

Charlotte typically didn't experience déjà vu, but she was living through the most extreme example of it currently, as she stared up at the grand Spencer family home on New Year's Eve.

Back then, she'd been rattled and anxious when approaching Sutton's childhood home because she'd been reckoning with the depth of her feelings. Terrified of those feelings, of what they meant, of how undeniable they were, of what they might do to her life or her career.

Right now, over a decade later, she was rattled and anxious for entirely different reasons.

Mostly, they boiled down to the fact that Charlotte was *confused*.

And Charlotte never enjoyed being confused – ever – but certainly not in the way she'd been confused in the last week. Since Christmas.

The information Charlotte had right now was this:

She'd spent an incredible Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with Sutton. They'd had mind-blowing sex, she'd shared so much of her vulnerable thoughts and feelings about her childhood and her family, and Sutton had given her a gift that had rendered her speechless.

Sutton had cried when receiving Charlotte's own gift. Real tears, streaming from her beautiful blue eyes.

She'd called Charlotte *perfect*.

Charlotte hadn't known just how much it would mean to hear that. Not in any way related to sex, where she'd been praised by Sutton and other women many times. Not in any way related to her work, where she'd been praised by too many to count.

Sutton had called Charlotte perfect, because of romance. Because of the gift she'd given her. Because of the vulnerability she'd shared with Sutton when giving her a gift... and Charlotte *had* felt vulnerable when she'd given it to Sutton.

She hadn't realized until the moment she'd handed Sutton the necklace *everything* it said.

That Charlotte had held onto Sutton for thirteen years. That while Sutton had moved on and found a different life with a different woman – as she deserved to – Charlotte never had. That there was a part of her that, clearly, hoped they would find one another.

Sutton had trusted Charlotte with her manuscript, something so personal and held so close to herself, that no one else had ever read it. Not even her mother, not even Regan.

Charlotte felt like... like they'd amplified their connection, that morning. She really did. she *felt* it. She'd left Sutton's house that day, heading to New York, but feeling closer to Sutton than she ever had before.

Like she – they – were on the verge of something. Something Charlotte might not even be able to name, but she could feel it.

Then, though, she'd experienced the last five days.

Sutton hadn't been her typical self since Christmas.

Most definitely not herself as of the last couple of months, ever since they'd formed this friendship-turned-more.

*Concerningly* not her typical self.

And Charlotte, alarmingly, couldn't quite nail down what was different.

It wasn't as though Sutton had gone radio silent on her, which would have been more than concerning.

At first, Charlotte hadn't thought much of it. After she'd left Sutton's, she'd gone home and finished packing her things, before driving to New York. Sutton had been planning on spending the afternoon and evening with Regan and Emma. They'd exchanged some texts – fine.

The day after Christmas, Sutton had picked up Lucy from Layla's, and had then driven the two of them up to Boston to see her family, so they'd hardly talked.

Also fine – it had been a long and busy day.

Charlotte busied herself the day after that, settling in to do *nothing* but read Sutton's manuscript; she both understood how sacred it was to Sutton to share it with her and she wanted to dive into it, anyway. She'd figured, as the first official day back with her family for the holidays, that Sutton would be very busy.

But when she'd called Sutton later that night to check in, to catch up, to talk about her book – which Charlotte truly had loved – Sutton had answered, but kept things... short.

That had been when Charlotte truly had started to get this gnawing feeling in her stomach that wouldn't leave her alone in the couple of days since.

Sutton had been perfectly friendly. She'd asked how Charlotte had been, what she'd been up to. She told Charlotte a little about her holiday with her family.

But she'd been – off. She hadn't delved into anecdotes or settled into a real conversation. She hadn't even wanted to dive into the literal notes Charlotte had taken from her book!

Something was very, very... off.

Given that Charlotte had been in New York to meet with some constituents and have a belated holiday brunch with Caleb and Dean, and Sutton had been in Boston, though, there was no chance for Charlotte to be able to *see* Sutton and discern what in the world had happened.

Until tonight.

She'd been at brunch with Caleb and Dean yesterday. Both of them had been gloriously tan and relaxed from their holiday trip to Bali, which they'd just returned from the day before. Caleb had been teasing her about choosing to stay in the states and work, rather than join them, as she'd been invited.

And she'd just started to tell them about what was worrying her, regarding Sutton, when her phone had pinged, alerting her to an email.

“*That’s* your problem, right there,” Caleb had alleged, waving his hand at her as she’d checked her work phone. “I’ll be you anything. Your problems with Sutton are right there.”

