

*“Then I won’t.”*

Charlotte’s words echoed in Sutton’s ears, and in this moment, she wasn’t sure she would ever not hear them. The desperation, the urgency, the *certainty*.

She also wasn’t sure she’d ever forget how *shocked* she was in that moment. Truly, utterly, uncontrollably shocked. In a way that Sutton had never, ever felt before. Like the world had started actually spinning in the other direction.

She also would never forget the way Charlotte, herself, had looked after she’d spoken the words.

All Sutton had been aware of in the moments that followed, was the stunned silence. How hard her heart beat in her chest, how wide Charlotte’s beautiful honey-brown eyes were as they’d remained locked on hers.

Nothing had made sense. There was *nothing* to say, because nothing was making sense.

She’d never in her life been more relieved to have a gaggle of children interrupt her, as Lucy and several of her cousins had come barrelling down the hallway to hide from Alex, who was counting down to seek them.

The moment had been broken, Sutton had been able to flee and take a minute – or ten – to herself to regain her bearings on this earth, and when she’d regained her composure and returned to the party, Charlotte wasn’t there.

Not in the main entertaining area, not in the entire Spencer home.

Maybe not even in the state, for all Sutton knew.

After Charlotte uttered those words, Sutton could only imagine that Charlotte would run right back to D.C. immediately. That she would bury herself in work, reminding herself of her life’s purpose, determinedly putting her momentary insanity behind her.

Hell, for Sutton’s best guess, Charlotte may never even talk to her again. Sutton could imagine a world where Charlotte was so terrified and galled and disgusted by what she’d said that she would have to erase every trace of it from her life, which meant erasing Sutton.

She’d done it once before, so Sutton absolutely could imagine her doing it again.

What she *couldn’t* imagine, was that Charlotte had actually said that she wouldn’t run for president!

“She can’t have meant it,” Sutton insisted aloud for at least the tenth time in the last couple of hours, as she paced in her childhood bedroom.

“Maybe she did?” Regan insisted, unconfidently, from where she was now sitting on Sutton’s bed.

On almost any other night, Sutton would have been able to take some amusement from their current arrangement. Growing up, Regan spent the night at Sutton’s house *every* New Year’s Eve. After the countdown, as guests started dwindling, Regan and Sutton would come up to her bedroom and stay up for almost the entire night.

They hadn't had a "sleepover" in this sort of fashion since they'd been teenagers. They hadn't had to; they'd shared their apartment where they both had proper bedrooms for years, and whenever Regan had spent the night at her place in D.C., which had happened a handful of times in the last few years, Regan slept in the guest room. And, the biggest thing, was that they never stayed up until two o'clock in the morning, anymore.

But Sutton was so wired, she didn't think she could sleep even if she wanted to. She wasn't sure she could sleep even if she took an entire bottle of melatonin.

Regan had scared the hell out of her a few hours ago.

As Sutton had predicted, Lucy hadn't been able to quite make it until midnight, having fallen asleep near eleven. True to her promise, Sutton had gone into Lucy's room to wake her up to ring in the new year.

Truthfully, Sutton hadn't even truly left Lucy's room, after putting her in her bed. Sutton's own bedroom was now, technically, a guest room. But very little had changed in it, other than cleaning out all of her teenage memorabilia. Lucy's room was the bedroom right next to her own, one of the two rooms her parents kept as guest rooms specifically designed for their grandkids. Lucy, however, was the only one of her parents' grandchildren that didn't live locally, and therefore crowned this room as "hers."

Oftentimes, when Sutton was seeking a peaceful calm, somewhere that made every other one of her life problems seem small, a place that gave her clarity – she would sit at the foot of Lucy's bed while she slept.

Listening to the quiet, even breaths of her daughter, watching the way she snuggled into her stuffed animal, settled Sutton. These quiet moments typically gave her strength and focus when any other part of her world felt like it was thrown into uncertainty.

Tonight, for the first time since Lucy had been born, even this didn't quite do the trick.

She'd left Lucy's room after waking her up at midnight, getting a sleepy hug and exclamation in response, before her daughter had – as Sutton knew she would – fallen right back asleep a minute later.

As she'd quietly shut the door behind her, she'd almost *screamed* when she saw Regan waiting for her in the hallway, arms crossed over her chest.

Sutton had slammed her hand over her racing heart. "What are you *doing* there, creep?!"

