

1. Develop real friendship – off with a bang, if she said so herself! – while figuring out how her life fit together with Sutton’s, now, as adults. Beyond sizzling attraction and lovely conversation
2. Figure out how to romance Sutton and make her see how much Charlotte wanted her, in every way
3. Sweep Sutton Spencer off of her feet.

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Charlotte really didn’t know what to expect from *friendship* with Sutton.

Caleb and Dean were the only two people she considered her friends – and one was her brother while the other was her brother-in-law, so she didn’t necessarily feel like it counted, if she was being honest with herself.

And maybe it should have alarmed her that she found herself on her fourth decade on this earth and that the concept of making a real friend was foreign to her. When she thought about it in those terms, it did seem rather... concerning.

But it had never bothered her before.

Sutton herself was the only friend – barring Caleb and Dean – that she’d ever had that she’d thought was worth keeping.

All she really knew was that sitting in her townhouse with Sutton, letting Sutton explore her kitchen and then exclaim over her sunroom, before lounging on a chaise and just... existing with her, was the best weekend Charlotte had had in years. Sutton had stayed for over two hours, while Charlotte neglected packing and prepping for the upcoming week.

And honestly, she didn’t give a shit; she could handle the meetings with less prep.

She’d been extremely reluctant to say goodbye to Sutton after dinner. Because... she *was* going to leave the city for at least two weeks – very likely more, depending on what happened in certain key meetings.

“Let me know if you hear anything, about the chapters we submitted,” Sutton had said as she’d lingered by the door. “And thank you, again, for dinner. I’ve never even *heard* of that Indian place!”

Charlotte smiled indulgently; her cheeks were almost sore from the amount of real smiling she’d done at Sutton tonight. But it was such an instinctive *thing*; looking at Sutton like this – in Charlotte’s home, comfortable, bright-eyed, talking about her work and Lucy and, just, life, that wonderfully husky laugh falling from soft lips – it just made Charlotte... happy.

“Maya, one of my assistants, she orders from there all of the time.”

Sutton’s slow smile was nearly lethal, the way it cut through Charlotte. Sutton had such a sweet, soft smile, but there was an edge to her that Charlotte saw – maybe she was the only one who did – as Sutton mocked, “Oh, *one of my assistants.*”

Charlotte’s mouth fell open, “She is! What would you like me to call her?”

Sutton merely laughed, leaning back against the door as she regarded Charlotte. “Nothing. I want you to call her what she is. I just...” She fiddled with the ends of her jacket sleeves. “It’s sometimes crazy,” she confessed.

Charlotte knew she must have looked as wanting and confused as she felt inside as she asked, “What is?”

“This,” Sutton gestured around them. “All of this. I just... you... you really did it,” she said, softly. “Everything you planned. Everything you wanted.”

The words were admiring and encouraging and warm, but as Charlotte stared at Sutton getting ready to leave, they landed hollowly inside of her. Landing in a void of longing and wanting that Sutton’s company alone, filled. “Not everything,” she murmured, the words slipping out, echoing with that longing that hit so strongly.

Sutton rolled her lips before she smiled, a little teasing. “Right. Here comes Ms. President.”

Charlotte exhaled quickly, both amusement and disappointment wrapping together in a confusing bundle in her stomach as she smiled. “Right. Yes.”

“Let me know if you hear anything before I do, from the publisher? I can get started writing the next bit or editing through their suggestions,” Sutton offered as she hesitated at the door, her hand on the knob but not quite twisting.

And Charlotte – it was so ridiculous, especially considering she herself was on a flight in the morning, but... she didn’t want her to go. She liked Sutton in her house. She liked the way the house felt *warmer* with her. She liked the way she felt with Sutton, she liked the way *life* felt with Sutton.

But. They were friends. That was what was happening, now. And if a friendship was what she could have with Sutton, a friendship would be what she’d take.

“I’ll let you know,” she promised. “And,” she added, as Sutton started opening to door. “I’ll text you anyway. As friends do.”

A grin pulled at her lips, especially as Sutton slowly smiled back.

“Right. Good, then.” Sutton stood in the open doorway, lingering as if unsure how to say goodbye for several seconds. Before she nodded to herself minutely and leaned in. Surprise slid through Charlotte, as well as the light flutter in her stomach, even as Sutton wrapped her arms around her.

It was a quick, brief squeeze – it was *friendly* – and Charlotte leaned into it, anyway.

“Have a good trip. Um. Effect change.”

Charlotte laughed, bright and easy, so – so brought about by Sutton. “Will do.”

And so what if she watched Sutton leave, the way she walked down the walkway, breathing a little sigh that no one else had ever made her feel?

