

Sutton returned Charlotte's kiss, hungrily.

She matched her beat-for-beat, her hands feeling greedy with the need, tugging Charlotte up against her. Reaching down, sliding her hands over Charlotte's sweatshirt-covered waist, down over her hips, itching already to touch the warm, soft skin underneath.

It was *her* sweatshirt, she vaguely registered, even as she knew it burned the fire inside of her even hotter. Charlotte was in her clothing, looking as sexy as she always did – devastatingly – but also Christmassy and cute and she looked like... Sutton's.

Charlotte groaned in the back of her throat, something so guttural that it resonated through Sutton's entire body, as Sutton's hands slid under her shirt and splayed her hands up over Charlotte's waist.

She flexed her hands there, digging in just the right amount – the amount she knew Charlotte liked, and was rewarded with a keening sound from Charlotte.

Charlotte seemed to know exactly what Sutton wanted – then again, when they were like this, when didn't she? – as she pushed herself up from where she'd been nestled against Sutton on the couch, and instead straddled her. All without breaking their kiss.

Charlotte's hands landed on her shoulders, finding her balance as she rocked her hips against Sutton.

It was heady. So powerful. This *want*, that came from the pulse-pounding *need* she always seemed to have inside of her for Charlotte. It was never-ending, Sutton had learned over the last few weeks.

But she could feel it tonight, in this kiss, in this moment. That want was not only undeniably present, lacing through her veins, but it was magnified.

She felt it in every movement, every action. She felt it as she mapped out Charlotte's back, then up her sides, thumbing over her nipples. She felt it in the way Charlotte arched her back against her. She felt it as Charlotte panted into her mouth, the way she slid her full lips over Sutton's like even in the moments where she needed to take a breath, she wanted to share the very air they were breathing.

It was that needy, hungry feeling that she had whenever she kissed Charlotte, whenever she touched her, but it was something *more*. Something stronger. Somehow, it was all stronger, which seemed unfathomable to Sutton, because she'd already been insatiable when it came to Charlotte Thompson.

Charlotte's hands dug into her shoulders then, and Sutton could *feel* her reluctance as she pushed herself back, truly breaking their kiss.

She still stayed there, though, straddling Sutton, her thighs bracketing Sutton's and keeping them locked against each other. Sutton's hands stayed where they were, dipped just under Charlotte's borrowed pajama pants, so she could run her fingers over Charlotte's full hips.

Sutton panted up at Charlotte, her lips still tingling from their kiss, as Charlotte looked down at her.

The only lighting came from the television and the colored lights of the Christmas tree, casting Charlotte in a seemingly mystical light. Captivating, if Sutton was being entirely honest, and she swallowed hard, searching Charlotte's eyes with her own. Questioning. Because there hadn't been a single time they'd started to have sex that Charlotte had stopped them or hadn't wanted it.

And Sutton... she *wanted* so badly, she had no idea how Charlotte couldn't be feeling the same –

“Darling, I... I didn't come here for this,” Charlotte whispered, holding Sutton's gaze. Her voice was so throaty, it sent a shiver right down Sutton's spine.

She loosened the tight hold she still had on Sutton's shirt, smoothing her hand over to cup Sutton's neck in a touch that was both comforting and sweet and still made Sutton shiver, especially as she stroked her thumb over her the hollow of her throat.

“Do you not want t–” Sutton couldn't even finish asking the question before Charlotte cut her off with a choked laugh.

“No. I want,” she assured without a second of hesitation. She gently – so gently – stroked her thumb over Sutton's neck again. Sutton shivered, again, but it had nothing to do with heat or wanting or anything sexual. Especially as Charlotte elaborated, “But I don't want you to think that *every* time we see one another – especially if it's not related to the book – that we have to have sex or that I'm expecting it. I came here tonight just to be with you. To make sure you were okay. To make sure you didn't feel lonely, especially on Christmas Eve.”

There was such a genuine sweetness to Charlotte's voice. Something Sutton didn't hear very often, but tried to never linger on it whenever she did. Something she'd heard in Charlotte's voice, years ago, and after Charlotte had ended things between them, it haunted Sutton.

As she sat there in her living room on Christmas Eve, she couldn't help but let the tone and the words delivered with it linger. To settle inside of her, even though she knew it was a bad idea.

It was a bad idea. Sutton *knew* it.

And Charlotte was perfect and, technically, correct, as she insisted that they didn't have to have sex every time they saw one another.

Her heart stuttered in her chest, as she nodded. “I know. I know we don't have to have sex.”

Maybe that in and of itself, was a big part of the danger.

She knew Charlotte hadn't come here just looking for or wanting sex. She *knew* Charlotte had come here with the kindest and most caring of intentions. Intentions Charlotte seemed to have for Sutton, frequently and sometimes singularly.

Everything would be so much easier, really, if Charlotte had come here only for physical intimacy.

But for the last six weeks, they had been very physical. Sutton kept it that way; it made sense that way. She always wanted Charlotte, she knew Charlotte wanted her. Between them, sex was the most uncomplicated part.

Not to mention it was the best sex Sutton had, and a part of her felt like she needed to get her fill, to sate herself, before it was over.

Sex made sense.

The little, sweet human moments filtered in, but Sutton did her best to accept them for what they were.

