

There was a belief Sutton had picked up in the last decade or so that she hadn't been able to quite kick – the steadfast idea that if things were going *too* well, the other shoe was sure to drop down at any moment and ruin things. Or, at the very least, complicate them.

There were times, now, when things were going well in her life that she sometimes braced herself for the inevitable fall-out.

And she hadn't always been this way. It took a while, but there came a time when it was too hard to be so hopeful and faithful, only to feel like life was kicking her in the stomach.

Like when she'd thought everything was going well in her relationship with Charlotte – admittedly, it had been her own naïve fault for believing Charlotte had been on the same emotional page as her – and then she'd just not seen the breakup coming.

Or when she'd believed everything was going well between herself and Layla – they were settled in D.C., she'd just picked up her job again when Lucy turned two – and then Layla left her for her ex.

That wasn't even really to speak of the relationships before that, which, obviously, had been awful.

This time, though, things were going so well, and she couldn't really let herself be nervous or anxious over it.

Because it really *was* just all this simple and it wasn't involving her personal life or anything like that.

Lucy was perfect. The highlight of her life, as always. She'd just lost two teeth, signed up for skateboarding lessons, and had finalized her list for Santa by November first, as Sutton – or, Santa – always preferred.

Her courses were going well; she was entering into some of her favorite course material that they would be working with until the end of the semester.

Regan and Emma were solid, as always.

Her parents were great –

She was having her weekly video chat with them the week before Thanksgiving, for the first time in two weeks, checking in after they'd returned from a cruise for her mom's birthday.

She'd grinned instinctively at the slight tan lines on her mom's face from where she'd clearly been wearing her sunglasses. “You look *amazing*,” she'd been unable to stop herself from gushing, not that she'd had stopped herself if she could.

Her mom smiled, and at sixty-eight, Sutton could dream to look as beautiful as her mom still did. “As do you, sweetheart.” Her mom angled her phone closer, as she'd whispered, “Your father might grumble about it, but he had a delightful time... until he got sunburned. But I did warn him about re-applying sunscreen.”

“I'm not going to grumble,” her dad's voice protested from the background, where he was unpacking their suitcases.

Sutton smiled brightly. “Maybe he’ll still have it next week when you two arrive next week for Thanksgiving.”

“I imagine he will,” her mom winked back conspiratorially.

“Now *that* will be a worthwhile trip,” her dad voiced, closer now, appearing – indeed, a bit sunburned – over her mom’s shoulder. His hair was fully gray, but thick as ever.

Sutton smiled back at them, taking these few moments before she would relinquish her phone to Lucy to have her usual catch-up with her grandparents. “You had fun, I heard it from a reliable source already.”

Her mom smiled brightly up at him, and he couldn’t even pretend to grumble as he returned it, reaching up to stroke casually, softly, at her shoulder, before he went back to unpacking.

Sutton barely held back her sigh at it. As much as she’d admired their relationship growing up, becoming an adult with her *failed* relationships only made her appreciate it that much more. What they had was so damn difficult to find, cultivate, and keep.

“So, yes, our trip was lovely. And you? We did our best to remain *on vacation*, as you all insisted, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want updates,” her mom arched an eyebrow at her. Waiting.

Sutton somehow still *felt* that look as if she were thirteen and confessing to getting a C on a math quiz.

“Everything here is good, mom. I’d tell you if it were otherwise.”

“Ah. Yes,” her mom paused and Sutton’s stomach swooped for a moment because she knew that look very well. Something was coming. And – “I did, however, hear some interesting news when I checked in with my editor. Some interesting news from the publishing world...”

Oh.

Sutton bit her lip. “Ah.”

Katherine tilted her head expectantly. “You’re *writing* Charlotte Thompson’s biography?”

And there it was.

“And, apparently, have been working on it long enough that you’ve turned in several chapters, and yet – not a word about it?” There was a hint of hurt feelings in her mom’s voice, and it made her wince, her stomach turning.

Which was ridiculous, because she was nearing forty, and she was *allowed* to keep some personal life facts private from her mother.