"Waiting for you! I've seen you for, like, five minutes the entire night. Charlotte completely absconded into the night," Regan listed off the inarguable details, before throwing her arms into the air as she whisper yelled, "I need to know what the fuck is going on!"

"I don't even *know* what the fuck is going on!" Sutton whisper-yelled back, before dropping her head into her hands. Whatever calm she'd found in the last hour was completely shot yet again.

*"Then I won't."*

"I told Charlotte that I couldn't really be with her," Sutton had said, slightly muffled from where her head rested in her hands.

“Sutton! What?!” Regan remanded, stepping closer as she dropped her hands to Sutton’s wrists, gently tugging them away from her face.

Sutton allowed her to, staring helplessly at her best friend’s baffled, demanding expression as she stated, “And she told me that if I can’t be with her because of her political office, then... then she won’t run for President.”

Yeah. Saying the words aloud had done absolutely nothing to make them seem more real. It still felt like an alternate reality.

“She said *WHAT?!?*” Regan yelled, this time, with not a hint of a whisper.

Sutton had the presence of mind to reach up and slap her hand over her friend’s mouth, throwing Lucy’s door a look. “Lucy’s *sleeping.*” But in the beat of silence after, she didn’t hear a peep from inside of the room.

Regan grabbed Sutton’s hand and yanked it away from her face. “Yeah, and your perfect daisy child sleeps like the fucking dead when she’s tuckered out.”

Sutton allowed it with a nod; she wasn’t wrong.

For several long moments, they stared at each other. Sutton took a strange satisfaction in the clear knowledge that Regan was very obviously just as shocked and confused and unsure as she was.

Regan had pulled Sutton into Sutton’s own bedroom, then, giving Emma a quick phone call to let her know that she had to stay with Sutton for the night.

And in the hours since, they’d cycled through the entire conversation, and had dissected every possibility.

“Are you sure you heard her correctly?” Regan had asked.

Sutton had scoffed, shoving at her shoulder. “What else could she have possibly said? Those words aren’t commonly mistaken for something else.”

“Well, I don’t know!”

Regan had tried again – “Maybe she said she won’t... but she didn’t mean *run for president.* Maybe she was referencing something else that you’d talked about?”

Honestly, Sutton had considered that. She’d had to, because nothing about Charlotte’s statement made sense.

But... “No.” She’d shaken her head, firmly. “There was no way she was referencing anything else.”

Even if it could have been a conversational mix-up – which, it definitely wasn’t – the look on Charlotte’s face afterwards would have been enough to tell Sutton what she’d meant.

And, hours later, all Sutton could really believe was, “She couldn’t have really meant it.”

It was the *only* thing that made sense, and she’d repeated it at least four times.

Regan was quiet for a long moment, before she grabbed Sutton's phone from the bedside table and offered it up to her. "Text her."

Sutton recoiled, staring dubiously at her friend. "You want me to text her at 2:27AM? That's – no."

Regan kept her arm outstretched, insistent. "Text her senatorial ass right now, Sutton Victoria Spencer. Or I will. And you *know* I will."

Before the very viable threat fully left Regan's mouth, Sutton snatched her phone out of her grasp. Just in case. "Don't you dare."

Her phone felt five times heavier than it really was as she gripped it, still not unlocking it.

"You're not going to be able to sleep until you talk to her, even if it's just for her to confirm that she'd said it in the heat of the moment. And, what? You think *she's* asleep? After she said *that*?" Regan's eyes rolled so hard.

"No. I don't think she's sleeping." Sutton's heart thudded in her chest, as she stared down at her phone. With no texts or calls or any other notifications from Charlotte, Sutton knew she wasn't asleep, either. Sutton *knew* Charlotte was awake right now, just as haunted by her statement as Sutton was.

She swallowed hard, as she looked back at Regan, unable to really decipher or put a name to the feelings pummeling through her. "But..."

"What are you so afraid of?" Regan asked, softly, as she stood up from Sutton's bed, standing in front of her. "If she didn't mean it, which is the most likely scenario, then nothing changes. Then it's exactly what you thought was the case. It sucks, but it is what it is. And if she *did*, then—"

"Then, I have no *clue* what to do from there," Sutton cut in, feeling a claw of desperation low in her stomach. "You're always telling me that I need to get out there? That I need to date?"

Regan had encouraged her to find someone new to share her life with so many times over the last few years. Sometimes gently encouraging, sometimes energetically bolstering, sometimes bordering on forcefully.

