

Babysitting an energetic six-year-old for two hours, Charlotte learned, actually felt more like babysitting for six hours.

It started with Lucy exclaiming –

“Kin-kinet... sand?!” Then she turned confused eyes Charlotte’s way. “What’s that?”

Charlotte knelt next to her, taking the box from her. She’d asked Autumn to get some sort of DIY craft thing, as Sutton had informed her that she wanted to get Lucy more into some activities that were calming, for the evenings.

She studied it for a few seconds, before saying, “Kinetic sand. It appears to be sand that is... magnetic?” She pointed out the shapes and figures made out of colorful magnetic sand on the back of the box and watched as Lucy’s eyes popped wide.

“That is so cool! Can we do it?”

“That’s why I bought it.”

She learned during this activity that she truly needn’t have worried about making conversation with Lucy, because Lucy was happy to make conversation with her. She didn’t appear to notice or care that Charlotte didn’t know how to use those soft-child-tones that people used on young children or that she answered the same way she would answer an adult.

Treating Lucy like she was an adult, but small seemed the best way for her to go about this.

She learned over kinetic sand that Lucy’s best friend named Tommy, a boy with two dads, as well as what Tommy’s pets – two cats, a dog, and a lizard – names were. She learned every bit of first grade gossip there was to be had, and that it was far more than Charlotte would have ever expected, if she was entirely honest.

“Wow. Miles kissed Jackie on the cheek and then pushed her into the fence? I hope your teacher did something,” she frowned at the injustice of the recess story.

Lucy nodded sagely at her. “I told the teacher and he got in a lot of trouble. His mom got called and everything.”

Charlotte patted her shoulder with her clean hand. “Good job.”

It was that simple for Lucy to beam at her. “Thanks!” She turned her attention back to the kinetic sand on the plate on table in front of her, her eyebrows scrunching up in a way that left Charlotte reeling with how similar it was to Sutton’s expression.

It hit her, then, all over again that this was *Sutton’s daughter*. Logically, she’d never forgotten it, but emotionally, it was overwhelming whenever she thought about the fact that this little person had genetically come from Sutton. That Sutton had raised her and made her into the person she was.

Lucy, entirely unaware of the thoughts Charlotte was having, turned to face her in excitement. “Look! Charlotte! The sand is making a ball.”

She giggled with it, as she held up a little hand to show off her handiwork, and it made Charlotte smile indulgently, as well. “Incredible. You did really well reading the instructions.”

And she had; Charlotte had been very impressed with the fact that Lucy had been able to read how to make this all on her own. Was that normal, for a six year old? She didn't think so.

Lucy's smile turned into her absolutely *beaming* and Charlotte sat up a bit straighter.

"Thank you!" Her voice raised just a bit in her excitement, and she turned her attention back to the ball in her hands, rolling it a few inches across the table. "Look!"

Charlotte diligently did, and then found herself grinning along with Lucy's giggles, as she continued to manipulate the sand ball. Yes, she could definitely do this. Caleb could take his doubts and –

Her smile slipped as she watched Lucy toss the ball several feet in the air.

Kinetic sand, she learned, was not quite the easiest clean up, despite what the box said.

Lucy's still damp-from-being washed hand grabbed at Charlotte's, tugging her down the hall, twenty minutes later.

"Come on, I'll show you my bedroom!"

It was Charlotte's own doing; after cleaning the table and the floor and herself and Lucy's hands and hair to the best of her ability, she'd instructed Lucy to change her pajamas.

Lucy paused as they walked down the hall, smacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth before she turned to Charlotte and stuck her tongue out up at her. "Is there sand on my tongue?"

Taken by surprise for a moment, Charlotte took a breath and bent down to study said tongue... "I believe it looks normal to me."

Lucy coughed into her arm once, before shrugging. "I think I got sand in my mouth." She took off down toward an open room at the end of the hall only a moment later, the abrupt change in action giving Charlotte pause.

"C'mon!" She called, gesturing for Charlotte to follow.

Shaking her head slightly, she did.

