

Brooke shivered through her puffy, insulated coat as soon as she stepped out of the perfectly heated Mercedes that dropped her and Taylor off at the top of a pristinely manicured, sloped driveway, directly outside of the one of the largest houses Brooke had ever seen.

And, of course, Taylor didn't miss it, as she lifted an eyebrow at Brooke, tempered amusement written all over her face.

Brooke couldn't help the petulant scowl that pulled over her mouth, then, as she wrapped her arms around herself. "It's too damn *cold*."

Taylor laughed then, warm enough to spark some warmth inside of Brooke through the frigid temperature, as she reached out and straightened Brooke's jacket collar, before dipping her warm hands under to stroke the skin of Brooke's neck. Goosebumps chased her touch, and Brooke wasn't sure if it was due to the cold or *Taylor*.

"My little southern dweller," she murmured, and the affectionate look in her eye was so genuine, Brooke accepted the slight teasing of the words. "I *promise* I will never bring you north of the Mason-Dixon after October ever again."

She *was* going to roll her eyes, but instead shivered so hard her teeth clacked together as a strong gust of wind blasted through the trees at them. "Deal," she acquiesced, her eyes watering with the chill.

Sure, climate change was among them. But it didn't change the fact that on the coldest winter days in Faircombe, the weather *rarely* dipped under 45 degrees, and she was currently standing outside after dark in Massachusetts on New Year's Eve, and the temperature was hovering below freezing.

Taylor's smile remained, as she turned and looked at the house in front of them. A house that had three stories and was so vast, Brooke couldn't even *see* the entire layout from where they stood. It was tastefully decorated for the party, with lights strung up for visibility and aesthetic, the sounds of the bustling inside just barely reaching them ten feet away.

"This is *some* house," Taylor murmured, still stroking her thumbs over Brooke's neck.

She took comfort in the touch, a touch she might not have allowed for so long in public if they were home, but... they *weren't* home. And she did appreciate Taylor's tactile comfort right now, public or no.

"Thistle Drive is impressive in its own right, but..." Taylor acknowledged, before simply not finishing the end of her sentence.

Brooke didn't need her to.

Yes, Taylor grew up very comfortably wealthy in Faircombe, and she appreciated that Taylor never took that for granted. The Vandenberg family was the heart of Faircombe, and always had been; Brooke – for all she'd been around them her entire life – had *no* clue how far their family money extended.

But the Vandenberg family, their wealth and prestige, most definitely did not compare to that of the Spencer family, an undeniable fact.

And that fact settled heavily in Brooke's stomach, the same way it had since she'd received the handwritten note and invitation, six weeks ago.

She dug her teeth into her lip, swallowing thickly as she stared up at the house, not saying anything as the frustrating, irritating, frankly ridiculous nerves stole through her against her will.

Taylor turned to look at her again, the smile fading as she studied Brooke's expression, and Brooke knew she saw everything.

She knew Taylor had always had a way of seeing right through to the truth of her, but ever since they'd started building a life together nearly two years ago... well, it was scary, how well Taylor could read her with a single, short look, now.

"You okay?" Taylor's voice dipped low, into that rasping place that slid right down Brooke's spine.

She pursed her lips, ready to push through the nerves, as she once would have. As she would with anyone else.

Before she found herself admitting the truth, "I just – I don't fit in with these people." She gestured uselessly at the home in front of her. "At some – some giant party."

She'd been trying to push past it in a variety of different ways – especially utilizing her biggest coping skill: putting the uncomfortable feeling in a box that she could ignore – for weeks.

But now that they were literally here, that box was unable to be ignored.

The bafflement on Taylor's face was clear. "Brooke, sweetheart, you are the center of attention at town hall events every month. You're the lynchpin that pulls off every town event, where *hundreds* of people attend, if not more. This? Ain't nothing compared to everything you do, on a regular basis."

Damn it if Taylor's genuine delivery in her words and the sweet look in her eyes as she stared into Brooke's didn't sweep Brooke right up in the sentiment.

Still, though, before she drifted too far, she shook her head. "This is very different than what I do on a regular basis! I'm behind the scenes at home, first of all. Second, I'm – I'm doing my *job*, there. I'm not being some social butterfly. I'm not you! I don't walk into any group of people and just... fit in."

That had *never* been something Brooke was particularly good at, and she stared up at Taylor, challenging her to deny it.

Unsurprisingly, she did. "Hey, *you're* the reason we were invited here tonight, not me. *You.*" She laughed as she spoke, sliding her hands down to shake lightly at Brooke's shoulders. "You met Jack and Katherine because of your business proposal for Faircombe, and Katherine invited *us* to come to the party because she liked you."

"Because of work," Brooke insisted, desperately trying to get Taylor to see the point. "This party isn't about work, though." She'd done, as Brooke was wont to do, her research on this event in the last few weeks. As much research as she could do, anyway, given that for such an

established and high-profile annual gathering, there were practically no pictures or press information. What she'd been able to gather, though, was that *that* was deliberate.

This wasn't some giant schmoozing work event, where everyone came here to discuss the plights of government or public service or do any *work*. If anything, it seemed, this evening could be for social networking.

Which Brooke had never and would never claim to be good at.

"I have nothing in common with these people," she insisted, shaking her head up at Taylor. "These rich, elbow-rubbing, northerners, who *choose* to live in a place that gets so cold, I can't even feel my nose, anymore."

There was a look only Taylor could wear, as she looked at Brooke in that moment. Laughing amusement, sheer enjoyment, and an admiring love, all wrapped in one, as she accepted Brooke's comments with one, serious nod.

"All right. I'm not going to keep us out here to argue with you and freeze our asses – sorry, noses," Taylor winked, before sliding her hands down to squeeze Brooke's, "Off. But I *will* say – you can fit in here. We can leave whenever you want."

"Right, in that fancy car service," Brooke murmured, shaking her head.

Because they'd been dropped off in a *Mercedes*, that had been arranged to give herself and Taylor a ride to and from the event tonight, whenever they called for it. Which was what the Spencer's arranged for every guest who couldn't or didn't want to drive to the party. Insane. Thoughtful and tasteful, but incredibly, *insanely* expensive.

Taylor squeezed her hands once more, but before she could say anything else, the door opened to the home behind them.

"My apologies if I'm interrupting anything, but I just saw you standing outside and couldn't just walk away without inviting you in and out of the cold," a voice called out to them.

Both Brooke and Taylor turned to see a beautiful, tall woman in a dark dress, with red hair falling smoothly over her shoulders, standing in the doorway.

For a split-second, Brooke thought it was Katherine, before she blinked and took another look. Maybe, if Katherine had found a time machine and set it back by thirty years – she supposed if someone could afford it, it might be the Spencer's.

Taylor gave her another smile, before turning to face the door, keeping her hold on one of Brooke's hands. "Hi! You're absolutely not interrupting anything, we were just admiring the house. But we were also freezing, so I think we will accept the invitation inside."

Taylor spoke so easily, as she always did to people.

She leaned down and whispered against Brooke's ear as they walked, "If you find yourself without me by your side at some point and you feel nervous, go to the refreshment table. There's bound to be delicious food there, and it gives you a ticket to not engage in a real conversation with someone – talking with your mouth full is rude."

