

“God, it’s crazy out tonight,” Sutton grimaced as she walked into the mall, looking around to see the several hundred people milling around.

“I have no idea what you’re even *doing* out in stores, tonight,” Regan could not have sounded more incredulous. “It’s a Friday night less than two weeks before Christmas. Are you insane?”

“I have to finish shopping for Lucy,” Sutton explained, even though, “We already talked about this, earlier?”

She maneuvered around a woman holding far too many bags for one person to carry, before she moved to hold open a door for her.

“I realize literally *what* you are doing there, I just can’t believe the fact that you *are* there. Sorry, I guess that was my bad for not totally explaining, but in fairness, I thought you knew what I was getting at.”

The corner of Sutton’s mouth ticked up into a smile as she shook her head. Sure.

“As you so astutely pointed out, Christmas is in less than two weeks, and I *don’t* want to be out shopping any closer to Christmas than I already am. I just need to get it done,” she murmured, as she spotted her first target and ducked in.

“We live in the digital age, babe. The magic of shopping is all online, now. Have you heard?”

Sutton walked through the store, shaking her head. “Regan, it’s *impossible* to get the RealJam Guitar online. It’s sold out everywhere!”

It was the hottest new toy/electronic on the market this holiday season, and Sutton had been trying to hunt it down for the last two and a half months, since Lucy had named it as the only gift she wanted for Christmas. A new model guitar, integrated with Bluetooth and virtual reality enhancements to allow for instruction and self-improvement at home – and it was flying off of literal and digital shelves for the last six months.

So Sutton had picked up a few other items here and there that she knew Lucy would want but her daughter was very steadfast on this guitar.

And Sutton was very intent on finding it for her. If she could, that was. But, god, she so hoped she could.

Regan sighed, and Sutton could hear the sympathy in it. “Believe me, I know. Emma and I have been trying to get it for you, too.”

Sutton scanned her eyes over the shelves, smiling as she softened at Regan’s words. “I know you have. And I appreciate it.”

“You know my motto: why do I need a kid, when I already have yours?”

She laughed, combing through the crowd. “And I appreciate that village mentality, too.” She *truly* did; Regan and Emma had showed up for her in the hardest and most lonely moments of parenting.

“I love you, you little redhead sunflower, and I love your offspring maybe even more,” Regan emphatically stated, but spoke again before Sutton could return the favor. “What I *really* need

to know, though, is this: you have a Friday night free. Luce is at a sleepover and is going to be picked up by Layla. You and I *both* know that this guitar is, unfortunately, not still going to be there—”

“Two different stores confirmed getting a shipment today,” she cut in.

Regan, true to form, ignored her. “— and you have the perfect opportunity to spend a full night getting railed by Charlotte. Or... railing Charlotte?” Her voice turned thoughtful.

Sutton bit her lip as her cheeks warmed at the thought.

In truth, she would never be able to decide which of those options she enjoyed more.

And there had been *many* variations of those words to choose from in the last few weeks. Thanksgiving, of course. Where she couldn't help herself, because Charlotte was being open and confessing to that *want* and how alive it was, and — well, it was very much still alive.

The night after the fundraiser for The Zones, where she'd had sex with Charlotte in Charlotte's *car*. Granted, it was a very spacious area, but... but Sutton had never done anything like it.

Something deep inside of her pushed her forward. She wasn't sure exactly what — maybe the fact that Charlotte had clearly gone out of her way to seek her out that night. Maybe it was that this flame was reignited and it felt so fucking good to just give in, for the first time in years, to something that felt so good. But whatever it had been, she'd felt like a woman possessed as they'd climbed into the back of Charlotte's car after the event.

She'd pulled Charlotte on top of her and slid her hand up Charlotte's dress, feverish with how wet Charlotte was for her already, and then with how quickly she was able to make her come, reaching up to stifle the sounds Charlotte made with her other hand.

And they'd made time for those rendezvous several times a week since then. Every single time they met up to work together, it didn't matter where. In Charlotte's office — last week, Charlotte had gone down on her as Sutton had sat on her desk. At Charlotte's apartment, when Sutton had bent Charlotte over the couch.

