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Introduction

A great big hello to all of my favorite readers!

Don't tell the other readers who haven't subscribed to me that I've said that ;) It's been a crazy, crazy couple of years for me. In the beginning of March 2020, I didn't even know if I was ever going to really publish *Those Who Wait*. It had been completely written (initially as a fanfic, for those who might not know), as well as then edited and adapted, but I felt totally out of my depth when it came to publishing it. I was, honestly, terrified. Of seeing bad reviews, of no one taking a chance on this project that I'd put so much love and work into.

Covid (in one of the only positive things that damn pandemic will ever be able to claim) really pushed me into publishing. We were living in a fucking *pandemic*! Who knew what was going to happen in the future? Regardless of the outcome, I had to take the leap and start publishing.

And it went so much better than I could have ever imagined, thanks to all of my wonderful readers.

Thank you all *so* much for taking a chance on me and my books in the last years; it's been such a ride.

In honor of you joining my newsletter, I have compiled all of the extra bits of TWW that I've stacked up. A handful of outtakes from *TWW/ Forever and A Day*, some pictures, and just... well, anything you might want from the lives of Sutton Spencer, Charlotte Thompson, and Co. if you were so inclined to want more of them.

So without further ado...

[Here is a Those Who Wait spotify playlist! The songs as listed are in order as to how they appear throughout the novel.](#)

Chapter 1: Charlotte's Point of View *I wasn't sure in the beginning which PoV to start with... so I did some quick sketching with both – ultimately deciding that Sutton's worked best for the novel.*

Not getting home from the office until almost ten at night wasn't even common for Charlotte's renowned workaholic self. Not on a Friday night, at the very least.

Though, she should probably gear up for more of those, she thought, pausing for a moment, as she slowly closed the door to her apartment and shook her head.

Because campaigning for a seat in the House of Representatives, on top of her job that already kept her late several days during the week, wasn't going to be a small feat.

It was *happening*, though, and that much was for certain. She was going to run for the newly open seat.

She almost couldn't believe it – mostly because it didn't go in accordance with the plan. The plan she'd outlined and had in place for almost ten years now. The Plan, really, of her entire life. First, to intern at the governor's office throughout college as she got her political science degree – completed, rather masterfully if she thought so, herself, considering she'd done so with honors and holding a record number of jobs and internships in DC.

Then to jump head-first into whatever she possibly could while obtaining her law degree. Truly, it hadn't much mattered to her which department or organization it would be in politics, because she knew she could find the passion for any of them somewhere inside of her. Also rather masterfully done, as she'd been in the Mayor's office for just shy of five years and was already a Deputy Mayor.

But the plan after that had been – well, calling it simple would be the world's biggest understatement and, honestly, utterly foolish.

Charlotte was no fool. So, the plan was by no means *simple*, but it was well-crafted and thought out. To be in the House by the time she was thirty.

Then to be in the Senate by the time she was thirty-eight, so that by the time she was in her mid-forties, she could fastidiously and undoubtedly have gotten every possible kind of governmental experience she would need to run for President in her fifties.

It was ambitious, she knew. It was crazy, if she asked her brothers. It would take a nearly single-minded focus and determination that would be almost impossible –

her grandmother's words. Words that she'd uttered with that proud slight smile that told Charlotte what Charlotte already knew. That she could do it.

And even though the Plan didn't entail her actually running for the House for another year and a half, when the next traditional election would be held, the unprecedentedly vacant seat... well, it presented her with the only deviation to her plan that she'd ever truly considered.

If she could attain her goals even sooner than planned, it would only make things simpler for her in the long run. She'd thought about it, whether or not she should campaign for the House now, unable to think of almost anything else for a few days.

The email she'd gotten from her grandmother this evening, sending an attachment for the official forms to file to get everything rolling with the simple note – *No time like the present* – only confirmed it.

And in the three hours since officially deciding to run, Charlotte had already started to come up with a plan for the coming months.

Of course, she'd need to officially file the documents and announce it. Especially to Dean, even though, she grimaced

slightly as she took off her heels, she didn't quite know exactly how he'd take the news. It wasn't as though she *wanted* to leave the Mayor's office. Yes, she would have taken just about any job that would allow her with growth in politics, but she was lucky to land in one she genuinely loved. And she knew her boss and best friend may not have anticipated her possible departure so early.

Releasing her hair from the twist she'd had it in for work, she reached for a wine glass and the bottle of red she'd planned to break open this weekend with Caleb and Dean. But getting a head start to celebrate by herself – she deserved that.

Tilting her head to the side as she cradled the wine glass in her head, she *hmm'd* in thought. Organizing a small staff to help keep her campaign in order would have to be a priority, too, but that would take a bit of time and research to determine who she was running against and viable candidates.

“And that's only the start,” she murmured to herself, thinking of the to-do list she'd been working on for the past few hours. And rather than feel overwhelmed at the prospect, she felt buzzing with life.

This was the time to start climbing the ladder. And goddamn, she was so ready for the rest of her life.

Drumming her fingers on her countertop, she felt that buzz drop just a bit as she looked down at her phone where it now laid next to her wine glass.

Because there was the small but significant matter – relatively high on her new to-do list – of getting rid of the only somewhat public evidence of her sexuality. And if she was being entirely honest with herself, and she was, this was probably the biggest hold out Charlotte had had against campaigning now.

Being discreet about being a lesbian had never bothered her. Going to fundraisers and promotions and galas and every event in

between with either Dean, a family member, or by herself rather than with a “romantic” partner had always been a benefit to her, really. Not that she’d ever had a woman interest her in a romantic fashion beyond the physical, anyway.

No, Charlotte hadn’t made her profile on the aptly named SapphicSpark app several years ago to find a love connection by any means. She smartly steered clear of anyone who’d messaged her seeming to look for anything deeper than a hookup, and found that the app’s promise to maintain privacy of its users to be entirely accurate.

What she *had* made it for, though, had worked out so truly well for her.

After a stressful week at work, there was never a shortage of attractive available women who wanted exactly what she wanted – mainly, to fuck. Once or twice, and then part ways.

It was satisfying and quick and easy. And Charlotte was always smart about it –

chatting for a couple of days and getting a read on who she was getting involved with before offering to meet at one of the places that she and the majority of the women on the app understood to signify that this was going to be nothing more than casual.

Not once in the last five years and too many women to count, not that she would, had her read on people even via the short, impersonal messages let her down.

Did she want to give up having sex while her name and face started to become more recognizable? Of course not; the idea of committing to anything other than her job made her grimace, but the idea of giving up all of the orgasms...

She sighed again, heartily. It wasn’t like she would be celibate forever. Eventually, when she had a more secure foundation, she knew she could very carefully indulge in some flings.

And besides, she could give herself orgasms. In comparison to this small council opportunity, giving up SapphicSpark was a no brainer.

With that in mind, she opened the app. Instead of her semi-regular Friday night hookup perusal, she'd delete. She had to do it before she submitted her campaign paperwork at the beginning of the week, anyway.

After taking another sip of wine, though, she decided to prolong her last foray and check out her inbox that was beckoning her with three new messages since the last time she'd opened it.

Jenna, 2:11PM

Funny thing, coming across your profile again so soon. But messaging you last time seemed to work out fantastically for both of us, so I figured why not? Want to start with drinks?

With a laugh that wasn't quite a snort but very close, she deleted that message in a second. Jenna, she remembered the name and the pretty brunette in the picture accompanying it, wasn't wrong in her assertion. They *had* a good time getting drinks about three weeks ago, and the sex after was pretty good too.

But Charlotte could count on one hand the amount of times she'd slept with a woman on multiple occasions, and on a couple of those occasions, there always seemed to be a graying moment on the other woman's end. It was a moment she could sense here and there of – could there be more?

And she sure as hell wasn't going to even pretend that would be happening at this stage. Not even a polite message back. Besides, her profile would be gone soon anyway.

Addison, 5:56 PM

It looks like we both like dancing and a nice

cabernet and gorgeous women... I'm thinking there could be a few other similarities as well. HMU

On a normal day, Charlotte would go to this Addison woman's profile and check out what she had to say for herself, get a closer look at the few pictures she had up –

that read like an average first message for someone who might be interested in the same thing she was interested in.

But today wasn't a normal day.

"Goodbye, Addison, nice knowing you," she murmured with an eyeroll, and deleted that one, too.

"Lucky number three..."

Sutton, 7:43PM

Hey, there. I saw your profile and you look really interesting – and hot. Do you want to hook up meet up sometime?

Her thumb, that had been settling over the delete button as it had for the last two messages paused. Before she read the message over again. And then again, once more, for good measure. There was just – an audacity, she guessed was the best way to say it, in those words that gave her pause.

She straightened her spine as she leaned farther over her counter, and instead of delete, she tapped the icon to get a better look at the tiny thumbnail size picture.

Oh.

The tumble of wavy red hair that had stood out in the tiny chat icon screamed for attention when she pulled the picture up to full-size. It was blowing in the wind, the moment clearly a snapshot where she wasn't trying to pose or be anything. She was half-turned, as she genuinely grinned into the camera, as if whoever had taken the picture had just said something that she

couldn't help but giggle at. That was no manufactured-to-look-alluring smile.