And yet... there’d been a reason she hadn’t told her.

Other than Regan, her mom could read her like no one else.

So when she said, “It’s – I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. We are just – we’ve reconciled as friends, and we’re just working together. It’s all really – professional. Really good,” she knew exactly what her mom would see.

Even if it *wasn't* a lie.

There was a skeptical look on her mom's face, as Sutton expected. Because... it had been her mom whose shoulder she'd cried on when she'd fled New York, her mom who'd held her after Oliver's wedding during her final break down, her decision that she just had to *get on with it*.

"Mom, I'm thirty-eight. I'm no longer in love with Charlotte Thompson. I can work with her. And," she hesitated, because she worried exactly what her mom would read into this, but, "She is a good person. She really is."

Sutton really had never believed otherwise. Not even at her most heartbroken. Charlotte had never deliberately hurt her, had never lied to her, and she'd always been upfront about her priorities. It had taken some time and perspective, but the truth of it all was that Sutton got caught up in her feelings, and had misread Charlotte's affection for her.

She was older and wiser, now.

"And it's a great opportunity, to really write," she added, an afterthought even though it was also true.

Her mom slowly nodded. "It *is* a good opportunity, honey. It is. I just—" she shook her head. "You know, you are right. You're more than fully grown and if you think Charlotte has grown, as well, then... it's your prerogative."

Her mom's doubtful look didn't match her words, but Sutton wasn't going to push it. She was very grateful, though, when Lucy ran up to her from behind, "Grandma?!"

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The thing was, she *wasn't* lying to her mom.

In spite of the initial... bumpiness between them, things between herself and Charlotte were going so well in the last few weeks.

The truth she'd accepted when Charlotte had babysat Lucy was that – she really did trust Charlotte. Regardless of their history and everything between them, she trusted Charlotte with something more precious than her own life.

She trusted Charlotte, she had a good time with Charlotte, and she simply enjoyed *being* with her. Chatting, exchanging stories, talking about work.

The last few weeks had been a true reminder of that. Even though they'd gotten so entangled those years ago, the baseline was that just existing with Charlotte was *fun*. They'd enjoyed spending time together and talking for months before they'd slept together, and it was always so easy.

That ease melted right over them, now that she allowed it to.

Their meetings were still *working* – they did discuss the book, reviewing the stories, Sutton’s writing – and yet, they would often devolve into hang-outs.

It was easy for it to happen, when Charlotte would tell Sutton about her day or would mention Caleb and Dean or would ask how Sutton’s went or how Regan’s birthday was or how Lucy’s school play was.

And leaning into this was *so much easier* than it had been in the first few weeks when she’d kept her guard up and tried to be professional. So. Much. Easier.

She faced Charlotte, now, her knees tucked up under her with her shoes kicked off as they sat on the couch in Charlotte’s office. Her tablet, notebook, and recorder were long forgotten, now, after having spent two hours discussing their latest notes.

“*Please* tell me they didn’t get caught,” she managed to get out through a fit of laughter, muffling her giggles against the fist she was using to prop her head up.

Charlotte mirrored her pose, facing her right back, heels long dropped off. “Sutton, don’t you think you would have heard about the sex scandal if the mayor of New York’s husband was caught under his desk? Even if he *really was* looking for the penny he’d found on the sidewalk that he proclaimed brought him good luck.”

“Well, Dean’s secretary walking in on that position wasn’t very lucky.”

The surprised laugh that escaped Charlotte made Sutton smile triumphantly.

Something that she couldn’t quite kick from the past was that making Charlotte laugh like that – sheer, real laughter – always felt like a victory.

She didn’t have to ask to know that Charlotte just... didn’t laugh like this, often or with many others. She knew it, in her bones.

And she didn’t know if it made her foolish or ridiculous or silly, but it made her feel a particular kind of special, that she was able to do this. To relax with Charlotte and laugh with her and see a *true* side of her. It had always been that way. But, there was no point in questioning it or looking too deeply at that. It just *was*.

“I would say you’re quite right about that,” Charlotte agreed as her laughter died down.

