

Sutton had generally always enjoyed her birthday, as a rule.

Growing up, her parents made birthdays for all of them very special. They got to pick what was for dinner, they got to pick their own themed party; it was a day for *them*.

She'd been very lucky to have her parents and her family, something she'd always known, but it was a fact that had become more and more apparent as she'd gotten older.

Also as she'd gotten older, birthdays had taken on a new meaning.

Throughout her childhood, her adolescence, even into her young adulthood – she'd cared more about the celebration, and about getting older. Wanting, very much, to be seen as an adult, taken seriously.

Now, and for the past decade, things had slowly changed. Especially since she'd had Lucy.

While birthdays were no less joyous, Sutton viewed them very differently.

She didn't care about gifts, anymore – not that she'd been a very materialistic child, but what kid didn't love seeing a bundle of presents picked out especially for them?

Her outlook on the passage of time was drastically changed. She *was* an adult now, taken very seriously. And while she didn't feel negatively about the concept of getting older – she'd had no panic when she'd hit thirty, and continued to feel more than fine about aging – she'd come to start wishing the clock would slow down.

Not because of *her* age, no. But because of how everything changed when it came to everyone else. How quickly it seemed Lucy was growing up. How much older her parents were getting.

The thought occurred to her now, as she walked down the sidewalk next to her mother, toward the restaurant they were going to for dinner.

She gestured a few feet ahead of them, where Lucy was animatedly talking to Sutton's father, clutching his hand as she jabbered on. "Remember when she was so little, she'd climb dad like a little monkey whenever you two were in town? And she'd cling to him, refusing to get down?"

Lucy was, admittedly – blessedly, because Sutton wasn't ready for it to not be so – still little enough that she could easily be carried, especially in a piggyback. But she was such a ball of energy, now, that she often preferred to be walking, running, hopping, or skipping on her own two feet.

Her mom chuckled, lightly bumping her shoulder into Sutton's. "Of course." There was such a reverential warmth in her smile, as she stared ahead at her husband and granddaughter. It remained in her gaze as she turned and looked at Sutton. "Then again, I remember the same about you. When you were so small, you'd curl up on my lap and still have room for your favorite stuffed animal to join you."

And there it was, that little ache in the reminder of how time passed so quickly. One day, Sutton would have a birthday wherein she was walking down the street next to an *adult* Lucy, and – yes, she was not ready to think about that.

Shaking her head slightly, Sutton couldn't help but return her mom's grin. "If my childhood memory serves, you had a very comfortable lap to sit on for story time."

Katherine laughed. "Well, I would offer to try to recreate the memory for you, sweetheart, but I'm not sure you'd get the same comfort from it, given that you're even taller than I am, now."

Before she could respond, Lucy spun around to look at them, nearly tripping over her own feet as she scuttled backwards. "Mama! Is Charlotte coming to dinner?"

"Yes, hon, she's going to meet us there. Now, eyes forward," she called back.

Lucy giggled as Jack used their connected hands to tug Lucy up and off of her own two feet. "I told you she was coming!"

Sutton could see the look her mother was giving her from her peripheral vision, even before she turned to face her. "What is it?"

Katherine pursed her lips. "Nothing."

Sutton nailed her mom with a *look*. "You said you were going to give Charlotte a chance. That you believe she loves me and Lucy. And, really, if you *do* give her a chance, you'll see it for yourself."

She was sure of that, actually. It had to be true, because Sutton felt so adored by Charlotte; she truly couldn't imagine that someone else might not be able to see it

Even Regan – her staunchest, fiercest supporter in this life – liked Charlotte. Not only did she like Charlotte, she'd invited Charlotte over for coffee *without* Sutton! That was the biggest stamp of approval Sutton could imagine anyone receiving from her best friend.

If Regan could see the love and adoration that Charlotte made Sutton feel, then surely her very wise, very observant mother could, as well.

She just needed to work on getting everyone to the same place at the same time, to provide the opportunity for her mother to spend some time with Charlotte.

"I am giving her a chance, sweetheart," Katherine assured in a murmur. "I've been giving her a chance for the last two days."

Sutton squeezed her eyes closed at the reminder.

Her parents had arrived into town Thursday afternoon. Sutton had gone to pick them up from the airport and bring them to their hotel, stopping for a quick dinner. Friday afternoon – yesterday – they'd all taken Lucy out to the zoo after she'd gotten out of school, and had then stopped over at Sutton and Lucy's for the evening for some family time.

And, unfortunately, Charlotte hadn't been able to make the best of impressions during this visit so far.

