands itching to reach out and touch everything. “Can I play with something?” she asked, eyes locked on a gold-painted crown resting atop a pile of fabric.

Frances smiled but shook her head. "Not today, love. These things are for work."

Lily pouted for a moment, but there was too much wonder around her to stay disappointed for long. She turned in a slow circle, eyes wide, soaking in every bit of the magic surrounding her.

After some encouragement from Frances, Lily tried on a ridiculously large hat adorned with feathers. Susan laughed as Frances tipped an imaginary hat to her,

"Howdy, ma'am." she said in a low voice making Lily giggle.

.....

Next, they visited the makeup and hair department, where a makeup artist was busy sculpting a prosthetic nose. Susan watched, fascinated, as Frances explained how the actors were aged, disguised, or transformed. Meanwhile, Lily was mesmerized by the wigs and colors.

One of the stylists crouched down with a smile. "Want a little sparkle, sweetheart?"

Lily nodded eagerly, and with a gentle touch, the stylist dusted a bit of shimmering powder onto her cheeks. She turned to Frances, eyes twinkling. "Do I look like a movie star now?"

Frances tapped her nose. "You always do, sweetheart."

From there, they made a quick stop at the backlot, where different outdoor sets were constructed. Lily ran ahead, pretending to be in an old Western town one moment, then dashing through a New York street the next.

As they strolled through the studio, the hum of distant voices and the occasional clatter of equipment filled the air, but between them, there was only warmth and quiet understanding.

"She's so happy," Susan murmured, watching Lily skip ahead, her excitement palpable.

Frances followed her gaze, a soft smile playing on her lips. "She's beaming... I have to admit, this is going better than I expected."

"She just misses you," Susan said gently.

Frances let out a small sigh, looping her arm through Susan's. "And I miss her... all of you."

Susan gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "It won't be long before this all blows over."

Frances returned the gesture with a grateful smile, "I hope so...I don't think I take this much longer"

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, the weight of the moment settling between them in a way that didn't feel heavy, just honest.

Then Susan exhaled, a little dramatically. "I'm not sure I wanna give her back though."

Frances let out a startled laugh. "And here's me thinking I was burdening you with my problems."

"Oh honey," Susan said, shaking her head, "if this is a burden, please throw it at me any time you want." Then, after a pause, she added with a knowing smile, "You know... I don't think Yaz wants to give her back either."

Frances chuckled, shaking her head fondly. "Oh, Yaz... What did I ever do to deserve her?"

Susan smirked. "Oh, I don't know, sweetheart... That's between you and her." she said cheekily

Frances burst out laughing, the tension of the past few days lifting, even if just for a moment.

.....

Finally, Frances took them to very special place where she arranged for a brief clip from one of her recent movies to be played.

She led them into a small, dimly lit screening room, the kind used for private viewings and final edits. The smell of old film reels and worn-out seats filled the space, and the air carried a faint chill from the projector that hummed softly in the back.

Susan settled into a chair with quiet anticipation, while Lily, full of restless excitement, scrambled up onto one of the seats, her little legs swinging as she clutched Frances's hand.

One of Frances's colleagues, a kind man who had always been fond of Frances, had carefully selected a short, harmless scene from Frances's latest film, a lighthearted moment in the middle of a grand comedy that is suitable for Lily to see.

The lights dimmed, and for a moment, there was nothing but the soft flicker of the projector. Then, suddenly, Frances was there, larger than life on the screen, dressed in an elegant but slightly disheveled evening gown, her face twisted in exaggerated exasperation as she struggled to chase after a small, yapping dog that had stolen her shoe. Susan was laughing, but it was Lily's reaction that Frances was waiting for.

The moment Lily saw her mother on screen, her mouth fell open. She let out a sharp gasp, her small fingers squeezing Frances's hand tightly.

"That's you, Mummy!" she whispered, utterly spellbound.

Frances glanced down at her daughter, her heart swelling at the pure wonder in Lily's eyes.

Lily didn't blink, completely absorbed, watching as Frances tripped over a footstool, sent a tray of glasses flying, and then after a long, perfectly timed pause, sighed in dramatic defeat as the dog pranced triumphantly across the house with the shoe still in its mouth.

A second later, Lily burst into delighted laughter.

The sound was warm and bright, echoing around the small theater, making Susan chuckle along with her. Lily leaned forward, completely mesmerized, her little hands gripping the armrests. For the first time in her life, she wasn't just hearing about what her mother did, she was seeing it.

To Lily, it wasn't just ten minutes of the movie. It was magic.

When the clip ended, and the screen went dark, Lily turned to Frances, her face glowing with excitement. "You're funny, Mummy!"

Frances grinned, brushing a lock of hair from Lily's forehead. "You think so?"

Lily nodded eagerly. "Your hair was all frazzled! Did you hurt yourself when you fell down?"

"No" Frances chuckled. "That's what acting is, sweetheart. It's not real...It's making people laugh, or cry, or feel something. It's telling a story."

Lily tilted her head thoughtfully, as if processing this grand revelation. Then, with all the certainty in the world, she declared, "I wanna do it too!"

Susan laughed softly, exchanging an amused glance with Frances.

"Oh dear," Frances said, tapping Lily's nose.

Lily giggled, still bubbling with excitement.

As they stepped out of the screening room, Lily's hand still clasped tightly in hers, Frances felt something shift, a quiet but profound moment settling into her heart. She had always known that Lily understood, in a vague, distant way, what she did for a living. But now, for the first time, her daughter had truly seen it.