It was all in the name of... friendship.

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She didn't know that friendship with Sutton would mean such frequent texting – not that she was complaining about it.

**Charlotte – 11:31AM**

*Texting a friend, as one does, to inform of a safe flight. On my way to effect change. What are you up to this Sunday?*

**Sutton – 11:47AM**

*Lunch with Regan and Emma, soon. Preparing the digital quiz for my lit class tomorrow morning. What change, exactly, are you going to effect on a Sunday afternoon?*

**Charlotte – 11:48AM**

*World hunger on the agenda today*

**Charlotte – 11:48AM**

*Honestly, I have a dinner with Senator Gotts and a few house reps. Very light. Until tomorrow.*

**Sutton – 11:49AM**

*Ah, Gotts. Or, as my brother likes to call him – Always Gotts A Problem*

**Charlotte – 11:49AM**

*Ha, well, Oliver is correct. Nicholas and I get along, but he is absolutely draining*

**Sutton – 11:51AM**

*You remembered it was Oliver?*

**Sutton – 11:51AM**

*Jesus, I didn't even think – he's the governor now, I'm sure you two have run into each other at some point. Stupid of me.*

**Sutton – 11:51AM**

*Or, just, you are obviously aware of political events*

**Charlotte – 11:52AM**

*You are never stupid. Yes, he and I have been at the same events on occasion.*

**Charlotte – 11:52AM**

*But I would have remembered anyway.*

**Sutton – 11:56AM**

*You are just that good. Color me entirely surprised*

*They talked about Charlotte's work –*

**Charlotte – 10:11PM**

*Sorry, it took me so long to respond. I've been in a meeting for the last four hours and I'm so frustrated about the state of this upcoming bill*

*But I quite enjoyed the tale of Lucy angling for a dog. I'm shocked it hasn't worked yet, if I'm being honest...*

**Sutton – 10:13PM**

*Fine, I do love dogs! But a dog is a responsibility and I want her to be prepared for that. My parents did that for us, and it worked*

**Sutton – 10:13PM**

*But enough about that. Tell me about what you're working on. The bill regarding gun control?*

**Charlotte – 10:14PM**

*Yes. I'm doing a spot on CNN about it, and the fucking POLITICS of it all, is revolting. Coming from a career politician such as myself, it should tell you everything you need to know*

**Sutton – 10:15PM**

*It does tell me all I need to know. But I also know you, and I know that you will find a way. You always do. Want to write out, here, what your talking points are?*

**Charlotte – 10:16PM**

*I'd honestly love to, but I also know that you are more than likely going to go to sleep soon and I don't want to keep you up to hear me rant and/or work out politics talk*

**Sutton – 10:17PM**

*It's important and you are very attention grabbing; one of the only reasons CNN is bearable sometimes tbh*

– About Sutton's work –

**Sutton – 1:17PM**

*I'm not positive, but I think one of my students wrote a paper using you as a queer role model, comparing you to Sappho  
{Attached image}*

**Charlotte – 1:34PM**

*What can I say? Sappho is likely my direct*

*ancestor. You should tell this student of yours  
that you know me. Earn some true respect*

**Sutton – 1:35PM**

*Oh, so you think I have to name drop you to  
earn respect from my students? Then again,  
if you came into my gender and sexuality in  
literature class, I'm sure you alone would leave  
a string of hearts behind*

**Charlotte – 1:35PM**

*Not at all; but I thought it might be more comfortable  
for you to have your students star-gazing at me rather  
than at you. I'm sure you already have their little sapphic  
hearts laying at your door*

**Sutton – 1:36PM**

*Ha-ha*

**Sutton – 1:36PM**

*It only happened one time.*

**Charlotte – 1:37PM**

*Please, do tell*

– about Lucy... well, a lot about Lucy, and it wasn't all that shocking; she was Sutton's pride and joy, and Charlotte knew Sutton well enough to know that would be the case even before meeting Lucy over dinner –

**Charlotte – 4:41PM**

*Got the edits in – I can send them over if you want  
to have a look whenever you're not busy*

**Sutton – 4:44PM**

*I'm sitting in the parents' section for karate  
class, watching a group of 5-8 year olds try  
to break a board with their hands. Please  
send it to me now*

**Charlotte – 4:45PM**

*I'm very tempted to not send it to you, now, because  
I personally find the idea of watching children break  
wooden boards with their hands fascinating*

**Sutton – 4:45PM**

*With the giggling and screaming and fits  
of running around, you would need at least  
eight ibuprofen to make it through the hour,  
Charlotte Thompson*

