

## *A Charlotte Thompson Christmas*

To put it simply, Charlotte Thompson was bored.

“Charlotte, you haven’t eaten any of your Christmas dinner,” her nanny, Alma, reminded her, pushing Charlotte’s plate toward her with a small smile. Kind, but firm, as she often was. She’d been with Charlotte for a year now. Ever since she’d turned ten.

She generally liked her more than Ilsa, the nanny she’d had before Alma, but she didn’t love her more. Charlotte thought that was an important distinction. But Ilsa had been with her since she’d been born, so that had a lot to do with it, she thought.

Charlotte kept her chin firmly planted in her hand, elbow resting on the table, as she blew out a petulant sigh. They sat in the formal dining room because her parents insisted on eating in here on all holidays. Even holidays when they weren’t there to enforce it.

She sighed again. “I’m not hungry.”

Alma arched a *look* at her; Charlotte was already familiar with that look. “You have to eat at least half your plate, you know the rules. You’re a growing girl.” Alma aimed a meaningful look at her elbow on the table that Charlotte pretended not to see.

Even though she really *wasn’t* hungry, she picked up her fork and toyed with it for a long moment before scooping up the smallest bit of mashed potato. But she still didn’t bring it to her mouth, and instead, she put it down again.

“I’m not hungry, Alma. If I eat when I’m not hungry, I’ll throw up,” she debated, sliding her elbow off the table and straightening her spine and staring her nanny in the eye. Her grandmother did that whenever she debated and her grandmother was the President of the United States, so it had to mean something. “I don’t want to throw up on Christmas.”

“Agnès prepared this amazing feast and I’m going to be the only one eating it? That doesn’t seem quite right. Or quite fair to her,” Alma spoke, her voice turning into that Actually Stern tone she got sometimes that could mean Charlotte was in trouble.

Charlotte looked along the dining room table that seated twenty-four. It was lined with food, and all of the food looked great, it smelled delicious.

And Charlotte didn’t want any part of it.

“Well, it’s not *fair* to me that I have to eat this food when no one else does.”

“*Have to?* Charlotte...” Alma trailed off, rubbing her temples in the way she had. “Do you remember the soup kitchen I took you to at Thanksgiving?”

Charlotte held out a few seconds, but then nodded. She did remember; it had been something totally new and different to her. When they’d come home, she’d made a presentation to her parents – they’d scheduled her in luckily on the following Friday when they’d both had time – about how all of their leftover food should be arranged for donation, as they frequently had *so*

many leftovers. They bought so much food and only four of them – now that William was in college – lived there!

It *had* shifted something inside of her, that was true.

Alma nodded, holding eye contact. “You are more than fortunate to have the opportunities and lifestyle afforded to you by your parents. They work really hard to give you everything – all of this food, all of the presents you have. But there are a lot of people in the world who work just as hard as your parents and don’t have nearly what you have.”

Charlotte nodded along with her; this was big to Alma, and she’d been teaching Charlotte a lot. She sometimes used Charlotte’s own grandmother’s speeches or announcements to help her understand, too.

“So, before you are pouty and talking about how you *have* to eat this food, remember that.” Alma tapped her finger next to Charlotte’s plate.

And Charlotte *got it*, she really did.

Still, her attitude melted away in that moment, and she slumped back in her chair. In the absence of her irritation, there was just... loneliness.

She stared down at the empty table again, crossing her arms around her waist. “Yeah, my parents work so hard. Hard enough that they need to take their holiday vacation in Bora Bora. Without us.”

The *again* was implied.

Her parents hadn’t been home for Christmas since Charlotte had hit six. That was the year they’d calmly discussed Santa Claus and the truth behind the magic of Christmas. Which was fine, Charlotte wasn’t *stupid*. She was sure she would have figured it out around then, anyway. They said that she was old enough to know the truth and William had officially been a teenager, which meant he was responsible enough to be around if she or Caleb needed anything. They’d had Ilsa (and now Alma), too, who lived here, and Louisa and Gerald, their live-in housekeepers.