And in Lily's wide, adoring eyes, Frances had just become something even greater than a movie star.

She had become a hero.

.....

To finish off the tour, they stopped by the studio cafeteria, where actors and crew milled about. Susan, always one to appreciate a good meal, took in the lively atmosphere. Frances let Lily pick out a burger, and as they sat down, she exhaled, finally relaxing a little.

Susan leaned in. "This has been quite the morning."

Frances smiled, watching Lily happily dig into her burger. "And we haven't even started yet."

"When are we gonna see Yaz?" Lily asked dipping her chip into ketchup

"Now after this" Frances leaned in kissing her head "Did you have a nice time?"

Lily just nodded with her mouth full. Excitement gleaming out of her eyes.

....

After having a nice meal, Frances led them through the winding hallways, the familiar scent of pressed garments and sound of sewing machines growing stronger as they neared the wardrobe department. As she pushed open the door, Lily's eyes widened, her small hand tightening around her mother's fingers.

Rows of dresses, costumes, and racks of neatly hung garments filled the space. Sewing machines hummed steadily, and the air carried the gentle chatter of seamstresses at work. A few women lifted their heads, momentarily pausing their tasks, while others exchanged

quiet whispers at the unexpected visitors.

Before Frances could say anything, a woman with neatly pinned hair and measuring tape draped around her neck strode towards them with a bright smile.

"Miss Louise! Well, this is a surprise."

Frances smiled back. "Laura, I hope we're not interrupting too much." She turned to Susan. "This is Laura, head of the wardrobe department. And this," she placed a gentle hand on Lily's shoulder, "is my daughter, Lily. She wanted to see where Yaz works."

Laura's smile softened as she crouched slightly to Lily's height. "Well, you've come to the right place, hun. She's somewhere here, I just saw her."

Lily's eyes darted from the sewing machines to the towering racks of clothes, her mouth slightly open in awe.

Just then, through the steady noise of machines and conversation, Yaz spotted them. Frances watched as her expression shifted from mild curiosity to delight, her eyes lighting up.

Before anyone could say a word, Lily gasped.
"YAZ!"

Without warning, she let go of Frances's hand and took off, weaving through worktables and stacks of fabric, her little feet thudding against the floor. Heads turned, conversations faltered, and realization dawned in the room like a slow-spreading wave.

Yaz barely had time to react before Lily flung herself at her, arms and legs wrapping around her like a tiny, determined koala. A surprised laugh escaped Yaz as she caught her, steadying them both with ease.

"Hey pumpkin," Yaz murmured, a fond smile tugging at her lips. "Or monkey, which one are you?" She laughed as Lily wrapped herself around her

She pulled back just enough to look at her, grinning from ear to ear. "I saw a studio, and a horse, and a real train!"

"Did you now?" Yaz chuckled, shifting Lily comfortably in her arms. "Like it?"

Lily nodded enthusiastically, her excitement bubbling over. "You work here?"

"Among other places," Yaz said. "This is where all the costumes are sewn. See by all these nice ladies"

Lily's eyes darted around, drinking in the colorful chaos. She pointed at a pile of rich velvet and shimmering satins stacked nearby. "What's *that*?"

"Those are the fabrics we use," Yaz explained, following her gaze. "It's like one big shop, isn't it?"

Lily nodded, completely captivated. "I like it."

"I bet you do" she grinned

Across the room, the quiet whispers among Yaz's colleagues grew louder. No one needed to say it out loud. Yaz had known about Lily long before the rest of the world had.

Yaz smirked as she balanced Lily effortlessly, carrying her back toward Frances and Susan. "I think I'm under interrogation."

Frances, arms folded, gave her an amused look. "Did you doubt?"

Yaz huffed a soft laugh, pressing a light kiss to Lily's hair. "Not for a second."

Lily twisted in Yaz's arms to face Susan, her eyes shining with excitement. "Susan! Yaz sews! Did you know?"

Susan chuckled, thoroughly entertained. "I did, sweetheart. And she's very talented."

Yaz gently set Lily down, smoothing a hand over her hair before turning to Susan. "You look just as excited as she is," she teased.

Susan let out a breathy laugh, shaking her head. "My head is *spinning*," she admitted. "We got the exclusive tour! If I'd known, I'd have brought my camera."

Frances smiled, tucking her hands into the pockets of her trousers. "We won't keep you, darling. I can see you're busy."

"I'd love to stay longer," Yaz said with genuine regret, "but I've got a bit of an emergency to sort out."

Frances nodded in understanding. "That's alright, love. Just wanted to remind you—the press conference is in two and a half hours. We'll meet in my dressing room."

Yaz tipped her head slightly, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips. "I'll be there."

Their eyes lingered for a second longer before Yaz gave Lily's hair one last ruffle and stepped back, already slipping into work mode. Lily watched her go, her little fingers curling around Frances's hand as they turned toward the door.

"She's busy," Lily stated, not with disappointment, but with admiration.

Frances gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "She is. But she'll always make time for us."

....

Lily sat perched on a high salon chair, her tiny feet swinging in the air as she watched the hairstylist section off her hair with practiced ease. A crisp white cape was fastened around her shoulders, making her feel very official, like she was about to star in a movie herself.

Right beside her, Frances reclined in her own chair, her golden curls being meticulously brushed and pinned. The salon smelled of hairspray, pomade, and roses, a scent Lily decided must be what glamour smelled like.