It was warm, she decided, tilting her head as she felt her own lips quirk up in response to it. It was almost like she was the person on the receiving end of that warmth, the person on the other side of the camera.

She was almost hesitant to leave the profile picture to click through the few others.

One where she was grinning again, this time almost incredulous, Charlotte thought, but with a sparkle in her eyes that was so... open.

And then a third, that had Charlotte pausing again. This time, though, it was the eyes that stopped her. The clear, light blue of them and winged with more makeup than she'd worn in the previous photos, it could have easily looked like seduction, she was sure. With a bit more pouting on soft looking pink lips, or even a change in angle or... anything. But instead, she had the barest of what seemed like a sincerely innocent small smile, the bit of makeup accentuating her eyes looking flawless, the bit of rosiness in her cheeks giving Charlotte the oddest sensation to want to stroke her thumb over her cheekbone and see if it was as soft as it looked.

The entire look of her, of these guileless looks, made her seem somewhat exposed even though none of her pictures were indecent by any means of the word. The warm feeling of *want* that had settled in her stomach wasn't really unexpected – this was a very beautiful woman, after all – but it was surprising in how much she felt it in response to pictures that were so very innocent in nature.

In the years she'd been using this app, it was her experience that there was typically at least one picture that women – women who sent provocative messages at the *very* least – posted to look

purposefully alluring. With smoky makeup, smoldering eyes, revealing clothing... a whole number of things.

And who was Charlotte to judge, when she admitted to most of her pictures being selfies with the eye smolder in at the very least one of them? It was a tool of the trade, so-to-speak, and she'd hooked up satisfyingly with many women who played that specific game.

She took just another interested perusal at the pictures, before tapping back to her profile.

Likes: literature, dogs, snow, knitting, running, and lemon cakes.

Her eyebrow quirked up at that, unable to stop herself. Just because several of the likes weren't even typical to find on here – knitting, hello? – and Charlotte was often skeptical of the truth in “literature” being a legitimate interest, but something about this woman had Sutton truly believing that all of these were very true to her.

“Sutton,” she murmured. Not the most common name, but pretty. It rolled off the tongue easily.

She could imagine the way it would sound from her own voice, panted or shouted, depending on what the girl with the fiery hair and the ocean eyes could make her feel.

Going back to the original message, she shook her head as she reread it. The *you look*

really interesting – and hot and the clearly crossed out rather than deleted hook up invitation. Both very flirty remarks, no subtlety in the approach. Not a hint of shyness, even coyness.

Not that she minded – she could even prefer such a straightforward attitude, really

– but something about the message felt strangely at odds with the unassuming, almost gently disarming look of the woman in the pictures.

Granted, Charlotte supposed that she didn't actually know this Sutton; she could look like an angel while underneath being someone who was going to completely knock Charlotte off her axis.

All she really knew at this moment was that if she was going to delete her profile and go into sexual exile for the foreseeable future, she could do with one more potentially great fuck.

Feeling herself smirk, she finished her wine and took another look at Sutton's picture – make that three or four great orgasms; if she was getting all of this from just a read on these pictures, she was more than willing to bet that Sutton's effect would be even better in person.

She ignored the delete option again, and instead hit *Reply*.

Charlotte, 10:02PM

My, that is one of the less subtle approaches I've received on here, I must say.

A shiver of anticipation worked through her already. After all, she might as well make the most of this last weekend before she officially filed her campaign forms.

She was meeting her grandmother in the morning to iron out some details and ask some questions she had about some campaign particulars, and had potential plans with Caleb and Dean. But those were for dinner; nothing too late. And if it conflicted with Sutton's schedule tomorrow, well, dinner with her brother was easily rescheduled.

Yeah, a sex Saturday with Sexy Sutton seemed to be just what Charlotte needed as her final big bang.

She was pouring herself another glass of wine, this time preemptively toasting to herself and the hopefully illustrious night in store for her.

The reply she got in less than five minutes made her smirk – until she read it.

Sutton, 10:05PM

God, I'm so sorry! I've been wanting to send this for hours, but couldn't message you again until you answered. That's not – I'm not the person who sent that first message! My friend created this account and sent that to you. I'm sorry, again. And dreadfully embarrassed.

Well. Charlotte blew out a breath, pursing her lips as she read the message over.

And a part of her that couldn't help but question and analyze first wondered if perhaps she was embarrassed of the original message and was trying to backpaddle.

Then again, she supposed, she *did* have the distinct impression that the message with the hooking up implication didn't seem to fit the persona she'd somewhat expertly put together. She supposed she could at the very least take away that her people reading skills were still proven to be spot on.

But just to be sure Sutton knew there was nothing to be embarrassed about if that *was* what was holding her back...

Charlotte, 10:07PM

I never said lack of subtly was a bad thing. Perhaps in other matters, but not when it comes to this.

She paused, tapping her fingers against the counter for a moment before she figured she may as well just ask for her own sake of figuring out how likely it was that there could be anything here.

So, your friend arranged this? Are you not looking for a sapphic spark, then?

She'd barely had a second to rinse her glass out in the sink before her phone buzzed in response.

Sutton, 10:08PM

Oh, I am. Yes. Well, kind of.

Her eyes narrowed even as she felt her smirk returning. Now that was an answer that was a little too fast for true disinterest.

Charlotte, 10:10PM

Kind of?

Sutton, 10:12PM

I meant to say, that I like both men and women.

She waited a few minutes, weighing the words as she brushed her teeth. It was because of the pictures, she was sure, that she almost felt like she could see the earnest expression on this woman's face as she said the words. And the way she could imagine it, she imagined a lot of discomfort in those words. As if she perchance hadn't really disclosed the "woman" factor of her sexuality much.

After all, quite literally everyone she'd ever spoken to on here had thrown their sexuality into this conversation fairly quickly, easily, when prompted.

So she took a guess.

Charlotte, 10:16PM

You haven't done this very much, have you?

Sutton, 10:18PM

No. Never, actually. Is it very obvious?

"Extremely," she murmured through a chuckle, amused and unsure if she should be alarmed or endeared at her stark honesty,

as she made her way into the bathroom to start getting ready for bed.

Charlotte, 10:19PM

Only a little ;)

As she slipped into her bedroom, she debated leaving the conversation there. After all, there wasn't going to be anything coming from this, clearly. And it was getting a bit late.

But on the other hand, Charlotte found her curiosity unusually piqued.

This Sutton seemed to be... different from what Charlotte was used to encountering on here, to say the least. Intriguing, really, and since when had Charlotte ever been able to pull herself away from something who'd tugged at her curiosity? It just was a matter of being that it was very rare that some *one* made her curious.

Charlotte, 10:22PM

Tell me, why did your friend deem it necessary to create this account and send messages from you that seem to be more suggestive than you would like?

For a few minutes – the longest it seemed to take Sutton to answer – she wondered if she'd overstepped – it wasn't as though she was ever willing to answer questions beyond fairly light ones to establish a flirty rapport, personally.

Sutton, 10:27PM

She thinks I need to get out more, I guess. And she thinks that I should, um, go out and hook up with someone.

She had no idea why she thought that the somewhat rambling of words seemed endearing. And the thought made her narrow her

eyes at her phone, “Your friend certainly knows how to tease me with a good time, then, doesn’t she?”

Charlotte, 10:30PM

And that’s not what you want?

Alarm for the morning set, and she climbed under the blanket just as she got her answer.

Sutton, 10:34PM

I – well, no. Not that I don’t want to ever meet someone, it’s just... I’m not wanting to go out and find a hook up just for the sake of hooking up. You know?

It was probably a good thing, she thought, that hooking up didn’t seem to be what Sutton wanted. Mostly because, truly, a beautiful woman like Sutton with this apparent penchant for telling the truth and revealing more than necessary information even to strangers on a dating app would get truly eaten alive on here.

Which... oddly, she didn’t want to envision for her.

Even, she sighed, if it meant their paths definitely weren’t going to line up. Because Charlotte certainly was one of those who would very much like to eat her alive.

Charlotte, 10:39PM

Unfortunately, that is where you and I differ. Which is a shame, I might add.

She couldn’t resist adding it. Especially when she could imagine the reaction it might have on a woman like Sutton who seemed so very shy.

Sutton, 10:45PM

Do you? Do this very often, that is.

... okay, not the response she’d been expecting.

Eyes narrowed, even though she was not *really* feeling insulted, because she truly wasn't ashamed of her sexcapades via SapphicSpark, and she didn't generally give a damn what the few people in her life who knew this side of her thought about it, either. But she found that with a small kernel of *something*, that she didn't quite like thinking that this woman might be judging her for it.

Charlotte, 10:48PM

Are you insinuating something?

Sutton, 10:50PM

No! No, no. I was asking because I was just, well, curious about how this usually happens?

Sutton, 10:51PM

I mean, you seem... like you know what to do, in situations like this. Unlike me, clearly.

Hmm. So she was going to go with more endeared tonight than alarmed, apparently, picking up her phone to type when it vibrated yet again for a third time.

Sutton, 10:52PM

Gods, that was probably a very silly thing to ask. You can just ignore me.

"Ignore you... not quite yet," she hmm'd to herself, still grinning slightly as she shook her head.