Before she could answer, her phone vibrated and she looked down at the text Regan sent –

***Regan – 8:03PM***

*legit no rush, my precious starfish, but I’m just wondering when to expect you home so I can give Em an ETA on dinner. Luce is all ready for bed*

Sutton’s eyes widened when she registered the time.

***Sutton – 8:04PM***

*Sorry! Didn’t realize the time. I’ll be home soon*

She bit her lip as she looked up at Charlotte, unsurprised at the knowing look in those golden brown eyes.

“Time to head out?”

Sutton bit the inside of her cheek as she nodded. Absurdly, she wanted to apologize. Which really *was* ludicrous, because the apology owed was really only the one she’d given to Regan. And yet, it was so simple to get caught up with Charlotte that cutting their time together “short” felt... criminal.

Sutton was mature enough to admit that if she didn’t have responsibilities at home, she’d stay later.

She was also mature enough to know when it was *time to go*.

“Thank you, again,” she said as she pulled on her shoes, gesturing at the now-cleaned up table. “For dinner.”

Charlotte shrugged as she stood, stretching.

Sutton took in a deep breath and averted her gaze, instead searching for her jacket. Small things like that? Made their friendship far simpler.

“It was nothing; I should thank you. Knowing that you are joining me here on Tuesdays reminds *me* to have dinner.”

Sutton shook her head in exasperation. “You need to take better care of yourself, really.”

Charlotte shrugged again, smiling at Sutton softly. “I get by.”

Sutton didn’t smile back, though. Becoming Charlotte’s friend again had brought back memories she’d had from back then – how Charlotte used to overwork herself, how she’d spend entire days living on coffee and very little else, how she refused to sleep even when she was literally sick and exhausted.

And it was very clear that with a bigger, more important job, those habits had only gotten worse.

Sutton moved to tug on her jacket, before she turned to look expectantly at Charlotte, who’d returned to her desk.

Charlotte met her stare, quirking a brow, “Yes?”

“It’s time to go home,” she stated. “That includes for you.”

Both of Charlotte’s eyebrows winged up, clearly surprised. “Oh, does it?”

Sutton folded her arms, standing her ground. No, she couldn’t take care of Charlotte, like... a partner. But she could take care of her like a friend. “Aren’t you the one who told me you were in the office by seven thirty this morning? That’s over twelve hours ago. You already sent home Autumn and Maya, so...”

Charlotte held her gaze, leaning against her desk, and they stayed in that stand-off for at least a minute before Charlotte broke.

“Fine. All right. You win.”

Sutton grinned.

“And you better not be using your home office, either. You need to relax. Take a little bit of time for yourself,” she gently chided as she watched Charlotte shut down her laptop and lock some of her drawers.

Charlotte gently shook her head. “Relax, she says,” she murmured, before moving to the coat closet.

Sutton had a very vivid memory in that moment, of Charlotte-of-old telling her about how she typically used sex as her way to de-stress, and her stomach clenched with the reminder.

But Charlotte didn’t go there.

“An entire country’s future on the line and she wants me to relax.”

Relieved that Charlotte went in that direction, Sutton shook her head. “All right, Atlas.”

Charlotte only smiled gently as she pulled out her jacket. “Can I offer you a ride?” She asked, as she put her jacket on, effortlessly swishing her long hair out from getting trapped against her back with a tilt of her head, in that smooth way she had.

Sutton moved toward the door, feeling light and refreshed and just – *happy*, as she nearly answered that *yes* she would love a ride. But, she was still buzzing in that light way, as she shook her head. “No? I think I might walk. For a bit, anyway; I’m... I’m feeling energetic. I should work some of it off before I get home.”

Before she had too much time on her hands and was in for the night, before these light and happy feelings could possibly turn anxious or overthinking.

Charlotte’s lips turned down into a look of utter contemplation, before she nodded. “Perhaps a wise idea. I’m feeling energetic myself. Do you mind if I join you?”

Sutton shook her head without a second thought, that buzzing feeling lighting up brighter at the prospect. “Of course not.”