There were always grownups around. Which meant that her parents didn’t have to be, Charlotte guessed.

But this year was even worse than usual. Because even William and Caleb were gone, today. Even when their parents hadn’t spent Christmas here, William and Caleb had always been here with her!

But William was spending his winter break doing an internship in England and Caleb – now that he’d just turned thirteen – was *all that* and had gotten invited to go skiing at Walker Resort in Aspen with his friend from school and had left two days ago.

“No one wants to be here with me on Christmas,” she whispered, staring down at her plate, filled with all of that food.

She felt pretty empty inside, but the idea of eating it just made her stomach twist harder.

Alma was quiet for several long moments, before her hand landed on Charlotte's arm, patting gently. "I'm here," she said, sounding nicer than Charlotte thought she'd ever heard.

It made her eyes hurt, stinging with tears as she turned to look at Alma, holding her gaze as she muttered, "Yeah. Because you get paid to be here." Charlotte bit at the inside of her lip and arched an eyebrow at Alma as she was quiet for a few moments. "Can I be excused?"

Alma nodded at her softly.

Charlotte bypassed the grand room that hosted their large, professionally decorated Christmas tree and resolutely did *not* look inside. Coming downstairs this morning, there had been a ton of presents as there always was. But Charlotte was the only one opening them, and it just felt *lonely*.

She'd only been laying in her bed for ten minutes when her cell phone rang. The black RAZR had been given a birthday gift from her parents a few months ago, and the main reason why it was Charlotte's favorite present ever was happening *right now*.

Excited for the first time all day as *Grandmother* flashed over the ID, she answered quickly, "Merry Christmas, Grandmother."

"Merry Christmas," her grandmother's voice came back to her, a little grainy; it usually was on international calls. "What's wrong?"

Charlotte blew out a long sigh. "How do you *always* know?!"

Not even her parents could tell when something was wrong, definitely not over the phone. But Grandmother always knew.

"My dear girl, don't you know by now? I know everything," her grandmother joked, but Charlotte nodded sagely to herself in her room. "Now, tell me. Why is my granddaughter not having a good day?"

Her grandmother didn't like complainers, Charlotte knew that, and she bit her lip. But she also didn't like not having her questions answered promptly, so...

Pulling a pillow into her lap, Charlotte smoothed her fingers over the edges and tried to put on her most mature voice, while still feeling really glum. "No one's here. William's in England, and Caleb's in Aspen, and Mom and Dad are in Bora Bora, and you're..." she trailed off, screwing up her face in thought. "In... Sudan?"

"Charlotte! Been watching the news, have you?" There was evident warm pride in her grandmother's voice, and it chased away some of the lonely cobwebs in Charlotte's heart, as she sat up a bit straighter.

"I have been," she said, satisfied with herself. Her grandmother had told Charlotte six months ago that someone who didn't watch the news was someone that *wanted* to be in the dark. Charlotte never wanted to be in the dark.

It's how she'd found out that her grandmother had left the country three days ago. And she hadn't answered her phone when Charlotte had tried to call her, which meant that business was *urgent* and that she'd call when she could. "Are you still busy?"

Her grandmother sighed. "Ah, well, things are quite complicated, but I'm not too busy to call my girl on Christmas."

"Did you just finish work now? Even though it's..." She quickly calculated the time difference she'd looked up the other day. "Eleven at night?"

"I am just finishing now, and the holiday gift to myself this year is having such an intelligent granddaughter."

Charlotte beamed.

"I have to make one more call before I can settle in for the night. But I should be home in two days, and I'll send a car for you when I return. You can come and stay with me for a few days. We don't need Bora Bora or London or Aspen, do we?"

"Really!" Charlotte hadn't been to D.C. to stay with her grandmother in almost five months.