Right here, right now, Sutton could admit that this intimacy felt different than it typically did. It felt, already, truly intimate.

Right now, right here, Sutton didn't have a single defense to hold up against Charlotte, even if it was a bad idea to have sex when she felt so... *much*.

This entire night so far was so, so dangerous for her to be around Charlotte.

But she couldn't stop it. She *couldn't*, she...

Charlotte mirrored her nod back, the smallest yet most meaningful of smiles teasing at her lips. As if her knowledge that Sutton knew her true intentions of being here mattered so very much. "Good," she whispered.

Dangerous.

The word floated through Sutton's mind, just as much of a whisper as Charlotte's.

And while she knew it, she couldn't listen to it. Not right now.

Maybe it was because of this *moment*. Of the way they were wrapped together in the soft glow of the room, and it was Christmas Eve. Of how a part of Sutton always longed for home, for her family, tonight, and with Charlotte here with her, she... hadn't.

Maybe it was because of exactly what Charlotte had just said. Because Charlotte had come to her, tonight, seeking her out, unasked and entirely unexpected, for the sole purpose of being there for Sutton on her first Christmas that she didn't have Lucy. Because Charlotte had known how deeply Sutton would be feeling that loneliness. Because Charlotte didn't *want* Sutton to feel that loneliness.

Maybe it was because of the way Charlotte had just shared such an honest look at her childhood. Because, as Charlotte explained what it was like during Christmas in her youth, Sutton *ached* for the young girl Charlotte had once been, lonely and forgotten on the holidays. How that ache remained, even, for the woman who'd had to harden against that feeling.

How she'd been able to see with such a complete vision, now – *finally* – why Charlotte was the person she'd become as an adult.

She'd always had a scope – back then and now – a view most people in the world would never have, into the psyche of Charlotte Thompson. She knew that; she'd always known that she knew Charlotte in ways that Charlotte didn't offer herself to many others. But tonight, she felt like she'd cracked open something so rare.

A true vulnerability. The truth of what had shaped Charlotte, even if Charlotte herself didn't quite know it.

It was probably an insanely powerful combination of all of those things, that made her lower the guard she vigilantly kept up with Charlotte. It was all of those things that made another – bigger – part of her mind hush that warning of danger.

Just this once. Just this *once*, let the softer side of her – the side of Sutton that hadn't existed the same way in so long take over. To let her feel.

She leaned up, angling her chin, wanting...

And Charlotte met her halfway, connecting their lips once again.

It was the combination of *all of those things*, she dimly thought, that fanned the flames of the heat inside of her to burn even hotter, tonight. That was what it was.

The flames that, for once, didn't feel like they were burning Sutton from the inside out. Not in this moment, as Charlotte sighed against her, sliding her tongue along Sutton's, lighting her up.

No, the flames didn't *burn* as Charlotte carded her hands through Sutton's hair, tugging gently, as she rocked her hips against Sutton once more.

They smoldered.

Her hands gentled – no less wanting, but wanting to savor.

She slid her hands down, gripping Charlotte's waist, molding her hands to the curve, as Charlotte's hands cupped her jaw.

Charlotte's kiss gentled with Sutton's.

Beat for beat.

Sutton brought her hands up, sliding Charlotte's – Sutton's – shirt up as she went. She wanted to feel Charlotte's body, her bare skin. It mattered to her, right now, and she wouldn't – couldn't – think too sharply about that in this moment.

Charlotte lifted her arms for Sutton, reaching back and taking off her bra in seconds.

Sutton brought her hands up, cupping her breasts, mesmerized by how insanely hard Charlotte's nipples already were for her. She moved her thumbs over them, circling, as Charlotte swore, then ducked her head down again, kissing Sutton deeply.

She slid her tongue into Sutton's mouth, along Sutton's own, and it felt so – so perfect. Like she could taste every sigh.

And Sutton was just as breathless, just as wanting as she'd been, before. As she was every other time, even though this felt so *different*.

Charlotte breathed out little moans into Sutton's mouth, as Sutton slid one of her hands down, dipping into her pants again, drawing it over Charlotte's thigh, and sliding it between her legs.

They both whimpered, their kiss slowing to the point that their mouths were simply pressed against one another's. Breathing the same air, as Sutton rubbed her fingers over the sheer, expensive lace of Charlotte's underwear.

She was so wet, Sutton's fingers were soaked from rubbing her through the fabric.

And she needed to touch her. She *needed* to feel Charlotte, to be as close to her as she possibly could.

That same slow, smoldering need that didn't have Sutton hastily tugging aside Charlotte's underwear, the way she typically would when they did this, but teased her.

Sliding the tips of her fingers underneath, drawing them over Charlotte's hot center, groaning from the back of her throat at how she felt.

"Yes. Darling, inside. I want you inside of me," Charlotte spoke, a desperation lining her words, her lips sliding over Sutton's in the most tantalizing, sensual movements, that sent shivers all over Sutton's body.

"You want me inside of you?" Sutton whispered, angling her head up, now. Just enough to be able to look at Charlotte in the dim, intimate lighting of the Christmas tree.

She traced her fingers over Charlotte, just *feeling* her. How hot she was. How swollen. How soaked. How her hips jerked and her thighs shook.