Her bedroom was painted a light blue, with a purple canopy bed in the corner, with stuffed animals hanging down from the top. A bookshelf, a dresser, a large mirror and a trunk, and several see-through containers that held – as far as Charlotte could see – legos, paint, some sort of science experiment looking material?, and much more.

Lucy immediately pulled out a drawer from her dresser and dug around in it. "I wanted to wear my Ivy Abrams pajamas to show you them," she paused, to point at herself. "Because they're my favorites."

"Ah. I'm unfamiliar with Ivy Abrams," Charlotte said, still taking in the room from her perch in the doorway, her hands clasped at her waist.

Lucy dropped the clothing she was wearing as she spun around. “No way! Charlotte, that’s *crazy*,” she informed her, so seriously, it was damnably cute and hilarious in equal measure.

Charlotte arched an eyebrow, holding her hands up in defense. “I don’t get much reading done.”

“My grandma thinks that’s crazy. She says people should always read,” Lucy commented, accepting those words as the gospel truth, as she hurried over to her bookshelf and grabbed a book, before hustling over to Charlotte to present it to her. “See?”

She certainly wasn’t surprised by Katherine Spencer’s thoughts on reading, she thought as she looked at the animated cover. There was a young girl on the cover, surrounded by animals, all in a cute little illustration. “I see, indeed. What does Ivy do?”

“Talks to animals and goes on adventures!” Lucy explained, looking at Charlotte as if she couldn’t quite grasp how in the world Charlotte didn’t know that. She pushed the book up at Charlotte. “Here, you can have it. It’s the first one.”

She was so earnest in that moment, so *Sutton*, that Charlotte felt a piece of her melt. An... unfamiliar feeling with a child. Following it, she acquiesced and took the book. “That’s very sweet, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Lucy said back, as if it was so natural and easy to be so instinctively kind. Maybe for her it was; she was Sutton’s daughter, after all.

The next hour found them playing the Nintendo Switch Charlotte had purchased – and subsequently hooked up to the television in the living room.

Lucy’s eyes had widened as soon as she’d looked into the bag and seen what else she’d brought, and – “Mario Kart! I love Mario Kart!”

“Do you already have it?” Damn it – should she have gone with another recommendation?

“Um, no,” Lucy answered distractedly, as she hugged the box – longer than her short little torso – against herself. She was newly donned in a pair of Winnie the Pooh pajamas. “My friend Malia has it and we play at her house! I like to be Toad.”

Charlotte had no earthly idea what that meant in the moment, but she felt a sense of victorious pride that wouldn’t be quelled. She was killing this whole thing. “You want to be... a toad?”

Lucy laughed loudly, leaning her whole body against Charlotte’s arm as she kicked her legs out, “You’re so silly. Not *a* toad. Toad!”

Ah, well that explained everything, didn’t it?

Charlotte spent the following twenty minutes hooking the gaming system up to the tv and figuring out how to work the remotes, before she learned what it meant to be *Toad*.

Though she’d never played a video game, her competitive nature certainly kicked in. Especially after Lucy beat her in the first cup.

She'd dropped her little hand to Charlotte's knee and patted her there, wide eyes looking up at her as she'd said, "Don't worry, you'll get better."

And somehow, the touch and the words made that competitive edge take a little break.

As they played this, she learned all about Lucy's other hobbies – how she enjoyed skateboarding because her Uncle Ethan brought her on his skateboard when she was four, and it had been so much fun; she'd giggled through the entire story in the sweetest way. How she'd *really* wanted to paint her room half blue and half orange, but Sutton had made her choose one, with the promise that they could re-paint two years to the next color of her choice. How her Auntie Regan had come over and helped paint, and then had dabbed a color of paint on Sutton's cheek when she hadn't been expecting it, which had been *so funny*.

Lucy exhaled in a big yawn after their third cup, leaning back against the couch, using one little fist to rub her eye.