"Now, Miss Lily," said Dottie, the hairstylist assigned to her, "we're gonna give you some soft curls, nice and bouncy. How's that sound?"

Lily beamed. "Like Mummy's?"

Dottie chuckled. "Something a little gentler for you, sweetheart. We're gonna use a good ol' wet set...no hot curlers for you."

She reached for a jar of setting lotion, dabbing a little onto her fingertips before smoothing it into Lily's fine hair.

Lily wrinkled her nose. "What's that stuff?"

"It's setting lotion," Dottie said, combing it through. "Helps your curls stay all nice and pretty. Hollywood secret."

Lily glanced at Frances. "Do you use this?"

Frances, amused, met her daughter's gaze in the mirror. "Sometimes, darling. But I usually have hot rollers or pin curls. The stylists here are miracle workers."

Dottie grinned. "That's right. Now, we'll curl your hair the old-fashioned way."

She took soft cotton rollers and carefully wound each section of Lily's hair, securing them with small clips. Lily sat very still, watching Dottie's hands move swiftly.

"Did they do this for all the movie stars?" Lily asked.

Dottie nodded. "Oh, honey, they've been setting hair like this forever. Even before your mama's time! Back in the '30s, women used finger waves and pin curls. In the '40s, they did these beautiful, structured waves. And now in the '50s, we like things soft, bouncy, and elegant."

Lily liked the sound of that. "I want elegant curls!"

"You'll have the prettiest ones in Hollywood," Dottie assured her.

After a while, the rollers were set, and Lily was given a pink satin scarf to tie around her head while the curls dried. She felt very grown up.

Meanwhile, Frances's stylist was expertly sculpting her signature soft curls, setting them in place with a careful spritz of hairspray.

When it was time to remove Lily's rollers, Dottie carefully uncurled each one, brushing through her hair with a soft-bristle brush to blend the curls into gentle waves.

Lily gasped at her reflection. "I look like a princess!"

Frances reached over, smoothing a hand over her daughter's curls. "You look beautiful, darling."

Dottie grinned. "Wait, I've got one more trick for you."

She pulled out a tiny jar and unscrewed the lid, revealing a delicate shimmering powder.

"This," she said, "is what we use to make movie stars sparkle under the lights. Marilyn's hairstylist loves this trick."

Lily's mouth dropped open. "Magic dust?"

Dottie winked. "Hollywood magic."

She dusted a tiny bit of shimmer over Lily's curls, just enough to catch the light.

Lily turned her head side to side, watching her hair glisten. "Oh! I really am a movie star now!"

Frances laughed, kissing Lily's forehead. "You were always a star, sweetheart. Now you just shine a little more."

Lily, positively glowing, hopped down from the chair and twirled, letting her soft curls bounce and sparkle in the light. Hollywood, she decided, really was full of magic.

....

Lily sat on a stool beside Frances, her small fingers tracing invisible shapes on the vanity table. Frances, wrapped in a silk dressing gown, closed her eyes as the makeup artist, Millie, carefully dabbed foundation onto her skin.

Lily, wide-eyed, scanned the colorful array of compacts, lipsticks, and brushes spread across the table. Everything smelled like roses and powder, and the little jars of rouge and shimmering creams looked like they belonged to a fairy's treasure chest.

She hesitated, then reached for a lipstick, twisting it up to reveal a perfect ruby red bullet. "Is this the one that makes your lips all shiny?" she asked, glancing up at Millie.

Millie, a plump woman with a warm smile and a pencil tucked behind her ear, chuckled. "That's the one, sweetheart. Makes your mama look like a movie star—well, even more than she already does."

Lily tilted her head. "What did movie stars use before?"

Millie paused, dabbing Frances's cheeks with a puff of powder. "Oh, honey, you wouldn't believe the things they used to do!"

Lily's eyes sparkled. "Like what?"

"Well," Millie said, leaning in conspiratorially, "back in the old days, before talkies, when movies didn't have any sound actors had to wear some pretty strange makeup. They used blue lipstick because red didn't show up right on camera."

Lily gasped. "Blue lips?! Like when you eat too many blueberries?"

Frances opened one eye and smirked. "Not quite as fun, darling. But yes, it must've looked odd in real life."

"And blush!" Millie continued. "They didn't have nice pink blush like we do now. Sometimes, they'd use green or yellow on their cheeks to make them look just right in black-and-white film."

Lily wrinkled her nose. "Green? That sounds like they were sick!"

Millie laughed. "It sure must've looked that way off-camera. And eyebrows? They'd paint them on with greasepaint, big, dramatic shapes so you could see them from far away."

Lily turned to Frances, squinting at her perfectly arched brows. "Did you ever have to do that, Mummy?"

Frances smiled softly. "Not quite, sweetheart. By the time I started, they had better film, so we could use normal colors. But some of the older actresses, like in the silent films, they went through all of that."

Lily picked up a little pot of cream blush, rubbing her fingers over the smooth surface. "I think I like our makeup better."

Millie winked. "Me too, kiddo. Now, let's make your mama look extra glamorous."

As Millie swept red lipstick over Frances's lips, Lily leaned her chin on her hands, still marveling at the magic of it all. She decided that Hollywood was full of secrets, and she was going to learn every single one of them.

....