Hearing the unstoppable little moans that escaped the back of her throat, as Sutton rubbed her clit.

"How badly?" Sutton asked, staring right into Charlotte's eyes, as she circled her clit harder, but not faster. Not even as Charlotte started trying to move with her.

Charlotte's hands clawed into Sutton's hair, tugging, as her mouth fell open, panting at Sutton's touch.

God, her clit was *so hard*. Sutton panted with it, too. But she didn't move, yet.

She wanted to hear it.

She wouldn't move fast enough for Charlotte to come, like this. Sutton knew what she needed – and that thought alone sent the most insanely energizing jolt through her body. She knew that Charlotte needed her to touch her clit hard and fast for her to come apart.

But she didn't want Charlotte to come yet, she thought, as she stared up at Charlotte, her heart hammering.

Sutton was so wet, herself, she ached and squeezed her thighs together with it. She knew she would likely come as soon as Charlotte really started to fuck her, later. She knew it would be so simple.

But she didn't *care* about that, right now.

All she cared about was this.

Was Charlotte.

The way she stared down at Sutton, eyes so dark. So needy.

"You have no fucking idea how badly I want you, Sutton," Charlotte scratched her nails against the back of Sutton's neck as she spoke.

Both the sensation and the words had Sutton gasping, and it was enough. It was more than enough for her to give them what they both wanted.

She slid her hand down, pressing two fingers into Charlotte.

They slid in so easily, fitting so perfectly. Like she belonged there.

She *did*, she thought, wildly. Uncontrollably.

“God,” Charlotte grit out, the little moans from the back of her throat starting as Sutton started sliding her fingers in and out.

Deeply, firmly, but not quickly. No.

She wanted to feel everything. Every movement, every quiver, every time Charlotte tightened around her.

Those sounds that Sutton didn't think Charlotte knew she made.

She had a hunger inside of her, something she wondered if it could ever be sated, sparked by Charlotte's words. By Charlotte sharing herself and being vulnerable with Sutton.

It consumed her, the embers only growing hotter and hotter with every sigh that left Charlotte's mouth. Every trembling moan. Every hitch of her breath. Every time she jerked her hips down, thoughtlessly and shamelessly demanding more.

Sutton took in everything, feeling it rock through her body. Through every part of her.

When Charlotte's thighs quaked around her wrist, and her nails dug hard into Sutton's shoulders, and the sounds she made became even louder, even more choked off, Sutton knew she was so close. *So* close.

Her heart *pounded* with needing it, too. Needing Charlotte to unravel completely, all around her.

And still, she stopped moving. She hadn't planned on it, but – she – she needed. She swallowed and her throat was so dry and she could only stare up at Charlotte, and she didn't know what she needed, but she knew she wasn't ready for this to end.

Charlotte's chest heaved as she strained against Sutton, mesmerizing her, her breasts swaying with each breath. *Yes*, Sutton dimly registered. She needed *more*.

She kept her fingers stilled inside of Charlotte, curled deeply against her, feeling her drip around her fingers. Feeling Charlotte clench, desperately. Feeling Charlotte shake from how close she was to coming.

Sutton slid her other hand down and settled it on Charlotte's hip, gripping, keeping her as still as possible. The wanton, uncontrollable rocking Charlotte could manage as Sutton held her still did nothing, she knew. Nothing that Charlotte *needed*.

The knowledge of that worked through Sutton, viscerally. The power.

She stayed perfectly still as she realized *that* was what made the throbbing between her own legs nearly unbearable right now. *That* was what had made her pause.

That she *needed*, in this moment, to soak in every second of this. Every single second that she was what Charlotte needed. *Who* Charlotte needed.

Whimpers snuck out of Charlotte's throat as she finally blinked her eyes open, bleary and demanding and wanting and confused, they locked onto Sutton's.

"Good," she whispered, the feeling of the word like gravel in her throat after so many minutes of groans and panting for breath.

"Su... Su-tton," Charlotte grit out, attempting to move her hips again.

Sutton tightened her hand against the motion, making Charlotte moan, the sound so guttural. Feral, almost, as her fingernails dug in harder against Sutton's shoulders and she could feel Charlotte clench again around her again.

Fuck.

God, she wanted it. She wanted to see and hear and feel Charlotte come for her.

Still, she didn't move. Didn't let herself.

The confusion that clouded Charlotte's gaze became even more pronounced. She took in a deep breath through gritted teeth, like she was trying to focus on Sutton. Like she was trying to get more clarity on the situation.

But Sutton didn't want more clarity.

Honestly, she wasn't sure she could think super clearly right now. All she knew was that she wanted Charlotte, entirely mindless for her. Open and vulnerable and giving and only for Sutton.

All for Sutton.

In all of the ways she'd dreamed about, fantasized about, and then locked away.

She flexed her fingers, the three she had inside of Charlotte, curling them inside of her.

The clarity that Charlotte had clearly been trying to grasp, dissipated, and a vicious, intense sense of satisfaction slid through Sutton.

"*God,*" Charlotte keened, throwing her head back. "Please. S-ut – just – *please.*"

Sutton slid her fingers out, then thrust again. Once more, making sure her palm rubbed against Charlotte's clit with every movement. Then again, as Charlotte scrambled to find a new purchase against Sutton's shoulders.