"That was *really* fun," Lucy said, nodding with it after taking a moment. "Maybe you can come back and we can play again?" She looked at Charlotte, more alert after voicing the idea. She turned and reached out to take the plastic cup she'd been drinking juice from, holding it with both hands, as she sat back on the couch, sipping as she watched Charlotte, clearly waiting for a response.

"Oh, I'm not taking the Switch with me," Charlotte said, turning slightly to face her.

Blue eyes widened as Lucy jerked the cup away from her mouth. Charlotte's own eyes widened as the liquid hit the brim but then settled back. "*Really?* Is it for me? Is it gonna stay here? That's *mine*?!"

The excitement seemed to perk her right back up, and Charlotte smiled at it, a little caught up, herself, at having caused it. "Of course."

Before she realized... Sutton didn't have any of these systems? Shit. Was Lucy not allowed to have video games? Did she just commit some sort of babysitting taboo?

But, as she looked down into the sweet little face that seemed to mirror Sutton's in miniature – with some added freckles – she found she couldn't take it back. It *should* be simple, she thought. She'd outright fought with key world leaders at this point, gone toe-to-toe with some people who held more power than a person probably ever should.

Saying no to a child shouldn't be difficult.

And yet...

"I'll just," she cleared her throat, "Talk about it with your mom, when she comes home."

Lucy nodded sagely at her, wide-eyed and grinning still from ear-to-ear. "Thank you *so much*, Charlotte! You're the *best*!"

In an action that seemed too quick to be plausible, Lucy had pushed up on her knees and launched forward – Charlotte presumed to give her a hug?

Only to send her juice all over Charlotte's lap.

The wet splash had Charlotte sitting stock-still, and Lucy froze with it, too. She went back to grasping her cup with two hands, her mouth open as she stared at Charlotte. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Charlotte was gamely trying to hold back a grimace as the sticky juice had completely seeped into her Armani pants, as she hesitated to text Sutton.

Lucy had oh-so-carefully placed her cup on the table before hopping off the couch and running into – well, somewhere. Out of the living room, like a flash; she really could move like lightning.

She’d returned just as Charlotte carefully stood, not wanting to let any of the liquid get into the soft, comfortable, material of Sutton’s couch, even as she stood for a moment and didn’t quite know what to do with herself.

Lucy came running back, presenting Charlotte with a towel, looking so solemn and sincere as she did so. “Here you go! It’s one of the good fluffy ones. And, um, maybe you can wear some of my mommy’s pants!”

Charlotte had paused at that, automatically about to refuse even as the thought sent a charge right through her, at the idea of wearing something that belonged to Sutton. She should refuse *because* of that reason, honestly.

But...

It wasn’t as though Charlotte had come here with the intention of needing to change her clothing, so she didn’t have anything else to wear. The juice had completely soaked through her pants, so unless she wanted to wear these, then she either had to change into Sutton’s clothing or walk around in her underwear, which was certainly not an option with Lucy here, so –

Biting at her lip, she texted Sutton.

Charlotte – 7:56PM

Small emergency that includes my pants being covered in juice. Would it be possible to borrow some of yours?

Sutton – 7:56PM

Emergency?

Charlotte – 7:57PM

By emergency, I mean everything and everyone is fine, by the way.

She watched as Sutton saw the message almost immediately... and then waited. Because bubbles appeared and then disappeared. And then appeared and disappeared. And again, until finally –

Sutton – 7:59PM

What happened?

... she was going to save the whole *I gave your daughter a Nintendo switch, I hope that's all right* conversation until later.

Charlotte – 8:00PM

Nothing big. Like I said, just a spill. Sorry, if it's weird – I just don't have anything else to wear

Sutton – 8:03PM

*No. Not weird. At all. It only makes sense!
Of course. Of course you can borrow something, no big deal. Any lounge pants I have are in the dresser in my bedroom, bottom right drawer.
Help yourself. Of course*

It seemed like a little bit more “of course” than Charlotte was willing to bet was really natural, but she was feeling that same feeling Sutton must be, as well.

Charlotte – 8:04PM

Great. Thanks. I'll see you when you get home

... wearing your clothes.