Yaz sat on the plush couch in Frances's dressing room, idly flipping through a magazine while Susan perched on the vanity stool, crossing her legs with effortless poise. The scent of powder, perfume, and warm stage lights lingered in the air, the hum of activity just beyond the door filling the quiet moments between their conversation.

Susan stretched, letting out a small sigh. "You should've seen her, Yaz. That little girl was everywhere. I swear, the second we stepped into the studio, she turned into a firecracker. Couldn't sit still for a second."

Yaz smiled, setting the magazine down. "That doesn't surprise me. I expect she's taken in every last detail by now."

Susan chuckled. "Oh, honey, every single one. I mean, I figured she'd be excited, but Lord, I didn't expect her to be that bold. Walkin' up to people, asking a million questions. 'What's that camera do?' 'Why's that man holding a light?' 'What's inside the makeup box?'...just chatterin' away like she owned the place."

Yaz's eyes softened. "Good for her. She can be so quiet sometimes I was half expecting her to cling to Frances the whole time."

Susan shook her head with a laugh. "Not today. Her excitement won out over any nerves"

Yaz let out a short laugh. "I love that. Next thing we know, she'll be directing Frances."

Susan grinned. "Wouldn't surprise me one bit. And oh, when they went into makeup, She climbed right up on the stool next Frances asking all sorts of questions about lipstick and powder, just eatin' up every word."

Yaz tilted her head. "And she wasn't shy about any of it?"

"Not even a little," Susan said proudly. "I don't think she even realized how many people were around, she was too caught up in the magic of it all."

Yaz exhaled, a warm feeling settling in her chest. "That's wonderful. I want her to feel like she belongs in Frances's world, not just like she's tagging along."

Susan smiled, reaching over to pat Yaz's hand. "Oh, she belongs, alright. That little girl's got show business in her bones."

Just then, the door handle rattled, and they both turned as it swung open.

Lily burst in first, curls bouncing, eyes shining like stage lights, and arms spread wide. "Look at me! I have Hollywood hair!"

Behind her, Frances stepped in with a laugh, her own curls freshly styled, red lips perfect as always. "Well? Does she look like a star or what?"

Yaz and Susan exchanged amused glances before Yaz reached for Lily, pulling her onto her lap. "Oh, you're a proper little movie star now, aren't you?"

Lily nodded eagerly. "And I have magic dust in my hair!"

Susan winked at Yaz. "Told ya. She's got show business in her bones."

.....

Frances stood in front of the mirror, adjusting Lily's dress. The peach-colored fabric shimmered under the soft light of the changing room, and Lily twirled slowly, admiring herself in the reflection.

"I look like a princess," Lily said, her voice small but full of wonder.

Frances smiled gently, brushing a lock of hair from her daughter's face. "You do, sweetheart. A very beautiful princess."

Susan was standing nearby, a reassuring presence as always, her hands folded in front of her. The room was quiet except for the occasional rustle of fabric as they prepared for what was to come. Frances had been hoping for a peaceful moment, for a brief respite before she would face the press but there was a sharp knock at the door.

Frances frowned, turning toward it.

"Just a moment," she called out, her voice calm but with a hint of irritation. She wasn't ready for any interruptions. She finished with Lily then called out again "Come in now"

The door cracked open slightly, and a man peered in, his face slightly flushed, his manner eager but careful.

"Miss Louise, may I have a word?" he asked, his voice low, almost hesitant.

Frances's brow furrowed. She exchanged a glance with Susan, then nodded curtly.

"Of course. Give me a moment."

She stepped away from Lily, smoothing down her dress before walking to the door.

Standing in the hallway now, her back straight she frowned "What is it?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

The man shifted nervously, his eyes darting between her and the changing room door.

"There's been a change of plans," he said, his voice faltering slightly.

Frances's pulse quickened. "What change?" she asked, confused but wary.

He cleared his throat, then blurted, "The studio wants Miss Lily to come to the room with you. They want her to answer few questions" just three simple questions."

"What?" Frances's stomach dropped. She clenched her fists by her sides, her heart racing. "No," she said flatly, her voice firm, "Absolutely not.... That's out of the question. We had a deal"

The man stepped forward, trying to appear non-threatening but clearly uncomfortable. "I understand, but the studio insists. It's only three simple questions ma'am. What's her favorite food, how she likes the studio, things like that. It'll be quick."

Frances's temper flared. She could feel the heat rising in her chest. She stepped closer to the man, her voice cold but sharp. "You don't get to change things on me, not like this. I made it clear what the boundaries were. And they don't get to send a messenger with thus shit either"

The man's face tightened, but he persisted. "It's just a few questions. Nothing invasive, Miss Louise. It'll only take a moment. You can have a look" he passed her a clipboard

Frances felt a burst of anger, a flood of frustration. "Bastards," she muttered under her breath grabbing a clipboard from his hands. "You planned this from the very beginning, didn't you? Set me up to get her in front of these vultures."

She turned away for a moment, her breath quickening. The last thing she wanted was for Lily to be paraded in front of the press, her every word and movement analyzed. But the studio was relentless. She exhaled and looked down, reading all the questions. There were only few, but few more than what she wanted.

She knew she couldn't say no, not without making an even bigger mess of things. She had no choice but to go along with it.

With a deep, controlled breath, Frances turned back to the man. Her eyes were cold, but her voice was even. "Fine," she said, her tone clipped. "We'll do it. But this is the last time."

The man, relieved but trying to keep his composure, nodded quickly. "Of course. Thank you, Miss Louise. I'll make sure it's over quickly."