**Charlotte – 4:46PM**

*I'm moderately insulted, yet still agreeable with*

*your conclusion. However, please don't pretend that you don't love watching Lucy run around during these little classes*

**Sutton – 4:47PM**

*Fine, I won't. She's having an amazing time, wearing her yellow belt. It gets all of her energy out, she's thrilled, she just lost a tooth last night, she's going to facetime Alex later to tell her about her new rank. And she's just so adorable*

**Charlotte – 4:48PM**

*Ah, see? I knew you loved it. I didn't realize she got her yellow belt, that's exciting. She talked about that at dinner the other week. I'm sure your sister will be thrilled. The only person to this day who has ever manhandled me*

**Sutton – 4:48PM**

*Oh my god, I totally forgot about that. I'm still SO sorry*

**Charlotte – 4:51PM**

*Don't be, it was quite the experience. I bet she's very proud of your little karate kid*

**Sutton – 4:53PM**

*She certainly is. She makes a point to come to every meet, if she can. And Lucy loves telling her karate friends all about her professional fighter aunt. She believes it is extremely impressive*

**Charlotte – 4:54PM**

*I believe Lucy is correct; someone who is able to flip a person 4x their size is very impressive. Oh, tell Lucy congratulations from me, if she remembers me from dinner*

**Sutton – 4:59PM**

*IF she remembers you... you have been on the TV. Much like my daughter is swayed by Alex beating people up into thinking she's cool, you being ON THE TELEVISION is even more so. She has talked about you several times*

**Sutton – 5:00PM**

*She is very pleased that you said congrats and she'd like to show you  
(attached image)*

*– about Autumn and Maya's continued affair... which turned into a bit more –*

**Charlotte – 8:03AM**

*They arrived in the same cab today. THE SAME CAB. It's as if they now want to broadcast it for all the world to see. Discretion be damned.*

**Sutton – 8:05AM**

*lol. It's a cab! Were they clothed coming out of it? Not fixing lipstick or skewed clothing?*

**Charlotte – 8:05AM**

*No, they were perfectly put together. Who do you think I'm hiring to work for me? A lawsuit on hold?*

**Sutton – 8:06AM**

*I expect no less from you. But my point is – maybe they got breakfast together. Maybe they are staying at the same hotel. Maybe they wanted to catch up before work to reconcile the demands from their very busy boss*

**Charlotte – 8:06AM**

*We are talking about two women who barely ever say two nice sentences to one another, Sutton. And for the last year, have done so very infrequently. They spent the night together! And they aren't pretending that they didn't!*

**Sutton – 8:07AM**

*How do you know, then? Are they acting any differently, now? Exchanging a nice word?*

**Charlotte – 8:11AM**

*Fine, no, they are not. Maya just informed Autumn under her breath while not looking at her that her handwritten agendas are redundant when she has the same notes copied into digital planners. And Autumn murmured that she'd like Maya to kindly mind her own fucking business*

**Sutton – 8:12AM**

*... why, out of the many applicants you surely had, did you choose two women who do not like one another to be the ones constantly in each other's proximity?*

**Charlotte – 8:12AM**

*I appreciate the energy it brings to the room. They always keep one another on each other's toes, and as a result, keep me on mine*

**Sutton – 8:15AM**

*Of course you did it on purpose... of course  
YOU did*

**Sutton – 8:19AM**

*Why are they sleeping together if they can't  
stand one another? I can't wrap my mind around  
it*

**Charlotte – 8:29AM**

*I don't find it shocking that it's not something  
you can relate to*

**Sutton – 8:29AM**

*I'm feeling a little insulted, I think?*

**Charlotte – 8:32AM**

*It's not an insult; I was merely stating it as a  
fact. Autumn and Maya are running on this...  
pure energy. Maybe these little personal details  
about one another are annoying, but the reason  
they still work for me isn't because they couldn't  
find another job; it's because they like this energy  
just as much. They love being kept on their toes.  
Neither of them want easy – or, maybe if they do  
WANT it, it's not something that will make them  
happy right now*

**Sutton – 8:36AM**

*Well, color me crazy, but I think that deep  
down, everyone wants the easy kind of love*

**Charlotte – 8:38AM**

*Both of them are career-driven, and they love this  
world. They want a little zing back and forth. And  
honestly, that probably does give them some kind of  
ease. That they are on each other's level in so many  
ways. But that's what they are thriving on. And so  
I suppose, in a way, I manufactured this.*

**Sutton – 8:39AM**

*I like a zing*

**Charlotte – 8:50AM**

*You do*

**Charlotte – 8:51AM**

*But the zing you want, is pleasant. You don't want  
the flirting that begins in barbs, a romance where you  
are in competition, where everything is a battle. You  
want a zing where a woman (or man, I suppose),*