She only paused when they were outside, both turning in different directions. She turned to throw Charlotte a quizzical look. “You live this way,” she gestured, tilting her head in the direction she’d turned to go in.

“And *you* live *this* way,” Charlotte countered, as she pointed in the direction *she’d* turned to go in.

Sutton laughed, exasperated. “I’m the one who started this entire walking discussion; I’m not going to let you walk by yourself. Senator Thompson, alone on the street, after dark? I’m not a monster.”

She semi-joked. But the idea of Charlotte walking somewhere alone after dark, especially knowing that there were – at times – vitriolic responses to her as a politician... didn’t sit well with her. No, she wasn’t about to do that.

Charlotte, herself, stood firm, arching a look at Sutton. “And you believe I would have you walk, by *yourself* at night? Please.”

Sutton opened her mouth to push against it, before Charlotte spoke again, “Sutton, I will have my car meet me at your home. If you don’t want the ride, I will walk you and then get a ride. Deal?”

She posed it like a question, but it was already a solid plan. It was something Charlotte did so well, and Sutton could only admire her for it.

And she did, as she acquiesced, turning to walk in the same direction. “You are irritatingly good at getting your way.”

“It’s part of my charm,” Charlotte winked.

“*Charm*, right,” Sutton pushed her shoulder against Charlotte’s lightly, but then just... stayed that close.

They walked in a companionable silence for a few moments before Charlotte checked her phone, reading something, before she slid it back in her pocket without answering.

“That better not be work,” she soft of joked.

Charlotte knocked her shoulder back into Sutton’s. “It was Caleb. He and Dean are leaving for their trip to Italy tomorrow, and is officially on vacation.”

Sutton nodded, before her eyebrows drew down in thought. “So... you won’t be spending Thanksgiving with them?”

Charlotte looked up at her, shaking her head. “No, I likely wouldn’t have even if they were in the country; I don’t really have the time for a trip right now. Will you be returning home?”

Sutton thought back to the look on her mother’s face regarding Charlotte and felt herself flush. She cleared her throat. “Um, no. I’m actually hosting it, since Oliver and Lucas are going to see their wives’ families for Thanksgiving this year. My parents, Alex, and Ethan are going to come here.”

“Ah, that must be exciting for you.” Charlotte smiled, that little smirking smile. “You *love* to host, I know you do.”

Sutton rolled her eyes, blushing all over again. “I can’t help that I’m so easy to read. But, yes.”

“How was their cruise? You said they’d been gone for two weeks?”

As always, Sutton *shouldn’t* be surprised at Charlotte’s memory, but she constantly was. It was as though she filed away every little comment Sutton made – she’d texted that as a side comment to Charlotte over a week ago – to bring up at a later time.

“They had a really good time... I think it helps my dad to get out and go do *something*, even if it is a vacation.” She paused before she said the first thought that came to her head, anyway. “He’s like you, in that he just doesn’t really know what to do with himself now that he’s retired.”

Charlotte pulled a face. “Retirement. It’s a curse word for those of us who live for work.”

Sutton shook her head, knowing in her bones that she resembled her mother in that moment. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Darling, what *ever* would I do with myself every single day without a purpose?”

*Darling* knocked right into her. She *felt* it, nearly causing her to stumble.

She felt it, in several ways. In the way that she ignored to the best of her ability, the one that felt that endearment right into the pit of her stomach, right into the core of her. The way that it was a word reserved for Charlotte and Charlotte, alone. The way that she was the only person who’d ever called Sutton that word and... and that, after everything, she’d been the only person who’d ever looked at Sutton and touched Sutton and made her feel like she was. Like Charlotte felt that she was darling, and precious to her. Regardless of how legitimate it was.

And mostly, she felt it in the way that resonated through her entire being, but softly. A way that felt... right.

Still, she shook her head and did her best to steel against it, as she looked at Charlotte. “You know, *darling* isn’t what many people call their friends.”