Brooke couldn't help but smile slightly, herself, as she squeezed Taylor's hand back.

The woman in the doorway gave them a gentle grin, waving them in as they approached. “I’m Sutton Spencer.” She tilted her head to the side, eyebrows furrowing slightly as she studied them. Not, Brooke could admit, in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. “Is this your first year? I’m pretty good with faces, and I don’t think we’ve met.”

Brooke was thankful for the warmth that enveloped them as Sutton shut the door, and they stood in the foyer. She resolutely did not look around and stare, like she wanted to.

“It *is* our first year! Good eye,” Taylor commented, as she unzipped her jacket. “We live down in Faircombe, Tennessee, actually—”

“Oh!” Sutton’s startlingly blue eyes lit up in recognition, which... fine, did land another positive notch in Brooke’s estimation. “My parents travelled there earlier this year, for that social programs in small towns funding project. My mom said she’d met – well, you, I guess.” She smiled an incredibly bright and charming smile, then.

Taylor chuckled, nodding as she did. “Nailed it. I’m Taylor, and this is Brooke Watson, my partner.” She leaned in, conspiratorially whispering, “She’s the brains behind the operation, who wrote the proposal to your father.”

Sutton reached out, shaking both of their hands, before she offered, “Can I take your jackets? I’ll tag them and hang them over there.” She gestured to their left, down a short hall. “You can pick them up whenever you’d like.”

As Brooke took off her jacket, Sutton continued, “Typically, you’d be able to re-acquaint yourself with my mother, who likes to take that on, personally. But she’s dealing with a few last-minute snafus, plus, you’ve arrived a little earlier than a lot of our other guests.” She laughed, shaking her head. “Which is absolutely the way I would arrive to a party, as well.”

Taylor smiled, so naturally, so brightly, as she slid her arm around Brooke’s shoulders. “She’s a stickler for punctuality. And by that, I mean – fifteen minutes early is the latest you should ever arrive anywhere.”

“It’s just manners,” she couldn’t help but insist, rolling her eyes at the good-natured remark.

She couldn’t deny, though, that there was no one else she’d rather be with at a strange party in an unfamiliar place full of unknown people, than Taylor.

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“Darling, I’ve finally found you—” Charlotte cut herself off as she jogged down the main stairs, noting that Sutton was, in fact, not alone.

But instead, was standing with two women whose attention quickly snapped to her as she slowed herself down to a non-rushed walk.

“Hello,” she greeted, her business smile tugging at her lips, rather than the excited, anticipatory one that had taken over when she’d spotted her fiancée from the landing on the stairs. She reached the bottom, offering her hand. “Charlotte Thompson.”

The tall, brunette woman smiled exuberantly and unabashedly as she shook her hand. “I know, and I’m very excited to meet you. Taylor Vandenberg.”

The name rang a doorbell in Charlotte’s mind, but she couldn’t *quite* place it...

Not until the other woman, shorter, with her hair twisted up into a demure twist gave her a quick, firm handshake as well. “Brooke Watson.”

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows, flicking a quick look to Sutton, and resolutely *not* smirking.

Yes, they were, indeed, one of the queer couples Katherine had invited in order to make the evening a little more queer-friendly.

A sweet idea, Charlotte thought, even as Regan had pulled a semi-joking, semi-serious offended look, as she’d gestured at herself and Emma and asked, “*What we’re not queer enough?!*” Before she’d pulled Emma down to give her a smacking kiss on the lips.

“Ah, yes. I read your proposal,” Charlotte acknowledged, quickly flipping through the repertoire in her mind of said proposal that Brooke had given to Jack for review, to remember the key points. “Incredibly thoughtful. I’m not sure there was a better researched plan in the bunch.

And by that, she meant – there wasn’t one. Brooke Watson’s proposal that she’d sent to be reviewed for Faircombe to gain a coveted spot on Jack’s project getting involved in small towns and helping to breach gaps between bigger cities and bigger government was by far the most extensive one they’d received.

Brooke’s smile became less cautious, then, as she gave Charlotte’s hand one more squeeze, before dropping it.

“Thank you; I spent a lot of time on it, and was very honored to have been included.”

“As a civil servant myself, I can appreciate the passion,” Charlotte commented, and that was entirely truthful.

She was nothing if not appreciative of other women trying to make a difference in their communities.

“I truly do hate to interrupt, but I need to borrow Sutton for just a moment before we jump into the thick of things for the party,” Charlotte gave a small, apologetic look at the couple. “But I would love to make time to catch up later tonight and discuss some points in your proposal, if you’re interested.”

The grin that flashed over Brooke’s face was equally relieved and thrilled, and very interesting, as she nodded. “Absolutely. Yes.”

Taylor laughed, the hand she had on Brooke’s shoulder rubbing slightly.

Sutton cleared her throat, softly, then, easily regaining everyone’s attention. She nodded down the long hallway, “If you go straight down there, you’ll find exactly what you’re looking for. I’ll go handle this, and I hope that you’ll have a good time, tonight.”

They watched Brooke and Taylor walk through the archway, which was about all of the patience Charlotte had, before she used the arm she slid around Sutton's waist to guide her deeper into the foyer, into one of the small alcoves the old, Spencer home had.

Sutton was laughing softly as she willingly walked with Charlotte. "I *do* have to hang their jackets up, you know," she murmured.

Despite her words, though, she easily let Charlotte guide her into the shadowy nook, only large enough to accommodate the both of them if they were breathing one another's air.

Charlotte had no problem with that.

She reached up and cupped Sutton's jaw, tilting her head down as she surged up, grateful for her heels that put her closer to matching Sutton's height.

Their mouths met, already hungry for one another, and Charlotte felt the *need* slide right through her. So, so easily. Like a switch had been flipped.

The way it always was with Sutton, the way it hadn't changed in the years since they'd been together. The way, if anything, it had only gotten more intense.

"I've missed you," she whispered, sliding her lips down the side of Sutton's neck, breathing her in at the same time that she sucked, so lightly, at the soft skin there.

Sutton's breath caught in her throat, and Charlotte could *feel* it under her lips, just as she felt Sutton swallow.

"I know. Me, too," Sutton murmured, bringing her free hand up and carding her hands through Charlotte's hair.

Their eyes met, and even in the shadows of the alcove, Charlotte swore she could feel the electric blue of them.

"If at all possible in the future, I'd love for you to not travel during the holidays," Sutton rasped, before she pulled Charlotte in close, again, and kissing her, deeply.

She groaned, softly, sighing into Sutton's mouth, as everything in her body agreed with Sutton's words.

They'd spent Christmas together, but her grandmother had uncharacteristically requested Charlotte's assistance in some matters with the Thompson Foundation for the last five days. And though Charlotte hadn't *wanted* to not be with Sutton during that strange week between Christmas and New Year's Eve, her grandmother *had* undergone a knee surgery less than a month ago, and asked so very little of Charlotte, that she'd felt it impossible to say no.