"Because I know you're *lonely*," Regan spoke, softly, reaching out to grab Sutton's wrists in a gentle hold. "Because I know you aren't someone who's ever wanted to go it alone. Sutton, you're – and I say this as your best friend in the entire fucking world – *annoyingly* perfect."

There it was. That word made this ugly, revolting desperation churn her stomach. It pushed her breath out, harshly, as she tugged her wrists out of Regan's grasp so she could drag them through her hair.

"There! Right there! *Perfect*," the word dripped from her lips, colored in disgust and disbelief.

Regan's bafflement was palpable. "What?"

Sutton resumed her pacing from earlier, feeling even more unsettled, now. "You just said it. I'm *perfect*. Well, if that's true, how come I've fallen in love with two women, who have

both left me?" She challenged, the backs of her eyes burning at the admittance of the raw truth. "How come every time I'm in love, I get blind-sided by a breakup? And how come, in those breakups, I get told I've done nothing wrong?"

There. The confusing, looming, ugly truth was laid between them, and Sutton felt wrecked from simply admitting it aloud. Something she'd never, ever voiced, but had been so present in the background of her life for years.

Regan's eyes were wide and surprised and sad, and she shook her head, her voice uncharacteristically quiet. "Sutton—"

"Charlotte and Layla both shattered different parts of my life. My heart. And... both of them told me I couldn't have done anything differently," her voice broke, as she stared at Regan, helplessly. "According to Layla, I was *perfect*."

She could *feel* the bitterness seep out on that word, from every pore in her body.

"I haven't been trying to date or find a partner for years, Regan, because every time I've had my heart broken, apparently, there was nothing I could change. Both times, there was nothing I could do differently, there was nothing I could change about myself. Nothing I could work on. I give everything I am in a relationship; I treat my partner as best as I can, and, yet, it's not enough. I'm sick to death of being the *perfect partner*, and still never being enough. And I can't do it again. I can't handle it. I can't."

She felt like all of the energy zapped out of her body for the first time all night, as she collapsed onto the side of her bed, dropping her phone to the blanket next to her, burying her face in her hands.

Within moments, she felt Regan settle next to her, an arm wrapping around her waist and pulling her in close.

"I'm so sorry, babe," Regan whispered, her other hand reaching up and brushing comfortingly through Sutton's hair, pulling her head down against Regan's shoulder.

Sutton settled her head, there, taking in a deep, shuddering breath, as she dropped her hands into her lap. "And I *really* can't do it with Charlotte."

She didn't have it in her to elaborate that in words. Maybe, one day, she could try to give her all in another relationship. Maybe.

But Charlotte Thompson was not just some random person. And if Sutton removed the barriers she had up between herself and Charlotte, if she let herself fall head-first into this the way she *knew* she would – so, so easily – she wasn't sure if she would recover from it, again.

"I get it," Regan murmured, continuing to card her fingers through Sutton's hair. And the best thing about Regan, was that Sutton knew she *did* get it.

They sat there, cuddled close the way they would when they were kids, for several minutes, Sutton taking comfort from the warmth.

Before she felt Regan nod against the top of her head, pulling back from their embrace so that they could face one another.

“Sutton, you are my *best* friend. The only people on this earth that I love in the same stratosphere that I love you, are my wife and your daughter.” Her dark eyes shone with sincerity, as she reached down and squeezed Sutton’s hands.

She squeezed Regan’s hands right back. “I know.”

“So know that when I say this, I mean it: your relationships not working out before? Had *nothing* to do with you. And *everything* to do with the people you were with, and the situations *they* were in. It was shitty and hard and unfair, and I’m not saying you didn’t have some bad luck in the mix with you.” Regan held her gaze, giving her a gentle smile, even as she nodded, firmly. “And I will not try to sway you on what you should do, one way or the other with Charlotte or your love life—”

Sutton scoffed, incredulous.

Regan accepted it with a cheeky smile. “For tonight, anyway. But... either way? You *have* to talk to Charlotte about this. You have to see her again, no matter what, to finish the final parts for the book. You have to know what it means, regardless of whether or not you want to try to be with her or not. And I’ll fully support you, whatever you decide.”

Sutton took in Regan’s words, letting them roll over her in quiet acceptance, and for some reason, they quieted the insanity for the very first time since her conversation with Charlotte, earlier.

She’d spent the last few days certain she would break off the sexual part of their relationship after the new year. She’d determined that was the best path, and she’d been prepared to follow through with it. For both her sake and Lucy’s.