They always started with their work first, and then somewhere along the line, their tone switched.

“Either way, regardless of whichever one of you is fucking the other at the time, my point is: you have a full weekend night, totally free and clear, and for the first time in *years* you're in a... huh,” Regan's tone turned deliberately obtuse. “Would you call this a relationship?”

Sutton rolled her eyes, regardless of the fact that her best friend couldn't see.

“Personally, that's what *I* usually think of when I think about someone exclusively fucking one person, and doing it multiple times every single week.”

“I told you a couple of weeks ago, and I'm telling you again: you and I are *not* going to do this.”

“I just want to talk to you about your life!”

“And I *don't*,” she shot back, her stomach twisting uncomfortably.

Because she and Charlotte, for as much fucking as they did and, for that matter, as much talking as they did, had not been talking about *this*.

They picked up the rhythm they'd managed to find in the last couple of months, where they'd found a friendship. They'd just managed to figure out how to add sex to it.

"You can't be having a friends with benefits relationship with Charlotte Thompson again. Not again," Regan lamented.

And, if Sutton was being honest, didn't *disagree*. Except... "It's just – it's *good*. And I can't stop it. I've tried."

She had tried. For the weeks after they slept together the first time, she'd tried. Being friends and only friends with Charlotte, working together – it never made the attraction, the want, the desire dim in the slightest. And not attraction, want, and desire merely physically; interacting with Charlotte could be so much simpler if it was only physical.

It was a want for just, more.

And if more was playing out in whatever they had going on, Sutton felt powerless to stop it. She didn't *want* to stop it, if she were being honest with herself. Because Regan was right in that, this was the first time in years that Sutton had anything remotely like this happening in her personal life. Dating, sex, romantic intimacy of any kind – none of it had been a regular part of her life in so long.

That was what she had, right now. That was what she was going forward with, and right now, she was finding it was all she needed. Maybe she just needed what they had to be *easy*, and talking about logistics and "what this was" would make things complicated.

She just wanted to live in the easy part, for now.

"So... you two are just magnetically unstoppable when it comes to keeping your hands to yourselves. And you're just rolling it," Regan summed up.

Sutton nodded, as she leaned back against a shelf in a quiet corner of the store. "Honestly? Yes. For once in my life, that is what I'm doing."

Regan was quiet for a few beats, before she groaned. "I cannot even believe this. Out of all of the people who have wanted a piece of you over the last few years—"

"Excuse you?! Like who?" She demanded.

"That woman Emma works with, who wanted your number. That other woman you went on a couple of dates with and told you that she was *totally okay* with doing whatever you wanted, at whatever speed you were comfortable with. The guy who—"

"Okay, okay, I get it," she cut Regan off, reaching her hand up to rub her temples. "But..." it was difficult to put it exactly into words. "I wasn't comfortable with those people, like this. I..."

Yeah, she truly didn't know how exactly to put her thoughts into words. There had been *options* over the years, with a few people, but she'd been so – so scared, to put her trust into

someone, again. So scared to put Lucy into a situation. And even if she'd been attracted to them, it was never this soul-searing, unignorable kind of need.

"This is different," she qualified. "Things with Charlotte have always been different."

For better or worse, that was the truth.

"I know! That's why I can't believe that you aren't Sutton Spencer-ing this!"

Sutton's mouth fell open. "Did you just use my name as a verb?! What does that even mean?"

"Oh, you know *exactly* what that means! Questioning what every small thing could possibly mean, what it could *be*, what is the other person thinking or feeling – what are *you* thinking or feeling, quantifying and qualifying—"

"All right, I get it," Sutton cut in, feeling tremendously *too* seen. "But why am I getting the feeling that you are *encouraging* me to *Sutton Spencer* this?"

Because she knew all of Regan's tones, supportive and skeptical and everything in between. This entire conversation did not lend toward the skeptical end.

Regan sniffed. "Because! I *am*!"