Charlotte nailed him with a derisive look, as she held her phone up before she’d checked it. “Oh? And how do you figure, wise-one?”

Her brother sipped at his mimosa as he shook his head. “You have a very, very rare day off. You haven’t seen Dean and I in-person in months. We’re having a lovely holiday brunch. And... you’re checking your work emails!” He shot Dean a look, before gesturing at Charlotte.

Dean had shaken his head. “I’m not going to get into this. I don’t know how many times I have to say it, but I will say it again: I recuse myself from your sibling-work conversations.”

“... because, and I will say it if I have to, your own husband is a workaholic as well,” Charlotte reminded Caleb.

“*No one* is as bad of a workaholic as you are,” he shot back with a snort. “If you’re having a problem with Sutton, it’s that. I’ll bet you *anything*. It was what happened between you two before, hmm?”

Charlotte glared at him, even as she detested the feeling that started creeping into her stomach. “Yes. But only because I wasn’t willing to be in an open relationship before. It had nothing to do with my actual *work*.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel badly,” Caleb’s tone gentled, his brown eyes boring into her own. “You’re doing something you love, that you’re passionate about. I just...” He trailed off, clearing his throat. “Maybe you’re right. Like I said, it’s been forever since we’ve caught up. Tell us what we’ve missed.”

Charlotte couldn’t help it, though. She’d glanced down at her phone – deliberately intending to not answer the email at brunch – and had been glad she hadn’t sipped her own mimosa when she saw that the sender was *Katherine Spencer*, as she likely would have caused a spit-take.

“What in the...” She’d heard her own bafflement – then brief concern... before she reasoned that if something happened to Sutton or Lucy, Katherine likely wouldn’t reach out to her at all. *That* caused its own potential spiral she’d had to steel herself against.

Despite her resolution from only moments ago to *not* open the email at brunch, she couldn’t help herself.

Or help the surprised gasp she let out.

“What?” Caleb had demanded. Both he and Dean leaned forward from where they sat across the table.

The message was short and simple –

*Charlotte –*

*I’d like to reach out and extend the invitation to our New Year’s Eve party tomorrow.*

*I realized that it's quite late notice, but I was reviewing our guest-list and realized you weren't on it.*

*I hope to see you tomorrow, though I certainly understand if we don't.*

*Happy holidays,*

*Katherine*

In the day since she'd received the email, she'd swiftly rejected Caleb's excited offer to join her, gone home to deliberate her wardrobe, packed a bag, made a hotel reservation in Boston, and had driven in this morning.

The invitation, unfortunately, shed no light on whatever was going on in Sutton's mind.

Because Charlotte was certain that Sutton hadn't been responsible for inviting her, given that if she'd wanted Charlotte here or believed Charlotte would be able to come – she was trying not to obsess over this aspect – Sutton would have arranged for her to have been invited ahead of this or invited her, herself.

She definitely hadn't been part of the planned guest list at all – which was fine, Charlotte didn't take that personally. But she knew from years ago, that Katherine and Jack didn't send email invitations, but lovely, personalized stationery, four to six weeks in advance. Even though it had been over a decade since she'd received one, she knew that hadn't changed.

Sutton hadn't called her last night, either, so Charlotte felt that this was the perfect opportunity to see exactly what was going on with Sutton.

She needed to.

Charlotte had never felt like this, before. It was anxiety and anticipation and uncertainty and confusion and she didn't want that feeling at all, let alone with Sutton.

She wanted that feeling from Christmas, back.

With that thought, she nodded to herself, and stepped up to the immaculately, beautifully decorated porch and rang the doorbell.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she dropped her hand to her side, only waiting for seconds before the door opened.

And she was greeted by Katherine, herself.

Truly, déjà vu.

Charlotte bit back the bit of nerves that fluttered in her stomach under the observant look that was instantly trained on her.

“Charlotte,” Katherine greeted a second later, before she nodded, tilting her head. “You came.”

“I was invited,” she answered some sort of unspoken, arching an eyebrow, even as she smiled as well. Truthfully, she felt more off-kilter at *this* New Year's Eve party than she'd had years ago.

Which was saying a lot.

“So you were. Apologies, for such a last-minute invite, and the manner in which I contacted you,” Katherine’s voice seemed very... measured, but Charlotte wasn’t really certain what she was looking for. “I was a bit surprised when you RSVP’d so shortly; I’d expected – and would have understood – if you’d had other arrangements.”

She stepped back, gesturing for Charlotte to enter.