Wherever this would lead, she needed to know.

With that in mind, she took a deep breath and reached for her phone.

***Sutton – 2:43AM***

*Are you awake?*

She had her answer before she actually received an answer, from the way her message was immediately read, a full minute before those three little dots appeared. Which was a full minute before she actually received the short, simple response.

***Charlotte – 2:45AM***

*Yes*

***Sutton – 2:47AM***

*I think we should talk about tonight. And... just, in general. Let me know whenever works for you?*

***Charlotte – 2:51AM***

*To be perfectly honest, darling, I don’t imagine I’ll be getting much sleep. You can come whenever you’d like. I’m*

*staying at the Fox and Hyde, room  
3501*

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Sutton had thought that her New Year's Eve – well, she supposed it was now New Year's Day, technically – couldn't get any more surreal, but as she approached Charlotte's hotel room at three-thirty in the morning, she found that it most certainly could.

Somehow, by the end of her conversation with Regan, she'd found a determination inside of her, to face Charlotte. To face *whatever* this was.

Which was why she was here right now, instead of trying to get whatever fitful sleep she could try to manage, and coming to see Charlotte in proper daylight. Instead, she'd taken a quick shower – just to feel as refreshed as possible – hugged Regan, who had agreed to stay over in case Lucy needed anything so Sutton wouldn't have to wake her parents, and had borrowed her dad's car to drive to Charlotte's hotel.

She took a deep breath, lightly rubbed her palm against her bag settled on her hip, and raised her fist to knock on the door.

Only to startle slightly, pressing her hand over her heart as the door opened before she could actually knock.

Charlotte stood in the entryway, no longer in her sleek, stunning black suit or her hair beautifully curled and swept up, like it had been at the party. And seeing Charlotte standing there in her foyer, next to her mother, had shocked Sutton to the core. The sight of her had made her heart stutter in that inevitable *god, she's beautiful*, before the reality had set in.

The reality that she was figuring out how to break things off.

And now, as she stared at Charlotte a foot away from her, long brown hair pulled into a high ponytail, wearing joggers and a sweatshirt with no trace of makeup on, her heart did the exact same stutter.

Before the reality set in, again, and she took a deep breath. "Hi."

Charlotte gave her a small smile. "Hi." She moved backward, pulling the door open to let Sutton walk by her. "Come on in."

She did as directed, looking around the lavish suite. Fox and Hyde was a luxury hotel, and Charlotte was staying, of course, on one of the top floors. Even as she heard Charlotte close the door to the suite, she didn't turn around.

No. Amidst the insanity of the night, Sutton had – somehow, in the morning hours where clarity was typically the last thing available – found a purpose.

She headed for the far side of the suite, toward the large windows overlooking the city, bypassing the side of the suite that had the large king-sized bed, the barely mussed covers telling her that Charlotte – similarly to herself – hadn't even truly attempted sleep tonight.

Charlotte spoke from where she followed a few steps behind her, “Sutton... about what I said earlier—”

“I’m not here to talk about that,” Sutton cut in quickly, her heart leaping at the ghost of “*Then I won’t.*” She cleared her throat as she turned, slowly, to face Charlotte again. “At least, not right away.”

And she didn’t know what to make of the firm yet hesitant tone Charlotte was using, either. But she didn’t want to think about it. She *wasn’t* going to think about it, not right now.

Charlotte slowly winged an eyebrow up. “Then, what exactly are you here to discuss with me at nearly four in the morning?”

“Before we potentially get into... that,” Sutton had to clear her throat, as she gestured to the bag at her hip, then at the desk and chairs on the office/living area of the suite that she’d walked into. “I want to finish our interviews, for your biography.”

Her own words hung between them, as she stared Charlotte in the eye, feeling like she could see the cogs turn in Charlotte’s constantly-processing mind.

She watched Charlotte swallow heavily before she slowly worked out, “You want to finish our interviewing for my biography, at my hotel at four in the morning, because you want to be able to completely be able to break this off.”

Sutton’s stomach twisted at Charlotte’s words – at the meaning in them and in the despondent way Charlotte sounded as she spoke.

“I don’t—” She broke off, rubbing her hand over her stomach. “I don’t *know*, Charlotte,” her voice fell into a whisper, as that same uncertainty that she’d been steeling away so easily cut right back. “All I know is that I want to have everything, professionally, as neatly tied up as possible, before things get any... blurrier.”