Charlotte, 10:56PM

Oh, dear girl. I don't typically make it a point to reveal the inner-workings of my interactions on here, you know. A true lady shouldn't reveal her secrets.

This, she firmly did believe was true. There was no need for her to share her inner-workings and dealings on here with anyone, and frankly the thought of telling almost anyone else she'd met on

here about her somewhat formula for picking up women made her feel a bit distasteful.

Granted, those were all different scenarios. Because she would be using those moves on those other women.

Charlotte, 10:57PM

However, I could make an exception for a pretty woman in need. I only need to know one thing...

Sutton, 10:58PM

Which is?

Briefly, she wondered if this was somewhat too much – after all, she had made it abundantly clear that if Sutton wanted to hook up, it would be something Charlotte would also very much enjoy.

But then she landed on Sutton's picture again, and figured it couldn't hurt to ask...

Charlotte, 11:02PM

Just to be completely clear, there is no chance of you being interested in – as your first message said – a hookup?

Because I absolutely cannot abide showing my hand in that case.

Especially because Charlotte could make a few tweaks to some of her rules of thumb in this case. She got the very distinct impression that everything in this conversation with Sutton was the painful truth. If Sutton, this seemingly sweet-and-sexy, albeit charmingly naïve woman wanted to forgo meeting at a club or a bar, in a place that she felt uncomfortable, Charlotte would make an exception for that.

Sutton, 11:05PM

I can confirm that I don't think I will be prepared to hook up with anyone any time soon.

Regretful. Truly regretful. She took a moment to say goodbye to her imagined fantastic final sex for the foreseeable future, before she got herself more into a work mindset. A problem-solving, question answering mindset. She could field questions for a sweet girl like Sutton for a night.

Charlotte, 11:09PM

Well, then, disappointed as I may be, I am now willing to answer what you'd like to know. Do you have specific questions in mind?

Sutton, 11:11PM

Do you only use this website for hooking up?

Huh. Well that question seemed rather her-specific rather than about the app community populace in general.

Charlotte, 11:13PM

Yes. Though in the name of honesty, I am always upfront about my not-serious intentions.

Sutton, 11:16PM

Okay. But what happens then?

It took her a moment, as she re-settled under the covers, to decipher what she meant by *that*. Because as soon as she read it, all of the images that Charlotte conjured to mind were so very X-rated.

But... Sutton, this innocent Sutton, certainly wasn't asking her to essentially sext with her, right?

No, she reasoned. Probably not.

Charlotte, 11:18PM

I do hope you aren't asking me to explain the proverbial birds and the bees, sweet girl. I was under the impression you wanted this to be PG ;)

No harm in testing the waters, though. It wasn't as though she would be opposed in the least to indulging in a bit of dirty talk with Sutton. It wasn't something she really did on here, admittedly. Some light sexts as a prelude to meeting up on occasion, maybe.

Sutton, 11:19PM

No! No, I know how... that... works. I meant, like, how do you go about doing all of this? When a woman messages you, what happens then?

She found herself shaking her head, grinning minutely down at her phone as she blew out a breath. Of course all signs pointed to Sutton being a bit flustered by her

– the unexpected part was how much Charlotte was into it.

She'd never really considered herself having a thing for naivety before. It never really crossed her mind that she would find a bit of excitement in this somewhat shy, almost innocent approach. It wasn't really like she was going to often find her hookups in genuinely shy and/or naïve women.

Another regretful sigh, this one a bit lofty, left her, before she nodded to herself.

They may not be having sex, and she didn't really want to reveal that she had somewhat of a pattern on here with women, but Sutton seemed to genuinely want to know, so.

Charlotte, 11:22PM

Well, it's all fairly straightforward, no pun intended. We chat a bit here and make plans to meet up. Typically at a bar or perhaps a club – always somewhere public. We spend a bit of time out to make sure we're... compatible. And from there, I see if they'd like to go back to my place for the night.

Really, ideally, she typically managed to finagle the situation so that they went back to the other woman's place. She didn't necessarily enjoy having the women she was sleeping with occupying her personal space – not that she was entirely against fucking women in her own bed, but the few times where they'd gotten the mistaken impression that they were going to stay for the night were never a fun aftermath for either party involved.

It entailed Charlotte being as courteous and magnanimous as possible, as she essentially showed them the door.

She hesitated for a moment, before figuring – what the hell? If she was being entirely honest:

Charlotte, 11:22PM

Not to boast, but they usually do.

Sutton, 11:23PM

Oh, I can imagine.

The reply took her by surprise – in all honesty, Sutton had probably taken her more by surprise in the last hour than anyone had in the past on this site.

But that instantly smooth delivery...

Charlotte, 11:25PM

That was smoother than I expected. Offense entirely unintended.

Sutton, 11:27PM

None taken, as it was actually inadvertently done.

So very charming, she thought with a tired laugh. Yeah, she was fairly certain that if Sutton got a tighter hold on her confidence in messaging women on here she would kill it. Seemingly intelligent, a knockout, and the utter lack of falsities – a dream for many women.

Charlotte's ideal hookup dream, apparently, too.

But it was truly best to cut this off now, before Sutton drew her into more conversation that enticed her despite the lack of chance of anything going on between them. Really, it would just be teasing herself, plus the fact that she had to be up in less than six hours.

Charlotte, 11:30PM

You're an interesting woman. Unfortunately, however, it is getting late, and I must be getting to bed. I've an early morning tomorrow.

Sutton, 11:33PM

I don't think I'm quite as interesting as you are. But I should be going, too. Thank you, for this. You know, not mocking me like you undoubtedly could have.

That damn sincerity she could just feel coming through in that message. She briefly wondered why Sutton would believe Charlotte would actively mock her, before she decided Sutton was entirely, completely unaware of her entire appeal.

Charlotte, 11:35PM

That's not really my style. But it was more entertaining for me than I might have anticipated. Goodnight, Sutton.

And good luck, if you stick it out on here, she silently added. But she couldn't quite envision Sutton continuing on here for a long time. In a way, she didn't quite want her to. She had a sneaking feeling that if she burned herself out for too long on here, that quite engaging *thing* about her wouldn't shine quite so bright.

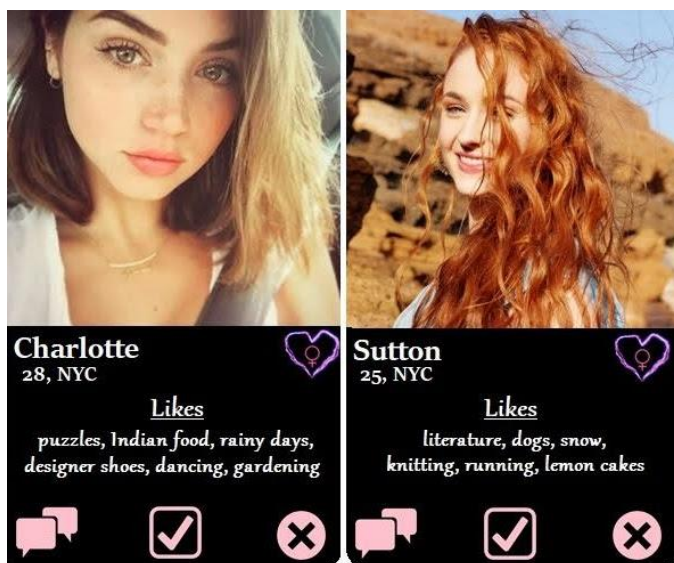
For that sake, she hoped Sutton found what she was looking for relatively soon.

Sutton, 11:36PM
Goodnight, Charlotte

She plugged in her phone, rolling onto her side as she cuddled into her blanket.

She still had to delete her profile and wipe the app itself from her phone – the entire goal of the night had been sidetracked, and she rolled sleepy eyes at herself.

The chat with Sutton was still up, though, when she looked down again. The bright laughing smile and red hair gleaming off the screen at her. Instead of deleting, she hesitated for a moment and locked the phone. She still had a few more days before it was a necessity.



An outtake set after the holiday party of chapter 18

Charlotte was never one to wake up before her alarm, in ordinary circumstances.

She certainly didn't wake up prior to her alarm going off when Sutton had been spending the night in the last few months.

Sutton-benefit nights had doubled somewhat like the ultimate relaxant; not only did Sutton's company lighten her mood and relax her, but with her exuberance and seemingly boundless energy when it came to having sex, Charlotte was always sated and her mind calmed enough to wind down.

Yet, here she was. Awake, over a half hour before her alarm.

And she couldn't help the way her sleepy eyes lingered on Sutton, who slept soundlessly next to her, curled up facing Charlotte.

She hadn't intended for Sutton to spend the night, necessarily. In fact, no matter how many times she told herself that she *shouldn't*, Charlotte kept finding that she didn't want to say goodbye to Sutton at the end of their times together.

It was alarming.

It was even more alarming that she always went against her better judgement and told Sutton to stay the night. Or – she huffed out a quiet sigh at herself, running her eyes over the curve of Sutton's cheek – catching her by the wrist and pulling her closer as Sutton was getting ready to go, and swallowing Sutton's surprised, breathless laugh as she'd kissed her, slow and deep and leading her toward her bedroom.

She certainly didn't *like* that she was going against her better instincts. Smarter instincts. But then, she supposed she didn't like having Sutton not be here with her even more.