"How are you encouraging this, now?" Sutton almost felt like she was going crazy. "The first time Charlotte and I did this, you were the captain of the *do not do this* train!"

"It's been twelve years! Things are different now," Regan argued.

She looked around. She was standing in a mall, in a packed toy store, less than two weeks before Christmas, in D.C., where she lived. "Things *are* different, now."

She was divorced. She had a daughter. She had a full-time job. It had been *twelve years*.

"It's complicated," was all she edged out, and before Regan could say anything, her phone beeped in her ear.

She pulled it away to check, seeing Charlotte's name flash over the screen.

She was divorced. She had a daughter. She had a full-time job. It had been *twelve years*. And she still had that ridiculous *swoop* in her stomach at the call.

"She's calling me, now," she told Regan, adjusting the phone back to her ear as she pushed herself to continue searching for the guitar.

"Great! Love ya!" Regan swiftly said, before she hung up.

The entire situation was so jarring, it took a moment for Sutton to process, as she stared down at her phone.

Which was still informing her that Charlotte was calling.

"Charlotte. Hi. Is, um, is everything okay?" There was a strange part of her that felt like Charlotte could just *sense* Sutton talking about her and their relationship.

She'd felt like that in the past, too.

“Darling,” yes. The swooping feeling was so damningly real, “Did my eyes deceive me or did you actually text me that you were in-person shopping in a mall on a Friday night, the week before Christmas?”

She laugh-groaned. “I was *just* having this conversation with Regan. Yes, I am. And—”

She came to a stop when she saw the large display set up for the RealJam Guitar... completely empty. This time when she groaned, she *meant* it, as her stomach sank with frustration and disappointment.

“Is everything okay?” Charlotte asked, and Sutton could hear the genuine concern in her voice.

“No.” It would have been shameful, really, how pathetic her tone sounded even to her own ears. But she was beyond caring... and she *was* comfortable enough with Charlotte, that she didn’t care.

“What’s wrong? Do you need help with anything? I’m leaving the office, now, so—” There was an urgency in Charlotte’s tone that alone was able to warm something inside of her.

Still, she turned, defeated, as she headed toward the exit. “No, but thanks. I’m okay, I promise.” She sighed, reaching up to rub her eyes. “Have you heard of the RealJam Guitar?”

Charlotte’s silence was very telling, even before she spoke slowly. “Is quote-unquote jamming not what *all* guitars are supposed to do?”

Sutton laughed, as she walked out of the store. “No. I mean, I guess so. It’s – the RealJam is this new guitar designed for kids, or any beginner, I suppose.”

“Ahhh, yes,” Charlotte hummed. “The guitar Lucy wants for Christmas. She was telling me about it a while ago.”

“She’s been talking about it for a while, yeah,” Sutton confirmed. “And it’s been *impossible* to find. I called two stores today before my final class and they both received the stock this afternoon, but neither put on-demand items on hold.”

Which was fair, but *stressful*.

“Well? Have you checked the second store?” Charlotte prompted.

Sutton was already on her way. “Tell me something else, to keep me from panicking if this doesn’t go my way?”

The low hum of Charlotte’s laugh in her ear *did* alleviate some of the stress. “Of course.”

“You can tell me how your meeting went, with the senator from California?”

Charlotte paused. “I *was* trying to think of something to tell you that was actually entertaining. I think that would be the point of distraction.”

“I’m ente – well, I wouldn’t say *entertained* is the right word. But I am interested in hearing how your work is going.” And that was the truth. She never got bored hearing Charlotte discuss what she was working on. Not only because her politics were topics of interest for Sutton, but because she loved the passion with which Charlotte spoke.

Charlotte's voice and story about work kept her entertained as she made her way to the second floor and checked the department store she'd called... only to find that they, too, were out.

She swore under her breath at the realization.

"No guitar?" Charlotte asked.

Sutton squeezed her eyes closed, trying to temper the worry that she wasn't going to be able to get it. "Not even the life-sized *ad* was left up."