It seemed crazy, really, to think that things between them could be blurrier than they already were, but Sutton truly believed that if anyone could manage to muddle things further, she and Charlotte could.

“Please,” she beseeched, as Charlotte’s lips pursed tightly closed, obviously in thought.

Charlotte nodded, then, blowing out a deep breath. “All right, then.”

The slightest edge of relief slid through Sutton, as she sat in one of the plush armchairs, taking her phone, notebook, pen, and tablet out of her bag. Charlotte sat in the chair across from hers, crossing her legs and smoothing her hands over her thighs, as she shook her head back.

Somehow, Sutton thought, as she lifted her notebook and pen up to rest on her lap, Charlotte managed to seem just as put-together and prepared in this moment, as she did during their meetings in her office on Capitol Hill.

Feeling her heart thudding in her chest, Sutton started recording on her phone, placing it on the coffee table adjacent to them. She glanced down at her notes, the comments and questions she’d left for their final topic, but she knew she didn’t need them.



She summoned her strength, as she looked up to meet Charlotte's gaze with her own. "As you know, we've been moving through your life, topic by topic... and the only big topic left to discuss is—"

"My romantic life," Charlotte finished, holding Sutton's gaze steadily. "I'm ready."

For just a moment, Sutton looked down at her notes even though she wasn't really reading them.

It wasn't as though they'd deliberately saved this "topic" for last. It just... worked out that way. Because, in a true-to-Charlotte fashion, there were no tangents about her love life when she recounted anecdotes throughout her life. They'd discussed her grandmother, her parents, her brothers, her high school years, college years, beginnings of her career, move to spending most of her time in D.C. — they'd discussed so, so much.

And, for most people, this would have likely already branched into her love life.

Charlotte was just... not most people.

In the most glorious, undeniable, magnetic, and — for Sutton — damning of ways.

She rolled her shoulders, as she dove into it. "When was the first time you started questioning your sexuality?"

"Oh, I don't think I ever *questioned* it," Charlotte intoned, both thoughtfully and cheekily.

Sutton couldn't help but smile, even as she shook her head slightly. So very, very Charlotte.

"But, for the purpose of what you're asking — I started looking at other girls and registering that I found them... enticing, by the time I was thirteen, I believe." Charlotte's tone took on this quality she got that Sutton had learned in the last few months. Pensive, like she was truly sifting through her memories to give Sutton an answer to the best of her ability.

"When was the first time you had any romantic interaction with a woman?"

"Ah... not to name names, but there was a very lovely cheerleader I went to high school with."

Sutton lifted her eyebrows with interest. "And what happened between you two? Did you initiate it?"

Charlotte smiled softly. "I did, yes. We were both on debate, and were sharing a room during a travel competition, when it started. I was nearly sixteen—" She nailed Sutton with a look, "And already captain of debate, I might add."

Sutton, annoyingly charmed, shook her head. "Of course you were," she murmured, before forcing herself back on topic. "Was this nameless cheerleader/debater a girlfriend? Did you have *any* high school girlfriends?"

Sometimes, in the last couple of months, it was like this. Sometimes, she knew the answers, but she needed to ask, anyway. To have everything clarified and on the record and official.

"Girlfriends? No," Charlotte answered, even though Sutton, clearly, already knew it. "I had... dalliances, for certain. Here and there. The nameless cheerleading debater, in specific, was

two years older than I was, so we weren't made to last after she graduated that year. Which was fine with me."

"If it was fine with you, you didn't have any feelings for her? At all?" Sutton asked, and she couldn't control how much she truly did want to know.

Back when she and Charlotte had met, when they'd started *this*, she knew that Charlotte didn't engage in relationships, and she'd told Sutton that she really just never sought out a romantic connection. But what Sutton had never asked was if it had *ever* happened. Did high school sophomore debate-captain Charlotte Thompson have at the very least a *crush* on the senior cheerleader she'd apparently hooked up with?

She could already see the answer reflected in Charlotte's direct, honest expression. "No. I mean... I was attracted to her. I enjoyed whenever we ended up spending time together. But I never got those first-love butterflies or anything like that."

"Not with her or the others after?" Sutton *needed* to clarify, hating how much she felt like she hung on Charlotte's every word.

Yet, that was nothing new.

Charlotte shook her head. "No. None of them."

