

Sutton knew that what she was about to do was probably a bad idea.

Really, logically, she knew that. Seriously.

She'd spent the last two days thinking about Charlotte nonstop – which, in and of itself, was not a good thing. Back in the day, she'd thought of Charlotte constantly. When she'd been a grad student with ample time on her hands.

Now, though, she was a woman with a career and a daughter to think about and prioritize. She didn't have the time and energy to spend getting lost in thoughts of Charlotte Thompson. At least, she *shouldn't*.

Apparently, she did.

She'd talked it over with Regan, then Regan and Emma, multiple times.

And what everything boiled down to, was that she simply couldn't imagine the future with Charlotte. Not because of *her*, but because she truly couldn't imagine that Charlotte – after taking time to think about it – would ever truly be happy giving up the one thing she'd always wanted.

So, she'd imagined what that conversation would look like. She'd imagined

She *hadn't* imagined Charlotte showing up on her doorstep with some grand romantic speech. She hadn't imagined Charlotte calling in fake-sick to work, to think about their relationship. The Charlotte she'd known had to literally be forced out of the office when she'd been actually been ill!

And she certainly hadn't imagined Charlotte looking at her, with those luminous, beautiful doe eyes, beseeching Sutton to let Charlotte choose her.

Sutton... she'd tried.

She'd really, truly tried to face reality.

She'd spent *months* managing to put in enough effort to hold herself back from Charlotte. Ever since the trajectories of their futures had been merged – even before they'd been sleeping together, but *especially* then – she'd been managing to hold onto her logic and reasoning, sometimes by a mere thread.

In all of their intimate moments, she'd managed to hold herself back.

But right now, in this literal moment, every thread that had been holding onto her sanity had been severed.

Let me choose you.

Sutton reached out, driven by this *need* inside of her, as she grasped the collar of Charlotte's jacket and swiftly pulled Charlotte against her.

Charlotte put up no resistance. If anything, she was already moving to press herself against Sutton. Like she'd been waiting for this moment.

Maybe she was.

Because, as soon as Sutton's lips met Charlotte's, she felt everything slide into place. Like maybe she, too, had been *waiting*. She hadn't known it, but that's exactly what it felt like.

Especially as Charlotte breathed a sigh into her mouth, and Sutton felt Charlotte's arms wrap around her neck, pulling her even closer.

Sutton let herself be pulled, this time, still clutching one hand to Charlotte's collar and holding her close, as she used her other hand to cup Charlotte's jaw. Stroking over the softness of her skin at the same time her tongue stroked over Charlotte's.

She heard the whimper that left the back of her throat at the same time that she felt it leave her. Unlocked from somewhere deep in her soul, the place that truly had been *waiting* for this.

It felt so *good*, to feel Charlotte's soft lips brushing against hers. To take Charlotte's bottom lip between her own, with no rush. To just let herself feel it.

Sutton melted into it. Giving into the touch, into the wanting.

Not in the frantic, hot, needy way they'd been giving into one another for the last couple of months, but the way that just spoke of familiarity. Intimacy. Comfort. Yearning. The wanting of *more* than physical, in the way that just made the physical things feel even better – this deep, slow kissing included.

“Oh my gosh!” Lucy's squeal cut into the evening air.

Cut right through that deep, liquid melting feeling that had slid through Sutton's bones, that was absolutely certain.

Immediately tensing, Sutton tore herself away from Charlotte, breathing heavily as she turned to see her daughter standing at the end of the hallway on the other side of the mudroom, clutching the glitter-filled painting she'd clearly been coming to show Sutton with both of her little hands.

“Oh my *gosh!*” Her daughter shouted again, her mouth falling open as she stared between them, before landing her attention squarely on Charlotte. “You're kissing my mommy!” Then she looked at Sutton, her eyes wide, eyebrows high on her forehead. “You're kissing Charlotte?”

Sutton did her very best not to blush in the face of her daughter catching her, indeed, kissing Charlotte, as she lifted her hand to subtly wipe the lingering moisture from her lips.

“Honey–”

“Are you two girlfriends? Are you like Arianne to my other mom?” Lucy asked, pinging her attention back and forth between them. “Does that mean – um! – does – are you gonna move in, like Arianne lives with my mom?!”

Her voice grew louder in decibel as she continued her questioning, and that easy, slow feeling inside of Sutton quickly subsided, as she was so acutely reminded of why losing herself in

Charlotte had been something she'd resisted. And why it most likely was so very not a good idea.

Charlotte, for her part, looked much more collected than Sutton felt. Her hair was still tousled a little from the wind outside, her collar askew from Sutton's hands, her lips plump and red from their kiss. And she didn't look nearly as caught red-handed as Sutton felt. No, Charlotte looked cool as a cucumber, if a little uncertain what to say.