The shock of it went right through Charlotte, vibrating through her body. She'd had sex with Sutton weeks ago, and the echoes of that touch still took a concentrated effort to *not* think about, in the name of friendship, on a regular basis.

But wearing someone's clothing was a different kind of intimacy.

In many ways, Charlotte didn't consider sex to necessarily equal intimacy. She'd had sex with many women, both before and after Sutton. But she'd never shared those levels of intimacy with anyone else.

Taking a deep breath, she moved to the only door that was closed, curiosity, excitement, and – oddly – a bit of nerves coursing through her. Utterly ridiculous, she knew, but...

She opened the door and paused to take it in.

Sutton – fully formed, adult, divorced, mother, professor, author Sutton – lived here.

The room smelled like her. The faint, sweet scent lingered in the air, likely on her clothes and the bedding that kept it alive even when she'd been gone for hours. It was just as tidy as Charlotte would imagine.

The bed with the warm, cherry wood headboard was made, peach colored duvet perfectly fitted with a reasonable amount of pillows artfully arranged over it. The doors to, what Charlotte assumed, were the ensuite and the closet were both cracked just a couple of inches. There was a stack of books on the bedside table that Charlotte very much *wanted* to go look at, but she respectfully refrained, next to a picture of Lucy.

Even if none of those items were there, she knew that was Sutton's side of the bed. Sutton had always slept on the right side of the bed... even when she usually would end up closer to the middle, as a habitual cuddler.

It was so stupid, she thought – not for the first or even the tenth time – that she remembered these things. That she could remember exactly how Sutton felt curled against her, but she *did*.

Clearing her throat and pushing back against that, she turned toward the dresser. An ornate wooden jewelry box was there, with a few assorted perfumes, a pinch-pot that Charlotte could only assume Lucy made, and another collage of photos. An iPad rested on the end, on top of another book, with a pair of glasses resting on top.

She could picture the way Sutton had likely been lounging here, before placing everything she'd been using down, including slipping off her glasses, on the way out of her bedroom.

All right. Bottom right drawer.

She opened the drawer to the neatly folded and stacked lounge pants there. Most of them a warm, warm cotton – thankfully, or else they likely wouldn't fit. Charlotte may keep in shape because the last thing she needed public criticism about was her fucking body, but her hips would never quite be as slim as Sutton's.

She tugged out a pair of black joggers, and... she paused there, having such a strange flashback to opening her drawer, in a condo she hadn't owned for years, and finding a few items Sutton had started keeping at her place, at Charlotte's own request.

The what-ifs and the wondering that she'd managed to block out for *years*, hit in that moment. She'd had these thoughts for a long time, after their breakup, but –

A loud crash shocked her out of her thoughts, her hands tightening on the soft pants in her hand.

A beat of silence went by, before – “I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll clean it up!”

Twenty-three minutes later, after discovering that Lucy had accidentally knocked down a little basket that held her toiletries – her toothbrush, kid's toothpaste, a hairbrush, a fruit-scented lotion, lip balm – and that in the fall, it had knocked down the soap dispenser, which had then spilled on the floor, and Charlotte had cleaned it while Lucy brushed her teeth, Lucy surprising her by giving her a quick hug around the waist, and watching her tuck herself into bed, Charlotte breathed out a deep sigh as she sat on the couch, leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

Fine, yes. She could admit that babysitting was... difficult. And that she was much more certain of her ability to spearhead political reform than entertain a child.

But she'd done all right. Things were okay. Sutton's daughter was safe and sound, and –
“Charlotte?”

Her eyes opened quickly, heartbeat stampeding in her chest as she stared at Lucy.

Who had gone to bed almost ten minutes ago, looking tired as she'd done so, but was now staring at Charlotte with big, sad blue eyes as she rubbed her small hands over her stomach, a stuffed dog held in the crux of her elbow.

“Yes?”

“My tummy really hurts and I can't get comfy.” Her bottom lip poked out in an adorable pout, even as she implored. “I think I ate some of the sand that landed in my mouth.”