She'd flown into Boston and arrived only an hour ago, barely having a few minutes with Sutton as the preparation for the party was in full swing. Not only that, but Katherine had apologetically asked for Sutton's help this year, after Sutton's oldest brother, Oliver, and his wife had come down with the flu, and Jack and Katherine were unexpectedly looking after Sutton's young niece.

Even now, as she reluctantly pulled back, she knew they were on borrowed time in this stolen moment.

And then the doorbell rang.

“I’ll take the jackets for you, darling,” she offered, reaching out to take them from Sutton’s grasp even as she cupped Sutton’s perfect jaw and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Thanks,” Sutton breathed, before she pushed herself off the wall and nodded. “Time to start hosting, again.”

“If anyone could do it up to Katherine Spencer standards, it would be you.” Charlotte meant every word.

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Mia looked around at the people milling around the party, eyebrows lifted as she surveilled the scene around her.

The majority of men here weren’t even in suits, they were in tuxedos – that told her everything she needed to know about the kind of party this was, if she’d come in entirely unawares.

Which, she hadn’t.

Mostly because she’d had Gianna and Riley telling her and Ellie how “huge” this night was. Riley, coming from an impressed, business perspective, Gianna coming from an excited social view.

And, honestly, yeah! Mia understood why Riley and Gianna had gotten an invite to the exclusive New Year’s Eve party thrown by a bestselling novelist and well-known politician/philanthropist.

*Her*, Mia Lennon Sharpe, getting an invite here, though, was still completely confounding to her.

Especially as she stared at the dozens of people congregating around them, wearing their undeniably expensive clothing and jewelry.

Finally, she slid her gaze to Ellie, who stood only an inch away from her side, just as she’d been perched there for the entire hour since they’d arrived.

And, right on cue, that kernel of self-doubt slid to the backburner as she couldn’t help but admire the sharp cut of Ellie’s jaw and the juxtaposition with her always-tousled curly dark-blond hair.

If she thought *she* felt uncomfortable here, she knew Ellie felt it ten times worse.

“Hey,” she whispered, rubbing her shoulder against Ellie’s to get her wife’s attention. “When’s the countdown to blowing this joint and grabbing our favorite takeout?”

Immediately, Ellie’s sharp gaze cut from where she’d been looking around at the people in the room – same as Mia had been – to her.

That furrowing between her eyebrows appeared, then as she shook her head. “There’s no countdown,” Ellie insisted. “You got invited here. Because of how amazing you are. And I want you to be proud of that.” Ellie looked at the people around them, again, unable to hide the pained look on her face. “Even if we’re surrounded by at least 120 strangers.”

Mia felt her mouth curl into a smile, tilting her head up as she slowly turned herself to face Ellie, and cut off the rest of the room. It was her ideal way to spend any night. “Have you been counting the number of people here?”

Ellie – predictably – frowned, as she shook her head. “No. But I figure that the rooms we’ve walked through that seem to be the event space is about seven hundred square feet, let alone the majority of the house that most guests likely aren’t wondering into. Then I just took a few averages of the groups of people and multiplied to fit the space, so…”

Mia would never, ever forget the first night she’d spoken to Ellie. It was *impossible*, and it wasn’t because she believed in love at first sight or anything of the sort – though, in fairness, the first time she’d seen Ellie had been long before they’d actually interacted.

No, she hadn’t walked away from that first few hours they’d spent at The Witching Hour being in love with Ellie, but she’d certainly walked away feeling smitten and impressed and –

Ellie – her demeanor and her intelligence and her unapologetic authenticity – left an indelible mark inside of Mia, then. Something that had never gone away, despite all of the time Mia had spent trying to lessen it. That impression only grew deeper and more intense as time went on, until it was all-consuming.

And she felt that same *zing* in moments like these, every time Ellie reminded her of that first meeting.

“Well, I’m not really into getting to know the northeastern elite,” she murmured, leaning into Ellie, “I’m much more interested in spending our New Year’s Eve together.”

“We are together,” Ellie pointed out in her own whisper. Something soft but abjectly factual, before it melted into something sweeter. “But, just like when we went to the banquet to celebrate you getting your Medal of Valor, I think it’s as important to be here, too. You’re *amazing*,” she whispered, that irresistible smile – so small, but so promising – pulling at her lips. “And you save lives, and I want to be at every event that people are appreciating that.”

Ellie nodded then, like *that was that*, before she arched a serious look at Mia. “I was nervous going to that conference where they honored my work last year. But you said we should go.”

Mia... couldn’t deny that.

But – disagreeing on this aloud was futile, given that they’d gone in circles over this, before – Ellie was a *genius*. She was literally changing the future of medicine. She did not consider what *she* did to be nearly the same thing.

“Okay,” she gave in, because first, she hated disagreeing with Ellie, and second...

It felt good, when Ellie looked at her, so proudly. Even if Mia was still working on her own issues as to whether or not she deserved it, she’d never deny that having someone she



respected and admired as much as she did Ellie, look at her like *she* was something to be proud of – it filled something inside of her. It filled a cold, sad place with such warmth.

“It seems like we aren’t exactly the only people who want to hide away from the droves while we take in what’s on offer.” Mia said quietly, nodding to the woman who came to stand a few feet away from them.

She was dressed in her own snazzy suit, though, to Mia’s admittedly not incredibly fashion-discerning eye; she was definitely no Gianna, she didn’t think it quietly sang of *money* the way most of the other people here were dressed.

Even herself and Ellie, who were both sporting dresses Gianna had excitedly presented them with for this occasion.

She didn’t look as utterly uncomfortable as Ellie did, but she seemed like she felt... out of place, Mia decided. As she crossed her arms and furrowed her brow, and tapped her foot lightly against the floor.

Yeah, Mia understood that feeling.

She cleared her throat, gaining the woman’s attention. “Do you not know a lot of people here, either?”

When the woman looked at them questioningly – as if asking *you talking to me?* – Mia gave her an encouraging smile, as she reached down and took Ellie’s soft, warm hand in hers.

“Uh, no,” the woman shortly answered, her voice coated with a sweet southern lilt, clearing her throat as she looked down at the food in front of them. “Just my wife, who had to use the restroom.”

Her *wife!* Bingo – Mia’s kindred spirit instinct was never that far off.

She found herself grinning, then, shooting Ellie a wink and making her smile and shake her head.

“Well, you can feel free to join us refreshment table misfits,” she joked, gesturing to herself and Ellie.

“I’m the misfit,” Ellie cut in with a mutter, shaking her head at Mia and using the hand that wasn’t holding hers to gesture at her. “She has social graces to go and make friends anywhere.”

“I’m right where I want to be,” she countered, swiftly and softly.

It was something that happened at social gatherings, events, and parties – Ellie gamely insisting that Mia go and “do her own socializing” and that Ellie could manage by herself. It came up a lot more since they’d started their romantic relationship, as Ellie had exasperatedly insisted, “I don’t *want* to meet people and talk to them.”

She’d, actually, looked very much pained and anxious at the thought. Sympathetically and, somehow, adorably so.

Before she’d given Mia an encouraging, sincere look as she’d said, “But I don’t want to hold you back. Before we got together, you didn’t spend every social event glued to my side.”