Charlotte didn't even want to think about what it said that she'd woken herself up because she'd shifted even closer to Sutton in her sleep. No, she certainly wasn't going to think about that.

It was all too much. And too silly, she supposed, to fixate on it, when it wasn't like she was going to do anything about this stomach fluttering feeling. Or –

Those thoughts came to a halt as blue eyes blinked slowly, sleepily up at her. A smile tugged at Sutton's lips, adorable and sleepy, before she stretched. "Good morning."

She'd missed this, she thought on an exhale. Missed these times with Sutton that she hadn't gotten to have in the weeks that Sutton had been back in Boston with her family.

"Good morning," she murmured back, letting her eyes trail over the way Sutton's back arched with her stretch.

"What are you doing up?" Sutton whispered.

"I..." She trailed off for a moment. *Am having crises over the feelings I have for you*, didn't seem quite appropriate. "Had to go to the bathroom."

Sutton nodded, fiddling with the edge of the blanket, before she let out a soft hum,

"I guess I'll, um, get going."

She hadn't really *had* mornings with Sutton before, she realized. Because before the holidays – before all of these kisses that went against the *rules* – Sutton was always up and out just before her alarm.

It made her heart sink.

"Or," she found herself saying, "You could stay."

She wanted to cringe at herself. To roll her eyes at herself and berate herself for just prolonging this. But she wanted it, wanted more time with Sutton like this, curled up in her bed, for longer.

It was the privacy of her own bedroom; if she couldn't at least have what she wanted here, where else could she? Besides... it was only one morning.

Blue eyes seemed more awake now, as Sutton pushed up on her elbow and bit her lip. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You have clothes to change into, and it seems a bit fruitless for you to get up and go home just to have to leave your apartment in less than two hours to go to class," she added on, before she settled back under the covers.

It was also a bonus that Sutton felt like a human furnace. If only she could let herself believe she wanted her to stay for either of those logical reasons.

"If you're sure..." Sutton hesitated, looking up at her.

And Charlotte took only another second of Sutton in her bed and felt it low in her stomach how much she *wanted her here*. It was chased by that voice yelling in the back of her head that this was a giant mistake.

Still, she nodded, settling back down against her pillow, pulling the blankets up around herself.

It was done, that was it, and she was still a bit tired.

She didn't fall back asleep, not quite. Her doze was light enough for her to register Sutton shifting closer, and her fingertips tracing softly over her hip – back and forth –

just enough to feel it over the blanket. It was soothing, even with the feeling it caused in her stomach. It seemed to not only pacify the disquiet that had kept her awake, but lulled it into the back of her mind.

Charlotte was also never one to lounge in bed past her alarm. But she couldn't find it in herself to get up and drag herself away quite so fast.

Charlotte's apartment



Sutton and Regan's apartment



An outtake between chapters 24 and 25 (after Charlotte's big interview)

By the time Charlotte made it to Sutton's apartment, she felt like her entire world was about to fall apart at the seams.

Had she really just done that? Had she really, truly, just told a reporter in her final interview before her election, that she was a lesbian?

Her hands shook so hard she had to press them into tight fists and push them against her thighs as she clenched her jaw and shook her head, trying to focus over the rushing of the blood in her ears; she couldn't let herself think about that right now. She couldn't.

Sutton. *Sutton*. She just had to focus, had to keep her focus on getting to Sutton.

She stared at the front door, the thoughts about all she'd experienced inside of that apartment circling through her mind. The fact that all her body – and mind and...

heart – had been *craving* was inside, right now, was enough to make her want to run away and hide with how overwhelming it was.

But Charlotte Thompson didn't run. Not from this, not anymore.

Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her hand and let out a trembling breath, because this was it. There was already no going back, and if she had to go forward from here, she wanted to do it with Sutton.

Her fist was still shaking as she knocked on the door, the quiet moments following it leaving her in absolutely agonizing anticipation. Every second that ticked by felt like it dragged on. Like every second that went by was even more space between her and Sutton.

She heard footsteps from the other side walking closer, walking toward the door in the way she was so familiar with by now. How

she could picture light footsteps walking down the hall from the kitchen, getting closer. Closer.

And her breath caught and held in her throat.

Gods, but she wanted to see Sutton again, so much. Wanted to see those startlingly clear bright blue eyes, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the way her mouth would fall open in surprise at seeing her. She at least hoped it would be surprise.

Anger, sadness, blame, that same heartbroken look from a month ago in the café, she thought maybe she would see any combination of those things. And she *wanted* them; just wanted any part of Sutton, now.

She could explain herself as best as she could, hopefully, even though with the way her heart was pounding so uncharacteristically hard in her chest, and the way her head felt so – so full and frantic, she wasn't sure exactly how well she would do on that front.

It didn't change the fact that her fingers itched to stroke over Sutton's cheeks, so reverently, the way she'd been missing, and with every second as the shadow of footsteps came closer to the door, her heartrate picked up in her chest.

It didn't change how much she craved Sutton's own arms wrapping around her tightly, anchoring her in a way she'd never felt with anyone else before in her life. In a way that she'd never even expected or wanted to feel with anyone, but instead of feeling weighed down, it made her feel at peace, and it was a peace she missed so damn much. A peace she needed right at this moment, when she'd just put everything in her once-clear future into static.

The footsteps stopped, the shadow under the door right there, directly across from her. Only inches away, and it made her stomach clench.

She hadn't lowered her fist from where it rested against the door, as if holding it there would keep her closer to Sutton somehow, while she waited for it to open.

And when she saw the shadow on the other side of the door start to fade, footsteps walking away from the door, the breath she'd caught and held rushed out.

It *hurt*. She felt like she hadn't stopped hurting in weeks now, but this was different.

This was Sutton walking away from her, walking away when Charlotte came back for her. Walking away after Charlotte had come out to the *New York Times*, when she felt like she was holding so tenuously onto the control she'd spent a lifetime cultivating.

All she could see in her mind was the last time she'd seen Sutton. The way she'd looked at her in the café, her eyes brimming with anger and swimming with tears. *Heartbroken* and breaking Charlotte's own heart at the same time.

Sutton was in love with her – *so in love* – and this was it. She'd ruined it. She'd taken too long, and had thrown it away before she'd truly been able to let herself give it a chance.

The thought of it made her stomach roll, in a way that made her feel absolutely sick, filling her veins with panic, and – she was just so tired.

She was so tired of not seeing or talking to Sutton at all, of holding herself back and knowing she just wasn't allowed to do it. So tired from not sleeping at all and staying awake, thinking about her. Missing her.

She was so tired and this couldn't be it, because everything was changing now.

She'd changed everything, and she couldn't turn back even if she wanted to.

Her fist uncurled, the trembling only stopping as she placed her full hand against the door, leaning in until her forehead was pressed against the cool wood. It grounded her in a way, as she clenched her jaw, because she couldn't just let this be it. Not now.

"Sutton." Her throat felt raw and scratchy and her heart was so *full* just from saying her name.

"Sutton, please," the desperation in her tone was something she couldn't even stop, could barely care about. She had to clear her throat, twice, as everything she was feeling seemed so tightly wound she could explode. "I – you were right. In the café, you were right. I was –" she broke off, squeezing her eyes closed against the burning tears prickling at the backs of them, "I *am* so scared."

Her lips trembled as she had to pause, swallow hard, and gather herself for a moment. For a moment to try to keep the terrifying reality she'd just built for herself at bay.

She took in a deep breath, as deep as she could when she felt like her chest was so constricted. "I'm scared, but I do lo..." her jaw clenched on the word, her heart pounding against her ribs. And even as everything inside of her felt absolutely *wrecked*, she couldn't – she needed to see Sutton to be able to say the words out loud.

"Please," she settled on, lightly, helplessly, thumping on the door with her palm.

"Please open the door."

It seemed like it should be impossible, but everything ratcheted up another notch when the footsteps returned – pounding toward the door, now. She barely had enough time to lift her head away when it was jarred open.

The anticipation and elation and want and need inside of her rose, her breath stolen at the idea of seeing her, and –

And it wasn't the blue eyes and red hair that she'd thought it would be, that she longed for. Instead, she was met with glinting dark eyes, and a set jaw to match.

It took her longer to recover than it would on any other day. She had to take a long moment, clenching her hands into fists before relaxing them at her sides, her shoulders painstakingly pulled up to straighten her spine.

“Regan,” all of the other pleasantries she'd effortlessly let roll off her tongue in the past escaped her in this moment. “I need to see Sutton. I have to talk to her.” Of their own accord, her eyes flickered over Regan's shoulder, down the hallway. As if Sutton would be there.

She wasn't, though, and she distractedly looked back at Regan. Who, she knew, hadn't particularly liked her before, and never really had warm greetings for her.

But with the way she crossed her arms slowly and angled herself forward, Charlotte knew that Regan would very much like to throttle her.

“That's too bad,” heat simmered in her tone as she narrowed her eyes, tilting her head. “I really can't say I expected to see you showing your face here after how badly you hurt her.”

She knew how badly she'd hurt Sutton, but hearing the words felt like another blow.

Just one more blow that made it just a bit more difficult to maintain her composure.