*smiles at you and flirts with you and jokes with you,  
but it's never harsh or too mean*

**Sutton – 8:53AM**

*What I'm gathering here is that you are  
calling me soft?*

**Charlotte – 8:54AM**

*I am, yes. But don't mistake it for me calling you  
weak. What you are looking for and what you give,  
is honesty and softness and truth. Autumn and Maya  
have a zing, that is comfortable for their lifestyle and  
the walls they both have around what is comfortable  
for them. The zing you crave and the one people find  
in you, is vulnerability. And that is a far more difficult  
energy to both give and receive*

**Charlotte – 10:11AM**

*I'm sorry if I overstepped, in saying those things.  
I truly didn't mean anything negatively; very much  
the opposite*

**Sutton – 10:18AM**

*No, you didn't overstep. I guess... I just  
wasn't ready for so much insight into, well,  
me. And then my 9am course started, so...*

**Sutton – 10:22AM**

*Anyway. Maybe Autumn and Maya are going  
to end up having the soft zing. You never know*

**Charlotte – 10:25AM**

*Autumn just informed Maya that she can't have  
a sip out of her water bottle even though we stuck  
in traffic with no end in sight for at least an hour,  
and gave Maya a look as if she'd asked to cut her  
arm off. I think their soft feelings are safe*

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She hadn't expected the commentary she received from Caleb – though, she should have.  
That was on her.

“Who are you texting?” Caleb asked as she answered Sutton's latest message, before setting  
her phone, face-down, on her lap. Her brother's tone implied he already knew damn well who  
she was texting.

Charlotte ate another bite rather than dignify him with an answer.

“Work,” Dean surmised easily, shooting Caleb a look like he was crazy. “If it’s an ongoing back-and-forth, it’s always work.”

Caleb rested his hand on his husband’s, tapping his finger against the back of Dean’s hand as he stared at Charlotte with unconcealed glee. “No. It’s *Sutton*.”

Even as her phone vibrated with what was sure to be Sutton’s response to her last message, Charlotte resisted the need to check it, even though it went against everything she’d felt in the last couple of weeks.

Charlotte had never been much of an ongoing texter – who would she do that with? There was no one outside of work that she found it imperative to talk to every day, let alone multiple times a day.

But... god, if she said she didn’t eat up every word Sutton said, that her heart didn’t flutter with excitement every time she got a message signaling that Sutton wanted to talk to her, she would be quite the liar.

Still, if something hadn’t changed in... ever, it was that she didn’t want to deal with Caleb’s needling.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And what makes you so sure?”

“Every time we’ve seen you, you’re texting,” Caleb pointed out. “And, not for work. Not *serious face* Charlotte. But smitten kitten Charlotte.”

The look she gave him for referring to her as a smitten kitten was absolutely murderous.

Dean nodded slowly. “Huh. He’s right. I hadn’t even realized, but – you are always looking a little flushed? Happier, maybe?” He tilted his head as he narrowed his eyes at her from across the table.

And she knew she definitely flushed under his gaze at that comment.

“Sutton and I,” she spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable, as she pointed her fork at both of the men in her life, “Are friends.”

“Right, just like you two were friends the last time this happened,” Caleb nodded sagely – annoyingly.

Her phone buzzed again and she set her jaw against the way her fingers twitched with the urge to check it.

She’d been telling herself that they were *friends* for the last two weeks. She had to think about it in those terms – that Sutton wanted a friendship with her, and that was it.

Still, with the looks of both Dean and Caleb digging into her, she snapped. “What is it you want me to say? Do you want me to say that it’s Sutton for me, it’s only ever *been* Sutton, and I can’t imagine how it ever won’t be? Do you want me to say that I’ve spent the last thirteen years with this *wanting* inside, with this wondering what could have been if only I’d made a different decision? That every time we text, I feel both elated and insane, because *how* have those feelings not gone away? Fine, there, I said it.”

She settled roughly back in her chair, crossing her arms over her stomach as both her brother and friend stared at her in shock. She felt both immensely pleased at causing the shock and frustrated with herself for voicing the thoughts she was still working through.

Caleb's mouth opened, then closed, before he cleared his throat. "I mean... yeah. I guess I wanted you to say that?" He slid his gaze toward Dean, whose eyebrows were near his hairline.

"I never thought we *would* hear it," Dean finished for them both.

Charlotte took in a deep breath before slowly blowing it out and sitting upright, straightening her shoulders. "Well. Now, you have."