“And I’m not many people,” Charlotte countered without missing a beat. She stared at Sutton, searching her gaze, “I believe, if my memory serves, that I called you darling long before anything else happened between us that didn’t qualify for friendship.”

A part of Sutton wished her own memory didn’t serve her so easily. But, it did. She could so very easily picture it. “Your memory always serves,” she murmured, as they walked. She tipped her face up to the sky, unable to stop herself from saying, “You said it to me before we even met in person.”

In those text exchanges they’d had, that’s when it had all started.

Charlotte smiled indulgently. It was... unfairly attractive. Her look fond and sweet but also tinged with that inherent sexiness. “Yes, I recall. Because you just, *were* so darling. And you still are. You’ll have to live with that,” she added, her voice unfairly soft.

Sutton let out a deep breath, one that she didn’t let shudder or reveal any of the feelings in her stomach.

And even though she’d been very good about not letting herself go *there* – anywhere beyond platonic – it couldn’t be helped that there were these... moments. It seemed unavoidable between them.

She’d had to really accept it when she’d returned home the night Charlotte had watched Lucy, when she’d walked into her living room to find them both solidly asleep on her couch.

Lucy had been curled up on Charlotte, her head on Charlotte’s shoulder, her little face utterly relaxed and comfortable, and Charlotte’s hands had laid lax on Lucy’s back, as if she’d been comforting her when she’d accidentally fallen asleep, and –

And Sutton’s stomach and heart had fluttered in combination with each other.



She already knew Lucy really liked Charlotte – she thought Charlotte was cool and fun, and she *was* – and she wasn't as surprised as Charlotte herself was that Charlotte handled Lucy's exuberance well.

And yet, her own response to the scene in front of her had made all of the very soft, very not-strictly-friendly feelings tug at her.

She'd debated what to do when she'd stumbled upon the scene, and had ended up lifting Lucy and bringing her to bed, before she'd returned to the couch. She'd studied Charlotte sleeping – so vulnerable and relaxed and open –

And Charlotte was well and truly such a *catch*, that it astounded her. She was absurdly, unfairly beautiful. Genuinely charming. Brilliant. Powerful. Funny. Attentive. And privately, quietly, so, so sweet.

She hadn't brought it up that night, when she'd gently woken Charlotte and not let herself brush the dark tendril of hair that fell over Charlotte's forehead. And she hadn't even brought it up since, but –

*Darling.*

“Can I ask you a question?” She found herself asking.

“I do believe that is the crux of our relationship since we have reconnected, so – yes. You may ask me anything.” Charlotte swung her arms wide, taking up much of the space on the empty sidewalk, and still, somehow, she looked so in-control. “I am an open book.”

Sutton stared for a beat, mostly because she simply couldn't help it. Charlotte *did* look like an open book right now. Her eyes were bright and wide, unguarded, the smile still curling ever so lightly at her lips. It was so at-odds with the Charlotte of Sutton's memories. How she was still very much the same person –

Bewitching, captivating, sensual, concise, knowledgeable, charming.

But, on the other hand, she was so... different. Actually open and unguarded, in ways that she'd never been back then. Not unless she was sick or on the verge of falling asleep. Maybe after they'd just had sex. She'd always been warm with Sutton, and affectionate. She'd never really kept *secrets*, but she was still *private*.

And they were right in public, right on the sidewalk.

Charlotte was looking at her, so open, telling Sutton she could ask her anything. So, so different than the past.

“Why did you come out?” The words came out in a tumble, and maybe she should regret them, but Sutton had been *wondering*, for so long. Not just in the last weeks of reconnecting, but ever since she'd seen it on the news, when it had happened.

Charlotte quietly studied her. “I never expected *you* of all people to be questioning my coming out?”

Sutton looked at Charlotte sharply, shaking her head in denial. “I'm not – I don't mean that there is no value in it. It's, honestly, amazing.” She rolled her lips, trying to find the words.

She'd never forget what she felt, seeing Charlotte come out. Hearing the buzz around campus from her students, especially the thrill and elation of the queer students, people who already looked up to Charlotte in many ways.