Pulling herself back from the edge, back from thinking anything about herself and Charlotte, about Charlotte having those feelings for *her*, she cleared her throat and asked, "Was that a conscious decision, you think?"

"How do you mean?" Charlotte clarified, eyes narrowing just a bit, as she searched Sutton's face.

She could feel her cheeks minutely heat, even as she shrugged. "I mean... you clearly didn't want to publicly come out, until later in your life. And having a romance might have made that more difficult. Do you think it was as simple as – you just never truly fell for someone? Or was it a more conscious decision, to hold yourself back?"

For several beats, Sutton's questions hung in the air between them. Her own heart pounded in her chest at the question – a question she hadn't written down, but was rather something that steamrolled through her current thoughts.

Because... she had her own supposition on this.

And, apparently, it was something Charlotte, herself, hadn't anticipated discussing, either.

Several seconds later, she recovered, speaking slowly, "Well, I was never particularly interested in romance. I was always much more focused on the bigger picture. The future. In high school, I cared more about extracurriculars, in college I was more concerned about internships."

Sutton rolled her lips at the evasive answer, before asking, "Did you tell anyone about your sexuality? At what point in your life did you tell people in your inner-circle?"

Charlotte sat up straight, her shoulders back as she answered, "I told my "inner-circle" as you say, in high school. My grandmother, my brothers. My parents." The look in her eyes was

blazingly direct, intent and purposeful, as she stated, “I was *never* ashamed of my sexuality, and that’s something I need to be known. I was just – busy.”

“What did your grandmother have to say about it?” Sutton waited for the answer on baited breath. Because Elizabeth Thompson had been a force of nature. In the handful of minutes Sutton had spent with her years ago, she’d been both intense and dismissive.

But she also knew in her bones how deeply Elizabeth had loved Charlotte. She’d seen it... even if Elizabeth hadn’t shown her love and affection in typical ways.

Charlotte paused, then, interlacing her fingers together over her knee. “She was honest with me. As she so often was.” There was that warmth, that fondness in her tone. Unmistakable. A *longing* for a presence that was no longer here. It was something Charlotte subconsciously adopted every time they discussed Elizabeth. Something beautiful. “That the life I wanted for myself was already going to be an uphill battle, that I would already have a long road ahead of me. And that, frankly, my sexuality would make it more difficult.”

Her voice fell quiet, then, as she thought about those words. Sutton could see it on her face, how Charlotte re-lived that moment. “She told me the truth. Her truth. That there was so much more to life than falling in love.”

“Do you think that influenced the way you approached romance?” Sutton asked softly, her heart thudding in her chest at the question. At *needing* the answer to what she’d asked a minute ago, that Charlotte had somewhat side-stepped.

But... there was simply no way that those comments at such a pivotal time, from a woman Charlotte idolized, hadn’t informed her decisions in life.

Charlotte blinked at her for a few seconds, seemingly brought back to the present. “I suppose, yes. It may have.”

There was a raw edge of honesty in her tone, then, that even surprised Sutton.

Charlotte cleared her throat as she rolled her shoulders, adjusting her posture. “Admittedly, I was *never* someone who had flights of fancy, when it came to romance. Even as a little girl. I never spent time thinking about falling in love or having pretend weddings or anything like that. Maybe romance would have been something that mattered more to me as I got older, if my circumstances weren’t the way they were. The way they *are*. I guess I’ll never know. But... not getting swept up in romance, not dating, it was never difficult for me. I never felt like I was at-war with myself, trying to balance my life.”

Sutton nodded slowly, swallowing hard as she felt they were starting to walk into murkier territory. But, unfortunately, that was unavoidable on this topic. For them, talking about love would always blur the lines.

“You came out, publicly, within the last couple of years. How did that change your view on dating, given that you could publicly be with a partner?”

“It didn’t,” Charlotte admitted with a wry smile. “Not really.”

“Did you date?” Sutton asked, painfully curious, feeling her heart start to pound even as she willed it not to.

“Not really,” Charlotte repeated, her voice low and solemn, as she held Sutton’s gaze with her own. “I went out with a couple of women, mostly casual. Socially. But coming out publicly did very little to change my approach in life, at the time.”

Sutton nodded, gripping her pen tighter, even though – unusual for her, during these work meetings with Charlotte – she hadn’t taken a single note. Still, she carried on asking the questions she’d written, the questions she’d made note of pretending that Charlotte wasn’t Charlotte. Questions she’d ask anyone she was writing about, regarding their love life. As if it wasn’t personal to her, at all. “So, no one caught your interest, even though I imagine there were several potential interested parties.”