It was simply an empty stand, where the product had been set up earlier, only the price left to designate what had been here during the day.

"I'm sorry, Sutton. Truly."

"It's... fine," she sighed out.

"Are you heading home now?" Charlotte asked. "Or are there more stops on the shopping adventure evening?"

Sutton turned toward the exit, working through the throngs of people. "Honestly, I'll likely have better luck scouring the internet than trying to get it in-store. This was sort of a last-ditch effort," she admitted.

She hesitated before confirming that she would be spending the night alone. She hadn't wanted to delve into detail with Regan, as she'd said to Regan's face, and she *did* want desperately to get this guitar for Lucy for Christmas.

But... things with Charlotte, also as she'd said to Regan, *were* complicated.

They didn't address whatever it was they were doing. They were working together, formed a friendship, and were having sex. Frequently. Charlotte was a senator with a clear track to becoming the president, for Christ's sake!

Nothing said complication like having any sort of relationship with Charlotte Thompson.

It was just – god, things just felt so *good* with Charlotte. It was the eternal problem between the two of them, wasn't it?

Even if she could see that there, admittedly, were issues in doing what they were doing, Charlotte just made everything *feel* good. It wasn't logical. But nothing about being with Charlotte was ever logical, nor had it ever been.

It was driven by feelings. Back when they'd originally done this and again now, they were driven into everything that happened between them because it just seemed so natural. They were both deeply, insanely attracted to one another, they had fun together, they could talk easily together – about work, hobbies and interests, the future. Not *their* future, really, but *the* future.

Charlotte was someone Sutton could talk to for hours and not even realize, at the end, what exactly they'd discussed.

It just – was.

It was exactly why and how they'd fallen into this in the past.

And yes, Charlotte seemed different, now. She didn't balk at talking about her personal life or sharing things or being more public together or even spending time with Sutton's family.

But – Sutton wasn't the same person she'd been back then. This time, she could manage this. This time, she had her eyes open.

She chewed on her lip as she walked toward the entrance, the warring indecision of what to tell Charlotte regarding her plans coming to a halt, as the *wanting* side won out.

She did have a Friday night completely free. No work to do, no Lucy – she wouldn't even be picking Lucy up in the morning. No plans with Regan and Emma. Nothing.

And regardless of complication, she wanted to see Charlotte. She could feel that uncontrollable wanting, already.

“Yes. I'm heading home.” That anticipation worked through her. She *hadn't* planned on seeing Charlotte tonight, she had deliberately not made any efforts to do so. But the opportunity was presenting itself and even though she'd seen Charlotte a couple of days ago, being together not in the office – or on a night when they had no work to do – was... different.

“From the main entrance?”

Sutton paused as she reached the glass door to, indeed, the main entrance of the mall. “Yes?”

“Well, perhaps you shouldn't just stand there,” Charlotte teased.

That anticipation strengthened, even as she shook her head. There was no way Charlotte was literally at the mall?

She could feel that expectancy as she pushed the doors open, her fingers tingling with it.

And, “You're actually here?” She breathed in confused disbelief, still holding the phone up to her ear.

“I am,” Charlotte confirmed, that perfect half-smile on her lips, as she lowered her phone and ended the call.

Charlotte stood there, leaning against her black town car, one leg crossed over the other. In her long belted cashmere coat, the December wind tossing her hair, she looked like the epitome of someone in a romance.

Sutton rolled her eyes at herself and tried to squish that stomach fluttering sensation as she walked closer.

This would only work, she reminded herself, if she kept herself in reality and didn't get swept up.

“You know, I *do* have my car here; I could have met you at my house?”

Sutton tucked her phone into her back pocket as she drew up close to Charlotte, tilting her head in question.

Charlotte's coy smile only grew. "You *could* have... however, I may have a surprise stop for us along the way. If you'd like to drive us?"

Still feeling both the effects of Charlotte's unexpected arrival and of just... *Charlotte*, Sutton nodded, taking a few seconds before she confirmed. "Sure. Of course."