Especially as she locked questioning eyes with Sutton, very clearly leaving the answers up to her.

God, Sutton would love to resent Charlotte for being so calm under pressure. *Every* kind of pressure. She always had been.

And yet, if anything, it made Sutton feel the opposite.

If anything, Charlotte's ability to remain outwardly unflappable made her all the more attractive, physically and emotionally, to Sutton.

Damn her.

"Um..." Sutton ran a listless hand through her hair, squeezing her eyes closed as her daughter's expectant gaze landed squarely on her. "Honey, why don't you take your picture into the other room to show us later, and get ready for dinner? We'll talk more then."

There. Dinner was going to be ready in only fifteen minutes, but she'd at least bought herself a little bit of composure time.

"But!" Lucy disagreed, shaking her head. "Mommy!"

"Luce, I promise you we will talk at dinner. Go and get ready," Sutton sharpened her tone – at least, the sharpest she ever used with Lucy, which still wasn't all that sharp. But it was the stern tone that Lucy recognized.

She sighed, puffing out her cheeks with it. "Ooooooaaaaaay."

Lucy turned slowly, before she started trudging back through the house, sliding her feet as she went.

Sutton closed her eyes again, taking another stabilizing breath as she turned to look at Charlotte. Who was still staring at her, this time looking slightly... flappable. Uncertain.

Much like she had minutes ago, making her profession to Sutton. *Let me choose you.*

Hearing those words ping through her mind again, they summoned those butterflies. The butterflies that had driven her to kiss Charlotte in the first place.

Butterflies she hadn't felt in a very, very long time.

"This is your chance," she found herself saying, and was proud of how steady and serious her voice was.

Charlotte's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "My chance? For...?"

Sutton summoned all of her will-power, clenching her fists with it, as she nodded at the door a few feet away. “This is your final chance to leave. If you have any doubts about us having a future, about being with me even though I can’t be with you if you’re running for president, about what you just said to me. *Any* doubts or second guesses at all, then... take the chance,” she begged, unable to hide the desperation she felt at the idea. At how serious this felt to her. “Please. If you didn’t feel absolutely certain when saying everything you said when you arrived here, then *please* take the chance, and leave.”

Charlotte didn’t, though.

Instead, she stood firm and shook her head, staring imploringly at Sutton. “Darling, *why* do you keep trying to get me to walk away? Why are you fighting this?” She swallowed hard, as she clearly gathered her own strength, as she said, “If *you* don’t want this, then—”

“It’s because I want this!” The words exploded from her, baffled at how Charlotte couldn’t see that. “It’s because the idea of what you’re saying... it all feels too good to be true. And I’m terrified to really believe in it, Charlotte,” she confessed.

“Darling—”

Sutton cut her off, shaking her head. “Please, don’t,” she murmured, needing her heart to not skip a beat with that single word. Not right now. “Please. Only say that if you are so sure. If Lucy hadn’t walked in when she did...”

Sutton rolled her lips, still able to taste Charlotte’s deliciously familiar subtly sweet lip balm.

“Then I can tell you, I absolutely would have said yes, right now. Yes, to trying to move forward. Clearly,” she licked her lips again, flicking her gaze to Charlotte’s, a self-deprecating, embarrassed grin tugging at her mouth quickly.

Before it slid away just as fast.

“And we would have moved forward, navigating this as tentatively as possible. But the reality is, Lucy saw that. And I’ve never dated anyone, not seriously, with Lucy in the picture. But you and Lucy are both in the picture, together, and... not telling her about us for a little while, that would have been one thing. But if I go into the dining room and have dinner with her *now*, I can’t simply not tell her about you and me. I don’t want to lie to my daughter, not about something that impacts her, too. So, either I go into that dining room, and I tell Lucy that we are dating,” Sutton said, her voice low and measured, trying to tamp down on her nerves. “Or I go in there and I tell her that while she did see us kissing, it was just... friendly, and that she will likely not be seeing you very much, anymore.”

Charlotte held Sutton’s gaze, her expression solemn, seeming to soak in every word Sutton said. Charlotte had that way about her – she’d always had that way. Like everything Sutton said was important. Everything Sutton said was something Charlotte would give serious consideration to.

“It’s not an ideal situation,” Sutton admitted the truth, before she shrugged in acceptance. “But it is the reality. The reality that is having a daughter. Not everything can be on my timeline, or at my convenience, or done my preferential way. And if you *stay* – if you don’t take this chance to leave – then, you’re admitting will full knowledge that you understand this

is my life. I'm not just a me, anymore. Lucy and I are a we, and it's not always easy and convenient."