As she did, she took a quick glimpse around – noting the festive but tasteful décor, the updates that had been made to the home from the last time she’d seen it, and that even though it was quite a large manor, it still very much felt like a *home* – before she landed back on Katherine.

“I did. I cancelled them,” she answered, honestly.

Maybe in the past, she would have toed a line with Katherine. Not wanting to give away quite how much she was invested in Sutton or wanting to even hint that she was nervous. To play this interaction off as professional and amiable, but not overly personal.

Katherine lifted her eyebrows. “Ah. Well. Nothing too important, I hope. Can I take your jacket?”

Charlotte diligently unzipped it, handing the jacket to her. “For the last couple of years, I’ve attended Governor Labelle’s get-together,” she informed Katherine.

Who hummed as she nodded slowly, scrutinizing Charlotte once again.

Charlotte figured Katherine would understand exactly what she was telling her.

That Charlotte not only did have standing New Year’s plans, but they were with politicians Charlotte worked with frequently and handfuls of her own constituents, with whom she did her best to maintain a good relationship with.

But coming here, to see Sutton, to try to form a better relationship with Sutton’s family, even with a last-minute invitation, was worth more than that to her.

She took in a deep breath, pulling together her courage, as Katherine took to hanging Charlotte’s jacket in the nearby closet.

“I’ll be honest,” she pushed the words out, straightening her spine. She could do this; she could talk to *anyone*, even if that person was Katherine Spencer.

She’d grown up with Elizabeth fucking Thompson as a grandmother – there was no one and nothing more intimidating than that.

She’d made her own New Year’s resolution on the drive to Boston: fear or not, she wasn’t going to leave this party without getting to the bottom of whatever was between herself and Sutton. And she was going to be as honest as she needed to be to do so. Even to people who weren’t Sutton herself.

A relationship with Sutton would also mean having as good a relationship as possible with Sutton’s parents, even if it wouldn’t be smooth sailing. Charlotte wasn’t afraid of hard work.

“I’m surprised that you invited me, tonight. And I’m more than a little curious as to why,” she asserted.

Katherine turned to face her as she slowly pushed the coat closet closed, clearly a little surprised by Charlotte's words.

Admittedly, Charlotte was glad she wasn't the only person who wasn't entirely on even footing.

"I'd like to think you know me well enough to know that you are engaged in a personal relationship with my daughter. And that's important to me," Katherine answered, her tone measured.

"Yes. But I don't have to know you well enough to know that six weeks ago, you weren't very pleased about my relationship status with Sutton," she challenged. "You were very direct about it."

She didn't think she would ever – decades from now – forget how sharply and swiftly Katherine had told Charlotte that she'd shattered Sutton's heart. How those words and what they *meant* made her feel.

"And, clearly, you didn't invite me when you invited the majority of who was invited tonight. Therefore, I have to presume that *something* else is going on."

Charlotte held her chin high and searched Katherine's gaze with her own, her heart pounding, as she wondered if she'd get any clue as to what was happening with Sutton.

Katherine, for her part, pursed her lips and nodded as she studied Charlotte. "Ah. Truthfully, Sutton is less of the reason I invited you here, tonight. Mostly, it was because of Lucy."

There was a warm note that crept into Katherine's voice that Charlotte could hear even as she tried to figure out what Lucy had to do with her getting invited tonight.

"I'm afraid I'm not quite following," she admitted.

"My granddaughter has talked about you, quite a bit, in the last few days. I hear you were responsible for making sure she received her favorite Christmas present. That she made you a clay pot in school. She says you've been playing checkers with her..." Katherine trailed off, holding Charlotte's gaze with her own. "My personal feelings aside, I don't see Sutton or Lucy, in person, as much as I very much wish I could. But I can get to know the people in their lives and try to take comfort that they are surrounded by people with their best interests at heart. Not inviting you, in the first place, was a part of a caution I take with you, due to the past, which felt like something I had to reconsider."

There was a mixture of both contrition and matter-of-factness in her answer that Charlotte could appreciate.

"I do," the words worked themselves out of her. She cleared her throat when Katherine sent her a searching look, explaining, "Have their best interests at heart. I do."

She couldn't mean those words *more*. And she wanted, very badly, for Katherine to see that.

Especially right now, while she was so unsure of whatever was going on.

"You said, the last time that we saw one another, that you wanted me to really think about my actions. And I have," she asserted.