And Mia had explained, then, that while she hadn't spent every moment at Ellie's side before they'd gotten together, it had been a deliberate choice on her end. Because she'd *wanted to*. Yes, she could socialize and make unimportant chit-chat with just about anyone; it had been something Mia had never struggled with, but had become an essential skill when her parents had died and she'd had to navigate the world by herself.

But what she'd wanted – what she'd always wanted – was to be with the one person whose side she could stay at all night, having the best time. She'd just been trying so hard to not make that person be Ellie.

"I'm Mia," she introduced herself.

"Ellie. Beckett." Ellie gestured to herself.

And... yeah. God, Mia truly loved her.

"Brooke. Watson." Brooke mirrored Ellie's intro, and didn't seem like she was mocking her.

More, seemed like she was measuring the both of them, still.

"She's my wife." Mia tilted her head toward Ellie, grinning up at her.

Brooke nodded, then, seeming to take a comfort in that, before fixing Mia with an inquisitive look. "So, you're not from around here?"

It took Mia a second to realize that Brooke was referring to Mia's own voice – where she still carried her own whisper of an accent not from the northeast. "Texas. And you?"

"Tennessee."

And Mia's intuition told her that Brooke wasn't a transplant, as she was. "What brings you here?"

"Work, I suppose." Brooke cleared her throat, shrugging. "Uh, I'm a city manager, back where I live. Faircombe. I started working with Mr. Spencer a couple months ago and met he and Mrs. Spencer. Then, turns out, we got an invitation to come up to the party." Brooke eyed both her and Ellie, and Mia felt like she could see cogs working in her brain. "You two here for the first time, too? Since you said you don't know many people here and all."

Mia nodded, sending Brooke a finger-gun. "You nailed it. Well, we know my sister-in-law and her wife. But, that's literally it. Certainly never met Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, before."

"Mia was invited for her work, too," Ellie cut in quickly, sending Mia a meaningful look, before turning back to Brooke. "She's a firefighter."

Brooke's eyebrows lifted as she sent Mia a considering look.

"And *she's* a biomedical engineer, working on building organs," Mia informed Brooke, proudly. Okay, so she was the reason they'd scored an invite here, but she could still be proud of her spouse.

Brooke's eyebrows lifted even higher, and Mia appreciated the obvious interest and curiosity that flit over her face. "No way. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? Both of you."

Mia really enjoyed moments like these, where she got to help Ellie make new connections. Maybe it was shaping into a decent New Year's Eve party, after all.

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Gianna was, honestly, having a fucking incredible New Year's Eve.

"I know this isn't *quite* like the parties you usually get invited to for the night," Riley teased through a breathless laugh, as Gianna slid her lips up Riley's soft neck, her lips tingling with the contact.

"It's better," she promised, with absolutely sincerity, murmuring against Riley's skin.

And, god, was it ever.

Usually, the parties she attended for New Year's Eve were more traditional... well, parties. More dimmed lights, more pop/hip-hop music played at much louder volumes, people more likely to be dancing than making conversation in small groups.

And those parties had their merits, Gianna whole-heartedly believed that.

But the opportunity to see into this kind of exclusivity?! Unmatched.

Especially with Riley by her side? Unparalleled.

In fairness, though, she'd spent very few New Year's Eves in the last thirteen years without Riley, no matter where she went.

Usually, they would dance and drink and laugh and sing and occasionally kiss – very close to the lips, but usually on the cheeks – when the clock struck officially into the new year, before they'd stumble home together.

Last year, when Gianna had been in Los Angeles, had been the *only* time she'd spent away from Riley since their freshman year of college.

It was that thought, if Gianna was being truthful, that had been the catalyst to her taking Riley's hand in hers and tugging her away from Mia and Ellie, away from the center of the party, and into one of the secluded hallways.

She'd unexpectedly needed this moment of solitude with Riley. Needed, as she sometimes still did, to take a moment and indulge in all of the kissing and touching that she'd locked away for years.

The expensive material of the dress Riley wore felt incredible under her fingers, and she already couldn't wait until they were home so she could feel the only thing better – Riley's bare skin.

Finally, she felt Riley sigh/softly moan in the back of her throat, before Riley's firm hands landed on her shoulders and squeezed.

“Babe, we have to get back to the party,” Riley whispered, before she slid her hands up into Gianna’s hair.

She’d left it down for multiple reasons, but to give Riley the option of sliding her fingers through it, as she enjoyed doing.

Gianna reluctantly drew back, dramatically blowing out a breath as she looked into Riley’s perfect hazel eyes. “Do we *really*, though?”

And – yeah, her deliberate petulance was more than worth the bright spark of laughter in Riley’s eyes, as she tilted her head back. “And where’s Miss Party Girl?” She teased.

“Miss Party Girl got locked down,” Gianna lifted her left hand up and wiggled her fingers, unashamedly staring at the rings there.

Sure, they’d gotten married quickly, *technically*. Only having been in an official relationship for barely six months before they’d tied the knot, and all.

But Gianna would wager that she and Riley had known each other better years ago, than most couples who got married.

“Like getting locked down means you don’t love a good party,” Riley scoffed, shaking her head. “I was at the holiday spectacular last month, you know. For the entire thing, for once.”

Gianna merely shrugged, cheekily grinning. “When the mood strikes me to have you all to myself, who am I to deny it?”

Riley’s expression was sheer affection, before she sighed, “I’m the one who will have to deny, you, then, since I promised Ellie that I would keep her company tonight, if Mia wanted to mingle a bit.”

At that, Gianna acquiesced, and let Riley push herself off from the wall she’d had her pushed against, assisting her by tugging her hand. “I’ll agree because of my love for your socially uncomfortable dearest sister, *but*,” she aimed a skeptical look at the love of her life. “You’re crazy if you think Mia is going to want to leave her side.”

Riley agreed with a laugh as they started walking down the long, wide hallway, hand-in-hand, “Yes, but Ellie is going to want to make sure Mia doesn’t feel held back in any way, and I gave her my word.”

Gianna easily nodded, looking around at their scenery and really taking it in for the first time since they’d arrived. The dark green accent wall to their left, the tasteful artwork mixed with family photos on the wall to their right.

“I’ll give it to the Spencer fam – they know how décor,” she acknowledged appreciatively. She wondered if she could get the name of the artist of several landscapes they’d walked by... “Or their interior designer,” she thoughtfully added.

After all, Gianna knew her own parents had many artworks hanging in their homes and couldn’t name the genius behind them if their lives depended on it.

She cast a look around, before tugging Riley to a stop, and reaching into her clutch to draw out her phone.

Riley looked down at it, before looking back up at Gianna. It was a look Gianna rarely received since their beginning days in college, but she would recognize that serious, reproachful expression anywhere.

“Gianna!” Riley hissed, looking around them at the empty hallway as well. “The invitation was *very* clear – no media!”

Gianna snapped a picture of one of the pieces she admired, before throwing Riley a similar look as she whispered back, “I’m not going to post these, love! I just want them for my own use!”

Riley still stared at her, eyebrows lifted. “At the very bottom of the list of people I want to have me as *persona non grata*, is the most powerful family in the state. The country, possibly, especially if we’re including the Thompsons.”