She'd been proud, in a roundabout way. Excited and looking forward to what this could mean for the future of the country.

She'd been surprised.

And... unstoppably curious.

"But I mean, it doesn't appear you've been seeking a relationship?"

Charlotte gave her a sidelong glance, arching an eyebrow so perfectly as she implored, "Were you looking to see?"

Sutton felt herself blush as she turned away to face forward. Which, was ridiculous. Why *should* she be embarrassed about that? They were adults. She could admit to it. "Of course I did," she admitted, "After... everything between us way back then, I wanted to know."

That was only natural, right? Wouldn't anyone who had been in Sutton's shoes have done the same thing? Right? It didn't have to mean anything more.

She couldn't help it; she'd wanted to know if there was a particular someone who had inspired Charlotte's public coming out. She'd wanted to know if there was a person who'd inspired such big, larger-than-life feelings for Charlotte, that she'd thrown all her carefully guarded caution to the wind.

But there'd never been anyone, at least not publicly. And this subject, it sat heavily between them, still untouched even when it came to the biography.

And the topic *felt* off-topic, even now. Like it wasn't something they should touch on. Like by mentioning it, it could so easily bring up the past. A past they did not linger on or discuss, and that was the way Sutton, honestly, preferred it.

She rushed out her next words to make sure they didn't linger too much, there. "I guess, I just wondered why you decided to go public with your sexuality, if you weren't actively... dating. And maybe you are," she rushed to add, feeling like she was digging a deeper hole for herself. "But, it doesn't seem like it?"

Especially not since they'd started this friendship and talked just about every day, if only in occasional texts.

Charlotte's quiet only made Sutton regret asking, with all of these feelings swirling through her stomach, even more.

She very nearly apologized before Charlotte tilted her head back at the sky, answering softly, "It *was* always in the plan," Charlotte reminded her. Reminding her of the past, when she'd once told Sutton that *eventually* she would come out, but without a solid plan of when. "When the social climate seemed appropriate, when it could be something far less risky."

Sutton nodded, biting her lip because *still*. But, she wasn't going to push it.

And it surprised her when Charlotte continued to speak, her voice just a quiet admittance as she said, “And it’s not as though I didn’t – that I *don’t* – desire that connection. It’s not as if there hasn’t been anyone potentially in the picture.” Charlotte stared at her.

“Right,” Sutton whispered, even though... god, it was so confusing. She knew she’d gotten over Charlotte, she truly had. She’d gone into her marriage with a clear, focused heart. Looking forward to her life with her wife, and leaving everything in her past, in the past.

And yet, the idea of the *anyone*’s in Charlotte’s romantic life made her stomach cramp uncomfortably. Maybe it was that they were the people who’d entered Charlotte’s life nearer at the right time, and Sutton hadn’t.

But still.

“You are quite the catch,” she cleared her throat and attempted a lightness in her comment that she didn’t necessarily feel. Even admitted that – that *fact* – aloud felt almost inappropriate.

Charlotte’s laugh was disbelieving. “Sure. In some ways.” There was her easy confidence. Before she pursed her lips, contemplative, looking at Sutton again. “But in many others, I’m well aware that I’m not. Or, that I wasn’t, for them.”

It was so ridiculous that Sutton couldn’t keep the incredulity off her face. There was no fucking way she believed that the women Charlotte dated didn’t want to hold onto her.

Charlotte held firm, though, holding Sutton’s gaze. “I’m a big enough woman to admit that I have my flaws, darling. Prioritizing work,” She pursed her lips, before softly admitting, “Being... vulnerable... it’s not something I’m very good at.”

Sutton could only stare, because it – it just was so far from her own experience with Charlotte that she couldn’t readily agree. She could so easily see Charlotte’s easy smiles, the way she’d held Lucy as they’d slept.

Several moments beat by, unable to take her eyes off of Charlotte’s – until she was made to blink, rearing her head back and staring up at the sky as the drops of rain started to sprinkle down on her face.

“It’s raining,” she stated, dumbly, feeling as silly as the young woman she’d once been with Charlotte. Like she’d been so struck by staring at Charlotte and considering all that she was, that it took a literal natural phenomenon like rain to physically snap her out of it.