She waited in the chilly evening air as Charlotte leaned into the car to gather her belongings and inform her driver that she didn't need his services, "For the time being," she said, as she shot Sutton a look over her shoulder, that Sutton felt down to her core.

Charlotte had spent the night with her on Thanksgiving. She'd initiated no move of leaving Sutton's bed, and Sutton had enjoyed it. She'd liked having a warm, inviting, soft body in her bed, but she'd loved that it was Charlotte.

They hadn't had another opportunity in the last few weeks to recreate that.

Except for, apparently, tonight.

She wrestled with both the excitement she had at that and the concern that swirled through her at the implication as they walked to her car.

"Where exactly are we going?" She asked, unlocking the doors.

Charlotte sent her a smile over the roof of the car. "If I told you, Sutton Spencer, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

And try as Sutton might, she couldn't even muster up anything other than a trill of excitement.

The trill remained for the next fifteen minutes, as Charlotte directed her into a parking lot, as it was replaced by confusion.

"Um," she began as she slowly parked in front of the dark building – Lancaster's Play Emporium. Lancaster's was known in the area as a premiere indoor playground, complete with indoor pools and a gigantic toy store. "Though I understand why you thought of Lancaster's – it's one of Lucy's favorite places to come for a treat – it always closes by six on weekdays."

She turned to give Charlotte a gentle smile, because whether or not it was open, she *did* think it was a sweet idea. "I appreciate the thought. Even if it was open, I'm sure Lancaster's has been sold out of the RealJam as soon as the stock comes in."

She'd called the store section, herself, a handful of times in the last few months.

Charlotte looked up from where she'd clearly been typing a message on her phone to return Sutton's smile, her eyebrows crinkled in confusion. "You believe I brought you here without realizing it was closed? Sutton, have a little faith."

It was just a little tease, Sutton knew, and completely unrelated to anything regarding their relationship, but it was a little hard to have faith in someone who'd broken your heart the way Charlotte broke hers.

That was yet another thing that made this whole thing so damn complicated.



She blinked herself out of those thoughts, coming back to the moment as another car pulled into the parking lot a moment later. Sutton frowned as the car slowly drove over to where they were parked, before the back door behind the driver opened and someone climbed out. “Charlotte, what...” She squinted. “Is that Autumn? Your assistant?”

She whipped her head around to stare at Charlotte, who winked at her, before she opened her door and climbed out of the car.

Still confused – because was she about to be embroiled into some strange, illicit dealing of some sort?! Still, she supposed she *did* trust Charlotte enough that she wouldn’t be involved in something like that, Sutton turned her own car off and followed suit.

Autumn was the person Charlotte worked with that she was most familiar with, though she’d also met Maya more times than she could count at this point, as well. But while Maya would often be in constant contact with Charlotte via phone, Autumn was her veritable shadow during working hours.

Always so put together – as one would have to be in her role – and fastidious, soft-spoken but firm. A slip of a woman who was easy to fade in Charlotte’s shadow, but whose presence she could easily make known with a clearing of her throat. She knew not only from Charlotte’s testimony how much she valued her, but also from their ease in interactions.

Autumn was reaching into her pocket as she spoke to Charlotte, withdrawing a small key ring with three keys on it. “The large one will open this main door, and the smaller ones will let you into the toy store and then back room behind the check-out counter, respectively.” Autumn tilted her head down to get a better look at the keys. “I’m not positive which one is which; they didn’t specify that.”

Charlotte reached out to accept them. “I’m positive we can figure it out. Thank you for this.”

Sutton watched the short interaction, her brain having to take a few moments connect the dots, before her eyes widened. “Are – did you bring us the keys for Lancaster’s?”

Autumn turned to face her. Her expression was perpetually serious, which Sutton always found interestingly at-odds with her almost doll-like cute face.

“I did. I heard it’s important to your daughter?” She arched her eyebrows in question, and even though she kept that business tone, Sutton could just *feel* that she wanted to know more.

“It is...” She shifted her eyes between Charlotte and Autumn, before shifting slowly back to Autumn. “Thank you so much? I’m not sure how, but...”