She'd been busy on Thursday, having been in meetings with foreign affairs until late at night. She hadn't even left her office until nearly ten PM. When she *had*, she'd come over to Sutton's.

Which had been a lovely surprise for her. She'd just climbed into bed for the night, missing Charlotte. Knowing they hadn't been able to talk for most of the day because Charlotte had been in very important, do-not-disturb meetings.

Only for Charlotte to have appeared in the doorway to her bedroom, smiling that slightly self-conscious smile – one that still managed to look self-possessed, somehow – as she'd asked, "I assumed it would be all right for me to use my key? I didn't want to call when I got out of my meetings, as I wasn't sure you'd still be awake."

That incredible, overwhelming but in the best way possible feeling of being so *in love* had washed over Sutton. "Of course it's all right. It's always all right for you to use it; that's why I wanted you to have it."

The reality was, Sutton was trying very, very hard to not get ahead of herself when it came to her relationship with Charlotte.

Yes, they were in love. Yes, Charlotte was patient and sweet and perfect with Lucy. Yes, Lucy adored Charlotte right back. Yes, everything seemed to be going so incredibly well. Yes, Sutton wanted Charlotte around all of the time.

She wanted Charlotte to come home to her after a long day. She wanted Charlotte to breathe that heavy sigh of relief as she dropped next to Sutton on the couch or in bed and unburden herself of everything she'd gone through that day. She wanted to regale Charlotte with all of her own trials and tribulations since the last time they'd seen one another.

What Sutton wanted, very acutely, was for Charlotte to move in with her.

But the logistical reality of their relationship wasn't

lost on her. No matter how caught up in this fever of love she was, Sutton couldn't just throw caution to the wind completely, and ask Charlotte to live with her. Not when she had to put Lucy first, had to maintain her composure in her own career.

After all, this time last year, Charlotte hadn't even been a fixture in her day-to-day life. She'd been nothing more than an incredibly successful politician with whom Sutton had once been in love with. They'd only established a true, romantic relationship a couple of months ago.

Granted, they'd been sleeping together for a couple of months before *that*... but Sutton wasn't where to slot that into this situation.

As it was, she thought giving Charlotte a key was the best compromise between logic and emotion. No, Charlotte wasn't moving in; she still had her own home where most of her belongings stayed.

She just... also had the option of coming over to be with Sutton whenever the timing was right.

Was it Sutton's fault if she very much hoped that the timing was right as often as possible?

Charlotte had left early on Friday morning, unfortunately.

She'd kissed Sutton, long and slow, as they'd woken up. Then she'd slid her hand between Sutton's legs, working her to a breathtaking orgasm that had rolled over her in slow, intense waves.

"A pre-birthday orgasm," Charlotte had murmured into her ear, her breathing ragged. "Since I'll be busy tonight."

And, true to her word, Charlotte had been wrapped up for most of the day yesterday. She'd first gone to a meeting at the Thompson Foundation, before heading into legislative session for the rest of the day.

"Mom, Charlotte *is* a senator; you of all people know how this kind of schedule, and that certain things can't be easily moved around."

Charlotte had apologized to Sutton, several times, about the fact that she wouldn't be able to join in on Sutton's family time for the majority of her parents' visit.

Which, as Sutton had assured her, she didn't need to do.

But even when Sutton had insisted, "You don't have anything to prove to my parents, love."

Charlotte had gotten that glint in her eye, that determined glint, as she'd murmured, "Oh, but I do."

Sutton truly loved when Charlotte got that look.

Her mom cleared her throat, bringing Sutton out of her thoughts. "I am well aware of Charlotte's occupation, hon. I just hope that she really will be making it to dinner tonight so that I can get to know her a bit more."

Before Sutton could respond, they turned the corner to the block the restaurant was on, and – Immediately, a smile broke out over her face.

Waiting just outside the restaurant – early for their reservation – was Charlotte.

Charlotte, who rolled her shoulders back as if preparing herself for something more than dinner with Sutton's parents, even as an easy grin tugged at her lips.

"Charlotte! I was *just* telling my grandpa about you!" Lucy exclaimed, dropping Jack's hand to rush forward and throw her arms around Charlotte's hips to hug her hello.

Charlotte dropped a hand to the back of Lucy's head, stroking over her head, as she beamed down at her. "Were you? What kind of things?"

Lucy shrugged as she pulled back. "All kinds!"

Sutton's father offered her his hand, a small, reserved smile on his mouth. "Nice to see you."

Charlotte returned his handshake, quickly and firmly. "You, as well."