"Charlotte, if that's how you feel, then..." Caleb trailed off, giving her a softly encouraging look.

"Then what?" She challenged, arching an eyebrow at him. "Then, tell her? When she's made it clear that she isn't ready for more?"

It was something she was struggling with – both being incredibly thrilled that she was getting this chance to become closer to Sutton, while also knowing full-well that she was only going to be falling for Sutton even harder.

Clearly, Sutton was attracted to her – the knowledge gave her such a visceral satisfaction that throbbed through her whole body – but emotionally, Sutton didn't seem to want her. It was an irony Charlotte was becoming very familiar with: back when Sutton wanted Charlotte in every way, Charlotte wasn't emotionally equipped to manage it, and now that she was – or at least, she *thought* she was – Sutton didn't want it with her.

And that was an entire thing in and of itself, Charlotte believing she was ready for a full, real, adult relationship with Sutton. She'd never really done it, so how would she know? How would Charlotte know if she was ready?

She thought this friendship angle might be smart – to test the waters, so to speak, and move at a pace Sutton was comfortable with, while also seeing her own limits. She had to know how their lives could truly fit together, before getting ahead of herself.

Because the last thing she wanted was to have *more* with Sutton and realize she was wrong. She couldn't break Sutton's heart again; she wouldn't.

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She didn't expect the *Welcome Back!* basket Sutton brought to her when they met up for the first time since she was back in D.C.

She looked down at the basket in her hands, eyebrows lifting in surprise, before moving her gaze back up to Sutton. "You know I was only gone for nineteen days, right?"

Sutton's cheeks colored slightly, as she coughed into her hand. "I – yes. Obviously. But, I took to making these for Regan and Emma whenever they left to go somewhere longer than a week, because Lucy finds it really fun, so... it just – happened." Brilliant blue eyes shut tightly as Sutton shook her head. "Actually, it was silly. Just – here, I'll take it back. It was silly."

Charlotte hugged her arms securely around the basket, holding it closer to her as she arched a sharp eyebrow up at Sansa. “You can’t take this back; it’s my basket now.”

She led them to sit on the couch, combing through the items in said basket.

“It’s just some little knick-knacks,” Sutton explained, clearly a little embarrassed as she settled in next to Charlotte and watched her look through the items. “Lucy decorated that little Christmas ornament.”

Charlotte picked up the rather messily painted bulb, though there were admittedly charming hearts distinguishable on it, lips tugging into a grin. “Thank her for me, please.”

She reveled in Sutton’s quiet little smile, before turning back to the basket.

“Chocolate chip cookies,” Charlotte commented, excitement moving through her, as she lifted the container up, “Homemade?”

Sutton looked at her as though she were utterly crazy. “Of course, don’t insult me.”

Charlotte cupped her hands around the Tupperware. “If these are the cookies I’m remembering, I really enjoyed the sea salt in them.”

“They are,” Sutton was quick to say, before she cleared her throat. “I know you didn’t *love* desserts. Not as much as I do, anyway,” Sutton’s voice was soft, and it set everything inside of Charlotte to match the soft cadence.

Sutton remembered that. She’d only made the cookies twice in their tenure together, and Charlotte, as someone who didn’t overtly love sweets, had picked at them. Mostly, she’d eaten one the first time Sutton sheepishly handed a couple over because she just didn’t want to cause any frowns on Sutton’s gorgeous face. Her actual enjoyment of the dessert had been a delightful surprise.

But Sutton *remembered*.

God, she knew they were only *friends*, but it meant so much in her solitary heart that she wasn’t the only one with all of the memories they’d made still so vivid.

“Thank you, darling.”

The endearment slipped out before Charlotte could even realize she’d said anything, and everything inside of her froze – *too much, too fast* – as she slid her gaze to Sutton, waiting to see how she’d react.

Sutton’s posture was rigid for a few moments, her face looking shell-shocked before she recovered and shook her head slightly. “Um, you’re welcome.” Sutton quickly reached into her bag and cleared her throat. “I – actually, did you look over the email I sent you?”

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And she most definitely didn’t expect what happened to her the following Friday night, when Sutton called her for the first time.

Excitement shot through her; it was just after five and she'd been working since quarter past six this morning. To say Sutton would be the most welcome surprise would be the world's biggest understatement.

"Well, hello stranger."

"Hi," Sutton's slightly breathless reply came. "Sorry, I'm just managing a ton of th— Luce, if you jump on that couch one more time, your Halloween candy will be meeting the trash."

"Sorry, mommy!" Came the faint reply. After dinner with her, and a video Sutton had sent, Charlotte could recognize her voice.