“Regan –”

“No,” she cut her off, shaking her head back as she huffed out a breath. “You don't get to come here and try to be all smooth and

magnificent to try to get back into Sutton's good graces. I haven't sought you out to kick your ass – verbally or otherwise – because I made a promise to Sutton, but when you show up on my doorstep, then I get to say what I want to say, and you're going to listen."

It galled her, it truly did, to be spoken to like that. To be spoken to like that and not have a rejoinder already on the tip of her tongue, because she couldn't remember that ever happening.

And even if she did... well, if hearing Regan out right now was what it would take to be able to get through and see Sutton, she would do it. She would do just about anything, even if she felt like she was practically vibrating with how little patience she had.

Regan apparently read her silence correctly, as she nodded decisively. "Good. Now, do you know how Sutton and I became friends?"

Charlotte crossed her arms, holding herself as tightly as she could, as she took in a deep, measured breath to try to gather herself. "Yes." She peered over Regan's shoulder again, looking at the frames on the walls.

She couldn't quite see the pictures at this angle, but for this moment, it was almost like she could see the two of them, herself and Sutton, standing shoulder to shoulder, looking up at the pictures on the wall, months ago. The first time she'd been into this apartment, the day after they'd first had sex. As they'd been standing close enough that Charlotte felt the heat there, as Sutton had blushed and it had all been so new between them, this aspect of it –

And in a blink, it was gone, the feeling in her stomach bottoming out. In that moment, it was just a hallway again, dark with the evening, and she shook herself out of it, to look back at Regan. "You pushed down her bully."

There was blatant pride in the way Regan angled her jaw. “But do you know *why* I pushed down her bully?”

Impatient, exhausted, and still wanting to know every single thing she could about Sutton’s life, she shook her head.

It was clearly what Regan was waiting for. “We were seven years old. I just moved to a new town, new school, because my dad got a new job. And the kids there –”

She rolled her eyes. “They’d all basically been going to school together for their whole lives, and I was new and a little, well, weird.”

Charlotte could imagine.

“They didn’t exactly welcome me with open arms. But when the time came for recess, Sutton came to sit with me on the swings. And when we had art class, she shared her markers with me. She invited me to sit with her at lunch – this was every day for the first few weeks,” she paused, shaking her head slightly, a small smile playing at her lips. “Even at *seven*, in a class full of kids who wanted to be her friend, she didn’t think twice about seeking me out to be mine. She just was there for me.”

It made Charlotte want to smile, too. It made her heart feel so warm, in just the way Sutton did, because she... she could truly understand that. She could visualize that, even if she didn’t know Sutton for nearly two decades later, she saw that gentleness, that goodness inside of her that was so innate it irrevocably pulled you in.

“So, when she was being picked on, I was there for her. And I’ve been there for her ever since,” Regan finished, her tone turning steely once more. “So, no. You can’t see her.”

In that tale, in those memories, in the love that was so clearly in everything Regan did for Sutton, it sparked something inside of her. Sparked these feelings of warmth and love and pulled them

together enough to keep herself from teetering over the cliff it felt like she'd been on since she'd left her interview.

"I love Sutton," the words left her quietly, anguished in their own way, because she couldn't – she couldn't quite believe she was hearing herself say it aloud. Let alone say it aloud to someone who wasn't Sutton herself, but they were so *true* that she could feel it resonated throughout her entire being.

She loved Sutton. She loved her boldness. She loved her sweetness. She loved when she was so tired she literally could not keep her eyes open, she loved the way she tucked her hair behind her ear. She loved how almost frustratingly patient she was. She loved her so much it practically hurt.

"And I know that I broke her heart, because mine's been broken, too," she admitted, also for the first time. She hadn't let herself actually put a word to what she'd been feeling, to what had been keeping her up at night, making her ache.

It was almost maddening, how much this had changed her life. Her love for Sutton, her heartbreak, and she shook her head, drawing her hands through her hair and pulling at the roots as her breath quickened.

"And I – I've never felt like this, before, okay? I've never *wanted* to feel like this; I never wanted to be someone who lays in bed at night unable to sleep at night because all I can do is think about *anyone*. I've known for my entire life that it'll only bring me trouble in my career, in my entire life, but that... it didn't matter, anymore with Sutton."

Her breath left her, heart thudding in her chest with the enormity of it all, before she pursed her lips and squeezed her eyes closed as she tried to explain, "All of the sudden, here I am. Sitting at work, and even though it's in the middle of a busy day, and all I can do is think about her. I'm – I'm asking her to spend the night because I want her to be there in the morning. I didn't ask for her,

either, but she was always there and it was terrifying. To know that having that, having her, would risk everything for me.”

That *risk* that was so very, horrifyingly real, now. The risk that was going to be made public this very weekend. The risk that was jangling her nerves, making her feel like her body itself couldn't stop shaking, just a bit.

She took in as deep a breath as she could, opening her eyes to meet Regan's. And through her own jittered emotions, could see that the latent hostility was wavering in Sutton's best friend's gaze.

In a way, she really did admire Regan. In a way, she really did appreciate her, even in this moment. With how much she loved Sutton and was there for her. She would just admire it more if it wasn't directed as a wall between herself and Sutton, especially tonight.

“And I need to be telling this to her, Regan.” She gathered what felt like was all of her strength, everything she had left after the last couple of hours. “I know you're so very important to Sutton and I know that you've been here to try to protect her from people that will hurt her, but I swear to you that she doesn't need to be protected from me. So, please. Let me in, so I can say this to her.”

Because, in the words she couldn't say – wouldn't say – she was fairly certain that the only thing keeping her from breaking apart at the seams, was the prospect of seeing Sutton.

Regan stared at her, eyes a little wider than before, her jaw working before she sighed. Charlotte knew she was going to relent even before her shoulders slumped.

“You're right; you should be telling all of this to Sutton. Though whether or not you'll hurt her still remains to be seen,” she muttered, before tilting her head back.

“I would let you in, though, because Sutton can make her own choices...” She broke off, and looked almost regretful – she supposed, given that she’d never actually seen Regan look contrite – but she quite honestly couldn’t give a damn what Regan looked like when everything welled up inside of her at the prospect of *seeing Sutton*.

For the first time in a month. For the first time since she’d been so overwhelmed and shocked at Sutton’s bold declaration of love. For – certainly – the first time she would ever be able to admit that she was in love with her, too.

All of the nerves and the want and the love and the desolation came to tangle together and Charlotte could barely breathe with all she was feeling.

“But she’s not here,” Regan finished, her voice quiet. Solemn. Very nearly sympathetic.

The words slammed into her, painfully, viscerally, and she had to press her hands to her stomach at the feeling.

“What? When – when is she going to be back?” Mortifyingly, she stumbled over the words, but with the way the blood was ringing in her ears, she could hardly hear anything else. Nothing above where the world seemed to narrow into this moment.

Regan rubbed at the back of her neck. “Uh, not for a while? She’s home for Oliver’s wedding. Uh, she decided to go home early to get some... space,” she settled on, biting at her lip in uncertainty at her words.

“Okay. That’s – okay,” she heard herself speak, but somehow only registered her own words in an echo.

It wasn’t okay. It wasn’t okay because she needed to talk to Sutton. She needed to tell her how she felt before it really was too late. She had to tell her what had happened, had to tell her that she’d come out.

Because *god*, she'd quite literally *come out*.

She – she'd sat down, been face to face, with a journalist and had told her that she was a lesbian. In those exact words.

She was on the verge of the biggest step of her career that she'd ever taken, the step that would jumpstart the life she'd always imagined, wanted, and planned for, and she'd confessed to being a lesbian. In a very public, very forward way. And there was no taking it back.

By the end of the weekend, the entire country would know about her, and Sutton wasn't here, and Charlotte – she couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe?

“Uh... yeah, I know we don't have the best rapport, but are you okay?” Regan's voice sounded like it was reaching her through a fog, and she wrapped her arms tightly around her waist, feeling her face burn in shame.

I'm fine. I'm okay. I'm none of your concern.

“I... I –” it was all that could leave her, scratching at the back of her throat as the hot sting of tears hit the backs of her eyes, and this time it was too intense to push aside.

It was hard to pinpoint, really, exactly what this feeling was, that seemed to be crawling through her veins. Desperation, in a manner of speaking. Fear. Anxiety.

Because everything was going to come crashing down, she'd put everything on the line, and Sutton wasn't even *here*, and what was she going to do?

“What am I going to do?” She managed to get out before her voice broke, her shoulders shaking as a sob broke from her mouth. Her entire face burned red, mortification so strong and still not enough to quell everything else taking over.

“God, I – I came out and now Sutton isn’t even here, and she probably won’t even forgive me, because I did, I hurt her so badly, and...”

And she could have just thrown away her entire future. It could all be gone in two days, and –

“For God’s sake, maybe you and Sutton do belong together,” she heard Regan mutter, before two arms wrapped around her.

It wasn’t Sutton, it wasn’t the anchor that she felt she needed to be tethered back down. But it wasn’t nothing, either, and she didn’t had it in her to try to resist being drawn out of the hallway and into the apartment, or to pretend she didn’t find comfort in the way Regan’s hands rubbed at her back.

“We’ll figure something out.”