With every sound Charlotte made, an echo of Sutton's name sounded. Her eyes snapped open as Sutton could feel her tightening around her fingers, locking onto Sutton's gaze and holding there.

And she came.

Around Sutton's fingers, with Sutton's name on her lips, her nails leaving marks on Sutton's shoulders, still wearing Sutton's clothing.

She came for Sutton.

Charlotte was still panting as she started to come down, as she finally seemed to come back to herself. She stared, eyes dark and wanting, at Sutton.

And Sutton, her heart in her throat, couldn't look away.

Charlotte crashed her lips into Sutton's, then, lips and teeth and tongue demanding, as she reached down and clutched at Sutton's wrist. She lifted her hips and pulled Sutton's hand out from between her thighs, as she nipped at Sutton's bottom lip, then sucked it between her teeth.

Sutton's breath was already ragged, unable to keep her own hips steady because she *wanted* so badly. She wanted Charlotte inside of her. She wanted Charlotte's mouth on her. She wanted *Charlotte*.

She whimpered as Charlotte released her bottom lip, then brought Sutton's hand up to her mouth. Sutton let herself be maneuvered, anticipation spiking through her, desperate for Charlotte's every move.

Especially as Charlotte brought Sutton's wet fingers to her lips, and the nerve endings in Sutton's fingertips seeming to explode as Charlotte moved them over her full lips.

She couldn't even make sense of the sounds escaping her own throat, especially not as Charlotte then sucked Sutton's fingers into her mouth.

"*God*," she hissed out, biting off a whimper, as her fingers were encased by the warmth of Charlotte's mouth.

She felt Charlotte drag her tongue over her fingers, and she shuddered with it. She felt Charlotte's lips wrapped around her as she started sliding Sutton's fingers out of her mouth, and she *throbbed*.

Charlotte knew it, too. Sutton knew she did.

Even before she quirked an eyebrow and leaned in to Sutton's ear as she murmured, "Darling, I'm going to make you come so hard, you won't be getting back up tonight. Do you want it here or in your bed?"

Fuck.

Sutton knew without a single doubt, as those words pulsed through her body, that Charlotte wasn't being hyperbolic. "Bed."

Sutton woke without an alarm, at eight, rather than being hopped on or shaken awake or alerted by excited squeals about Santa before six, which was how her Christmas mornings had been spent for the last several years. Ever since Lucy could walk and talk and escape her own bed.

And while the thought of that sent a spike of longing, a spike of sadness through her...

She'd turned her head on her pillow to look at Charlotte laying next to her.

Still sleeping, soundly.

She'd always woken before Charlotte had. It was something she'd found so amusing, so endearing years ago. That Charlotte was such a go-getter, had every day planned, was always *ready* for whatever her day might bring.

But that she, instinctively, always slept heavier and for longer than Sutton did.

Sutton used to wake up before Charlotte, then – in the beginning, especially – she would often leave before Charlotte woke, herself or when she was just waking up.

But she always took a few moments to... look at her.

Something about Charlotte sleeping had felt so sweet to Sutton.

It still did, she thought, unable to control the way that feeling spiralled through her, melting through her veins, settling warmly in her chest.

Charlotte's head was turned toward Sutton, her body curled up in the direction of Sutton's, her arm thrown out over Sutton's waist. When Charlotte was asleep, she sought out and initiated closeness.

So, so endearing.

Her wavy hair was tousled and her cheeks were rosy and her pouty lips were open the slightest bit, and Sutton couldn't control the soft sigh that escaped her as her heart flip-flopped in her chest.

It was easier to keep up her emotional guards with Charlotte, she *knew* that.

And yet... she traced her fingers lightly over the arm thrown over her waist, revelling in Charlotte's soft skin.

She was grateful when her phone buzzed, repeatedly, on her bedside table, keeping her grounded in reality as much as was possible in this moment.

Turning on her side – Charlotte's arm still over her waist – she checked the messages she'd gotten that morning.

Mom – 7:02AM

Good morning, honey, and merry Christmas. I know it's hard right now without Lucy with you, but you will have her and all of us with you tomorrow. I can't wait to see you! I'd have called, but I sincerely hope that you are able to sleep in.

Mom – 7:03AM

Also, your father says Merry Christmas and that he is excited to talk to you later tonight. We love you

Little did her mother know that Sutton was grappling with far more this morning than not having Lucy. And her mother would *never* know, because Sutton knew very well that her mom did not approve of what she was doing with Charlotte.

She had no idea they were sleeping together, but she wasn't pleased with Charlotte being Sutton's friend, at all.

Her mother had her best interest at heart. But, Sutton reminded herself, she had this all well in hand, as she typed out a reciprocal holiday message.

She was enjoying herself with Charlotte. They were both having a good time. They had, as evidenced by the previous night, incredible sex. They treated each other fairly. They respected one another. They were – this time around – on the same page about what they were expecting from the other.

Charlotte hummed in her sleep as she was halfway through responding, her fingers stroking absent-mindedly at Sutton's hip, and she shivered at it, squeezing her eyes closed before she made herself stay focused.

She then scrolled through the other similar messages from her siblings, then to Regan's.