Frances stood still for a moment, staring at the man with a fierce, almost bitter gaze. She wanted to say more, to lash out at him and the studio, but she knew it wouldn't change anything.

With a tight jaw, she walked back into the changing room, her heart heavy with the knowledge that she had just lost another battle in this war.

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Frances pushed open the dressing room door, her face set in a controlled mask, but Yaz and Susan immediately knew something was wrong. The tension rolled off her in waves.

Susan, adjusting the sash on Lily's dress, looked up first. "What happened?"

Yaz, standing by the vanity mirror, narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Frances let out a slow breath, keeping her voice even for Lily's sake. "The studio changed the plan."

Susan's fingers stilled. "What do you mean, changed?"

Frances hesitated for half a second before saying it. "They want Lily to speak to the reporters."

Susan's hand flew to her mouth. Yaz straightened. "What?" Her voice was sharp, cutting through the room.

Lily, seated on the small dressing stool, looked between them, confusion flickering across her face. "What's going on?"

Frances barely had time to react before Yaz was suddenly in front of her, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward the door. Their eyes met, and Frances knew exactly what was coming. She didn't resist as Yaz pulled her into the hallway, the door closing behind them.

Inside, Lily turned to Susan, brows furrowing. "Where are they going?"

Susan crouched in front of her, smoothing down the soft peach fabric of Lily's dress. "Mummy and Yaz just need a moment to talk, sweetheart. Everything's alright." Her voice was calm, reassuring, but the tension in the air lingered.

The moment the door clicked shut, Yaz let go of Frances's hand and took a step back,

pacing once before turning on her. "Tell me you didn't agree to this load of bollocks."

Frances sighed, rubbing her temples. "Yaz..."

"No. No, don't 'Yaz' me right now." Yaz's voice was low but fierce. "They backed you into a corner, didn't they?"

Frances leaned against the wall, arms crossed tightly. "Yap...they did...They said it'll just be a few simple questions. Nothing difficult. Just.."

"Oh, right. Just a few simple questions," Yaz mocked. "Because they're such honest, trustworthy people." She scoffed, shaking her head. "Manipulative bastards, the lot of 'em."

Frances exhaled through her nose, her frustration bleeding through. "You think I don't know that?"

"I can't believe this...I knew it was too good to be true...I bloody knew it!."

"I can't get out of this and they fucking know it. I feel sick..."

Yaz stood for the moment thinking then stepped closer, her voice still sharp but lower now, controlled. "You have to prepare her, Frances. If you don't, she's going to freeze up, or worse."

Frances closed her eyes briefly before nodding, her voice low and tight. "I know... I'm losing my damn mind."

Yaz studied her face for a moment, the anger in her eyes shifting to something else. Concern. She exhaled heavily, running a hand through her hair before muttering, "God, I hate them."

Frances let out a humorless chuckle. "You and me both."

Yaz exhaled sharply, her hands planted on her hips. "Do you understand what they're doing? They wanna cash in on this, Frances. They don't give a toss about Lily, they'll use her if you don't stop it."

Frances didn't flinch. Instead, she lifted her chin, her voice cool and unwavering. "I know darling, I'm aware of that."

Yaz scoffed. "Then why the hell are you letting them?"

Frances stepped in closer, her hazel eyes locked onto Yaz's. "I'm not letting them do anything," she said, voice sharp. "The only way they're gonna use Lily is over my cold, dead body!"

Yaz narrowed her eyes, her frustration still burning hot. "These people are ruthless, Franny."

Frances crossed her arms, standing firm. "So am I." Her voice was cold, deliberate. "They want an interview? Fine. They'll get one... just not the one they were expecting."

Yaz blinked, caught off guard for half a second before shaking her head. "It better be a bloody good plan."

Frances didn't hesitate. "It is."

Yaz let out a slow breath, dragging a hand through her hair. "Alright. What's the plan?"

Frances gave her a knowing look. "Trust me."

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The room was small, intimate by design, with a handful of carefully selected journalists seated before her. A studio-appointed press agent stood at the side, ready to intervene if necessary, but Frances Louise didn't need him. She sat poised, legs crossed, back straight, the very image of composure. The cameras weren't rolling, but she knew her words would be printed across the country by morning.

She took a breath, measured and steady. "Good afternoon," she began, her voice carrying easily across the space. "This is not a conversation I ever expected to have in public but here we are. Someone decided that my private life is for taking so here I am to answer few questions and clear things out. My daughter, Lily, is the most precious part of my life, and my first priority has always been her well-being. The decision to keep her out of the spotlight was made solely for her benefit, and I do not regret it. But now that her existence has been brought into the public eye, I want to make one thing very clear, Lily is not a public figure, and she never will be."

A murmur passed through the gathered reporters as they scribbled notes. One of them, a sharp-featured man from *The Los Angeles Times*, cleared his throat. "Miss Louise, why did you choose to keep Lily a secret for so long?"

Frances didn't blink. "Because she is a child," she said evenly, "and she deserves the right to grow up without the weight of public scrutiny. My life has been played out in newspapers

and magazines for years, but she didn't ask for that. I wanted her to have the same privacy and security that any mother would wish for her child."

Another reporter, a woman from *Photoplay*, leaned forward. "Can you tell us a little about her? What is she like?"