"Really. And, my girl, you listen to me closely, okay?"

Charlotte nodded vigorously, closing her eyes to concentrate extra hard on the words her grandmother was going to say. "Okay."

"Whenever you feel sad today, think about this – December twenty-fifth is merely one more day on the calendar. We, *society*, have given it meaning. If you want to look at today as just another day, if you want to give it your *own* meaning, then you should. You own today, just like you own every other day in your own life. Don't give anyone else the power to ruin it."

It took Charlotte a few seconds for the words to sink it fully, but she sat with them to really let them hit her. Her grandmother was the smartest person in the world – it was a *fact* – and Charlotte always tried to take in every single word she said.

"Okay. I think you're right, grandmother," she nodded, getting more confident with the words.

When they hung up a few minutes later, Charlotte stood and walked to her desk with a purpose. Her grandmother was always right, and she was right about this, too.

Who cared if her family wasn't here today? Her parents weren't here all of the time, and it didn't usually upset her, not really. Today was just another day.

And she could give it her own meaning.

She walked into the den to find Alma a little while later, shoulders straight as she asked, "Can we go back to that food pantry from before, tomorrow? To volunteer?"

Alma looked at her, first surprised and then with a smile pulling at her lips as she lowered the book she was reading. "I think that's a great idea."

Charlotte nodded decisively. If she wanted to be more like her grandmother, she had to start picking herself up when she felt down. To be strong for herself so she could be strong for others. Especially those less fortunate than herself. That was what her grandmother often said, anyway.

And she was going to do it, too.



Charlotte, at twenty-eight, was *not* a Grinch.

She really wasn't.

She had her own version of the Christmas spirit, her own Christmas traditions. Volunteering her time, raising money and organizing drives for certain charities or shelters – generosity and giving was the meaning of the season.

And in her personal life? Christmas now usually meant a day or two of rare downtime.

She could spend the whole day lounging in bed or on the couch, reading. She could have dinner with Caleb and Dean, if they were in town and not on their own getaway.

Christmas meant a few days of quiet in an otherwise hectic time. And generally, Charlotte enjoyed it. Oh, she chose her life of chaos and relished in it, in her packed schedule.

But a couple days a year, it was nice to slow things down.

*This* year, however, she was *not* loving her downtime.

Her downtime this year reminded her that Sutton was still in Rome until next week. Charlotte hadn't really had much downtime since getting elected to the House of Representatives in March, and had deliberately made herself had even less time since Sutton had left in May.

But, damn it, she wanted Sutton back. FaceTime and phone calls were all well and good – they had to do, for the last seven months and it was much better than nothing.

Seeing Sutton the night before, though, as she'd lounged in her little apartment in Rome, with a festive Santa hat slightly crooked atop her head... yeah, it hit her right in the chest with a longing she couldn't control.

Just the way everything happened with Sutton, it seemed.

Sutton loved Christmas; she'd had her small studio abroad decorated since the beginning of the month. Charlotte put up a couple festive decorations, even “setting out” the fake tree – it was only 18 inches tall – that Caleb had given her a couple of years ago.

She let out a long sigh and tilted her head back against the couch cushion, working her jaw as she told herself to *relax*.

It was Christmas Eve, after all. She didn't have anything that had to be done for over four days, and then she'd be off to D.C. for a Congressional meeting.

Just as Sutton was due to arrive home. Not that she'd be coming back to New York immediately anyway; no, she'd return to Boston to be with her family in time for the New Year's party.

And to make matters all worse, Sutton hadn't answered her texts or calls all day long. What was that about? Charlotte had shrugged it off at first – it was still alarming, she thought, to have this level of *need* inside of her. *Need* to hear from someone, to talk to them, even if it was just a text – figuring that Sutton was busy.

But it had been so long now that it was after ten at night in Italy. Sutton likely was in bed and it was so unlike her to not answer Charlotte, especially in her downtime after her internship. In fact, it had *never* happened.