Regan – 7:55AM

Ho ho ho, Sutton Spencer!

Regan – 7:55AM

Don't mistake me for being Santa. I'm calling you a ho ho ho, with your sexcapades with a certain senator

Regan – 7:55AM

And don't mistake my calling you a ho ho ho for me being anything less than encouraging

Regan – 7:56AM

Anyway, Emma wanted me to remind you that "dinner" will be ready by 1. I wanted to remind you that you should come over even earlier so I can give you some presents and shower you in holiday affection – do not try to get out of it, I will not let you have a lonely Christmas

Sutton couldn't help but laugh, rolling her eyes affectionately. She *nearly* typed back *if you think I'm already a ho ho ho, wait until you hear what happened last night* but refrained from doing so; she'd tell Regan all of the details, later.

Sutton – 8:07AM

I will be over before dinner

She rolled her lips, unable to dispel the warm feeling she'd woken up with. Unable to totally shake the feeling that lodged inside of her last night. Unable to stop herself from adding into the message for Regan –

Sutton – 8:08AM
*And I'm not having a lonely Christmas
morning... Charlotte's here.*

She laughed as she saw Regan *immediately* start writing a response, but left the text thread, anyway. Regan could live with a little bit of anticipation to hear the whole story.

She opened Layla's message thread, then, more than excited to see the videos of Lucy on Christmas morning even though the feeling of it all happening without her was bittersweet.

Before she watched the videos Layla had sent to her, though, she set her jaw at the last message Layla had sent her this morning.

Layla – 6:49AM

*For the record, we will be discussing your
apparent "relationship" with Senator
Thomson when you pick up Lucy tomorrow.
That conversation is not over, Sutton*

Aggravation and exasperation rolled through her. The message was very in-line with the short conversation she and Layla had the previous night, before she'd left.

Where Layla had stormed into the kitchen, just out of earshot of Lucy and Charlotte, and Sutton had followed her, feeling a combination of trepidation and annoyance.

"Are you okay, darling?" Charlotte asked from behind her, her voice that slightly slow, sleepy timber, her southern accent more pronounced.

Sutton loved that. She always had.

Her heart fluttered with it, which she did her valiant best to ignore, as she turned to look at Charlotte.

Who was propped up on her elbow, dark hair cascading down to Sutton's pillow, arching a questioning eyebrow at Sutton, even as she still had a crease from the pillow on her cheek.

She looked unquestionably cute, and Sutton couldn't help but smile at her, in spite of the text. "Good morning. I'm sorry – did I wake you?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No. I just woke up, but I could feel that you're... tense," she settled on, frowning at the word, as she lightly stroked her hand where it lay on Sutton's hip.

She hadn't realized quite how tense she was, but Charlotte wasn't wrong. She deliberately took in a deep breath, holding it, before blowing it out and settling down into the bed.

The tension, admittedly was still present, but... it felt slightly better, snug in her bed with Charlotte's attentive, concerned eyes on her.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Charlotte asked, her gaze flicking to Sutton's phone, which was still clutched in her hand.

Sutton knew she should say *no*. She knew that she shouldn't open herself up like this to Charlotte. She *knew* she should keep these parts of herself separate. She knew she was only making things more difficult in the long run if she didn't.

But it was Christmas morning. And she didn't have her daughter. And she had Charlotte in her bed. And Charlotte had shared herself with Sutton, emotionally and physically, in the last twelve hours in ways Sutton could have never dreamed of. In ways that she *shouldn't* dream of.

And the words escaped her, because she just wanted it to all be simple. To be *easy*, and maybe she could let it be easy, just for now. "It's Layla." She closed her eyes and brought her free hand up to rub over her face.

"What about her?" Charlotte asked, and Sutton could hear in her voice how much she wanted to know, but also how cautious she was in asking.

But Sutton simply didn't have it in her right now to hold it in. Not when Charlotte felt so good next to her and sounded so coaxing, like she truly *wanted* to know.

"Last night, when we went into the kitchen while you sat with Lucy..." Sutton blew out a sigh, dropping her hand from her face as she stared up into Charlotte's eyes. "She is *not* happy about... this." She gestured between the two of them.

"I gathered that," Charlotte murmured, and – of course she had. That didn't surprise Sutton in the least. Still, she looked apologetic, as she searched Sutton's gaze with her own. "I didn't tell her, about us. But—"

Sutton shook her head against the pillow. "No. But you were here. On Christmas Eve, to make sure I wasn't lonely." She offered Charlotte a small, tentative, emotional smile.

Because *god*, it was so... thoughtful. It was *just like* Charlotte Thompson, wasn't it? To make Sutton feel this way, even when Sutton was trying not to. It was *just like* Charlotte Thompson, to make everything in her life so much harder, while simultaneously making her feel so damn good. It was *just like* Charlotte Thompson to be so incredibly, ridiculously romantic, even without trying.

She swallowed hard, pursing her lips.

"*You* aren't the problem, when it comes to Layla." Maybe in so many other ways that Sutton was careening toward but desperately trying not to. But not in the minefield that was Sutton's relationship with her ex-wife.