For the first time, Frances's expression softened, just slightly. "She's a bright little girl with the kindest heart you'll ever find. She loves animals, stories, she loves to paint and make cakes, and she has a laugh that can light up a room."

The next question came faster. "There have been reports about her health. Is it true she has a medical condition?"

Frances met the journalist's gaze, calm but unyielding. "Lily was born prematurely, which led to some challenges, but she is a strong, resilient child. She requires some medical care, yes, but that is a private matter between her doctors and me. I will not discuss specifics."

A man from *Life Magazine* spoke next. "You refer to yourself as her mother. How does she refer to you?"

Frances's answer was immediate, quiet but firm. "She calls me Mummy. In her eyes, that is who I am."

A journalist from *The Hollywood Reporter* leaned forward. "Now that the truth is out, will you and Lily be appearing in public more often?"

Frances's expression didn't change, but there was a new steel in her voice. "No," she said. "I understand there is interest, but I will not allow my daughter to become an object of public fascination. My responsibility is to give her a normal, stable life, and that will not change."

There was a brief pause before another journalist, one from *The New York Times*, spoke up. "Is Lily's father or your brother involved in her life in any way?"

Frances's expression remained calm, her answer measured. "Lily has never been told anything that might cause confusion in a child's mind. In her world, she has her mummy, and she has her uncle, and that is enough. My focus has always been on what is best for her, and I see no reason to change that now."

"Can you tell us how Lily has adjusted to life at the studio today?" one of the reporters asked

Frances gave a small chuckle. "She's been absolutely fascinated by everything around her.

She loved seeing how things work behind the scenes and has been full of questions. But she's still a little shy around new people. She's had a big day, but I think she's enjoyed herself."

"Did you ever consider sharing this, or was hiding her always your plan?" another question came soon after

Frances's jaw tightened slightly, though she remained gracious. "It was never about secrecy for secrecy's sake. It was about what was right for Lily. I did what any mother would do, protect her child until the time felt appropriate, unfortunately this decision was taken from me."

The man from *The Los Angeles Times*, cleared his throat. "Would you say motherhood has changed you in any way?"

Frances hesitated briefly before nodding. "Completely. It shifts your entire world. You see everything through the lens of what is best for them. I've always been independent, but now, every decision I make is with Lily in mind."

"Will Lily be following in your footsteps in Hollywood someday?" one reporter asked

Frances let out a soft laugh. "She's only a little girl. Right now, her greatest ambition is climbing trees and sneaking extra sweets. Whatever she chooses to do in the future, I will support her. But I won't push her into this industry. She deserves to find her own path."

The press agent, sensing they had reached the limit of what Frances was willing to say, stepped in. "That will be all for today. Thank you. Lily will be joining us in the room. Please keep questions short.

The door at the back of the room opened, and a hush fell over the gathered reporters. A studio assistant stepped inside, gently leading a little girl by the hand.

She was small, with soft, dark blonde curls that framed her face and wide, curious eyes that flickered around the unfamiliar room before finding the one person she was looking for. She wore a peach-colored dress, the fabric catching the light, with a satin sash tied neatly in a bow at the back, a picture-perfect Hollywood look.

A collective gasp went through the room. The reporters couldn't help but admire her, she was the very image of innocence and charm.

But Lily wasn't interested in them.

The moment she saw Frances, her little feet tapped quickly against the floor, carrying her straight to her mother. Without hesitation, she ran and climbed into Frances's lap, curling up against her chest as though nothing else in the world mattered.

Frances's hand immediately went to Lily's back, steady and reassuring. She smiled, her voice soft but clear. "She's a little shy," she explained to the reporters, her fingers lightly brushing over Lily's hair. She was still a little nervous, this was a world Lily had never been a part of. She hoped her daughter wouldn't feel overwhelmed.

"You alright darling?" Frances asked softly and Lily nodded

The reporters, sensing the vulnerability of the moment, softened their tone. A woman from *Photoplay* leaned forward. "Hello, Lily. My name is Sarah. I heard your mummy showed you the studio today...How do you like it?"

Lily's head tilted slightly, her fingers gripping the fabric of her mother's dress. She hesitated, her small lips parted but no words coming out. Frances could feel the tension in her daughter's tiny body.

With a gentle nudge, Frances whispered, "It's okay, sweetheart. You can answer."

Lily took a deep breath, her gaze flicking from Frances to the reporter. "It's big," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I saw a real train and a horse..."

The room filled with soft, approving laughter.

Another journalist, a man from *The Hollywood Reporter*, leaned forward. "Do you have a favorite food?"

Lily hesitated again, glancing up at Frances, her brows furrowing.

Frances smiled reassuringly

Lily's lips parted again, and this time she answered less shy, "Burger and fries."

The room chuckled, a few reporters nodding in delight at her straightforward answer.

Next, a reporter asked, "What's your favorite film?"

Lily looked at the reporter and then at Frances. "*Wizard of Oz*," she said, her voice growing a little more confident. "I got Glinda dress for Christmas" she added

Frances smiled relieved seeing Lily more relaxed.

There were murmurs of approval around the room, everyone appreciating the sweet simplicity of her answer.

A reporter at the front leaned in, eager for just one more question. "Lily, what..."

But before he could finish, the studio press agent stepped in, his voice firm but polite. "That will be all. Thank you."

The room quieted, the reporters realizing that the interview had come to an end.

Frances, her hand still resting protectively on Lily's back, stood slowly, lifting her daughter into her arms. She nodded to the press before turning, walking toward the exit with her daughter held securely against her chest.