"Is this a bad time? You *did* call me," she reminded Sutton with an endeared laugh.

Sutton chuckled back. "Right, I did. I just wanted to make sure we were still on for tomorrow? Since we have the notes back from the editor and everything."

"Yes," she replied, wondering if she'd spoken too fast to sound natural. But in the past two months, she hadn't canceled on Sutton once – and, truthfully, she only would if there was a literal national emergency. "Of course."

"I just wasn't sure, because I know you've been so busy this week; I mean, you worked until nine yesterday," Sutton's reply came with gentle reproach. "That can't be healthy."

"Ah, but who am I, if not dedicated?"

Sutton let out a begrudging laugh. "Fine, this is very true."

Charlotte looked down at her watch, before frowning. "Not that I don't enjoy a phone call from you," she really, really did, "But, weren't you going to attend your coworker's engagement party this evening?"

"Your mind is really a steel trap."

"It's my finest quality."

"One of them." Sutton seemed to catch herself, if the sharp intake of breath was anything to go by, and Charlotte smiled as the pleasure swept through her. "I mean... you have many wonderful qualities, and, so, you should never just have to pick one, but – your mind is a good one."

*God*, she wanted to pursue this. She wanted to tease and banter and *flirt*. So, so badly.

She swallowed a handful of remarks that wanted to escape, though, only letting out a little laugh. "I will use that as my next campaign slogan."

"Ha," Sutton breathed, before clearing her throat. "I *was* going to go to go. It's just... I wound up not having anyone to watch Lucy tonight. I had a really great girl before, but she moved, and Regan and Emma are on their trip."

"Oh, right, the France vacation."

"Exactly." There was a frustration marring Sutton's tone, with a tinge of disappointment, and Charlotte found herself saying the words before she even realized it –

“I can do it.”

There was a resounding silence as both Charlotte and Sutton took in what she said, before Sutton cautiously asked, “Um... do what, exactly?”

What in the hell was she offering? Charlotte’s heart pounding in uncertainty, even as she spoke again. “I...” she cleared her throat and nodded at herself as she sat up straight in her chair, before speaking again. “I can watch Lucy for you tonight.”

Charlotte stared across her empty office, chewing at the inside of her lip for a moment, before she caught herself and made herself *stop*.

She and Sutton were friends.

Lucy was Sutton’s child.

She *had* to spend more time with her, especially if they were going to see one another more frequently.

Charlotte had gone toe-to-toe with some of the biggest names in politics, on camera on national news.

How hard could this be in comparison?

“Sutton?” She prompted after thirty seconds passed, with no sound on the other end of the line.

Sutton cleared her throat. “I – sorry. I... did you just offer to watch my daughter?”

“Yes,” she sat up straight at her desk, nodding with the words she spoke, strengthening her tone. “Yes, I did. What time did you need to leave by?”

“Um. Well. I – um, I mean, if you’re... serious? I should leave within the hour, but you don’t have to.”

“I’m serious,” she confirmed, drawing in a deep breath. “I’ll be there as soon as possible. Go, get ready.”

By the time she arrived, it was forty minutes later, and she’d mostly calmed her nerves – which, she shouldn’t have any. Lucy was *six*, and Charlotte had a good time with her when they’d had dinner. Granted, she’d felt a little out of her depth, in a very unfamiliar way, but... it should be fine. Completely and totally fine.

She readjusted the grip she had on the bag in her hand – she’d sent Autumn to the closest mall on an emergency trip as she’d finished up her loose ends in the office, texting her a shopping list she’d received from Caleb. In a conversation that she’d wished she could have had with Dean, who *hadn’t answered her*.

“What was that game Ricky is obsessed with?” She’d demanded as soon as her brother picked up the phone, referencing their brother William’s son – he had three but Ricky was the one closest to Lucy’s age. “The one you played with him for hours the last time he stayed with you for the weekend?”

“Uhhhh... Mario Kart?” Caleb’s obviously confused answer came only seconds later.

Right. Charlotte quickly texted that, along with her other ideas, to Autumn. Who'd immediately responded with –

**Autumn Alton – 5:26PM**

*For what game system?*

“What game system?” She'd asked next. How many were there? Charlotte had literally never played a video game. Not once in forty years.

“... the Switch?”

She'd texted that to Autumn as well, hoping to god she knew whatever the fuck it was and how to get it quickly.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, sure. But, *why?*” Her brother's bewilderment was all over his tone.

She balked for a moment before she cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. “I'm babysitting tonight.”

There was a resounding silence before his bark of laughter came so loudly through the phone, she winced at the strength. “Christ, Caleb, I have ear drums.”