Sutton pushed forward, next, shaking her head in joking exasperation as she managed to get close enough to Charlotte to press a kiss to her lips. "I get the third greeting, and it's my birthday," she murmured as she pulled back.

“You, my darling, are always my first thought, no matter who I verbally greet first,” Charlotte returned so easily.

And, yes. That was a weak feeling in her knees.

Reluctantly, Sutton moved to Charlotte’s side, conscientious that they were both in public, and with her family.

She held her breath as her mom took a step closer, leaning in to give Charlotte a hug.

It wasn’t a hug that Katherine gave to Sutton or Lucy... or really, anyone she deeply cared for. But a hug from her mother meant that she really *was* trying, or she’d have offered Charlotte only a smile in greeting.

It made the nervous knots that were tied up in Sutton’s stomach relax, just a bit.

“Charlotte, very good to see you. I’ve heard you’ve had a busy couple of days,” Katherine commented, lifting her eyebrows.

“I have, unfortunately. But I made it clear on my calendar that under no circumstances was I to be interrupted this evening, or tomorrow,” Charlotte stated, angling her jaw up so she could hold a steady eye contact with Katherine.

Sutton slowly slid her gaze back and forth between the two, squeezing Charlotte’s hand in her own. “Thank you, love.”

“Yes, that is very appreciated,” her mother agreed, leveling an appraising look at Charlotte. “I would love to be able to use this time to get to know you a bit more.”

“Good; I’m looking forward to it.” Charlotte rolled her shoulders back, drawing up to her full height – something that managed to look impressive, even though she was shorter than both Sutton and Katherine. “But I’m not here to play any games, Katherine. I understand why you’d been wary of me, all of those years ago. Because you were right back then – I hadn’t been ready. While I had been in love with Sutton, I didn’t know what to do with it, and I broke her heart.”

Sutton turned sharply to face Charlotte as she spoke, slowly shaking her head. Because, as much as she loved and adored the fact that Charlotte was willing to face her mother and say these things – *she didn’t have to*.

Katherine opened her mouth, but Charlotte barreled on. “I don’t think that’s the most important thing to focus on, though. I know why you do, but I think the most important thing for you to know is that I’ve never stopped being in love with Sutton. Out of all of the regrets I might have in my life, missing all of that time with Sutton because I didn’t know how to get out of my own way will be the worst moment I have to live with. But I learn from my mistakes, and I’m not going to make the same ones, again.”

God, Sutton stared at Charlotte, and she wondered if there were hearts in her eyes. She wondered if Charlotte knew that these words healed something inside of her, something she couldn’t put into words.

“Charlotte—” Katherine began, but was swiftly cut off.

“Apologies, Katherine, but please let me finish. You may not trust me or my intentions with Sutton and Lucy just yet, and the reality is – if I had to come face-to-face with someone else that hurt Sutton, I wouldn’t like them or trust them, either. So, I understand where you’re coming from.” She flexed her hand around Sutton’s, squeezing tightly, as if drawing strength from it. “But I’m not going anywhere. I intend to be here, with Sutton, for as long as she’ll have me. Which is why I *really* mean that I’d like for us to truly spend some time together, as I imagine that we will have a lot of shared holidays in our future.”

Sutton didn’t care that she was standing on a very public sidewalk with her parents and her daughter.

She couldn’t stop herself from swiftly turning Charlotte to face her, cupping her jaw and angling her face up as Sutton pressed her lips to Charlotte’s.

She was mindful – just enough – to keep it *appropriate*, but it didn’t mean that she wasn’t passionate. Dear lord, how could she not be?

Sutton had been married before, and that was still the most romantic of vows anyone had ever pledged in front of her. To her.

She felt Charlotte’s hand curl into her hair, tugging gently, before her mother cleared her throat.

She pulled back, not even able to summon an ounce of embarrassment. How could she? Charlotte Thompson just proclaimed her love for Sutton in front of her mother, determined to win her respect.

Charlotte, on the other hand, had a slight blush creeping over her cheeks as she blinked widely, clearly trying to regain her bearings as she looked up at Katherine.

Who was watching them both, a small smile on her lips. “My daughter is a grown woman, with a very intelligent and responsible head on her shoulders.” Katherine slid her approving gaze from Sutton to Charlotte. “That being said... I truly *do* look forward to getting to know you better, Charlotte. I think you may just surprise me.”

Sutton could *feel* the smile on her own lips, how wide it was.

Charlotte’s looked fairly similar, as she nodded.

“Ah, I apologize to interrupt; our reservation is ready.” Jack turned to face them, holding out his phone where the alert from the restaurant had popped up. He glanced between them, his confusion palpable. Clearly, his attention had been very focused on the clapping game Lucy had been trying to teach him several feet away. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is great,” Katherine informed him, before she held out her hand for Lucy to take. “Shall we?”