No, she didn't have to justify herself to Katherine Spencer. But, damn, if she didn't want her to know that Charlotte was *in this*. That she wasn't playing with fire, about to burn both of them, again.

And she found that it felt good to say the words aloud and *mean* them, so ardently.

She also found that it felt good to surprise Katherine. To defy the expectation she'd set for Charlotte, given what had happened in the past.

She wondered what would come of the considering look –

Before both of their attentions were captured by Sutton and Lucy's voices.

"You *promise* that I can stay up til midnight?" Lucy asked, an insistence that Charlotte was now familiar with in her tone. For a six-year-old, Lucy was very certain of her wants.

Then again, Charlotte didn't spend much time with children; maybe Lucy wasn't as above-average as Charlotte believed.

Yet, she did believe it.

"I do promise," Sutton confirmed, a lightness, a warmth in her voice, as both of their feet appeared on the stairs they were descending into the foyer. "I promised that last year, too, honey."

"I *know*," Lucy spent at least three syllables on that single word, and even though Charlotte couldn't yet see their faces as they slowly walked down, she just knew the expression on Lucy's sweet little face. Begrudging yet stubborn. "But I didn't make it!"

"I will wake you up if you don't make it, how about that?" Sutton proposed.

"Deal!" Lucy exclaimed brightly, and her legs – fully in view of Charlotte, now – jumped from the step she was in in excitement. "But I'm gonna *make it*."

Sutton laughed. "Okay, hon. But no jumping on the stairs."

They fully came into view then, their hands locked together – well, Lucy's clutching onto Sutton's with both of her own – as Sutton swung their hands gently between them, taking their time making it down.

Her breath caught in her throat, an inescapable reaction, as she took Sutton in.

Wearing a long-sleeved, form-fitting black dress that made the fiery red of her hair truly pop, with her hair swept up on one side... *god*. Charlotte honestly wasn't sure if she was staring because Sutton looked so exceptionally amazing – which, she did – or if it was because she hadn't seen her in what felt like forever.

But was, in actuality, just under a week.

Yes. She was truly a goner.

"Mom?" Sutton called out as they hit the bottom stair, and only then did Charlotte realize that she and Katherine were somewhat hidden behind the banister in the foyer. "I thought I heard the bell ring and wanted to see if you had anything you needed me to help with?"

Katherine stared at her for a beat, before clearing her throat and stepping out from the coat closet under the staircase. “I’m just over here, sweet.”

Lucy dropped Sutton’s hand and used it to wrap around the large, polished round mahogany banister and spin herself fully into the foyer, adorably spinning out the skirt of the bouncy, sparkling green dress that Charlotte inherently knew Lucy had picked out herself. “Grandm—” As soon as she saw them, though, her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped into a wide-open smile. “Charlotte?!”

The immediate spark of excitement in those baby blue eyes warmed a part of Charlotte’s heart she’d never even been aware of having, and she found herself melting right back into a smile. “Hi, Luce.”

She prepared herself for the immediate hug she received only seconds later, but even as she reciprocated Lucy’s embrace, she kept her eyes trained on Sutton as she, too, stepped around the banister and came to stare at Charlotte.

Unlike her daughter, Sutton’s blue eyes did not immediately warm into a bright smile, and Charlotte’s stomach *sank*.

She didn’t quite know exactly what she would call the look in Sutton’s eyes, but she knew it wasn’t what she wished she’d seen.

It wasn’t cold, it wasn’t anger, it wasn’t even *unhappiness*. It was just – off.

And it was very clearly surprised. “Charlotte?” Sutton breathed her name out and Charlotte couldn’t for the life of her figure out what it meant. Sutton then flicked her gaze to her mother, throwing her an unmistakably questioning stare, before slowly back to Charlotte, herself. “What are you doing here?”

“I was invited,” she echoed exactly what she’d said to Katherine minutes before, but felt nervous for an entirely different reason, now.

“Uh... huh.” Sutton blinked at her, holding her gaze for several, long moments.

Before Lucy broke in – blissfully unaware of any unspoken glances in the adults around her – as she pulled back from the hug around her waist. “I never saw you at my grandparents’ house before!”

Charlotte’s heart *pounded* and her thoughts whirled in confusion and her nerves jangled together, but she dragged her focus from Sutton and down to the mini-Sutton in front of her, demanding immediate attention. “No, it’s been quite a while since I’ve been here. Since before you were born.”

In a whole other world, it almost felt like.

“I gotta show you around!” Lucy insisted, reaching for Charlotte’s hand. “My mommy is gonna help grandma set up party stuff, and I was gonna go and see my cousins, but now I can play with you!”