The laughter continued. “You – did you just say... you're *babysitting?!?*”

She huffed out a breath. “And?”

“And, *you're* babysitting,” he stated, before laughing again.

“You know, we have an equal amount of nephews,” she pointed out.

“Right, and when is the last time you hung out with them one on one, that both didn't include William or Claire or taking them out to lunch or shopping or to the movies?”

And – fine. He was right. And even that happened... infrequently. Charlotte hadn't stayed for extended periods of time in their hometown since she'd moved for college over twenty years ago. She went back maybe once a year, now, to see William and his children and they came to D.C. about the same to see her, and for other holiday, she sent gifts – either ones William told her to get or whatever was the latest and coolest for that year.

Charlotte hadn't really spent one on one time with a human under college age since she'd *been* that age. Even when she took William's boys, it was never one on one... she always took them all, and they often amused themselves while they were out and about, with bouts of conversation or questions for her every so often.

It always went well, but – this *was* different.

Still, she scowled. “I can entertain a six year old, Caleb.”

“Uh-huh, and that's why you're calling me, desperate for a gaming system.”

“I'm going to hang up, now.”

“God, you have it *so bad!*” Caleb shouted through the line as she hung up. “This is disgust–”

**Caleb – 5:28PM**

*disgustingly cute, was what I was saying!*

With another deep breath, Charlotte knocked. And only waited for a second, before the door opened. It was so quick, she startled at it... and then stared at Sutton.

Wearing a form-fitting blue dress, her hair, that just brushed her shoulders now, down and pin-straight and shiny. She'd already done her makeup – a light, subtle hand – and Charlotte's heart actually skipped a beat in her chest.

Just. Wow.

“Wow,” she breathed, regaining her ability to smile, pouring her charm into it. “You look... incredible. Are you certain this isn't *your* engagement party?”

Sutton laughed, shaking her head, “Ha-ha. I have nights like these out so rarely, I always figure I should take advantage when I can.” She stood back and gestured for Charlotte to come in quickly. “Come on, it's getting a bit chilly out.”

She walked through the threshold into the welcoming front hallway of Sutton's home for the second time. The hardwood floors shined and seemed so welcoming, the house itself was warm but not stifling. She wasn't surprised at all by the inviting, peach colored walls that led down to the living/dining area, because it just *felt* like... a home. Pictures hung on the walls everywhere – of Sutton and Lucy, Emma and Regan, Lucy/Sutton/Emma/Regan in any combination, handfuls with Sutton's parents mixed in, her siblings, who Charlotte presumed were their children... it was charming and cozy and it was so Sutton.

“Are you *sure* you want to do this?” Sutton asked.

Charlotte arched an eyebrow at her. “To confirm yet again, after the text you have already sent me... yes. I do.”

Sutton tangled her fingers in front of her, studying Charlotte before she shrugged loftily. “Okay. I just – I don't want you to feel like you *have* to.”

“I would never watch a child out of obligation,” the words slipped out of her mouth quickly, but, well. They were true.

Sutton laughed, the apprehension disappearing from her face with it. “That's a good point.”

“Who was supposed to be watching her tonight?” Charlotte couldn't help but ask. Because she *knew* that Sutton knew Emma, Regan, and her other babysitter wouldn't be available, and she must have had other arrangements.

“It was supposed to be Ashley – Layla's wife,” she explained, pulling a slightly tight expression. “Layla is on-call tonight in the ER. But Ashley was unexpectedly called into a surgery, as well. I suppose it's hard to be upset with that.”

Charlotte's mouth twisted into a scowl. “Not really.”

Again, Sutton laughed, pushing at Charlotte's shoulder with her own. “The downsides of co-parenting with doctors, I suppose.” She lingered closely, though, still smiling, and Charlotte



reveled in it. Before Sutton's gaze dipped and looked at the bags she was carrying. "What are those?"

Charlotte's hold tightened as she resolutely did not look down. "Just some kid-friendly fun."

The look Sutton gave her was utterly ludicrous. "What kind of kid-friendly fun? Lucy has so many things, you didn't have to bring anything."

Charlotte winked. "Better safe than sorry."

Truly, though.

Sutton's incredulous expression hardly faded, though she didn't seem to have anything else to say. "All right... well, I should be leaving soon. Lucy is washing up – I told her you'd be coming, and she was very excited."

"She was?" Charlotte asked, the surprise pushing through her.

Sutton chuckled, again. "I told you, before. You are on *the television*. That makes you very high up on her cool person list."

Charlotte, admittedly, puffed out her chest at that. It felt ridiculous in that moment – what did it matter if a six year old thought she was cool?