She'd kept herself busy today, running the Christmas Eve Santa Visit at the shelter for women and children for several hours in the afternoon, and she'd assured herself that by the time it was done, she would have heard from Sutton.

She hadn't.

So, now she was worried.

She had half a mind to call the damn consulate herself. She was Charlotte Thompson, and she knew how to pull strings.

... She was making herself wait a full twelve hours, first, though.

Charlotte was about to reach for her TV remote – she could find one of the Christmas movies Sutton had mentioned loving, to talk about it with her whenever she got a hold of her, if nothing else. What was it that Sutton enjoyed? The Grinch?

Charlotte had never watched it, but Sutton had reported watching it every year since she could remember with Regan.

She supposed it would have to do while she kept an eye on the clock.

Which was *ridiculous!* Charlotte Thompson had never kept an eye on the clock. She'd never felt the need to fill her time with banal things while *missing* another person...

But she'd never had a Sutton before, either. And certainly not one during the holidays. Which –

The knock on her door made Charlotte frown as she turned to look down the hall as if she had x-ray vision.

“Caleb?” She called out after a moment. “Fine, this one time, you can use come in without me letting you in while I'm home!”

The door opened and it only took her a second to realize – Caleb, while he had gotten better in the last couple of months about letting himself into her apartment, had left with Dean to go on their Christmas vacation last night.

Charlotte sat straight up at attention, alarm surging through her as she stood up quickly and tried to think about what she could use for a weapon. Sutton, Caleb, Dean, her grandmother – all of the visitors she had to her personal home – weren't in the city at the time.

But there were definitely footsteps walking down her hallway.

She grabbed her phone and unlocked it to call 9-1-1 if the case may be, as she cleared her throat and squared her shoulders as she called out, "Whoever is here –"

"What are you going to do to me?" Sutton interrupted as she turned the corner into Charlotte's living room.

All of the wind left Charlotte's proverbial sails, her breath stolen right from her chest as she stared agape at Sutton.

Her nose was pink from the cold outside and there were snowflakes in her red hair. She wore a long black jacket and was pulling a suitcase behind her and she was *everything*.

Charlotte dropped her phone to the couch. "Sutton?" She breathed, almost questioning her own eyes, but she knew she hadn't so much as broken out a bottle of wine for the night yet.

Sutton flashed her that smile. The one that was still a little shy in the edges, but also just this side of sassy, the way only Sutton had.

She dropped the handle of her suitcase as Charlotte continued to stare, astounded, and did an awkward, adorable wave. "Hi."

"What are you..." She shook her head. "What are you doing here?"

Sutton toyed with the ends of her sleeves. "Um, well. Last week, I was reviewing all of the work I had to do to finish up my internship requirements and thinking about how unfair it was to not be in the states for the holidays. So, I powered through all of my work and managed to expedite it all, because I – I just – I've missed home. My family, Regan, of course. But I also just really... missed you. So much," she pushed her hair off her shoulder, her voice lowering into a whisper as she rambled.

"And I'm sorry I've been out of communication with you; I just landed at JFK an hour ago and came right here and saw all your texts. But I wanted it to be a surprise. I haven't even stopped at my apartment yet. But with the way you're staring at me and you haven't said anything, I don't really know if this was the right –"

"It was," Charlotte cut her off, and took two long strides across the room.

She'd never believed in romance novels or films, not really. The idea of *taking someone into your arms* wasn't exactly a phrase Charlotte found believable. But damn it if that wasn't just what she did.

There was no one who fit like this, she thought as she slid her arms around Sutton's waist. There was no one in the world who would fit against her like this. There was no one in the world who fit against anyone the way Sutton fit against her.

She didn't care that she'd lost her mind over this woman, she didn't care that her heart pounded at the feeling of Sutton, she didn't care that she sounded like an insane person because she understood what it meant that everything slotted together inside of her like a puzzle.