Charlotte smiled – and despite everything inside of her, it wasn’t difficult. Which was so strange, but it was... it was so wonderfully sweet and special, to be on the receiving end of



this unfettered and uncomplicated attention and adoration. “I should maybe help your mother—”

“No,” Sutton broke in, shaking her head. Charlotte, Lucy, and Katherine all turned to look at her, and she swallowed before folding her arms over her stomach and smiling. Sweet and beautiful but still just not quite right, as she nodded to where Charlotte stood with Lucy. “I have a few things to help take care of, before everything really starts. You should enjoy a tour with Lucy. She’d love to give it to you.”

Lucy nodded vehemently in agreement.

Katherine, now, said nothing, only observing the scene in front of her, Charlotte noted.

And what was she to say, in the face of the three Spencer women in front of her, other than... “All right. You lead the way.”

Lucy giddily grinned, before wrapping both of her smaller hands around Charlotte’s – just like how she’d held Sutton’s as they’d walked down the stairs – tugging her down the foyer.

She tossed Sutton one final look over her shoulder, finding Sutton staring after her, biting down into her perfect, soft bottom lip.

For now, though, Sutton – and her answers – would have to wait.

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The first and only time Charlotte had ever attended a Spencer family New Year’s Eve party, she’d spent the first part of the night with Sutton, working as a political dream team. The second half of the night, she’d spent working the room on her own, while trying *not* to stare too obviously at Sutton having fun with her friends.

This time around, she spent nearly the entire evening with Lucy.

The tour of the Spencer home, it turned out, was over two hours long and counting.

Admittedly, she was riveted.

Lucy put a particular emphasis on several rooms Charlotte wasn’t as fascinated by – such as the gigantic playroom. Which was filled with toys and trinkets and truly was a child’s wonderland. “This wasn’t here when my mommy grew up,” Lucy had explained, fiddling with a toy as they wandered through, “This was the second living room, but since they have me and all my cousins now, they made this for all of us to play in!”

That very much fit the narrative of Katherine and Jack Spencer that Charlotte had in her head.

She knew from her talks with Sutton in the last several months, that all of Sutton’s brothers had children – Oliver and his wife, Jane, had four, Lucas and his partner had two, and Ethan was a single father of two – and that they all lived locally, so she was certain this toy room saw a lot of action. Sutton had sighed, wistfully, when she’d told Charlotte. “I don’t regret

Lucy in any way, therefore I *can't* regret the circumstances in having her, like being in D.C.... but I do wish she could be closer to her cousins more often.”

Lucy had also showed her the upstairs, opening *every* door they came across, whether it be a bedroom, bathroom, or linen closet.

Charlotte was interested, though, when Lucy had thrown open the door at the end of the long hallway, explaining, “This is my mommy’s room! All my uncle’s rooms when they were grown up are guest rooms, now, but they never redesigned my mom’s or Auntie Alex’s rooms, because they don’t live around here, so they keep their rooms for when we’re here. I sleep in the room that used to be my Uncle Ethan’s!”

She didn’t really get a good look, though, before they’d continued on their journey.

Lucy had then brought her down to the main floor again, to the rooms filled with the party-goers. Many were people Charlotte recognized, several were colleagues in some way.

They’d ran into Oliver, Sutton’s oldest brother, nearly immediately.

Who grinned widely – it was a charming smile, that apparently all of the Spencer family shared – as he dipped down and tugged Lucy up off her feet in a swinging lift, that easily settled onto his hip. He tickled her with his free hand, making her kick her feet out as she laughed loudly and wiggled against him.

“This is my Uncle Oliver!” Lucy shouted through her giggles. “He wasn’t at Thanksgiving at my house, so you didn’t meet him yet.”

Oliver slowed his tickle attack down, as he kept the easy smile on his face, but a far more thoughtful look swept over his face as he eyed Charlotte.

“Oliver Spencer,” he offered his hand. “Though, thanks to this perfect hostess, I suppose you now know that.”

“Charlotte Thompson,” she offered back, shaking his hand.

“My friend,” Lucy asserted Charlotte’s relation, wiggling enough against him that Oliver took the hint and set her back down on her feet.

“Nice to finally meet you, as both a Senator and Lucy’s friend,” Oliver acknowledged, as he dropped his hand back to his side.

“Likewise. I’ve heard a lot about you.” And Charlotte wasn’t simply blowing smoke; Sutton told her a lot about her family, both now and in the past. While Sutton was close to all of her siblings in different ways, she felt closest to Oliver in many ways.