Mother/Daughter politics

I was asked by a fan once to divulge more into the Katherine and Charlotte relationship, given that they are both so close to Sutton, and this was the spoils of that conversation.

1. (set very soon after the Charlotte & Katherine scene in the epilogue)

It was no mystery that one of Sutton's favorite things to do was to curl up in her mother's study, even as an adult. When she'd been younger, it was a place where she and her siblings knew they had to be quiet, had to respect their mother's work space – which usually meant that it wasn't typically a place where her siblings liked to spend a lot of their time.

But she loved it. It was *their* time together.

Especially in more recent years, when sitting in her mother's office meant spending time with her mom and writing or brainstorming together. It meant something to her

– a lot to her, actually – that she knew her mother didn't only placate her by discussing her writing, but that she really took what she had to say into consideration.

And these times were rare, after she'd moved to New York, so they were all the more to be cherished when she was home on short trips or during the holidays.

This holiday's writing moments, in particular, were important. As her mother had brought up the idea for her to officially collaborate on a story, as in Sutton would help co-write it and be featured as a co-author, for the first time. And the energy of that was terrifying and thrilling and was buzzing through her as they planned out the draft.

She met her mom's eye from her perch across the desk and shook her head, as she gestured to the papers they had in front of them

that were covered in handwritten thoughts and comments. “I think a better journey for them would be for Clara and Aurora to part ways, there.”

Her mom had been very receptive to working together, and she quirked an eyebrow. “If we do that, it’s possible that Clara might have her first individual book in the series sooner than I’d thought.”

Sutton bit her lip in thought, tapping her fingers lightly on the lip of the empty mug of tea she’d made herself hours ago. She could actually go for another mug, really, before they continued onward in this drafting –

The light knocking on the door drew both her and her mother’s attention, before it was slowly cracked open.

Charlotte peered in, offering a quick, bright smile. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” she kept her voice low, as she did whenever Sutton was working back home but she didn’t want to distract her. “I just finished my conference call and made myself some coffee. I figured you two could use some tea after being up here for a couple of hours.”

Sutton couldn’t stop the automatic smile that tugged at her own mouth – wouldn’t stop it even if she could – as her stomach dipped in the warm way that was now familiar to her. “You read my mind.”

It ceased being surprising to her long ago how, some how, some way, Charlotte just had a knack for knowing what she needed. God, she loved her.

“That’s very thoughtful, thank you,” her mom added, with her own grin as she pushed aside her empty mug.

Her girlfriend entered the study slowly, uncharacteristically tentatively, and it was only then that Charlotte had only ever been inside of the study when Sutton had given her a tour of the house.

Charlotte reached out, placing one of the warm mugs in her hand in front of her mom, before she turned and, as though they were in sync, met her halfway.

Her smile only grew when Charlotte ducked to press a quick kiss to her cheek as she cradled her tea down into her lap. “Your call was quicker than usual.”

Light brown eyes rolled in frustration, Charlotte’s hand falling to her hip. “Hardly anyone was prepared. You’d think *I* was the one who called the meeting the day after Christmas.”

“And you’d think that you weren’t glad that with everyone else being under prepared that it would make it simpler for you to talk everyone around to your plans,” she teased, tilting her head back to take Charlotte in as she stood in front of her, enjoying so much the way Charlotte smirked.

“You know me so well, darling.” She winked, before clearing her throat, “I guess I’ll let you two get back to work, then.”

Sutton bit her lip, hard, to stop herself from telling Charlotte to stay. Because she knew that out of her family, only Ethan was home and that he was playing his drums in the basement which was not something her girlfriend – or most people – wanted to sit in on.

Plus, she typically got a lot of work done when she had Charlotte working with her; her girlfriend’s mind was... incredible. Even if she wasn’t a writer or even interested in creating fiction, she was full of ideas, and always had good comments or questions that made her work harder.

But – well, it wasn’t just her own work that she was doing at the moment, not just her own time, and it was her mom’s study. A place that she often shooed other members of their family away from when she really needed to concentrate.

And despite the fact that Sutton had told her mother many times in the last couple of years about not only all of the amazing aspects about Charlotte, but also about how smart she was and how bouncing ideas off of her was so often useful for her, Sutton knew that there was this stubborn part of her mother was still holding out on fully accepting Charlotte.

It was disappointing, to say the least, and –

“If you’re done with your own work, why don’t you close the door and join us?”

Sutton’s told me often that you always ask the right questions,” Katherine suggested, her voice actually *welcoming*. Toward *Charlotte*.

Sutton couldn’t help the way her mouth fell open in shock, her head whipping to look at her mom, who merely sipped on her tea with a small, content grin on her face.

There was nearly a cross between her own surprise and a smile, as well as a touch of her own smugness, on Charlotte’s face as she quickly complied with Cat’s words and shut the door. “I’d love to.”

“I...” She didn’t even know what to say, even as she automatically scooted to the side in the warm blanket nest she’d made for herself on the love seat.

Her girlfriend’s warmth was quickly seated next to her, and she shifted easily, their bodies fitting together in a natural cuddle. She looked from her mom, who was writing something else onto the papers in front of her, before back to Charlotte, who met her gaze with a conspiratorial smile. “I told you we bonded.”

Charlotte *had* told her that, two days ago when Sutton returned inside from the annual snowball fight with her siblings. She just hadn’t thought her mom would have so quickly turned around...

She wasn't going to question it, though, not as Charlotte's arm settled behind her and she glanced up to try to get her head back in the game. And her mom was looking up at them, having paused in her writing, meeting her gaze with a soft smile, and – okay. She could get used to this.

(And it was the first of many times Charlotte was invited to join them)

2. Post Charlotte winning a senate seat –

“I feel like I should have remained upstairs,” Charlotte murmured into Sutton's ear as they slowed to a stop while one of the songs came to a close.

She felt her wife's hands stroke at her hips softly before she pulled back, wide blue eyes looking imploring into her own. “Don't be ridiculous. *You* belong here.”

Her lips pulled into a bit of a scowl as she shot a glare toward one of the women who had given them a glare moments earlier, one that neither of them could miss as Sutton had spun her out and then back in nearby where she'd been standing.

After having attended the Spencer New Year's Eve party for four years, now, it was ironically the first holiday season after Charlotte and Sutton were married that seemed to be the least welcoming to Charlotte here.

Not in terms of the Spencers, thankfully, and – granted – not even when it came to the majority of the guests.

The thing was, in winning her in the Senate, she'd won against Sean O'Malley. An older man whose stern disposition really won him little favor against her in the election, lesbianism be damned.

A Massachusetts-born and raised politician, Sean had a lot of ties here in Boston, before he'd started really making waves in New York politics a handful of years ago.

Given his past here, Charlotte had done her best to prepare herself for the fact that everyone here at the Spencer family party wouldn't necessarily be entirely in support for her during this election, regardless of whether or not she was married to Sutton.

She had even done her very best to respectfully not strike up a debate inside of the Spencer family, as she knew Jack, Katherine, and Oliver had known Sean for a number of years. In the end, she had been very pleasantly surprised and filled with affection with the fact that her in-laws had opted to campaign for her.

Though Sean himself was not invited to attend the party this year, it seemed, however, that there were a handful of people who did not agree with that support were in attendance.

"I'm very proud to have you here with me," Sutton murmured, tugging her in to place a kiss on her lips.

And she leaned into it, humming under her breath as she relished in the soft warmth, stroking her thumb along Sutton's jaw. "Well, if that wasn't the case, I wouldn't be doing my job, Mrs. Thompson."

She felt Sutton's smile more than anything, a reflexive one tugging at her own mouth in response.

"Plus, don't even try to tell me there isn't a small part of you that doesn't *love* the fact that you got a bigger show of support from here than Sean O'Malley, who has worked here for the majority of his life," Sutton challenged, a glint that she *so* loved in her eyes, as she lifted an eyebrow.

And the smirk that tugged at her mouth was positively unstoppable. Because yes, that was so very true. And of course, Sutton knew that about her regardless of the fact that she would never actually state such a thing.

“I would never,” she admonished with a wink, before squeezing Sutton’s hand. “And to that end, I’m going to get something to eat while you go talk to Regan before she yells at me for hogging you.”

She maneuvered her way through the crowd, stopping in the bathroom to freshen up her lipstick, before she made her way to the back entrance of the hall, close to the balcony doors.

Through the open doors, she spotted the small group of women who had been giving disdainful looks in her direction throughout the night, and barely held back a sigh. Especially as, just over the music, she could hear snippets of conversation.

“It’s just that she’s so inexperienced –”

“Nepotism at it’s finest –”

“And that smug look she has while she’s here...”

Irritation pulsed through her, she pursed her lips and bit back the urge to make any commentary as she walked in. It wasn’t as though she was entirely unfamiliar with these comments – she’d been getting them thus far for her entire career. And they were typically easy to shut down with any sort of debate or bite back from herself.

But, she reminded herself, she wasn’t in DC, or even in her own city. She was at a holiday party with her in-laws, and she knew better than many how to rise above any petty commentary.

“I would be interested in knowing, Barbara, why you feel the apparently encompassing urge to badmouth my daughter-in-law while at my own holiday party.”

Just as she was shaking her head back to enter the room, Charlotte paused, as Katherine’s voice rose above the mutters of the others only moments before. The mutters that now fell silent.