"What did she say?" Charlotte prompted again, and there was a sharpness in her voice, reflecting in the honey-gold brightness of her eyes. Something a little dangerous, like... protectiveness. Like, if Charlotte didn't like you, she would know just who to call to bury the body.

And, alarmingly, she truly might.

Sutton tried not to think too much about that fact or the fact that Charlotte was seeming so protective over *her*.

"She's mad," she said, simply. "That she didn't know about us, beforehand. That you know Lucy." She let out a scoffing, mirthless laugh, all of those negative, terrible feelings that made her feel sick pulling together in the pit of her stomach. "Mad, I think, that you're *you*."

Charlotte's expression was so tight, so pinched. Like she really was contemplating Layla's execution, as she nodded. "Mmhmm. Exactly the impression I got."

"And I just – *you* are none of her business. What *we* do, is none of her concern! Did she talk to *me* before she started dating Arianne? *While we were married?*" The words – the same ones she'd fired back at Layla last night – escaped her, still as fiery as they did the first time.

But it felt good to say them to Charlotte. It felt good to say them to someone, she wildly, insanely, thought to someone who understood her. Someone who was, clearly, on her side.

Not that Regan wasn't or Emma or her mother or the rest of her family.

But it felt good to say these things, her feelings and thoughts, to *Charlotte*.

Who narrowed her eyes to little slits as she bit at her cheek, as if she were biting back harsh, extreme expletives.

She didn't say the rest of what she'd said to Layla. That Lucy had met Charlotte before she and Sutton had started this... arrangement. That Charlotte was a trusted and safe person to be around their daughter. That, to Lucy, Charlotte was one of Sutton's friends and someone she was working with. That Lucy had no idea about Sutton and Charlotte's sexual relationship, because *why would she*.

"And all of that? Is the only thing you have the right to comment on when it comes to *my* relationships. What pertains to *Lucy* is something you and I can talk about; beyond that? I do not want to hear it," she'd quietly snapped.

"And you don't think it pertains to *Lucy* that you're in bed with a *Senator*? With someone who is on track to be the fucking *President*!?" Layla had crossed her arms, scoffing, "You don't think that is something I have the right to comment on?"

"What did she have to say to that?" Charlotte softly asked, after clearly breathing through some of her anger.

"She..." Sutton rolled her eyes, even as just the *thought* of the next words forced her nerves to leap into action. "She threatened to bring up our custody arrangement."

She'd seen *red* at that.

Just, it appeared, as Charlotte did. Her eyes widened, mouth fell open, and her fingers twitched against Sutton's hip as if they were ready to reach for her phone. "Darling, I can make a simple phone call and truly... *Layla* will never even get her day in court."

The threat was not a joke in the least. Sutton could feel how very serious Charlotte was, and she didn't know what it said about her that she found it equal parts amusing, thrilling, and endearing.

But Charlotte's response calmed Sutton's, and she reached down, smoothing her hand over Charlotte's. Intertwining their fingers so easily, as she shook her head. "No, that's... it's not a *real* threat." The words were a reassurance for both Charlotte and herself. "Layla can hardly manage the custody arrangement we currently have, even between both her and Arianne, and we both know it."

There were many days – Christmas Eve itself being the latest – in which Layla was late to picking up Lucy or had to postpone, due to work.

It was an empty threat and they'd both known it, but it was something Layla had never once said before, which showed exactly how rattled she was by the whole situation.

“It was just... not a nice message to wake up to,” Sutton summed up.

Charlotte's fingers flexed around hers, holding tighter, as she asked, “Have you watched the videos she sent? With Lucy?” She nodded toward Sutton's unlocked phone, where the video thumbnails were still on the screen.

“Not yet,” she admitted.

“Do you want to?” Charlotte prompted, so softly. Like she was trying to cheer Sutton up, to comfort her.

Damningly sweet. Sutton nodded, before she bit her lip and cast a look at Charlotte. “You... don't have to watch, if you'd prefer to get a coffee or anything, else.”

Charlotte shot her a truly incredulous look. “I hope you're kidding. Play the videos, please.”

So, she did.

She lost herself in several glorious minutes of watching Lucy open her gifts at Layla and Arianne's, her sullen pouts of yesterday forgotten as she exclaimed with joy over her gifts, then as she presented her own presents to Layla and Arianne.

It worked, very well, to soothe over the residual bad taste in her mouth, and she turned to look at Charlotte, who had a cute, soft smile on her face. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For the guitar; Lucy was *so* happy.” She pointed at the last video they'd watched, “She has it right there. She wouldn't let it go.”

And the guitar was there, present, amongst even all of the new gifts she had just opened.

Charlotte turned to look right back at her, smiling indulgently. “It was very worth calling in the minor favor.”

She was close enough to see the flecks of gold in Charlotte's eyes. Close enough to feel Charlotte's warm breath blow over her lips. Close enough to fall right in, at the thought of what they were doing. Laying in bed on Christmas morning, watching videos of Sutton's daughter, while Charlotte looked as enamored as Sutton felt.

Both of those flutters that Charlotte brought out in her kicked up, then. Both the one deep the good, warm one, and the discomfoting one. Both feelings Charlotte inspired in her, now, both uncontrollable. Her heart started beating faster with it.

With the way Charlotte just *looked* at her.