She did not look back.

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The soft hum of the studio lights and the distant bustle of the set outside seemed worlds away in the calm of Frances's dressing room. The three women had finally found a quiet moment to relax, and it felt like a rare treasure amidst the chaos of the day. Lily sat in the corner, her tiny feet swinging off the edge of the cushioned chair as she quietly colored in a small book Susan had brought for her.

Frances leaned in her chair, tucking a loose strand of hair behind Lily's ear. "You were so brave today, sweetheart," she said, her voice full of pride.

Susan nodded, beaming. "You really were hun. You handled all those reporters like a pro."

Lily's small cheeks flushed a light pink as she shyly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I didn't like all the people," she admitted, her voice soft but steady.

Yaz chuckled, her eyes warm with affection. "You were more than good, love. You were brilliant."

Susan gave a light laugh, her eyes glinting with affection. "So, Frances, when's the photo shoot? I thought they were meant to get all of that done today?"

Frances sighed, her smile faltering just slightly. "In about half an hour. After that, we're done for the day," she replied, though there was a trace of worry in her voice. She glanced at Lily, concerned that the long day might be wearing on her.

"I think she's had enough for today," Susan remarked thoughtfully. "As soon as we get home, I'll give her some food and put her down for her nap. She's been so good."

Yaz raised an eyebrow playfully. "If she doesn't fall asleep in the car on the way back, that is," she teased with a grin.

Frances smiled, grateful for the warmth of their support. "She's been through a lot today. I just want her to feel safe and calm when she gets home."

Susan nodded in agreement. "It'll be nice for all of us to wind down. You've done more than enough today."

Just as the women shared a quiet, comfortable moment together, the door to Frances's dressing room burst open so violently that it rattled on its hinges.

Lily, startled, looked up from her drawing, her crayon hovering mid-air. Her blue eyes, wide with confusion, locked onto the intruder, a tall man in a sharp suit, his face flushed red with anger. His breath came heavy, like he had stormed through the corridors to get here.

But as his gaze landed on Lily, something in his expression faltered. He hesitated, his mouth slightly open.

Frances was on her feet in an instant.

Before he could say a word, she grabbed him by the sleeve and yanked him into the hallway, slamming the door behind them.

She barely gave him a second to catch his breath. "What the hell was that?" she snapped, eyes blazing.

The man straightened his jacket, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to regain composure. "Sorry about that... I didn't know..."

"No, you obviously didn't." Her voice cut like glass.

He exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Look, we need to talk." His voice dropped, his frustration simmering beneath the surface. "What the hell is going on, Frances? *Mummy?*"

he hissed, barely controlling his anger. "You just went and told the whole world you're her mother, not her aunt. That wasn't part of the deal!"

Frances took a slow, deliberate step forward, her tone colder than ice. "Neither was shoving my sick kid in front of twenty reporters."

"That has nothing to do with it, Louise..."

"Oh, yes, it does,"

He clenched his jaw. "We had a deal."

Frances let out a sharp laugh, shaking her head. "Oh yes, we did. And you cornered me into it. Left me no choice but to agree." She took another step closer, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "But if you wanna play dirty, I *can* play dirty, too. I'll make myself the victim, the poor, heartbroken mother just trying to protect her sick child from a cold, ruthless studio."

His confidence wavered, but he scoffed, trying to brush it off. "Oh, come on, Frances..."

She didn't let him finish. "You really think the public won't eat it up?" she pressed, her voice a quiet storm. "Every mother in the country will be on my side. You really wanna go up against that?"

He took a step back, suddenly aware of how much power she still had. "Frances, don't..."

"No. You listen to me," she cut him off, her eyes blazing. "I'm telling you right now...you will not use my kid. Do you hear me? I won't let you."

His bravado crumbled as he realized how serious she was. He rubbed his hand over his face, his voice lowering. "There's no reason to make this more complicated than it has to be."

Frances's shoulders tensed, but she didn't back down. "Yeah, that's right. So how about we change the focus from my daughter to the damn film premiere?" A slow, knowing smile tugged at her lips. "I just gave you all a free marketing campaign, didn't I?"

The man's eyes flicked between her and the hallway, the weight of the situation sinking in. He paused, his anger momentarily forgotten as he considered the bigger picture.

Finally, he exhaled sharply, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Alright," he muttered, throwing

his hands up. "We won't push it any further."

Frances gave him a cool, satisfied smile. "Damn right you won't.... Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a very confused and scared daughter to calm down. And a photoshoot in less than fifteen minutes." She turned toward the dressing room door "And you can tell the rest of your team that I'm done being anyone's pawn."

She reached for the door handle.

"Frances!" His voice, no longer sharp, stopped her.

Her fingers stilled.

He hesitated, then sighed. "Look... I'm sorry for scaring your kid."

She inhaled slowly, then turned around, her posture less rigid. "Fine," she muttered. "Apology accepted." Her voice softened a fraction. "Look, I'll play by the rules... just don't push me like this again or you're gonna see a whole other side of me that you really won't like.... That's all I'm asking."

He nodded once, defeated. "Fair enough."

Without another word, she turned and walked back into the dressing room, leaving him standing in the hallway,

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The photographer adjusted the lighting, testing his lens before turning to Frances and Lily with a warm smile. "Alright, ladies, just like we talked about. Nothing too posed, nothing forced. Just relax and let the moments happen. Keep it natural, like it's just another day at home."