Gianna arched an eyebrow back at her. “I think there’s a big difference between me doing a livestream here – which is what I believe Katherine was referring to on that invite – and taking a photo of some of her lovely artwork!”

Riley opened her mouth to respond, before footsteps approached from a short hallway to their right. Gianna quickly slid her phone behind her back in deference to Riley’s feelings, as they both turned to face their intruder.

Gianna was feasibly certain she could talk her way out of any situation they found themselves in, anyway, but –

She lit up with a surprised, excited smile as the person came into view. “Taylor?!”

It felt unbelievable, really, because *why* would Taylor Vandenberg be *here* – and yet, there was no denying it was her. Dark brown, wavy hair tied back into a half-up, half-down style, her infectious perma-smile in place, nearly as tall as Gianna herself...

Recognition clearly slid over her face as well, dark eyes widening. “Gianna? It’s so good to see you!”

Gianna released Riley’s hand just in time to be engulfed in Taylor’s tight hug, something she’d gotten accustomed to in the time she’d spent with Taylor. Which worked, because Gianna was a hugger too, and she squeezed Taylor right back.

They pulled back, Taylor’s hands coming to rest on her forearms as she shook her head. “What are you doing here? I mean, I know you live here and all, but I never pegged you as running in this kind of crowd.”

Gianna haughtily tossed her hair back. “You should know very well, I am not limited to any one kind of crowd.”

Still, she laughed, as she stepped back and wrapped her arm instinctively around Riley’s shoulders. “Actually, I’m here because of my wife!” She squeezed her arm, looking down at Riley as that proud feeling welled up inside of her. “She’s a very well-respected news producer in the city, and she’s made a few connections.”

Riley looked up at her, the slightest blush tinging her cheeks as she shook her head.

“Wife?” Taylor’s voice pulled their attention back to her, as she looked between the two of them with a soft grin. “Well, a huge congrats to the both of you, then.” She waved, before offering that hand to Riley. “Taylor Vandenberg.”

“Riley Beckett,” Riley returned, shaking Taylor’s hand, before looking between the two of them. “How do you two know one another?”

“Taylor’s a travel professional,” Gianna supplied, “We met for the first time... was it six years ago?” She asked quietly and mostly to herself, as she thought back.

Taylor nodded, though, confirming. “Six years, yeah. On that Mediterranean cruise.”

Gianna nodded, the memories easily slotting into place. “I told you about her, remember? My friend on the cruise. Taylor gave me some tips and tricks.”

It had been Gianna’s first sponsored vacation, and while she hadn’t been nervous at all, she’d been very appreciative of Taylor’s experience and advice that she gave freely, regarding what sort of posts and material had worked well for her sponsored trips.

“Wait – *Riley*?” Taylor asked, a fresh excitement alighting her voice. “Like, the best friend, Riley?”

Riley nodded, her own proud expression visible and making Gianna’s heart warm. “That would be me.”

Taylor’s eyes were wide and soft as she looked back at Gianna. “Well, I’ll be damned. Even bigger congrats, then!”

“I never told you about my feelings for Riley,” she shot back, dubiously.

Sure, she and Taylor had gotten tipsy a few times together, but she’d only ever voiced her feelings for Riley aloud before they’d gotten together one time, and it had been to Ellie.

Taylor scoffed, but it was affectionate. “Sometimes you don’t actually have to spell something like that out.”

Gianna *would* be embarrassed... except, how could she be? Not now, not when Riley was literally her wife. She hummed. “I guess so.”

Taylor’s eyes dipped and fell to the phone in Gianna’s hand, now at her side. “You want to take a quick pic? I’d love a side-by-side with the one we have from the last time.”

“I’d have to advise against that,” a voice came from the end of the hall she and Riley had come from, minutes ago.

The three of them turned to face Charlotte Thompson herself, approaching them.

Gianna appreciated the perfect cut of her designer suit.

The smallest of smiles played at the corner of Charlotte’s lips as she approached, something somehow both personal and impersonal. Gianna could also appreciate that.

“Riley, lovely to see you,” Charlotte’s smile edged deeper into the personal affect. “Sutton and I are both very glad you could make it.”

Riley nodded, smiling, herself. “Of course. We were thrilled to be invited.” She gestured at Gianna with the hand that wasn’t literally interlaced with Gianna’s. “This is my wife, who I’ve mentioned – Gianna Mäkinen.”

Gianna smiled, turning on a bit of her typical charm. Admittedly, though, it was easy when she was truly excited to meet Charlotte. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Charlotte concurred, before glancing at Taylor, “And Taylor, I recall from earlier.” She also slid her gaze down to Gianna’s phone. “Truly, though, I have to advise that you don’t take or share any photos. It’s not like this party is a state secret or anything of the sort, but Katherine really devotes herself to this being a gathering of friends and family. It just so happens that many of those people happen to also be public figures of some sort, so – privacy here is something she takes very, very seriously.”

Gianna didn’t miss the quick look Riley gave her, and she couldn’t help but smile down at her. “I have no problem admitting you’re right, babe.” She slid her phone back into her clutch. “I should have never questioned you.”

“Charlotte,” Riley said after clearing her throat, tempering the smile that played on her lips. “Is Sutton around? I didn’t see her, after we arrived a little later than intended. I’d love to be able to catch up.”

Charlotte nodded, and her smile dipped into a place of undeniable, sheer warmth. “Yes, she’s around, being a world-class host. Likely circulating back at the main party.” Charlotte raised her eyebrows, suggesting, “We can go and seek her out together?”

It was phrased as a question, but there was very much a vibe that they were all being herded up.

And Gianna could very much appreciate another social influencer.

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Caroline blew out a breath as she placed the cookies on the refreshment table, feeling accomplished at her task.

They’d experienced a whirlwind when they’d arrived almost two hours ago, with Abbie nearly jumping out of the car before they’d even fully parked, and in the hubbub, Hannah’s homemade frosted sugar cookies had been forgotten in the backseat.

When Hannah had realized it, almost thirty minutes ago, Caroline had volunteered to go get them from their car. Even as Hannah had protested that it most definitely wasn’t that important – but... it absolutely was.

To Caroline, it was. If Hannah had spent the precious hours to bake these and painstakingly – and *perfectly* – decorate them, she would make sure they arrived at the party.

Only, she realized as she blew out a breath and rubbed her hands together trying to warm them up, it seemed that in her absence, Hannah had disappeared from the party.

She'd agreed that Hannah shouldn't make the trek back to their car, in the event that Abbie needed something and tried to find one of them after having run off to play with a group of other kids that had rounded her up.

But she'd thought that Hannah would still be *here* when she got back.

Alas, she reached down and took one of Hannah's perfect desserts, biting into it as she ran her eyes over the crowd again. She threw a look over her shoulder, expecting the other side of the refreshment table to likely be devoid of people.

When, actually, Caroline was... well, fucking confounded by the sight in front of her.

The sight of not one, not two, but *three* – what appeared to be, anyway – sapphic couples standing on the other side of the table. Accompanied by none other than Charlotte Thompson, lesbian politician, herself.