She breathed through the way her heart pounded and her stomach fluttered, and forced herself to blink, and look away.

“Um. I have a gift for you, speaking of gifts,” Sutton murmured, unable to speak in a totally normal tone. Unable to speak as if this morning wasn't affecting her in some way. She held

her phone up and shook it a little, bringing them back to the videos they'd just watched, as the reminder of opening the gifts. "If you'd like to open it, before I have to get ready."

Even giving Charlotte the option of her gift, though, sent Sutton's nerves buzzing.

Still, Charlotte's eyebrows lifted with obvious interest, her smile soft. "I would love it. I..." her smile dipped, right into her own obvious bought of nerves, as she offered, "Have my gift, for you, as well."

They sat on the couch, re-dressed in Christmas pajamas with mugs of coffee in hand, twenty minutes later.

And Sutton's nerves spiked even harder, as she flattened her hands over the small gift on her lap. It was adorned with the same cartoon animals playing in the snow that she'd wrapped Lucy's in, and – in the moment – she felt a little embarrassed by that.

She gripped her fingers around the edges of the rectangle, breathing out a small, uneasy laugh, as she cleared her throat and pressed her gift toward Charlotte. Better to just – do it.

"It's – it's nothing much," she managed to say, even as her nerves grew stronger.

Charlotte aimed an incredulous look at her, her fingers wrapping around Sutton's gift as she tugged it from Sutton's grasp. "*I* will be the judge of that, thank you very much."

Sutton nodded, tangling her own fingers together to give herself something to do as she nodded at the wrapping paper. "And the wrapping – well, I didn't really have anything sourced for adults."

The look Charlotte gave her was sheer amusement, pure warmth, as she slid her fingernail under the tape. "I wouldn't have it any other way." She paused, then, the amusement fading from her expression as she admitted quietly, "I've never..." she cleared her throat, "I don't recall the last time I opened gifts, in pajamas, next to a Christmas tree. This is – it's already very special to me."

The sincerity in her voice pulled Sutton right in, it made that place inside of Sutton, the one that Charlotte had cracked into last night, spill out.

And it pushed her right out of her own insecurities, as she gestured for Charlotte to open the gift. "Well... okay, then. I hope you like it."

The cute, small smile that tugged up Charlotte's lips as she focused on slowly opening the gift made Sutton, uncontrollably, smile, as well. She was so... *cute*. So ridiculously sweet and open and adorable, and pulling Sutton in, and...

Charlotte's mouth dropped open as she pulled out the printed pages Sutton had wrapped, genuine surprise splashing over her face as she scanned the title page Sutton had created.

Sutton's own nerves didn't stop their increasingly fast fluttering, tying up her stomach, not even when Charlotte flicked her gaze to Sutton's, her excitement clear.

"Is this what I think it is?" She asked, her own perfect hand splaying over the title page.

Sutton swallowed hard as she nodded. She found herself grinning, feeling unbearably shy, as she softly explained, “Yes, it’s... it’s my manuscript. The one we talked about, a few weeks ago. For my romance novel.”

It was something she’d worked on, played around with, and ultimately shelved, a while back. She had so many other things going on – with Lucy and work and the work to get the Zones set up, as well as doubt around her own writing – that it had been easy to put it aside.

Charlotte’s eyes were wide and so deep, and the look she gave Sutton was so *sweet*, Sutton couldn’t help the words falling out of her mouth, “I – I know it’s not – I just... I finished it,” she said, simply, pressing her palms into her thighs, as her knees sat flush against Charlotte’s. “I finished it, after we talked about it.”

After Charlotte had looked at her, so seriously, as she’d told Sutton that she would have loved to read it. That she thought Sutton should write, for herself. That she’d been surprised when she’d seen that Sutton hadn’t written any fictional novels, after looking her up.

“So, I thought you might want to read it,” she finished, quietly, as she gestured to the manuscript. It was terrifying, to give her work to someone. “And I know you prefer to read in actual printed pages, so.”

Even when she sent her mom her work, she felt a kernel of nerves. *This* felt... so much bigger than that. Charlotte’s opinion mattered to her – scarily so. In a big, demanding, way, that Sutton tried not to think about.

Charlotte reached out and slid her hand over Sutton’s. “I *love* it.”

There was no doubting her emphatic tone, or just how much she appreciated this. None.

It settled Sutton, her nerves fading, as she melted into an easier smile.

“I also love that you could fuck me on this couch the way you did last night and still be so self-conscious this morning,” Charlotte whispered, arching an eyebrow at Sutton, as the hand holding hers squeezed.

Sutton felt herself blush even as she rolled her eyes. “Shut up. It’s... different,” she settled on, squeezing Charlotte’s hand back.

And it *was* different.

But the feelings from last night and now from this morning, were starting to meld together, that much was undeniable.

Charlotte leaned in and pressed a light, lingering kiss to the corner of Sutton’s lips. Enough for her to feel the softness of her mouth, before she drew back, and reached down for the box she’d pulled from her bag.

And, curiously, Sutton swore she could see her recently forgotten nerves flash over Charlotte’s face.

She handed Sutton the gift, before placing her own hands back over Sutton’s manuscript. Clearly feeling her own anticipation.

Which Sutton felt well up inside of her, too, intrigued.