Charlotte joined her in staring up at the sky, blinking quickly as the rain started sprinkling down. “I don’t remember this in the forecast?”

“Me, neither.”

Even in the minute they spoke, though, the rain intensified, falling heavier.

“I suppose it’s lucky we’re near your house,” Charlotte arched an eyebrow at her, a lightness coming back to her face that Sutton was grateful for. They’d really been getting into heavy, uncharted – and for good reason – territory.

“Come on,” Charlotte breathed as the rain poured harder, her hand lacing through Sutton’s. Their fingers threaded together easily, in a way that they hadn’t done in so long, but it was as though their bodies didn’t forget it.

She tightened her grip as Charlotte tugged, and she found herself jogging along with Charlotte down the sidewalk.

As thunder rumbled through the sky, they turned onto Sutton’s street. And as lightning flashed, illuminating the world as it seemed like the clouds just decided to split in half and pour everything they had inside of them onto the waiting earth, they broke into a run.

And even though she didn’t think she’d ever found this much enjoyment in getting caught in the rain, as she ran down the sidewalk hand-in-hand with Charlotte, her clothes getting drenched, her hair soaked through, she felt herself laughing with the absurdity of it all.

A glimpse at Charlotte as they turned up Sutton’s walkway revealed a very similar smile on her face.

In a move that Sutton would try to wrap her mind around later, Charlotte used their intertwined hands to twirl Sutton, bringing her back against her door. So smooth, bringing Sutton perfectly out of the rain and under the arched awning outside of her house, as Charlotte kept in step with her, pressing close enough to stay out of the rain herself.

She laughed with it all, breathless with the butterflies swirling in her stomach and the damning feeling of whimsy that Charlotte, somehow – against all odds – could inspire inside of her.

She looked down at Charlotte, who grinned up at her. All easy and sexy and sweet, all at once, with the rain dripping down her face and dampening her dark hair, dripping off the ends.

Their breaths were visible in the cool night air between them, and Sutton’s stomach entirely bottomed out, feeling her blood rush faster through her veins.

She could feel her fingers tremble, where they braced against the door, and her entire body was already bracing – not for a physical impact, but for something much, much more powerful, and –

The alarm bells shot off in her head.

“Do you want to come over for Thanksgiving?” The words shot out of her, the first thing that popped into her head. Anything to lead into a different topic.

Charlotte blinked heavily several times, before she breathed a long, deep breath out. The warmth of it washed over Sutton, and she felt a slow relief as Charlotte pulled back just a bit, just out of her personal orbit.

“Thanksgiving?” She repeated, as if she wasn’t sure she’d really heard what Sutton had asked.

And... yeah, she understood that feeling, right now.

Swallowing hard, she nodded. Even with the extra inches between them, she didn't breathe exactly *easily*, her body still pulled taut with tension. "Since," she had to pause and clear her throat. "Since you don't have any plans."

Charlotte took in a visible deep breath, before pulling back even more, rolling her shoulders. A few moments beat by before she quietly affirmed, "I'd love to join you."

"Great. Good. That's good."

Dark eyes searched hers before Charlotte's lips curled into a small smirk. One that just *felt* private – meant just for Sutton – which then also felt ridiculous to think. "Good," she echoed.

Headlights flashed at them from the curb, and Sutton could have melted in relief as Charlotte looked over her shoulder. "It's my driver."

Sutton nodded again. "Good timing," she whispered.

Charlotte's eyes held hers, but she didn't echo the sentiment this time. "Goodnight, darling."

"Night," she breathed out, still holding herself against the door, muscles pulled tight.

She stayed that way until Charlotte got into the car, and only then did she *breathe*.

God, she had to get better at that. Had to get better at catching any of these potential *moments*, had to –

The door opened behind her, and she barely managed to catch herself on the doorframe before falling right on her ass.

She whipped around, to face Regan and Regan's knowing smile.

"Don't," she warned.

"I didn't say a word."