Except for the one who had commented on her smug look, with graying brown hair.

“Kate! We were merely discussing this past election.”

“And while I would never want to infringe on your right to discuss any matter of interest at your leisure, I’m not willing to stand by and allow it to happen – along with those glares of yours, directed at my family – right under my nose,” her voice was frosty, reserved yet dripping with judgment in a way Charlotte rarely was privy to hearing.

And her eyebrows lifted in surprise, even as appreciation rushed through her.

“It wasn’t at your *family*, Katherine, Sutton’s lovely as ever –”

“Though you weren’t invited to their wedding, I’m sure you’re fully aware that Sutton and Charlotte are married. Which makes both of them my daughters now,” from her vantage point, she could see how Katherine crossed her arms.

Even though she’d known Katherine for a few years now, and had come to very for her – as well as the other Spencer family members – very much, and did consider them her family... it was the first time she realized that she loved her.

“And yes, we supported her in the election against Sean, because in spite of age and length of experience, innovation and progress are what moves us forward instead of holding us back. Your husband was close to Jack, and as such, we’ve continued to invite you into our home. But don’t misunderstand; intolerance for any member of our family won’t be tolerated,” she finished, reaching out and plucking an empty plate from the stack on the table. “Do move along, please, you’re blocking the refreshments.”

It swiftly cut off any of the offended and somewhat cowed mumbles, and was so effective, Charlotte herself took a second to just be thankful to her.

Even more thankful when Kate turned to make eye contact with her, offering her the empty plate. “I appreciate your restraint from saying anything yourself. But it was unnecessary.”

It was an odd feeling, Charlotte decided, to feel this rush of love for someone who wasn't Sutton, Caleb, or Dean. Then again, she guessed, maybe she shouldn't be surprised to feel this affection for someone who had a big hand in helping Sutton be the person she was.

“I think it was worth it to not say anything myself to hear you bring them to heel yourself.”

3. Set after the *Forever and A Day* baby discussion –

Katherine Spencer was not unused to close scrutiny. Growing up, she'd been the oldest daughter of a man who owned one of the largest fishing companies in the world. She'd then married a man who became one of the most notable and respected politicians in the country. And in the last fifteen years, she'd been on the bestseller's list more than a handful of times.

It wouldn't be incorrect to say that more often than not, her every public move had been watched.

It wasn't typical, however, to have the feeling that she was being closely observed while in the company of her family. Yet that didn't change the fact that she knew she was all weekend long.

As a graduation gift from herself and Jack, they'd allowed Ethan to spend a week in New York over the summer. Originally, the plan had been to send Ethan and let him stay with Sutton and Charlotte, but given that she had a few meetings with publishers here – and she could always do with visiting her daughters more – she'd joined for the trip.

And through all of the dinners and some of the outings they'd had together, there was a curious sense of being watched.

She even was aware of it right now, as she smiled up at Ethan, running her hand through the curls that he'd finally allowed her to cut shorter last month, and tousling it, before placing both of her hands on his shoulders and making him look her in the eye. "But you better stick to your sister's side. No going off alone. I mean that to all of you," she leaned back to include both Sutton and Alex in her serious look.

Alex scoffed, "We are all adults here, even this one." She elbowed Ethan, though given the fact that the baby of the family had grown to be taller than all of his siblings in the last couple of years and Alex remained the shortest, her elbow hit around his waist.

She fixed a look at her daughter, before Sutton nodded. "Of course nothing's going to happen. But we have to get going now if we want to make good time."

Despite the fact that Ethan *was* eighteen, letting him go out – let alone to a concert – in Manhattan was something she certainly was only comfortable with given that he was going with both Sutton and Alex.

She waved again, watching them leave Charlotte and Sutton's apartment, before she nodded to herself. Now that *that* was out of the way...

She made her way into the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to take in the way her daughter-in-law was now putting away the leftovers from the dinner they'd all shared. She worked in thoughtful, deliberate movements. As she usually did no matter what she was doing in the kitchen, Katherine had come to learn, given how little time Charlotte typically spent there.

Though, she had asked for Katherine's recipe for lemon cakes and – according to Sutton – had become passably adept at making them.

Her face, she'd noticed in the last few days, had taken on a more serious always-thinking look this weekend that Katherine recognized from having witnessed Charlotte work in the last few years. That was one of the things that had clued her in the previous night that it was Charlotte who had been the one watching her so closely.

"All right, now that everyone has gone, tell me. What's been on your mind?" She cut right to the heart of the matter; she'd found that to be the most effective method when needing to discuss matters with Charlotte in the last few years, and it was something she very much appreciated about her.

Charlotte's movements slowed as she looked at her, over her shoulder, and minutely shook her head. "Nothing. Just thinking now about if you'd like to join me for a movie before turning in for the night."

Though it had taken Kate a few years to get a good read on Charlotte, she knew her now. She knew her, not quite as well as she knew her children that she'd raised, but she knew there was something weighing on her.

"Charlotte," she kept her tone low and firm but *warm*; again, the way she'd learned Charlotte needed. Like being coaxed in a way, though she was certain her daughter-in-law would never like the idea of being coaxed into anything. "I know you've been essentially watching my every move this week so far. I think I could be much more help to you if you just told me why."

She knew in the way her movements slowed – just a touch – that she was absolutely correct, and she merely tilted her head as she waited for the truth to come.

Charlotte sighed, seeming to hold the weight of the world on her shoulders in that moment, before she drew herself up. It was a re-posturing that pulled her shoulders back and her spine straight,

one that Charlotte did often when she put on a public persona or seemed to need strength.

“I... have been watching how you mother,” the words came quietly but solidly, and she could hear the honesty and deliberation in them even as Charlotte tried to keep her tone conversational.

“How I mother?” She couldn’t help but repeat, shaking her head slightly as she walked closer, leaning against the countertop a foot away from her.

“You know. The way you.” She sighed, gesturing vaguely. “Speak and touch and use your mother-senses,” she answered, before dropping her hands back down to push down the top of the final tupperware lid.

She couldn’t help but be amused. “I’ll admit I’m not quite sure how to talk you through this,” she allowed, before tilting her head to take in the tension in Charlotte’s stance. “Why, though?”

She asked, despite the fact that her *mother-senses* – and knowing Sutton – seemed to be leading her in the direction of an answer already. But that could of course be a leap, and not worth getting as excited as she knew she would get over it –

After long moments beat by, Charlotte bowed her head for a moment, before blowing out a breath. “We were going to tell you about it at the end of the visit, but... we’re... *discussing* having a baby. I would ask you to be surprised when Sutton tells you, but –”

The smile that positively took over her face, along with its resounding happiness welling inside of her, was impossible to hide. “That is *wonderful*.”

“I... I started thinking so.” There was a small smile playing around the edges of Charlotte’s mouth, before she shook her head, a look of utter stress taking over.

“But then, is it really? I’m already worried enough about it, and after watching you this weekend, I’ve realized I really don’t have those instincts you seem to have. It looks effortless, and I can only learn so much on the short trips you take here or I go to Boston. I can’t possibly learn everything I need to learn like that.”

The words burst from her in a way that genuinely surprised Katherine, a way she had never heard from Charlotte in over six years of knowing her, and it took a moment for her to unpack everything.

Sutton and Charlotte were seriously considering having a child – which she was more than thrilled about. Charlotte seemed to have decided this was something she wanted – which she knew from talking to Sutton was something she’d been worried about for a few months. And now she was doubting her ability to *mother*, based on observation.

If she thought about it, Katherine probably wouldn’t be shocked if there was a file in Charlotte’s laptop that detailed all of the “mother-senses” she thought she had to learn, already.

“Why did you decide that maybe this was something you’d want?” She settled on asking.

And got to take a moment to enjoy the way Charlotte turned to face her, shoulders drawing up in a shrug that looked somewhat more like Sutton’s mannerisms than her own. “I started thinking maybe it would be *nice*. And picturing things... babies. Sutton with our baby.” She trailed off, offering a shrug, before she let out a humorless laugh at herself, “But then I talked to my mom last week, and she just said, *that sounds nice*. And the next day, she sent me the number to the best nanny agency in the city. Which was – nice of her, in her way, because that is how she cares. But I don’t *want* the agency! I can’t remember my mother using her mother-instincts, really, ever.”

Charlotte bit off what she was saying, clearly holding back even more that wanted to come out, as she clenched her jaw and shook her head, taking a deep breath.

And it was the only thing she could think of to do; she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Charlotte. One arm around her, rubbing at her spine, before bringing the other up and stroking through her hair.

It occurred to her, in that very moment, that she was quite unaware of how many times Charlotte had been *held* like this, with the exception of by Sutton. Even with her children being adults, Kate knew she got in good *holding hugs* with them fairly often. It was a comfort, for all involved, even if at times, Ethan was at the age where he would deny it.

But even though she hugged Charlotte – hellos and goodbyes and the occasional others just because – it was never like this. She *held*, able to very much feel the stiffness in the way Charlotte in her at the fact that she was being cared for.

“You are instinctive,” she murmured into her ear, soothingly. “You couldn’t do what you do or be nearly as successful if you weren’t. I’ve seen you with Sutton for years. And when you have your own child, it will translate to that.”