And she could see by the look in Oliver’s eyes as he studied her, that he was very well aware of her relationship – both past and present – with his sister. “Same here.”

His speculative tone, frustratingly, gave nothing away. Gave Charlotte no indication of whatever was going on with Sutton.

Lucy retook her hand, then, tugging, “Come on, I wanna show you the Christmas tree. Not the one for show, for the party, the *real* one, in the family den.”

Charlotte nodded, letting herself be pulled along. “It seems the time to get off the tour bus is over.”

“With this guide, you won’t miss a single sight to behold of Spencer history,” he shot back as Lucy started tugging Charlotte through the people, unashamedly pushing through the crowd. “I hope to chat more, later,” he called out, giving her a gentle smile.

Which – was good, right? If he was smiling at her, it couldn’t mean that she’d done something *wrong*... right? If she’d somehow hurt Sutton or disrespected her – which Charlotte couldn’t imagine happening from anything she’d said or done lately – then her older, protective brother wouldn’t be smiling at her.

They found their way through the crowd and down a hall, coming to a stop outside of large, oak double doors, that were closed.

“The guests aren’t supposed to come in here,” Lucy explained as she let go of Charlotte’s hand and reached up to push one of the doors open. “It’s a *family* room.”

The den in question was large and spacious, but it definitely felt like a family room.

There was a large, stone fireplace against the far wall, with two oversized, soft-looking leather chesterfield couches. There were hand-knit stockings hanging not only above the fireplace, but along the windowsills, as well. Off to the side, next to the bay window, was the large Christmas tree, with colorful lights and homemade ornaments.

Yes. Charlotte breathed in deeply, finding herself comfortable in this room. It *felt* like Sutton, in here.

Maybe it was a different place, in a different house, in a different state, but this ambiance was the same, exact setting Sutton managed to recapture in her own home. It gave Charlotte the same feeling she’d gotten in Sutton’s home last week.

Lucy skipped over to gesture at all of the stockings. “My grandma knitted my mommy and Aunt Alex and all my uncles stockings when they were born. And then she made one for all the grandkids and my other aunts and uncles when everyone got married!” She stopped and pointed at a maroon one that Charlotte noticed was embroidered at the top with Lucy’s name. “This one is mine.” She then pointed at the light blue one next to it, “And that’s my mommy’s.”

“They’re beautiful,” she assured Lucy, revelling in the bright smile she received in return. And she *did* feel they were beautiful, as she traced her fingers over the soft wool that made Sutton’s stocking.

There was an ache she felt, then, right around her heart. Something tender and soft and loving and full and wanting, all in one, and she couldn’t quite put her finger on precisely what it was.

“Luce, honey? I think Charlotte’s received enough of a tour at this point,” Sutton said from behind them, surprising Charlotte and Lucy both.

She turned, her hand still on Sutton’s stocking, taking in the sight of Sutton standing in the doorway.

Lucy sighed. “Mommy! I’m not done yet.”

Sutton’s beautiful face melted into an exasperated smile. “Sweetheart, you have shown Charlotte more of this house than anyone ever needs to see in one night.” She arched her eyebrows, her tone turning playful. “Also, your Auntie Alex is organizing a *biiiiig* game of hide-and-seek with your cousins right now... and I happen to know that the hide-and-seek champion is in this very room.”

Lucy’s eyes widened as she bounced on her heels. “*I’m* the champion!”

“I know! So, you better not miss it!” Sutton cajoled.

Lucy nodded quickly, turning to Charlotte. “We can finish the tour later?! I gotta go!”

She laughed. “Of course. I’d hate for you to lose your crown.”

It seemed like only seconds, before Lucy raced out of the room, leaving Charlotte – blessedly – alone with Sutton for the first time all night.

Sutton, who sent her a small, apologetic smile. “I didn’t realize until I ran into Oliver that Lucy was *still* taking you on the tour. I’m sure you want to get to mingling with the other adults.”

“Actually, I had a wonderful time. Even for the ten minutes we spent in the kitchen, rooting around for the colander that folds up like a spaceship.”

Sutton’s cheeks flushed, adorably, from where she still stood in the doorway. “Ah... yes, many of Lucy’s barbies have taken a trip to the moon in that very colander.”

“So I heard,” she murmured, studying Sutton closely. “I really did enjoy the tour.”