She trailed off, still just – just thrown by this entire turn of events.

Charlotte cleared her throat, shifting closer to Sutton so their shoulders brushed, and then held there, as she nodded and smiled at Autumn. “Have a good weekend. Take the car home; no need for you to be taking public transport.”

Autumn nodded, “Thank you, sen... Charlotte,” she seemed to correct herself, which always amused Sutton when she heard it. Autumn looked between them, before she cleared her own throat. “I hope you have a good weekend, too.”

They waited a few moments to make sure Autumn returned safely to her car.

“Is that Hamish?” Sutton asked, squinting at the tinted driver’s window of the car. “How did he pick Autumn up and meet us here so quickly after he dropped you off?”

“No; I ordered a different car for Autumn before you exited the mall,” Charlotte answered, as they walked toward the entrance.

As Charlotte opened the door, though, Sutton could only stare at her. “You – how did this happen?” She asked, still in disbelief, even as they walked through the doors.

The automatic lights turned on as they entered, and Charlotte pulled the door closed behind them and locked it as she responded, “Ah, well, when we started talking, I thought about how this Lancaster Play Land—”

“Emporium,” Sutton cut in softly. But just... Charlotte didn’t even know the proper *name* of the place, and she still managed to pull these impossible strings.

“Emporium, right,” she nodded, as they walked toward the toy store area of the large layout. Sutton could feel Charlotte’s arm wrapping lightly around her lower back as they went, a move that was so automatic for her, Sutton was never certain if Charlotte was aware she did it or not.

“The Lancaster Play *Emporium* is owned by Kim Lancaster,” Charlotte continued her explanation, as she unlocked the door to the toy store.

It was a surreal experience to be walking through a dimly lit gigantic toy store that was completely deserted. It almost felt like something out of a movie. Then again, so many things about being with Charlotte did.

“And, wouldn’t you know? Kim Lancaster is married to Georgina Huffman, who just so happened to be my last campaign manager. I’ve met Kim many times – a very sweet woman, who has, quite enthusiastically, regaled me with tales of her business here over many, many dinners.” Charlotte clicked her tongue against her cheek in a quiet success as she slid the key into the door to the back room. “She has *also* told me many, many times that she is an avid supporter of mine and has offered her connections in the event I ever decide to procreate.”

“We both know that is likely not in my cards in this life. However, I am not above calling in such a favor for my favorite child,” Charlotte finished, opening the door with a flourish.

And there on the desk, stacked in their new-shipment boxes, were three RealJam Guitars.

Sutton shook her head in utter wonder and disbelief as she walked toward them.

“Apparently, she kept these off the shelves to raffle off the week before Christmas,” Charlotte spoke softly, still standing in the doorway behind her.

“Charlotte...” She trailed off, swallowing over the lump in her throat. That just seemed ridiculous, but it was what she felt when someone went so far out of their way for her like this.

When *Charlotte* went so far out of her way for her, like this.

“You didn’t have to do all of this,” she whispered, turning around to face Charlotte.

Who was watching her with eyes Sutton could only describe as soft.

“It was just a few simple texts,” Charlotte waved her hand as she spoke, but there was a quiet happiness emanating from her that Sutton found unmistakable. “But, if there’s something I can ever do for you, I want to do it.”

Sutton swore her heart seized in her chest at the words and she had to try make a valiant effort to not let them take a deep root in her heart.

“Thank you. So, *so* much.” She meant it. Because a part of her felt like it wasn’t right to use Charlotte’s connections like this. And in other circumstances, she might stick to those beliefs.

But...

“I hope I don’t sound unsympathetic,” Charlotte said as she stepped closer to Sutton. “Because I, too, want Lucy to have a wonderful holiday. Clearly. But I have to say, I think you’ve done a wonderful job raising a daughter who wouldn’t have a meltdown if she was missing this gift on Christmas morning?”

Sutton swayed closer to Charlotte, unthinkingly. Just wanting to be in that warmth – something she’d not been able to control very well since they’d truly re-started sleeping together.