Definitely queers, she thought, amused and confused, as she cleared her throat to break into their conversation. “Excuse me, but you all seem to be the right people to ask – have any of you seen my partner? Or kid? Both incredibly cute blondes, about yea high...” She held one hand a few inches above her head to represent Hannah, and the other level with her nose, for Abbie. “Socially known as Hannah and Abbie?”

She was met with an unfortunate smattering of shaken heads, shrugs, and two verbal apologies.

Which she accepted with an appreciative nod, “It was worth the ask, I think.” She scanned her gaze over the group, and couldn't help herself. “I'm sorry – I was never really into any LGBTQ student groups or anything, but is this some sort of sapphic club? How can I join?”

Before anyone answered her semi-joke, Charlotte offered, “Would you like me to ask around, for Hannah and Abbie?”

Of course, Charlotte Thompson would be the perfect person here to do that. Caroline imagined that if anyone other than Jack and Katherine Spencer themselves knew who *everyone* here was, it would be her.

Still, Caroline reluctantly shook her head. “No, but thanks for the offer. They aren't actually missing. At least, not to my knowledge,” She murmured. They *had* to be around here, somewhere. “And, really, I wasn't trying to break up whatever was going on, here. Just – very curious.”

Caroline had no issue copping to that.

“I was also never in similar student groups, and – no. This was not a formal meeting,” a short brunette – shortest person in the group – answered for her, with a deeply dimpled smile. “But, it's kind of turning out that way.”

The woman who'd answered her was leaning into a taller blonde, who stood next to – a literal *twin*? Huh.

She did a double-take, then, the face in front of her very much coming into recognition. “Hey, you're the woman from BostonNow Digital!” She squinted for a moment, pursing her lips as she perused her mental rolodex, and, “Riley?”



She was *sure* it was her; Caroline was great with faces. Even though Riley had only been the face of BostonNow Digital for its launch, it had been a *very* memorable launch.

She followed the clues laid out before her – Riley holding the hand of the tall, statuesque woman at her side, raising her brows in anticipation. She very much hoped it was the woman Riley had professed to essentially be in love with on-air, but kept her mouth shut. No matter how much she wanted to know, Caroline’s profession demanded tact, and she had it.

Still, Riley groaned, and the model-esque woman next to her grinned an absolutely blinding smile.

Wow, like *really* blinding. Caroline felt like she had to blink from it.

“Not my *finest* moment,” Riley said. “But, yes. That’s me.”

“And yes, I am Gianna, the woman in question,” Gianna confirmed, still smiling that smile.

Caroline couldn’t help but grin back, as she nodded. “That’s amazing; Hannah and I watched the launch, and were genuinely very invested.” She directed her gaze back to Riley, sobering for a moment, as she sincerely said, “I really appreciate the work you do, though. Agreed with everything you said – I *do* want to be aware of what’s going on, especially locally, but, well, don’t always have the time to make sure I’m catching the entirety of the news.”

And she meant it; she and Hannah both subscribed to Riley’s news channel.

Riley smiled, sincerity breaking through. “Thank you.”

“Uh, sorry to break in, here. But I’d really like to know what it is that you do?” a tall brunette broke in, directing the question at Riley. Quickly, though, she turned to look at Caroline, “I’m Taylor. This is my wife, Brooke. Riley’s sister is Ellie, her partner is Mia. I think you probably know who Charlotte is.” She flashed a quick, charming smile. “Sorry for the flash intros, but I just needed to give it before we deep-dive into Riley.”

Caroline held up her hands. “No, I appreciate it.” She pointed at herself, “Caroline Parker.”

“I’m the executive producer for BostonNow Digital,” Riley explained, and it was very clear even in that statement that she was very, very excited to talk about her work. “It’s the first streaming-based news channel.”

“I would also like to break in here, to say – regarding Riley’s first comment – I beg to differ, and actually do believe that the launch was your finest hour,” Gianna asserted, her tone both challenging and loving, as she stroked her hand down Riley’s back.

Riley’s cheeks colored, as... Caroline believed her name was Mia, nodded. “Honestly, Riley, it was amazing.”

Taylor’s eyes darted around the group. “I’ve been barred from taking my phone out,” she teasingly looked at Charlotte, who shrugged and sipped on her champagne.

“Not my rule, but I will enforce it.”

Taylor nodded. “Totally understood, but I really do have to be given information on what happened during this launch.”

Riley cleared her throat. “Well, it’s really not a long story – the man I’d hired to train as my main anchor flaked less than an hour before we went live. I was the only person who could step in – even though I very much live my life off-camera,” she grimaced. “And the actual launch went very well.”

“She was very passionate, very charismatic,” Gianna proudly asserted, bending to swiftly press a kiss against Riley’s cheek, that Riley had clearly seemed to anticipate and leaned into. “What happened next, babe?” She asked, seeming entirely enraptured even though she obviously was very aware of what had happened next.

“... and then Joel, my cameraman and friend that I wanted to murder, didn’t *fully* cut the livestream, before he and I talked about my feelings for Gianna. On-air. To everyone who’d tuned into the news stream.”

Caroline grinned at the memory, as Brooke’s eyes widened and Taylor gasped in clear excitement.

“No fucking way!”

“Yes fucking way,” Ellie confirmed with a solemn nod.

“The people loved it,” Gianna added, before seriously stating, “Even though it was already very much a success, before your confession aired.”

Riley’s lips pulled into a smile, even as she slid her arm around Gianna’s waist. “Well, I can’t say I regret it, even if it was mortifying at the time.”

“Who doesn’t love a tale of romantic triumph?” Charlotte commented, and her voice was so quiet, but seemed to command everyone’s attention. Her focused gaze slid back to Caroline. “Ah, speaking of careers – you work with Oliver, right?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Though he sent me a text earlier, informing me that he wouldn’t be here tonight, nor in the office through the week.”

“What is it that you do? Will we get to enjoy the spoils of your job, like this public love confession we’re inevitably going to watch later?” Taylor asked her.

Caroline couldn’t help but laugh as she shook her head. “Uh – I sincerely hope that none of you here will ever require my services in any way. I’m a divorce attorney.”

It was common when she stated what her profession was, for people to take a second to register what she did every day. Profiting – very well – from the demise of once-happy unions. She was used to it.

Taylor laughed, then, bawdy and contagious. “Yeah, I hope not.”

“Is... Hannah, you said?” Riley asked.

Caroline nodded.

“Is Hannah a lawyer, too? Is that how you met?”

An uncontrollable smile tugged at her lips as she shook her head and dipped her eyes down to the platter of cookies in front of her. “No, she’s not a lawyer. But... *it is* how we met.”

She met several pairs of interested eyes as she looked back up.

And Caroline, as always, was more than interested in talking about Hannah.

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“Abbie, where did you get up to?” Hannah muttered to herself, trying to control the worry that threatened to overtake her as she peered into yet another empty room.

The Spencer family home was even larger than Michael’s parents house, and that was saying something. Unlike the Dalton house, though, this place felt like a home, despite how insanely large it was. It felt warm and inviting, and that would be wonderful –

Except, Hannah couldn’t find her daughter.