As she spoke, she felt Charlotte slowly, slowly relax. Bit by bit, as if tentative.

Hesitant at being vulnerable. “There you go,” she whispered.

“And I promise you, that I didn’t have all of my mother–senses in the beginning, either,” she confided to her the utter truth. “Being a parent is scary for everyone at different times, no matter what.”

She didn’t often like to place blame around. And she didn’t even necessarily *dislike* the Thompson family. She’d come to a mutual respect with Elizabeth, though she often wondered how much of Charlotte she had somewhat sculpted into her likeness in her

childhood. She was able to fairly easily get through the dinners with Allison and Mitchell Thompson, as they were both decently intelligent and genial.

But she did not agree with them, in many respects.

However, she would give them one thing; they did enough right that they'd raised a woman who she had come to very much love.

And like any mother would to her child, she drew back, and met her gaze. "And if you ever need *anything*, you have a mother who is here day or night."



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The End

“I was thinking that for next year, with the Foundation, it’ll be good for us to personally hold the fundraisers at every headquarters,” Sutton spoke contemplatively as she stirred the pot of soup on the stovetop.

Charlotte paused where she was, after having grabbed two bowls from the cabinet, turning to face her wife. “Oh?”

She kept her response short and her tone light, even as Sutton’s statement rang over in her mind.

In the months since her second term as President had ended, Charlotte had rolled right into her new role – President of the Thompson Foundation. It had always been the final step of the plan for her.

She watched as Sutton tilted her head in thought, a few tendrils of her red hair that started streaking with white a few years ago when Sutton had turned fifty falling out of the ponytail she had it up in.

“I think it’ll be good for morale overall, and it’s been a while since we’ve really had the time to both travel to all of the foundation’s main locations. I know you’ve always checked in on them in-person,” Sutton shot her a smile that was no less dazzling now than it had been thirty years ago. “But it’s been a while since I’ve been.”

“Hmm,” was all that came out of Charlotte’s mouth as the cogs in her mind started turning.

Sutton continued to ramble, adding a dash of salt to the pot. “Madelyn is going to be starting law school next year and with Ellie taking her break from college –”

“Please, don’t remind me,” Charlotte edged in with a sigh, albeit playful.

She supported her daughter, she did. And she wanted her to be happy. But she also wanted her to be happy with a degree to fall back on should her photography not work out.

Sutton's bright blue eyes met her, the gleam in them comforting and familiar even as it was sprinkled with exasperation. "Love, not everyone can know what they were born to do and carve a straight path out for it. She needs to figure herself out."

"I know, I know. I'm not making any more comments." She mimed zipping her lips closed, even though it was difficult.

Sutton's warm grin softened as she continued. "Neither of the girls will be around next year and I'm actually writing a little before my deadline, so my schedule should be clear, too. We could plan the Foundation's event schedule soon."

"Actually... I want to talk to you about that." The words slipped out of her slowly, because it had been something she'd been wrestling with for a few months, now.

Sutton paused, forehead crinkling with a frown. "You're right, we should follow the schedules from previous years. I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

"Darling, the Thompson Foundation is our Foundation. It would be impossible to step on someone's toes," she shook her head, affection threading through her even as she stepped closer and slid her hand along the counter. The words felt foreign on her lips as she spoke, "I've been thinking and I - I don't think I'm going to maintain my position at the head of the Foundation. I've been thinking about... retiring."

She watched Sutton closely, even as she felt the oddity of the word leaving her mouth. Sutton seemed to find them odd, too, as that frown deepened before it flattened into a smile. Before Sutton broke into a laugh. "Okay, right. You're going to retire."

Retire. The word just seemed so... wrong. So unlike her. She didn't even fully grasp it, so she couldn't blame Sutton.

Charlotte continued to stare at her wife, and she could see the moment Sutton realized she wasn't kidding. Blue eyes widened and the hand she'd been stirring with froze, the ladle slipping and splashing into the boiling soup.

"Sutton!" She grabbed Sutton's hand and pulled it away from the liquid, but her wife didn't appear to feel any pain from the splash.

Instead, she gave Charlotte a wide-eyed look of utter panic. She tightened her hand around Charlotte's the other coming up to cup her face, before jerkily sliding down to her shoulder. "Are you okay? I know you just saw your doctor last week. But you *said* everything was normal." Her hands both started to move frantically, along with her eyes, as if searching for some hidden medical problem. "You said –"

Charlotte managed to catch Sutton's hands in her own, stilling them, even as she laughed at the absurdity. "I'm fine." She dipped to catch Sutton's gaze with her own, holding it. "I'm great, in perfect health. But I've just... I've had a lot to think about since last January. And I think I'm done."

Sutton's hands were slack in her own as she stared at Charlotte, looking for all the world like she couldn't comprehend what she was talking about. Which Charlotte understood.

Because in the past few months as she'd taken over day-to-day operations at the Foundation, she felt the same thing. Like she could hardly recognize this feeling inside of her that *didn't* want to keep driving forward.

But it was there and it was recognizable, now.

Sutton's hands squeezed hers, her voice soft as she asked, "Is it because of Madelyn?"

Charlotte bit the inside of her cheek. Because... well, as per usual, her wife was astute.

These feelings had started on the tail–end of a horrific time for their daughter six months ago. Their beautiful, brilliant, take–charge daughter, who’d been outed as bisexual by someone she’d thought she could trust. At the time, it had been right after Charlotte’s term ending as President, and in something that should have been deeply private and personal, their oldest daughter had been catapulted into a media frenzy.

Madelyn handled it with grace and aplomb. She’d done the interviews that had been thrust toward her, expected of her, given who her parents were. But Charlotte knew it was a lot of weight on her shoulders. A lot of weight that wouldn’t be there if she wasn’t in the public eye.

And while she was certainly less in the spotlight while she ran the Foundation, it was still a job that required a certain amount of public attention.

She squeezed Sutton’s hands back and closed her eyes at the feelings in her stomach. “I just want our girls to have some part of their life that isn’t about me and my career.”

Charlotte melted into Sutton’s arms when she was pulled in, wanting to be wrapped up in her scent. She took a deep breath against the crux of Sutton’s neck, wrapping her arms rightly around Sutton’s waist.

“Of course that wasn’t easy for Madelyn. But, Charlotte, she’s okay. She is *more* than okay.”

Logically, Charlotte knew Sutton was right. Madelyn was strong and had a composure that rivaled Charlotte’s own in public scrutiny. She’d mastered having a brave face in the eye of the media, because as much as they’d kept their girls as out of the media as possible... it was inevitable.

She heaved a sigh as she pulled back to look up into Sutton's eyes. "I don't *want* her to have to put on a brave face, anymore. I just want her to be able to live her life."

Squeezing her eyes tightly closed, she sagged against the counter. "And Ellie..."

god, she is dropping out of NYU and packing her bags to get as far away from anywhere resembling Manhattan or DC. And I love her so much, and she *is* talented, but – she wants to melt so deep into life behind the camera and to shrink far into the background and I... I *know* it's because of me." The words hurt as they escaped in a whisper.

She felt Sutton's hand cup her jaw and tilt her head up. Charlotte went easily with the motion, wanting Sutton's calming words, even if she maybe wouldn't believe them.

"First of all, there's no *you*. It's we. We are a team, and if either of our daughters are traumatized, there is no singling yourself out to take the blame." Sutton joked, before she brought both hands to Charlotte's shoulders and squeezed. "But they aren't, love. They're just not."

"But Ellie –"

"Is *shy*. She has always been shy. Don't you remember as a toddler? Long before you ran for President, Ellie was always quiet, always watching, never wanting to join until prompted. Who's to say she wouldn't be the same way if you'd been a – a florist?"

Sutton sighed, and strokes her hand through Charlotte's hair. "I love how much you think of our daughters, but they don't want you to stop living your dream for them.

It's worth a conversation with them, of course. But they won't want it. And neither do I."

Sutton's words washed over her easily and she leaned into believing them. She'd been better as a mother than she'd ever thought she could be; she loved more than she thought she would be able to. She was more available than her parents had ever been for her. But she would always believe Sutton to be SuperMom.

A reluctant smile tugged at her lips, even as she shook her head.

"It's not just that, though. It's... I had so many dreams. All of my political goals, wanting to make a difference. And my record already speaks for itself with how much I've implemented; I think... I've accomplished that dream."

She nodded as she said it, the truth of the words coursing through her with how *right* they felt.

She brought her hands down, tangling her fingers with Sutton's. "And I want time with you, darling." The truth rang in that statement, and with it, an entirely unexpected lightness. "I want to have time to take a real vacation with you, and go on your next book tour, and be with you for a weekend and be able to turn my phone off. I want to live a *life* with you, before we get too old to do all of these things."

"I want that, too," Sutton whispered, leaning down to press her lips to Charlotte's, the contact so soft. So easy to lean into. "That's all I've ever wanted. Everything else has just been extra."

Charlotte never would have thought she'd understand that. But in this moment, she did.

Jus so you know, I will never spam your email. I only like to drop in when I have something to say, like a little bonus or a book release announcement!

Or, in this case... when I have a lot to say.

Thank you if you've read this far. Until next time –

xoxo,

~~gossip girl~~ Haley