This house – this large, sprawling, but a *home* in every sense of the word, these people – these nosy, kind, intelligent, loving people... everything. Everything down to the handknit stockings and the many, many photos on the walls. Far more personal photos – of all of the Spencer children and grandchildren and family friends – than artwork on the walls throughout the home.

All of it had a hand in making Sutton the person that she was, Charlotte realized. That was why it made her feel so much.

“I’d wanted to take you on the tour, the last time you came here,” Sutton whispered, the words so quiet they hardly made it to Charlotte.

A confession.

And Charlotte’s heart and stomach both flip-flopped at it, her breath catching and holding in her throat.

Sutton tightly closed her eyes, as she brought her fingers up to rub at her forehead, wincing. “I’m – sorry. That’s... I didn’t mean to say that.”

Charlotte shook her head, quickly, as she walked closer to Sutton, coming to stand only a few inches away from her. If she wouldn’t approach Charlotte, then Charlotte would close the gap. Especially now, when Sutton said things like that to her.

“Don’t apologize,” she was quick to say, giving Sutton a soft smile. “I... I’d have liked that tour, then. I was just too...” she trailed off, wondering how to find the right words to describe her past self.

Too invested, therefore too scared? It felt far too long, yet not enough. She had no idea how to explain the actions of her past self, when she both cursed her and pitied her, all at once.

But Sutton dropped her hand from her forehead, holding it out in front of her, stopping Charlotte from saying anything else. “Please, don’t. It’s... it doesn’t matter, now.” She opened her eyes again, locking onto Charlotte’s, as she gestured back down the hallway. “We should get back to the party. I’m sure you want to—”

“I don’t want to mingle,” she cut in. “I don’t want to network. I don’t want to talk to anyone in this home more than I want to talk to you. I don’t want to talk to *anyone* more than I want to talk to you, period.”

Sutton’s mouth fell open on a trembling exhale, before she seemed to catch herself. “I... Charlotte, we should—”

“Darling. What is going on?” She implored, the pleading edge in her voice undeniable but so very present. Taking up so much space inside of her.

Sutton shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself, physically closing herself off from Charlotte. “I wasn’t – I didn’t plan on you being here, tonight. We have plans for our next meeting next week, and—”

*What was Sutton even talking about?*

“Sutton,” she cut in, swift and firm, but soft. “What are you talking about? Does it *bother* you that I’m here?”

“No... yes – I don’t *know*. Yes,” Sutton shrugged her shoulders up before heavily dropping them down.

That confirmation was all Charlotte needed to confirm the worst of her feelings in the last few days, and desperation clawed at her. “What does that mean? What did I do? Please, Sutton, just tell me.”

Charlotte was absolutely not a dating expert, but she was a fantastic learner. She just needed to *know* what she was doing wrong, and she could fix it.

“Nothing!” The word seemed to explode out of Sutton, before she caught herself, rolling her lips tightly. She tightly closed her eyes, as she reached behind herself and pulled the door to the den closed.

And despite the nerves and confusion and desperation, Charlotte felt comforted by that – at least they would have this conversation.

“You haven’t done anything wrong, Charlotte, that’s – don’t you remember Christmas? That’s the problem.” The utter distress coloring Sutton’s voice, bleeding into the look in her eyes, distressed Charlotte as well.

Nearly as much as it baffled her.

“What does that even mean?” She nearly begged to know. “If you feel that way, why do you say it like it’s a bad thing? Then why aren’t you happy to see me, tonight?”

God, she needed to know. She needed it more than she’d ever needed to know anything else in her fucking life.

“Because I don’t want to have this conversation tonight, while dozens of people – including my entire family and my daughter – are around.” Sutton’s words were both pleading and final.

And utterly chilling.

“Have what conversation?” Charlotte asked, trying very, very hard to not jump to any conclusions.

Sutton sighed, closing her eyes and bowing her head for several seconds. Seeming to gather herself, as she looked back up at Charlotte. “I think…” Sutton snapped her jaw closed, the muscle in her jaw jumping, as she clearly pushed herself to finish, “We are getting to the end of our collaboration on the book. And whatever we have between us, should taper off, too.”

The words struck Charlotte like a blow, and she stumbled back a step as she stared at Sutton. Hurt and confusion and – “What do you mean?”

Sutton stared at her, so resolutely that it was terrifying. “Charlotte, it’s the natural course of *this*,” she gestured between them, and for some reason, she said the words like it was a foregone conclusion.