It hadn't been this difficult, when she and Charlotte had been sleeping together. Not even with the knowledge that Charlotte and Lucy had bonded. Because she'd never believed *this* was going to be an option.

"I'm not leaving, Sutton," Charlotte stated with such assurance, Sutton knew that Charlotte hadn't even contemplated it. "I don't want the chance to walk out the door. If anything, I want you to lock the door behind me, while I'm in here next to you," Charlotte spoke so softly, then, as she reached up to stroke a lock of Sutton's hair behind her ear.

She shivered with the gentle touch, searching Charlotte's eyes for any hint of doubt.

All she found was steady warmth, and...

There truly was only so much push back she could summon in the face of something as incredible as Charlotte Thompson offering herself – and not just physically, but her emotional, intimate, whole self.

And after long months, Sutton's will to do so was simply gone.

"Okay," she breathed, reaching up and taking Charlotte's hand in hers. She laced their fingers together, and it felt so... so insane, the way they just *fit*. "Do you want to stay for dinner, then?"

"More than anything."

Sutton next to Charlotte, both across the table from Lucy, twenty minutes later. Their plates were loaded with spaghetti and meatballs, but no one was eating.

Not as Lucy sat with her spine straight, her hands linked together on the table in front of her, studying Sutton and Charlotte closely.

"Can I ask questions now?" She asked, aiming her puppy-dog eyes at Sutton.

She exchanged a look with Charlotte, who was wearing one of her alarmingly attractive sweet smiles. It was something she'd never seen on Charlotte, before. Not until she'd seen Charlotte interact with Lucy. A smile that made Sutton think Charlotte believed Lucy was absolutely adorable.

And for the first time since the months of seeing that smile, she let herself give in to the tempting warmth it alighted inside of her.

"Yes, hon, you can ask questions," she answered, turning back to face Lucy.

Who dropped her serious look quickly, lighting up in excitement. "Okay! Are you two girlfriends?" She repeated her first question from earlier.

Sutton's insides turned soft and anxious and thrilled – all of the feelings she'd once felt, years ago, at the prospect of being *Charlotte's girlfriend*. She honestly felt that by now, in her late thirties, being referred to as someone's girlfriend shouldn't appeal to her.

But, oh, it did.

And, *oh*, she really didn't think about how tricky this conversation would be. Because she and Charlotte hadn't even discussed that, themselves yet.

“Well, Luce,” Sutton started, the words falling slowly from her mouth as she tried to think of what to say. And all she could think of was – honesty. She didn't lie to Lucy. Not that she'd ever had anything to lie about, nor had she found herself in such a complicated situation in years, but... “It's—”

“Yes,” Charlotte answered, surprising her. “At least, I would like to be.”

Both she and Lucy turned to look at her, and Charlotte's cheeks were the slightest bit pink. Fuck, it was *so* endearing.

She felt Charlotte's hand reach out under the table, landing on her knee and gently squeezing, as Charlotte sent her an inquisitive look.

“You would?” She asked, needing the clarification, even if it was for what felt like the hundredth time.

“I would,” Charlotte nodded, a gorgeous smile playing at her lips as she turned to face Lucy. “Though – would you believe this, Luce? I've never actually had a girlfriend, before.”

Lucy's mouth dropped open in shock, the expression making Sutton laugh even as her heart stuttered at the sweetness of the interaction. “*No way!* You're so pretty!”

Charlotte chuckled again, reaching her free hand up to card through her long, wavy hair, and Sutton's heart stuttered all over again. Because *yeah*, Lucy was absolutely fucking right. Charlotte was so pretty.

“Thank you! But, yes way. I've never had a girlfriend, because I have always been very dedicated to my work.”

Lucy screwed up her face. “Yuck.”

They both laughed, then, as Charlotte slowly nodded in agreement. “Though I do enjoy a lot of my work... yes. It *is* yuck, that it's stopped me from having relationships,” she murmured in agreement, sliding her gaze back to Sutton once again. Just for a few seconds, before she cleared her throat. “So, I would like your mother to be my girlfriend. If that's all right with you.”

Sutton blinked widely at the last part of Charlotte's statement. She'd never even really considered what her having a partner might look like to Lucy – Lucy had never had to share her, in any sense of the word.

She supposed it was a blessing she hadn't had time to think about that, yet. Another thing to worry about, and –

That worry seemed to be unfounded, as Lucy shrugged, unperturbed. “It’s okay. My other mom, um, she has a wife. So I think mommy should, too.”