Then again... she gazed at Sutton for a beat. This six year old's opinion did matter.

"She's already had dinner. There's a drawer in the pantry for Lucy-appropriate-snacks – you'll know which one it is," Sutton assured her. "Since it's a Friday, she can stay up until eight. She might fuss about it, but she will be exhausted not too much later than that, so she'll be easy."

Charlotte nodded, cataloguing every piece of information into her brain.

"If you need me, you know where to reach me. My phone is fully charged, I'm less than an hour away, and when it comes to Lucy, my volume is on, too," Sutton informed her as she reached for her jacket.

A fissure of nerves pushed through Charlotte as she reached out quickly. "Wait, that's it? That's all? You aren't going to tell me the exact bedtime routine or allergies or doctors numbers or—"

The list of things she'd thought about on the way over rolled off her tongue.

Sutton cut her off with only a look. A gentle look. One of softness and amusement and... something sweet in there, too.

"Charlotte, I wouldn't let you watch Lucy if I didn't trust you."

"You trust me," she repeated, feeling uncharacteristically stupid, but... still. It felt nice to hear, and still *shocking*, considering... well, everything in their history.

Sutton hesitated, before she nodded. "I trust that if something was going to happen to my daughter, you would handle it. My actual biggest fear, is that you would call the National Guard for a very minor problem and that we will be on the next news story."

Charlotte pursed her lips. “Very funny.”

Then again, it wasn’t *not* in the realm of possibilities...

Sutton seemed to know it, and smiled at her again, full of warmth, with just a tinge of mischief. “I am kind of looking forward to seeing how you handle this, I’ll be honest.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted nearly into her hair. “Is this some sort of challenge?”

“Charlotte Thompson vs Lucy Spencer. Both enter. Will they both survive?” Sutton challenged, before breaking into a sweet laugh. “I find it very nice, to be your friend, again, Charlotte.”

God. Yeah. That word – the huge positives behind it and the longing she had for *more* twisted inside of her, even as she nodded.

“Me, too.”

“Lucy,” Sutton called. “I’m leaving!”

Little footsteps came pounding down the hallway, washing away Charlotte’s warm feelings to replace them with nerves. It was only two hours, she reminded herself, before Lucy was supposed to go to bed. Right?

Lucy’s hair was slightly damp and braided, clearly having had a bath in the recent past. She was wearing some sort of children’s themed – Charlotte would have to figure out what exactly it was – matching pajama top and bottoms, clearly a favorite pair, as they were a little worn.

She hopped right into Sutton’s waiting arms, clearly a ritual. Sutton laid a kiss on Lucy’s cheek, before Lucy mirrored it, and then squirmed down Sutton like a little monkey. “I love you.”

“I love you more,” Sutton mirrored. “Be good for Charlotte, honey.”

“I willlll,” Lucy sang in a way that made Charlotte truly wonder about the validity of that statement.

“Be good for Lucy,” Sutton aimed at her, a warm laugh in her voice.

“I will,” Charlotte echoed. She *would be*.

“Goodbye you two,” Sutton waved, “I’ll be back in a few hours. Before midnight.”

Charlotte gamely waved, before looking down at Lucy. Whose big, bright blue eyes were already on her as she bounced on her feet. “I watched you on the tv with mommy on Monday!” She announced.

Charlotte cleared her throat, nodding. She could work with that. “What did you think?”

Lucy shrugged, playing with the bottom of her pajama shirt with fidgety hands. “I dunno. It was boring stuff. But you looked pretty,” she asserted, brightly.

“I will take it,” she accepted, as she gently set down the bag, before sliding her jacket off and hanging it over the back of an armchair. “So...”

“Soooo...” Lucy mimicked, staring up at Charlotte as she bounced back and forth on her feet, silence surrounding them.

Lord, what was Charlotte doing here? How did she talk to a child? She’d gone forty years without engaging in conversation with someone this young, just the two of them!

“What’s in the bag?” Lucy asked, clearly not feeling the same sort of awkward nerve as Charlotte was. Thankfully.

Charlotte was relieved she’d had Autumn go to the store for her as she tugged the bag back up. “Ah! Well, I thought I would bring us some things to... play with?” That seemed like the appropriate terminology.

Lucy’s eyes – the same exact color and shape as Sutton’s – widened adorably. “Can I see? Please?!” She held her hands out but didn’t move to take the bag. Which Charlotte attributed to good parenting; god, had she seen some entitled children in her social circle.

Charlotte acquiesced and Lucy squealed, revealing her missing teeth in an exuberant smile, as she took the bag.

And Charlotte... well, she was truly worried about what she was in for.