She cast her eyes over the guitar again as she thought about really what it meant to her, to be able to give it to Lucy.

“It might sound... silly,” she hedged, because in a way, she did feel silly. That a gift had this much emotional meaning for her, that she was so driven to getting it for Lucy. Especially talking to Charlotte, who in her own words, didn’t have an inclination to be a mother.

But they were here, and Charlotte had done this for her, and more than feeling like she owed any explanation, Sutton found that she *wanted* to tell Charlotte, anyway.

“You’re right; I think Luce is going to be very occupied with the other gifts she’ll have received for the holiday,” she acknowledged. “Lucy and I are having our “Christmas morning” on Christmas Eve this year.” She gave a small, self-conscious smile to Charlotte. “Which, in the scheme of things, is not a big deal. I know that.”

She’d been repeating it to herself enough in the last couple of weeks. Since the first week of December, when Layla had called her to talk about holiday scheduling.

“But Lucy is going to spend the night with Layla on Christmas Eve, this year. She’s going to have Christmas morning there, with Layla and Arianne. It’s the first time I won’t be with her on Christmas morning. The first time I won’t wake up to her footsteps when she thinks she’s being sneaky, peeking at the tree before dawn. The first time I won’t be there to see her examine how many cookies Santa ate and make sure the reindeer ate all of their carrots. The first Christmas Eve I won’t be the one to read *Twas the Night Before Christmas* – two and a half times, because she always asks to hear it more, and always falls asleep during the third read.”

It was only a small list of moments Sutton would miss, but she’d been *trying* not to think about them as best she could. It was just... Christmases where Lucy still believed in all of the magic were so limited as she got older and older. And Sutton wanted to relish every one of them.

Instead of making a face like Sutton was being over-dramatic, though, Charlotte's face was the picture of sympathy. And so was the arm of support around Sutton's waist.

The frown etched into Charlotte's features as she spoke. "Layla's never asked to have her during Christmas before?"

Sutton blew out a breath as she confirmed, "No. During Lucy's third Christmas, it was the year we were getting divorced and it wasn't much of a conversation, I suppose." She pursed her lips, a humorless chuckle escaping. "Our divorce was nearly finalized and Layla had just found a place with Arianne, but it was barely even furnished. Lucy was with me most of the time, trying to give her the most stability we could manage at the time. And the last two years, they were with Arianne's family, so..."

She forced a shrug. "This year is the first time Layla has asked to have Lucy for Christmas. And I'm not going to deny her or Lucy these moments together."

Because as much as it did pain her, she wanted Lucy to experience the holiday magic in every permutation, with the facets of all of her family members who loved her.

"So, I'm going to give her an amazing Christmas Eve with me, before she goes with Layla." Sutton nodded to herself, as if re-confirming the plan, trying to talk it up in her mind.

Charlotte's eyes were so big and understanding and nearly luminescent in the room, though, and Sutton could have fallen right into them.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said, and the words were so simple, but she felt like Charlotte could pack unspoken words and emotion into anything.

It was part of her power.

"It's all right. I'll live." She smiled weakly.

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows. "You had better. I won't be done with you by Christmas, that's for certain."

Those butterflies, the ridiculous ones that she *shouldn't* feel anymore, fluttered, and she could feel her smile melt into one far more natural. "Oh?"

"Absolutely," Charlotte confirmed, her voice dipping as her eyes tracked to Sutton's lips.

She couldn't help but lick them. And even if she could, she wouldn't have. Because she fucking loved the way Charlotte's eyes darkened and the way she could feel Charlotte's warm breath wash over her neck as she drew in closer.

This draw didn't ever go away. It didn't get any less potent. And it was so, so easy to fall into.

She moved closer to Charlotte, so there were mere inches between them, craving the moment she knew was coming as Charlotte tilted her head and edged into her.

But that moment didn't actually arrive. Instead, Charlotte spoke so low, Sutton swore she felt her voice more than heard it.