She’d mingled a bit in the main event area after Caroline had been so damn lovely and offered to go get her cookies from the car. Mingled until she saw the gaggle of children who were in attendance chase through the party rooms –

And noticed that Abbie wasn’t among them, anymore.

She’d quickly followed the group of kids and asked where Abbie was, only to receive several shrugs in response. She’d asked where they’d played, and had been informed that they’d been “all over” including outside in the backyard.

Outside! When it was dark and below freezing! Abbie had given her jacket to Hannah when they’d arrived, so she knew Abbie hadn’t even had that on at the time.

Abbie should have known better, and Hannah intended to remind her of that.

As soon as she laid eyes on her girl to confirm that she wasn’t lost and freezing somewhere.

She’d looked outside, in what she believed was the backyard area. But who even *knew* how large the Spencer lot was?! Acres and acres, she imagined.

Her concern compounded, slashing through her even deeper.

God, she wished she had Caroline by her side on this search for Abbie. Not only because Caroline had a magical way about her that helped make Hannah feel safe, but... because Caroline still made Hannah feel like Caroline was in control of everything.

But Caroline had gone to sweetly rescue her cookies, and Hannah hadn’t been able to wait before embarking on her search.

Hannah grunted as she quickly turned a corner and literally *slammed* into someone who’d been coming from the other direction.

“God, I’m so sorry,” she was already saying, before she registered who she’d run into.

Sutton Spencer blinked back at her, hand over her chest. “Oh, no, *I’m* sorry,” Sutton returned, offering her a small smile. “I shouldn’t have been charging through here, like I don’t know there are literally dozens of people.”

“Well, admittedly, the dozens of people aren’t really *here*,” Hannah gestured around them, where there, indeed, was no one else.

She’d turned down a couple of hallways and gone through a few rooms, and before she’d realized it, it had been over fifteen minutes before she’d run into anyone else.

Sutton’s smile was soft and it harkened to something very similar inside of Hannah, even though she couldn’t place it. But it was comforting.

“True,” Sutton acknowledged, before she tilted her head and looked at Hannah with confused blue eyes. “Why are you back here? Is everything all right?”

She sounded like she was genuinely concerned, but Hannah also knew that people who’d been raised in the lap of luxury like this could fake something like concern very well. And weren’t necessarily very concerned about the plight of strangers.

It was that thought – the reminder of who she was talking to – that made Hannah hesitate.

She was here with Caroline, because Caroline was a partner at the same firm Sutton’s brother was partner at. She was here as an extension of Caroline.

Hannah didn’t want to admit to *anyone* that she’d literally lost her daughter! Let alone, though, to Sutton Spencer. Someone whose judgment could be blistering and demeaning, and could also reflect on Caroline.

But... it was for Abbie. And she knew Caroline wouldn’t upset with her for asking for help with anything regarding Abbie’s well-being, no matter what anyone might think.

“I can’t find my daughter. Abbie. You met her when we arrived? She’s blonde, about 4-foot-11, blue eyes. She was wearing a little suit–”

“Yes, I remember,” Sutton gently cut her off, nodding, “She was very cute. Very excited to be here.”

“You could say that,” Hannah agreed with an anxious smile.

Abbie had very much been thrilled to arrive at this party. Raised as a Dalton, Abbie was never intimidated by people with money.

“Um, so – she ran off to play with a group of other kids, a while ago, but she seems to have split off from the group at some point?” That fear bit through her again, making her nerves jump. “And apparently, they went outside? I just – I don’t know where she is. And I need to find her. And I also don’t really know where *I* am, so it’s not making my search any simpler.”

There, she’d confessed it all.

And she waited, prepared to receive the look she knew she’d receive from someone at a Dalton gathering. Braced to politely brush Sutton off and continue her search.

She was *not* prepared for how wide Sutton’s startlingly blue eyes grew, or for the very clearly sincere worry that washed over Sutton’s expression.

“Oh, my god, that’s a nightmare,” Sutton voiced Hannah’s sentiment, reaching out to rest her hand on Hannah’s wrist, giving her a comforting squeeze.

“It is,” she agreed, heart starting to race again, as the anxiety swept through her in waves.

“Well, I know the entire property, both interior and exterior, like the back of my hand,” Sutton assured her with a firm nod, and a very reassuring grin. “Let’s go find her.”

Hannah was certainly not going to argue with that.

“I came from... uh, down that way,” she gestured over her shoulder and to the left. “I didn’t see her. And I checked outside, in the fenced in area, outside of the French doors? But, again, didn’t see her. But I also don’t know if that’s where the kids went to play, so—”

Sutton took in her words, before tugging on her wrist and turning back to the direction she’d been coming from. “Okay, we can finish through this floor, and then check upstairs. The house is big, but no one’s ever disappeared here. Even when I *tried* to win hide-and-seek, I was always found.”

Hannah breathed out a laugh. “Good point.”

“I was just upstairs, checking on my niece. She’s only nine months old,” Sutton explained, a sweet, soft smile playing at her mouth. “And my mom is spending the evening with her, upstairs. RSV season, so my mom doesn’t want to take the chance of having her near all of the people tonight. Or exposing herself, for the most part.”

Hannah nodded in visceral understanding. “I remember how that was. It’s a wise decision, on your mom’s part. Oliver’s daughter?” She asked, having seen his adorable daughter at Caroline’s company party in the fall.

Sutton confirmed it, before she led them down toward the large double doors at the end of the hall. “This is really the only place left unexplored, between the party and here. You really did cover a lot of ground, even if you didn’t know exactly where you were.” Her words and her tone sounded so genuine, Hannah couldn’t help but take a little heart in them.

The closer they got, the louder the bustling sounds were, and the clearer the very appealing smells became –

“The catering kitchen,” Sutton explained before Hannah could ask. “Well, it’s just a *kitchen*, technically, but we usually only cook in and use the smaller kitchen that’s closer to the dining room. This was usually used more formally, for my grandparents and great-grandparents – you get the idea.”

As they walked through the double doors, Hannah’s hopes were already up, and... “God.”

She nearly *melted* in relief, as she spotted Abbie standing on a stepping stool over at one of the long counters, talking animatedly to the woman in a white chef’s jacket standing next to her, who was scooping cookie dough.

“Abbie!” She shouted, not even recalling how quickly she moved to where her daughter was standing. She just knew she was right in front of Abbie by the time Abbie fully turned to face her.

“Mom! Hey! Look!” She pointed excitedly to the cookie dough on the large cooking sheets. “I’ve never seen this many cookies being baked at one time!” She then pointed at the woman

next to her, who'd turned to face them. "And this is Bianca, she's the head baker at the catering company."

Hannah reached out and lightly swept her hands over Abbie, needing to double-check her physical safety. Which seemed to be perfectly fine, and she bowed her head for a second, able to take a deep breath.

"Abbie, you *cannot* disappear like that. I had no idea where you were, we're not in a place we know. And these people are working, honey. Working in a busy kitchen, with big appliances, stoves and ovens—"

"I'm really sorry," Bianca, apparently, broke in, regretfully. "I had assumed she had permission to be here. We all had a discussion with Abbie, here, when she was hanging out in the doorway, that she could come in and watch us prepare dessert, if she stayed right here in this spot," she gestured at the stepping stool Abbie was on.