She opened the lid on the box, removing the tissue paper, which revealed – another box.

A jewelry box, and a decently sized one, at that.

Sutton traced her fingers over the soft, velvet exterior, before she looked up at Charlotte in question.

“Merry Christmas,” Charlotte murmured, as she nodded at Sutton, urging her, “Open it.”

Sutton frowned, though, glancing down at her manuscript. “That’s not worth anything.” She ran her fingers over the box in her lap again, “*This...*”

She didn’t have to open it to know already that it would be expensive.

Charlotte wouldn’t give anyone – let alone her, and she knew it – something like this that wasn’t.

But Charlotte’s gaze was insistent, as she urged again, “Darling, please. What you gave *me* is one of a kind. Irreplaceable. There’s no monetary value on something like this.” There was such a passion in her words, it swept through Sutton, making her cheeks flush all over again.

She’d be delusional to believe that Charlotte couldn’t afford... well, any gift she’d purchased. She didn’t have the bad manners to reject something Charlotte obviously wanted to give her.

And, most of all, she wanted to know. She wanted it.

She didn’t want to want whatever Charlotte was offering, but she *did*.

With that, she held her breath and opened the cover of the jewelry box.

And her mouth fell open.

It was a necklace. A *stunning* necklace, with a delicate white gold chain, a large tear drop sapphire at the center, with small clusters of diamonds surrounding it, as well as twists of diamonds glinting along the chain. And because Sutton knew Charlotte as well as she did, she knew very well that every stone on here was high-quality.

“Charlotte,” she breathed out. It was all she could say, as she ran her fingers lightly – so lightly – over the necklace.

It had been *so long* since someone had given her something like this. Layla, when they’d been married, had gifted her with jewelry – sparingly, but occasionally. Even then, though, it had never been something like *this*.

Something so very aligned with Sutton’s taste, something so exquisite, something so exorbitant. Something so clearly with the intention of being for her, as a woman. Not “a mother” not “a daughter” not “a sister” not “a best friend.” But a wanted, special, desirable person.

“I can’t,” she managed to whisper, shaking her head.

Charlotte seemed to anticipate that, however, and she firmly nodded, resting her hand comfortingly on Sutton’s thigh. “You *can*. And I want you to have it. So very much.”

The words escaped Sutton, then, as she looked back down.

It was incredibly beautiful. So incredibly beautiful, and it tugged at something in Sutton's mind. Right in the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Only as she landed the tip of her index finger against the sapphire stone did it *hit* her.

Charlotte. Christmas. Expensive, exorbitant gifts.

"The earrings." The words fell from her lips on a gasp, as she blinked down at the necklace, looking at it closer.

Yes. The hue of the stone, the twist with the diamonds, the entire *design*, right down to the subtle and delicate statement of beauty. It perfectly matched the earrings Charlotte had given her, the first time they'd been in each other's lives.

"It matches the earrings you gave me," she murmured, confused and surprised and – was it a coincidence? "Thirteen years ago."

Charlotte's cheeks looked the slightest bit pink, she saw, as she dug her teeth into her bottom lip. "It does," she affirmed. Certain, but soft. She seemed even more nervous as she swallowed visibly hard. "They were a set. I bought them as a set," she explained, her searching gaze on Sutton's.

And *floored* didn't begin to describe the emotion rushing through Sutton, as the blood rushed in her ears.

"It's okay if you don't still have them," Charlotte murmured, squeezing Sutton's thigh, again. Reassuring.

But Sutton did still have them. She did.

She hadn't worn them, again, after Charlotte had broken up with her. It felt too big, too hard, too painful, too stupid, too... everything.

But she'd *never*, not in all of the times she'd culled and cultivated her jewelry collection, been able to get rid of the beautiful sapphire earrings. That perfectly matched her eyes, just like the necklace did. She'd never been able to forget the way Charlotte had said those words when she'd given the gift to Sutton, or the way she'd felt.

So seen. So appreciated.

She understood why *she* had those earrings.

But what she couldn't understand was –

"You kept this? For thirteen years?" She breathed the question out, as the backs of her eyes stung with tears, her throat feeling tight.

Charlotte nodded, rolling her lips, before she said, "It never felt right, to get rid of it. I just... they were a set. For you."

Charlotte had held onto this for over a decade. *For Sutton*. She'd held onto *her* for over a decade, and Sutton closed her eyes so tightly at the thoughts, at the feelings. At the intent, wanting expression on Charlotte's face, the beautiful sincerity in her luminous eyes.

She closed her eyes, so tightly, against the tears that she didn't want to leak out.

“Sutton?” Charlotte asked, clearly concerned, as she shifted closer.

But Sutton only shook her head, bringing her hand up over her mouth, as the other wrapped around her stomach.

“You make it so *hard*,” she pushed out, her voice thick, as she blinked open her eyes. “So hard,” she repeated. “You’re so... perfect.”

Charlotte’s tentative smile at her words didn’t reflect at all how Sutton was feeling.

Charlotte was so perfect, she made it far too hard for Sutton to pretend like she had any semblance of control. She made it hard for Sutton to go about their relationship like there was any way of getting out of this unscathed.

She made it so very, very hard for Sutton to not all in love with her all over again.