Everything inside of Charlotte immediately, vehemently disagreed. “I don’t want that. We haven’t spoken about exactly what we’re doing here, but –” Charlotte had to take a moment, trying to slow the stampeding thrum of her heart. “I don’t want this to slow down. I don’t want it to taper off.” God, those words made her feel sick to her stomach. “If anything, I want more. I want us–”

Sutton shook her head, decisively cutting Charlotte off. “No. That’s not – we *can’t*.”

For a moment, she could only *stare* at Sutton. She’d been confused about whatever was going on between them, but she genuinely hadn’t believed tonight was going to come to this.

“Why?” It was all she could force out through the tightness in her throat.

“For several reasons,” Sutton shot back, her cheeks flushed and breathing heavy and she didn’t look like she was enjoying this conversation, either, and Charlotte was just so – so…

She drew up her shoulders, straightening her spine even as the course of the conversation made her want to dissolve into herself, in an insanely pathetic way. “What are these *reasons*, then?” She demanded, folding her arms across her chest. If anything, she needed the extra support.

If Sutton wanted to put an end to what was between them, Charlotte wouldn’t let it happen without an explanation. She wasn’t going to let Sutton go so easily this time. She *couldn’t*.

“First and foremost – I have a daughter,” Sutton stated, as if that was something Charlotte didn’t know.

“I’m well aware; I’ve spent most of the night with her.” Charlotte gestured around the room. The room Lucy had led her into. “I adore Lucy. And I think it stands to reason that she likes me, as well.”

“She *does*,” Sutton confirmed, but sounded so utterly exasperated and pained by the fact. “And I love that, and it makes everything even harder—”

“Is this because of Layla?” Charlotte asked, feeling like maybe she’d finally struck a match. Yes. Last week, Layla had been very unhappy when discovering the nature of their relationship. But, “You don’t have to deal with that, alone. We—”

“It’s because Layla isn’t wrong,” Sutton cut in, her voice low but inarguably firm. Incontestably pained. Sutton’s fingers were interlocked so tightly, her knuckles were white from it.

“*What?*” Fuck, Charlotte felt lightheaded. She felt like she could hardly grasp what situation she’d walked into, like she’d been dropped into an alternate universe.

“She has no right to tell me how to live my life, but... you *are* a Senator,” Sutton stated.

“And?” Charlotte challenged, still feeling like she wasn’t able to understand, and *hating it*.

“And I – I can’t help myself when I’m around you! God,” Sutton breathed out the word, burying her face in her hands. “So, I let myself get lost in whatever we have between us, but you’re on track to run for president.” She slowly lifted her head to stare directly into Charlotte’s eyes, as she stated, “You are *Charlotte Thompson*.”

“I’ve always been Charlotte Thompson,” she stated, helplessly.

“I know, and that’s why you’ve done nothing wrong,” Sutton’s lips tugged into the saddest of smiles. “This time, it was all on me. Maybe it was last time, too. But... I have a daughter, Charlotte. And Lucy – her well-being, her mental health, her needs – *she* comes first. She has to.”

The backs of Charlotte’s eyes burned with tears as her nerves pricked with terror at the calm resignation in Sutton’s voice.

“You’re planning on being the first lesbian woman to run for president, and I would *never* stand in your way. But I can’t do that to Lucy,” Sutton swallowed, visibly hard, as she shook her head again. Just once. Firmly. “She’s my daughter – mine and Layla’s – and maybe, in another world, things could be different.”

*In another world...* Charlotte was certain she could feel her heart breaking in her chest, her breath quickening with it.

Sutton licked her lips, the bottom one trembling. “But she was brought into this world as Lucy Spencer, and we live a quiet life, and that’s the life I’m going to give her.”

Somehow, this was worse than it had been all those years ago. Charlotte had been heartbroken, then, but... but this time, it had all felt so close. Sutton – a relationship with Sutton – had been in her grasp, and now it was slipping away, and *no, no, no* –

But Sutton didn't seem to realize Charlotte was internally breaking down. She didn't seem to share the sentiment, as she continued talking, "I don't want her mothers' divorce dissected in a public forum, Layla's infidelity splashed on a tabloid, where all of her peers will know about it. I don't her life picked apart for the world to see, the way it would be, as soon as you start to seriously run for presiden--"

"Then I won't."

The words fell out of her mouth, interjecting into Sutton's breakup speech.

They came from somewhere, deep inside of her. A place Charlotte had never met. A place that shocked and alarmed her, even when she realized, shocked and breathing hard, that *she'd actually just said that*.

Sutton's eyes were wide, her mouth hanging open, as she stared back at Charlotte.