Abbie quickly nodded in agreement, sending her ponytail swishing. "Yes, and I *haven't* moved, I promise. I've been really, really safe."

"I thought you were playing with the other kids?"

Abbie scrunched up her face as she shook her head. "They all said they were gonna go outside. I don't even have my coat, and it's too dark to even really see anything! And they ran past this hallway, and I saw the kitchen, so... I stayed here instead."

Hannah couldn't help the deep appreciation she had for her daughter seeming to have really taken in her warnings over the years, around not playing in the dark or in the cold. "I'm glad you didn't go outside. But, at the bare minimum, you need to ask me before you do something like this."

Abbie furrowed her brows like she *wanted* to argue, before she blew out a deep breath. "Okay. But, can I stay until dessert's done? Please?"

Hannah looked at Bianca, who nodded. "She's been a great little helper."

"Okay. Yes. But, you need to come right back to the party, after," she advised. "Do you know how to get there?"

Abbie rolled her eyes, hard. "Uh, duh, mom! It's down that big hall, and then to the left and then through that big room, and then out to the right and all the way down, past the big staircase we saw when we came in."

Hannah blinked. Well, then. She couldn't help but smile at her daughter. "Amazing. I will see you soon, honey."

Abbie nodded, quickly. "I promise!"

As she and Sutton walked back to the party – and she found that Abbie's assessment of the directions was absolutely correct – Hannah felt unimaginably lighter. "I'm sorry," she found herself saying, as they approached the main event rooms. "Abbie... she was very, very excited to be included on the invitation tonight."

Though Abbie was used to the Dalton's and their social status, she was very much used to not being invited to their gatherings.

"And she *loves* cooking and baking shows. I should have gone right to the kitchen when she was nowhere to be found. If I knew where the kitchen was," she jokingly amended.

Sutton accepted her words with a light shrug, as if to say *no big deal*, with still not an ounce of judgment to be seen. "My parents have always made sure my siblings and I were invited to any party they were hosting at our house, as well as our friends or the children of family friends. But kids – they're unexpected and you can't control their every movement. I'm just glad she seems to be having a good time, and that she's safe."

Hannah couldn't express how much she deeply appreciated the sentiment. She gave Sutton a sidelong look.

It seemed that her experience with Michael and his ilk didn't prepare her for someone who seemed to be a very kind and... well, *normal* person raised in this world, the way Sutton seemed to be.

A little soft-spoken, but very sincere, and... strangely, Hannah thought as they drew up to the large archway leading into the party, she felt a little kindred to Sutton.

Maybe that was crazy, given how little she really knew her.

Hannah immediately came to a stop as they stepped into the room, spotting Caroline chatting in a group of women over near the refreshment table. She couldn't help but smile, though, because... of course she was.

Caroline was never out-of-sorts or nervous or uncertain, not in moments like these. Hannah felt it, that flutter under her heart, seeing Caroline standing next to her plate of cookies that she'd insisted on retrieving from the car.

It felt so reminiscent of the first time they'd met.

She realized after several seconds that she'd paused, frozen, before looking at Sutton, apologizing, "Sorry, I..."

Before she realized that Sutton hadn't paused to wait for Hannah, necessarily. But was, rather, staring at the same place Hannah was, with her own soft smile.

Hannah followed her gaze and – right. Charlotte Thompson was there, too, and was now the one chatting rather than Caroline.

"Seems like we've missed out on a little gathering," she commented.

Sutton seemed to shake herself out of her stare, looking at Hannah as she chuckled. "It appears so." She inclined her head, "Shall we join?"

They approached the group in question, and, as if she had a sense, Caroline turned to look at her.

The large, beautiful smile that slid over her face revealed that one dimple that Hannah so adored. "I was wondering where you'd gotten up to?" Caroline asked, both in front of the

group, but so directly focused on Hannah, that she felt like she was the center of Caroline's universe.

Hannah stepped right up against Caroline's side as she sighed. "I was trying to find Abbie."

Immediately, she felt Caroline stiffen, her smile dropped entirely. "Is she missing? Is—"

"She's in the kitchen, with the caterers. Watching them make dessert," she explained, already nodding along with Caroline's knowing expression.

"Of course," Caroline's smile returned, softly. "Of course she is."

"And, I presume you went on the search for the missing child, darling?" Hannah heard Charlotte ask Sutton.

She slid her gaze to them, observing the way Charlotte stared at Sutton like she *was* the entire universe.

"You presume correctly, as always," Sutton murmured.

Yes, Hannah thought. Tonight was strangely illuminating, to see how very similar people like Sutton and Charlotte could be to her.

\*\*\*

*Ten.*

*Nine.*

Taylor turned to look at Brooke, arching an eyebrow down at her, as the countdown rang out around them.

"Well? How do you feel about some PDA, surrounded by all of the other sapphics?"

She felt Brooke curl her arm around her lower back, even as Brooke rolled her eyes. God, she loved a Brooke Watson specialty.

*Eight.*

*Seven.*

Ellie looked down at Mia, after looking around the room of people starting the classic countdown.

"Did you know that the origin of the midnight countdown and kissing at midnight is actually not super concrete? Kind of interesting. But, presumably started by German tradition."

Mia's hands came up, cupping her jaw and sending warmth echoing through her veins, compounding at the smile that played on Mia's full lips.

"I didn't know. But I fucking love that you do."

*Six.*



*Five.*

“Kind of crazy that it’s our first New Year’s Eve together where we can ring it in the traditional way, and we can’t document it,” Riley couldn’t help but comment, as she settled against Gianna’s body, slotting in perfectly against her.

Gianna shook her head. “Like I give a shit. As long as I can kiss those lips at midnight? I don’t care who else could be around for it.”

Love and want – so easily entangled with Gianna – slid through her, and Riley lifted an eyebrow, murmuring, “Why wait?”

*Four.*

*Three.*

“What an incredibly fascinating night this has turned out to be,” Caroline whispered, smiling warmly at Hannah, as Hannah rested her arms over Caroline’s shoulders. “Can’t wait to debrief at home with you.”

Hannah’s gray eyes were smoky warm as she toyed with the ends of Caroline’s hair. “You know I love a nightly debrief in bed with you.”

“Best part of the day,” Caroline agreed.

“Um... after you two kiss each other for real, you should kiss me on the cheeks, because Bianca says it’s for good luck!” Abbie’s tired voice broke in from next to them, making Caroline smile even wider.

“Deal, Abbacado.”

*Two.*

*One.*

Sutton smiled against the softness of Charlotte’s mouth on hers.

And she could *feel* the memory wash over her, feeling herself melt with it.

The night, *four years ago*, when Charlotte had arrived at this party. They’d been unofficially together, not yet really in a relationship. Charlotte still hadn’t come out, and every interaction they’d had in front of watching eyes had been under the guise of friendship.

But Sutton had followed her, outside, into the freezing air. And had kissed her to the background din of celebrations.

And now... here they were.

Surrounded by everyone else, including other sapphic couples, engaged, and building their future.

She supposed you really never knew what exactly a new year could bring, but she knew she was more than ready to face it with Charlotte.