“Yes!” Lucy called, latching onto her grandma’s hand.

Sutton waited a beat, waited for a moment of privacy with Charlotte, so she could turn and face her properly.

Charlotte's gaze was already on her, excitedly waiting. "I think I may have started to win her over just now."

The pride in Charlotte's tone was undeniable, and Sutton – she just loved this woman. "Yes. I think you have."

Sutton would let Charlotte have this moment, because she deserved it. But Sutton wasn't shocked; she couldn't imagine any reality that Charlotte wouldn't be able to win someone over.

It was hours later that they finally found themselves alone, at long last. While Sutton loved when her parents visited because she loved spending time with them, in this moment, she also loved that they'd taken Lucy for a sleepover.

After Charlotte completely melting Sutton before dinner, she *needed* time alone with her tonight. It was the best birthday gift she could have received.

"Happy birthday, darling," Charlotte breathed into her mouth, barely pausing their deep, sensually slow kiss.

She'd initiated it the moment they'd sat on Sutton's living room couch, god only knew how long ago. She'd climbed into Sutton's lap, straddling her, as she'd started kissing up Sutton's neck, making her shudder.

Sutton hummed against Charlotte's lips, feeling *so much* inside. So many feelings inside of her, tangling together. Desire and love and reverence and wonder, and she slid her hands up to rest on Charlotte's curvy hips.

And the memories hit her, at the reminder of it being her birthday.

The flashes of this day, years ago. She hadn't thought about that night in so long – she'd actively done her best to shield her mind away from it for years, and eventually, slowly, it had faded.

But now, as she felt Charlotte's body all warm and soft and utterly perfect pushing against her, Sutton remembered.

She broke their kiss gently, leaning her head back as she tried to catch her breath.

"Everything all right?" Charlotte asked, stroking her thumbs softly over Sutton's cheeks.

"Thirteen years ago, to the day, I was crying my eyes out over you," she whispered, staring into Charlotte's eyes. They were so luminous in the soft lamp light that washed over them.

God, she could see it so vividly in her mind.

How she'd tried to enjoy her birthday with her friends, how Regan and Emma had both tried their hardest to take her mind off of her Charlotte-induced heartbreak. And how it had felt like a band-aid over a bullet hole.

Charlotte's playful, gorgeous grin immediately fell away into a much more remorseful expression. She leaned back, putting inches between them, as she was clearly surprised by what Sutton had said. Sutton couldn't blame her.

"Sutton, I—"

Sutton hurriedly shook her head as a stab of guilt edged in, and she tightened her hands on Charlotte's hips. She didn't want Charlotte to move away from her. If anything, these memories just made her want to pull Charlotte closer.

"No, no, I didn't mean to make you feel badly." She searched Charlotte's eyes with her own, hoping she could see that Sutton meant what she said. Needing Charlotte to know how she felt. "Even before what you'd said tonight, I didn't have *any* negative feelings about the past, Charlotte. I couldn't be doing this with you – wanting to build a life with you – if I did. I was just..."

She rolled her lips, searching for the right words to describe the fullness of the feelings inside of her. "I'm marveling, to be honest."

"Marveling?" Charlotte echoed, tentative amusement etched into her expression. She stopped angling herself away from Sutton, however, and resumed the soft, stroking of her thumbs against Sutton's face from where her hands cupped her jaw. "You were *marveling* over the fact that on your twenty-sixth birthday, you were unable to celebrate because I'd broken your heart?"

Sutton slowly nodded. Yes, and hearing Charlotte repeat it back to her, even in that tone, didn't change anything.

She slid her hands down Charlotte's arms, tugging Charlotte's hold away from her face, and she laced her fingers through Charlotte's. Wanting to feel that connection, this connection that existed between them like a living, breathing thing.

"Yes. I mean... at twenty-six, I loved you with everything I had. And, had things gone differently, our lives might look very different. Maybe they wouldn't." She shrugged, shaking her head, because the what-ifs just didn't matter.

"But I'm marveling because even now, thirteen years later, here we are. No matter what it took to get here – the lost time, the politics, the other relationships in between – we're here. Together."

They were in a different state, with different job titles, in different places in their lives, and they'd *still* found one another.

It settled inside of Sutton, filling every heartbreak she'd ever experienced.

She took a deep breath, the feelings nearly overwhelming. "I guess it really is true, then."

Charlotte tilted her head in silent, beseeching question.

"Good things really do come to those who wait."