“No. That is, there were interested parties, in your words. And I entertained the thought of them, sometimes. I tried to.” Charlotte’s voice took on that serious, painfully sincere note, as she stared intently at Sutton. “But the truth is, I’ve only ever wanted *more* with someone, once.”

“Oh?” Sutton intoned, holding the pen in her hand so tightly, it creaked.

Charlotte nodded, not looking away. The look in her eyes so gripping, Sutton couldn’t look away, either. “And it was long before I ever came out, publicly.”

“Charlotte,” the pleading note in her own voice was uncontrollable. “Don’t do this. This,” she gestured at her notebook, at her phone. “This is *work*. It’s not the time for *us*. Please.”

“It is the time for *us*, Sutton, when the topic during *work* is about my love life.” Charlotte corrected, firmly. “Because on this topic, what you’ve not asked is whether or not I’ve ever regret my decision to not come out when I did. If I wish I did it, sooner.”

“I imagine you don’t have regrets,” she managed in a voice barely above a whisper. “You didn’t sound regretful when discussing your love life a few minutes ago.”

“Not when discussing my love life from high school or college, or whatever. Because I didn’t have regrets about not being with that cheerleader or anyone who came after her, during those years. I never *wanted* more with them, regardless of the reason why,” Charlotte explained, the energy rolling off of her in waves as she leaned forward in her chair, holding Sutton’s gaze.

“But I do have one regret, Sutton. The *only* thing I look back on with regret, is whether I should have come out, sooner. That I should have given myself the opportunity to pursue a real relationship, sooner.”

“No,” Sutton shook her head, closing her eyes tightly. “No.”

Even in the last month, even amidst the resurgence of their sex lives, they never revisited the past. The past was *the past*, and Sutton liked it exactly where it was. They didn’t discuss Charlotte breaking Sutton’s heart. They didn’t discuss everything that had been said and unsaid, back then. It was for the best.

It was the unspoken rule.

“Yes,” Charlotte insisted, ignoring their unspoken rule. “Because I’ve only been in love once. And it’s the reason I’ve never been able to meaningfully date, even after coming out.”

Sutton shook her head, breath shuddering out as she stared at Charlotte. “No. Don’t – you can’t rewrite history like that, Charlotte. You can’t. Just because of what’s happening between us right now–”

“This has nothing to do with us right now. This has nothing to do with what I said earlier,” the fire in Charlotte’s voice was blazing and insistent, though not angry. It was passion, undeniable. “I’m not re-writing history.”

“You *are*. You are, though, because I was *in love with you*, Charlotte Thompson!” The words exploded from Sutton, from somewhere so deep inside of her, somewhere that had been bottled up and pushed down long ago. “I was so, so in love with you, and I was fine with you not coming out. I was fine with us not labelling what we were to one another. I was completely *fine* with that, and you still ended it.”

That was Sutton’s painful truth. That she would have continued to live, for an indetermined amount of time, by Charlotte’s career. And even then, it wasn’t enough.

And the hard, shattering truth that she’d had to accept in order to move on so long ago, was that if Charlotte had truly loved her, it would have been enough.

“And I deluded myself, into thinking that you might have felt the same way, until I had to eventually accept that you didn’t. Because if you felt what I felt, you wouldn’t have been able to walk away.”

The pain from that, though healed, would always be sensitive scar tissue on Sutton’s heart. Best left alone. And it ached now, all over again, as she stared, desperately, at Charlotte.

Charlotte, who jumped from her perch in her chair, unable to contain the energy inside of her. “You weren’t the only person who was shattered when things ended between us, Sutton.” The painful edge in her tone was unmistakable, yet Sutton swore to herself that she had to be mistaking it.

Charlotte stood directly in front of her, before immediately dropping to her knees, her hands falling on Sutton’s thighs, her grip warm and desperate. “I wasn’t okay with not labelling what we did, back then, any longer.” Her hold tightened, as if Sutton’s heart-pounding attention could stray from her for even a single moment. “Because I was so deeply in love with you, I couldn’t see straight, anymore. I wasn’t seeing anything correctly, not even my career. And that terrified me. So, I ended it. And I was *wrong*.”

*No*. The word was stuck in Sutton’s throat, thick and croaky and intent, but she couldn’t actually voice it. Even though – *no*. It wasn’t true. Couldn’t *be* true.