Heaving a breath, Charlotte sat forward... what should she do?

She'd, of course, looked up what happens when a child swallows kinetic sand earlier, when Lucy reported getting it in her mouth. In small amounts, it could cause gastrointestinal distress but it should be fine. In large amounts, there might need to be medical attention. That thought alarmed her, the fear of it pushing down the dregs of exhaustion that had started to creep in.

She studied Lucy – it couldn't have been a *lot* right? She had only coughed and spluttered a little bit. A small mouthful, at most. Was that all right?

“How much sand went in your mouth?” She asked, instinctively reaching out and putting her hand over Lucy's on her small stomach. As if she could sense how much sand was in there or something.

Lucy shrugged. “I dunno. Just one or two little swallows.”

She wasn't taking any chances.

A call to poison control later, she was... somewhat calmed. The operator on there informed her it was highly likely that Lucy hadn't eaten enough for it to cause any real damage, and had given her the warning signs to look out for.

Sutton herself didn't seem overly worried when she'd texted her while on hold to poison control – she'd called and spoken to Lucy, asking her questions that Charlotte couldn't hear, before speaking calmly to Charlotte – “She has a very sensitive stomach, so it doesn't surprise me that a mouthful of sand is giving her a stomachache. I'll be leaving very soon.”

Charlotte wanted to assure her that, no, she didn't have to rush home, that she was still in control of this, but... you know what? She wasn't going to argue against it.

Especially not as Lucy looked up at her from where she sat on the couch, looking utterly miserable, her fingers toying lightly with her stuffed dogs' ears, as she asked, “When do you think my mommy will be home?”

Charlotte sat next to her, placing her phone on the table in front of them as she answered, “Soon.”

Though, based on her location and that it was a Friday night, it might still take an hour or so before she arrived.

“Can I lay with you until she's back?” Wide baby blues dug right into Charlotte's chest as she froze at the question. “Please? Usually mommy rubs my tummy when it hurts, but you

don't have to. My mommy said to remember you aren't Auntie Regan and I remember, but, um... please?"

Oh, Jesus Christ.

It was there, in this moment, with those heartbreaking eyes coupled with the heartfelt tone and the sheepish, shy look on Lucy's face that Charlotte just... *felt it*. This little girl was so much of Sutton, she was – she was precious.

And she couldn't say no to that, she found.

"Sure. Yes." She hesitated for a minute, unsure of where to lay on the couch... how did one cuddle with such a small person?

The answer was made for her when Lucy crawled up to her sliding her legs over Charlotte's lap and just... flopping her body against Charlotte's. She fell back against the couch with the movement, Lucy's head falling against her shoulder.

She snuggled in, feeling like a mini space heater, her soft wavy blonde hair ticking at Charlotte's neck.

She wrapped an arm around Lucy's back automatically, before draping the other over her knees, and – this wasn't half bad or nearly uncomfortable as she might have thought. Lucy's breath puffed against her as she turned her face closer into Charlotte, wiggling to get impossibly closer.

"Will you come back? I had fun tonight," she said, her voice noticeably sleepy, with the smallest hint of pleading.

And in a total shock to Charlotte, she found it... endearing.

Gently, she rubbed her hand over Lucy's back, feeling her relax minutely against her. And the more her little body fell into Charlotte's, the more relaxed she felt herself melt into the couch.

"I'll come back," she murmured, meaning it.

Which – she would and she knew she would, because of Sutton. But the Lucy aspect of Sutton... well, Charlotte hadn't known exactly what to expect. She knew she wanted Sutton enough that she would figure it out.

But, well, maybe it would be easier than she thought.

Lucy yawned widely, before pressing her face against Charlotte and she looked down at her little face. She could recognize the bits of Sutton there, especially now, while she was so still. The slope of her nose, the shape of her face, her ears, the set and color of her eyes. And with that thought, it may have melted her even more.

Yes, it would definitely be easier than she'd originally thought, she thought again, as she closed her eyes and settled back.