Her missing piece was here. And that's what she cared about.

"It was the right thing," she murmured, pressing her lips to Sutton's.

The kiss was much softer than she'd even imagined from herself. But the thing was, while she was hungry for Sutton – *god*, was she ever – she'd lusted for women before.

Sutton was the only woman she'd ever wanted *this* with.

She caressed Sutton's lips with her own, sliding against them. Feeling their softness, humming at the sensation.

She slid her hands into that long, luxurious red hair, relishing in the sensation of cool strands sifting through her fingers. Charlotte only took her mouth away from Sutton's enough to kiss her cheeks, her chin, her perfect nose.

"You were right, you were so right," she continued to murmur, unable to stop and barely aware of what she was saying.

She cupped Sutton's jaw, feeling those perfect lips smile against the tip of her thumb, as she pulled back enough to look up into shining blue eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Charlotte asked in wonder, the lightness inside of her filling her up so much, so fast, she felt like she was flying.

Sutton's eyebrows drew together even as her smile turned a bit confused. "I just told you –"

Charlotte cut her off with another kiss to those perfect lips, laughing against them as she pulled back. "No, I know. I just – I assumed even if you came home for the holidays that you'd want to be with your family."

She knew all about the Spencer holiday traditions. Decorating the tree together, their hot chocolate Christmas Eve, their wearing Santa hats on Christmas mornings while opening gifts, and hosting a large Christmas dinner with their nearby friends and family.

Sutton loved these traditions, and she still grinned when telling Charlotte about them, all giddy. Like she still felt "the magic of Christmas" as an adult.

Sutton brought her hands up and intertwined their fingers as she pulled their linked hands back down with a gentle swing. A tinge of red touched her cheeks. "I mean, I plan on going back to surprise them the day after Christmas, but I – I wanted to see *you*, the most. That's what I wanted this year for Christmas."



Charlotte used her hold on Sutton's hands to pull her in close, capturing her mouth again.

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They laid in her bed a couple hours later, the curtains to the large double windows open to let the moonlight stream in, as Charlotte laid facing Sutton, taking her all in.

It wasn't enough, after eight months apart.

"I have gifts for you. Wine. And shoes," Sutton whispered. "I found them both at this amazing market one weekend. I know you weren't expecting me to be back, so I'm not expecting anything in return –"

"I don't normally do gifts," Charlotte murmured, as she reached out and brushed her hand through Sutton's hair. It wasn't really in her face, but she just had the most uncontrollable urge to touch her.

She always had. Sutton was a living piece of art for her. The way she laughed, the sparkle in those blue eyes as she laughed, the way her eyebrows drew down when she was deep in thought.

A work of fine art, but one that was accessible to her. Always open.

Sutton leaned her cheek into Charlotte's touch as she gave her a look of confusion. "What do you mean? You got me those perfect earrings last Christmas, and we hadn't even discussed exchanging gifts."

Charlotte let out a small cough of embarrassment, before she shook her head at herself. No. She would not let herself be self-conscious about anything in her relationship with Sutton, not anymore.

"I didn't... necessarily buy them *for* Christmas," she hedged, before clearing her throat at Sutton's inquisitive look. "I just – I was out shopping and I saw those earrings, and I didn't know how to give you – my *friend* – eight thousand dollar earrings for no occasion, so..."

Sutton's mouth fell open as she whipped her head back. "Eight *thousand*?!" She spluttered out.

Charlotte shushed her and pulled her back down to her bed; Sutton wasn't allowed to leave just yet. Not for hours. "*Anyway*. This year, I... I have gifts for you. They're wrapped and everything."

Because Sutton loved Christmas. And Charlotte loved her.

And she found the next morning, as they sat in Charlotte's living room with the fireplace going, Christmas music playing, as she snuggled up to Sutton's side with a silly little Santa hat on, and pure joy running through her veins...

That maybe there was something to say for Christmas magic after all.