“*Yes*,” Charlotte insisted, clearly not needing Sutton to actually voice her thoughts. “And I’ve hated myself for it so often over the years, because you moved on, darling, but I never did.”

This must be what insanity felt like, Sutton thought, as she wanted to laugh and cry at once, her feelings overwhelming her, as she stared down at Charlotte.

The young woman she’d once been still lived inside of her, clearly. Because at Charlotte’s words, a part of her screamed with joy. Like some part of her healed in hearing them.

All the while, the heartache and blistering pain and the painstaking effort she'd put in by putting Charlotte behind her, shouted in self-righteous disbelief.

And all of it tied together inside of her, *insanely*, as Charlotte Thompson beseeched Sutton to believe her, on her knees at Sutton's feet.

"And that's why I said what I said earlier, Sutton. Earlier tonight, at the party."

Oh god. They *were* discussing it. Charlotte was going there.

And Sutton... she still couldn't find any words, her tongue feeling too thick.

"I was wrong, to walk away from you, then. To walk away from us. From everything we could have been together, everything we could have built. And I've never felt it – this *thing* we have – with anyone else, no matter how much time passes."

"Charlotte." Her name – begging, desperate, a prayer – was all Sutton could voice.

This was a dream. It was a nightmare. It couldn't be – *couldn't* be real.

"So, if it means having you, then I *won't run for president*."

The words rang through the air, clear as day, for the second time in twelve hours. And even though Sutton had already heard them, the shock of it slammed into her all over again.

The shock, though, finally managed to help her find the ability to speak, again.

"Charlotte, what does that even *mean*? What does that mean for you?" It was easier to ask that, than to focus on herself. So much easier to focus on Charlotte, than the calamity of thoughts and feelings trying to barrel through her.

Charlotte, clearly, had been entirely unprepared for that question, as she stared up at Sutton, blinking widely.

That look bolstered her to continue. She reached down, unable to keep her hands to herself, as she dropped them to Charlotte's.

Maybe it was stupid, maybe it was ridiculous, but this – it really felt like the end. Despite all of Charlotte's pretty words, the reality was different. Sutton knew that, now.

"What does your life look like, without this plan in front of you? How long will it take for you to resent me? What will you do with yourself?" She challenged, asking the questions she'd been unable to voice earlier, but what made Charlotte's statement so unbelievable it was absurd.

"I don't doubt that you—" she choked on the word *love*, unable to get it past her lips. She couldn't go there, with Charlotte, not even now. "Have a lot of intense feelings for me. But have you even thought about what you're saying you'll give up?"

Sutton knew the answer without needing any confirmation from Charlotte.

It was what made the acceptance inside of her so easily accessible, even as it *did* hurt. Even as she wished she could get lost in this beautiful dream. She just *knew* that it wasn't real. Couldn't be real. Not for Charlotte Thompson.

And the thing was, Sutton understood that.

She reverently traced her fingers over the backs of Charlotte's hands again, swallowing thickly at the soft warmth of them.

"If things were *different*..." she trailed off, unable to finish that thought. "In another world, Charlotte. In another world. But you and I don't live in that world." She shook her head, cutting Charlotte off with a look, when Charlotte opened her mouth. "Before we can talk about this, I need you to really think about that. I can't... you *did* shatter me, Charlotte," she confessed, the hurt of those old feelings now cut wide open all over again. "And I can't even entertain the notion of being with you in any *real* capacity, unless it's exactly that. Real."

She slid her hands up to Charlotte's jaw, cupping it, relishing the feeling under her palms.

Charlotte brought her own hands up to cup the back of Charlotte's, her eyes big and unsure, and digging right into Sutton's unprotected heart.

"Darling," it was all Charlotte said, and even though she had barely moved in minutes, she was breathless.

Sutton understood, though. She understood exactly how Charlotte felt, as she stroked her thumbs up, brushing against the softness of Charlotte's bottom lip.

"I don't need you to say anything, now. Actually, I really don't *want* you to," she insisted, quietly. Pleading. As she rubbed her thumb slowly over Charlotte's lip, once more. As if she was memorizing it.

But the true craziness was that she already had it memorized. She always had.

"Please, Charlotte. I *need* you to seriously think this through, before you say any of your pretty words again. I won't hold anything you've already said against you, if you realize – as I suspect you will – that you won't truly be happy, giving up the dream you've worked for your entire life, for me."