“While we are in *an* office, it is not *my* office. And who knows what these cameras can catch.” Charlotte pulled just enough back that Sutton could look down into her eyes. “And I would much rather we start this tonight, when we’re alone.”

It was hardly a douse of cold water, the anticipation only serving to fan Sutton’s desire as she reluctantly nodded. “You’re right—”

Charlotte surged up, sliding her lips along Sutton’s. The kiss was fast and needy and she fell into it. Because yes, there were cameras and Charlotte’s hands only touched in appropriate places – Sutton’s neck and hair and shoulders – but Sutton’s knees threatened to tremble anyway.

It lasted far, far too short a time, as Charlotte drew back, tugging Sutton’s bottom lip between her own as she went.

It was so easy, Sutton thought weakly.

It was so easy as they were walking out, to slip her hand into Charlotte’s when Charlotte brushed her fingers against Sutton’s.

So easy to come to a pause after they locked up the toy store again and stood looking around at the play arena, looking at Charlotte as she stared.

“I didn’t truly take in how insanely large this playland is when we came in,” Charlotte murmured, squeezing Sutton’s hand as she looked around.

Sutton found herself smiling at the wonder on Charlotte’s face, before she made herself look around. “I’ve been here a few times. But it looks even bigger when it’s not swarmed with children, if you can believe it.”

And it was very true. The arena was three stories of over ten thousand square feet of air bridges and suspended trampolines and swimming-pool sized ball pits and tunnel mazes, with arcade games sprinkled throughout.

It didn’t feel quite as humongous when there were hundreds of children, but right now, Sutton felt as though she and Charlotte were Jack at the bottom of the beanstalk.

Charlotte laughed. “I think I can.” Her mouth twisted to the side, her voice so thoughtful as she said, “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

It was crazy to think about, but – yes. She imagined Charlotte didn’t ever come to something like this to just run wild in as a kid.

And it was so easy for the words to fall out of her mouth, “Do you want to...?” She trailed off, gesturing at the arena.

Charlotte’s brows crinkled as she shook her head. “What? No. That’s – ridiculous.”

Sutton found the excitement moving through her as she lifted her eyebrows and reached out to touch Charlotte’s arm. “You’re it.”

Charlotte’s frown only deepened in incredulity. “*It? I’m it?*”

Sutton backed away from her slowly, laughing. “Yes, *it*. Like in tag. And now you have to catch me, to make me *it*.”

“Sutton...”

“I grew up with four siblings, I’ve always had a Regan, and I have a six-year-old. Being *it* is a very serious crime,” she teased, waiting a few moments as Charlotte continued to stare at her.

And the more seconds that ticked by, the more embarrassed she felt. This was what happened when she dropped her guard and got swept away in the fact that Charlotte pulled all of these strings to get her access to an exclusive present for Lucy. This was what happened –

“If I recall, you used to enjoy going on a run,” Charlotte mused, breaking Sutton out of her thoughts. “Do you still have time for that?”

Sutton tilted her head. “Um, occasionally. Not as often as I used to. Wh–”

She cut herself off on a shout as Charlotte lunged forward toward her, a devious grin on her face.

She just barely was able to evade her, darting to the left, toward the start of the maze.

And it was so, so easy to race through the empty complex, just barely managing to stay a step ahead of Charlotte. Until they hit the netted trampoline, and Sutton lost her footing.

She fell, feeling Charlotte trip right over her, as they bounced together on the trampoline.

She managed to flip onto her back, breathless from the running and the laughter. Joyful in a way that she couldn’t remember being for a reason that didn’t involve Lucy in painfully long.

Charlotte’s body pressed into hers, her hands on either side of Sutton’s head, as the bouncing came to a stop. She stared up into Charlotte’s eyes, feeling warmed from head to toe as Charlotte smiled so brightly down at her, unbridled laughter all over her face.

And it was so easy to feel honored by it. To *know* she was the only one who ever got to see Charlotte like this, even if Charlotte didn’t say that.

So easy, it was utterly terrifying.