Frances gave him a knowing nod, then glanced at Lily, who was already fidgeting with the makeup brushes on the vanity, her small fingers exploring the different textures. Frances knew exactly what was needed from this shoot, something real. Something that didn't look staged.

She sat down in front of the vanity, lifting a powder brush as if she were about to begin her usual routine. Through the mirror, she caught Lily's curious gaze and smiled.

“Hey, peanut, what did you draw today?” she asked lightly, her voice casual and warm.

Lily, still clutching a crayon, looked up with wide eyes. “It’s a train... and a horse!” she announced proudly, lifting her drawing for Frances to see.

The photographer seized the moment, capturing the innocent pride on Lily’s face and the soft admiration in Frances’s expression.

Frances took the drawing, examining it with a smile. “It looks really good, sweetheart... Did you have a nice time today?”

Lily grinned as Frances brushed a stray curl from her face. “Yes.”

“So what did you like the most?”

“Your film.”

Frances chuckled. “I thought you might like that.”

“It was so funny... and it looked like a huge TV.”

“It’s called a screen, darling,” Frances corrected gently. “And what else? Tell me...”

The photographer moved around them, snapping a few more shots as their conversation unfolded.

The soft click of the camera drew Lily’s attention, and she turned toward the photographer, her expression inquisitive. He caught the moment perfectly, her big, curious eyes, the tilt of her head, the way she held the crayon like it was the most important thing in the world.

Frances returned her focus to the mirror, dusting a light layer of powder onto her cheeks, though it was clear her real attention was on Lily. She was guiding the moment subtly, letting it unfold naturally rather than directing it.

The photographer, watching through his lens, admired how seamlessly she managed it, this wasn’t just a performance for the camera. This was simply Frances being a mother.

Lily picked up a small compact of blusher, her fingers tracing the lid before looking up. “Can I have some?”

Frances smiled. “Sure... but just a little bit, darling.” She took the brush and gently dabbed a

hint of pink onto Lily's cheeks.

Lily turned to the mirror, inspecting herself critically. "Not sure... It's very pink."

Frances laughed, pressing a dramatic kiss to Lily's cheek before blowing softly against her skin. Lily shrieked with laughter, wiggling in delight.

Click.

The photographer grinned behind his camera, knowing he had just captured something special.

As Lily recovered from her giggles, Frances leaned her elbow on the vanity, watching her daughter with a soft expression. The moment felt almost too perfect to interrupt, but the photographer knew he needed just one last shot.

He lowered his camera slightly. "Frances, do you think you could pull her into your lap for one more?"

Frances met his gaze in the mirror, her lips curving. "Lily, sweetheart, come here."

Lily climbed onto her mother's lap without hesitation, settling comfortably as Frances wrapped her arms around her. She pressed a kiss into Lily's hair, her chin resting gently atop her daughter's head.

The photographer raised his camera once more. Just as he clicked the shutter, Lily nestled closer, her tiny fingers playing with the fabric of Frances's robe.

Click.

He exhaled, lowering the camera. "That's it," he said, smiling. "That's the one."

....

The sun hung low in the sky, casting golden light over the studio parking lot. The day had been long but filled with moments Frances would carry with her—small glimpses of happiness, of connection. And now, it was time to say goodbye.

Susan stood by the car, her hands resting lightly on Lily's shoulders. Frances stepped forward, wrapping her arms around her old friend in a firm, grateful embrace.

“Thank you, Susan,” she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “For everything. For bringing her. For always being there.”

Susan gave her a reassuring squeeze before pulling back, her eyes warm. “You don’t have to thank me, sweetheart. You know I’d do anything for you both.”

Frances smiled, but it faltered slightly as she turned to Lily. The little girl tilted her head up, watching her mother with those beautiful blue eyes.

Frances knelt, smoothing Lily’s coat gently. “Did you have a nice day, sweetheart?”

Lily nodded eagerly. “Yes! I saw your movie, and I drew, and I had my picture taken.” She wrinkled her nose. “A lot.”

Frances chuckled. “That’s show business for you.” She brushed a curl from Lily’s cheek, her hand lingering for a moment. “I want you to know something, my darling. I’m so, so proud of you.”

Lily blinked up at her. “Why?”

Frances felt a lump rise in her throat, but she kept her voice steady. “Because you were so brave today. You were patient, you listened, and you were yourself, just like I hoped you would be.”

Lily grinned, wrapping her arms around Frances’s neck. “I love you, Mummy.”

Frances squeezed her tightly, inhaling the soft, familiar scent of her little girl. She wished she could stay like this forever, holding Lily close, but she couldn’t. Not yet.

Reluctantly, she pulled back and kissed Lily’s forehead. “I love you too, my darling. So much.”

Susan gently took Lily’s hand. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you in the car.”

Frances watched as they climbed in, she forced herself to smile and wave back, even as her chest ached.

The car door shut. The engine rumbled to life. And then, just like that, they were pulling away.

Frances stood rooted to the pavement, watching as the car disappeared down the road.

The weight of loneliness settled over her, heavy and familiar.

For a long moment, she remained there, alone in the quiet of the parking lot. The evening breeze tugged at the hem of her coat, but she didn't move. She wished more than anything that she could take Lily home with her. That they didn't have to be apart.

But wishing wouldn't change anything.

With a sigh, Frances straightened her shoulders, turned, and walked back into the building.

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