Relieved, and wishing very much she could pull Lucy in for a hug right now, Sutton gazed at her, so full of that *love* Lucy made her feel. “Thank you, honey.” She mulled over Lucy’s words again, before she slightly shook her head. “Though, Charlotte isn’t exactly like Arianne.”

“I know,” Lucy nodded, firmly. “She gives funner presents and comes to holidays with grandma and grandpa, which is *way* better!”

Charlotte chortled, before turning it into a cough at Sutton’s sharp look. Even though Sutton, herself, wanted to chuckle at it. But, presenting as a united front with Layla and Arianne was something Charlotte might have to learn...

Wow.

Shaking her head at that thought – getting far too ahead of herself – she resolutely tamped down on any sign of amusement. “What I was referring to, honey, is that Charlotte and I aren’t married.”

“So... you *aren’t* moving in?” Lucy asked, seeming alarmingly crestfallen at the idea.

Charlotte, for her part, seemed just as surprised at the reaction as Sutton did. “I – sorry, little darling, but I’ll be living in my own house for now. But if you’d like, you can come over there sometimes, too?”

She tentatively suggested, looking at Sutton for approval as she did so.

“Really?!” That seemed to perk Lucy right up, just as Charlotte, unsurprisingly, had figured it would.

Sutton held Charlotte’s light, hopeful gaze with her own. God, she truly was such a sucker for her. “Yes, sweet, we can go to Charlotte’s house, sometimes.”

“Okay!” Lucy crinkled her face up in thought, before she tilted her head and sent Charlotte a far too imploring look for a five-year-old. “Are you still gonna be *my* friend?”

“If anything, I think we might be even better friends,” Charlotte promised without missing a single beat.

“Am I still gonna be your sweet pea?” Lucy asked her, then, sliding her gaze to Sutton.

She felt her heart squeeze in her chest and she couldn’t resist reaching across the table and cupping Lucy’s small, soft cheek in her palm. “*Always*, honey. That will never change.”

Lucy accepted that with a nod, before she turned her head to plant a pecking kiss against Sutton’s palm, mirroring exactly what they did during Lucy’s bedtime routine. “Um... are you gonna hang out with us even more, then?” She asked as Sutton removed her hand.

“Yes,” Charlotte affirmed, solidly.

“Can I ask more questions if I come up with ’em later?” Lucy distractedly asked, starting to look down at her plate.

In a way, Sutton was a little impressed that her daughter's attention hadn't been captured by the spaghetti and meatballs, before this, seeing as it was her favorite meal.

Sutton couldn't help but laugh. "Yes. Always."

"Okie! Let's have dinner," Lucy announced, lifting her favored purple fork with the silicone grip.

Sutton let out a breath she hadn't even been aware she'd been holding, as she felt Charlotte's that still sat on her knee squeeze again, this time for several seconds. And even when she stopped squeezing, she didn't remove it.

Sutton turned slightly, looking toward Charlotte, who was already looking at her. And the look on Charlotte's face was something Sutton could only describe as adoring.

God.

Her stomach fluttered again. They were really doing this.

She wasn't sure she'd be able to eat her spaghetti.

Two long hours later, Sutton exited Lucy's bedroom, softly pulling the door closed behind her.

She walked down the hallway toward the living room where Charlotte was waiting, before she paused just before crossing into the entryway.

She was thrown back, suddenly, to months ago. To the first night Charlotte had met Lucy, the first night Charlotte had joined them for dinner.

The first time Sutton had kissed her, in over a decade.

And she'd paused right here, looking at her decorative mirror, before entering the room after putting Lucy to bed.

Back then, she'd been conscientious of her looks, before getting over herself because – it didn't matter what she looked like. Because she and Charlotte were nothing other than friendly colleagues.

Now... Sutton studied herself for a few seconds, recognizing every little aspect of her face. Every faint laugh line, the small wrinkles that so recently started forming at the edge of her eyes.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Charlotte's voice carried to her, making her blush and startle, as she turned to see Charlotte only a few feet away.

She was smiling at Sutton, so openly, so fondly, her arms crossed over her chest.

Sutton, still embarrassed at having been caught, brushed a hand through her hair as she turned away from the mirror. “I’m not chopped liver,” she acknowledged, her gaze unable to look away from Charlotte. “But... I’m no *you*.”

The words fell to a whisper, from the truest, most honest parts of her soul.

Before Charlotte could say anything – and Sutton could already see the vehement disagreement forming on her lips – she shook her head. “Did you know that was one of the first things I ever said about you? Years ago,” she explained, the memory she hadn’t thought about in a very, very long time coming to the forefront of her mind. She grinned at it, nostalgic. “When Regan swiped on you, on SapphicSpark. I’d paused on your profile...”

She trailed off momentarily, as she walked closer to Charlotte, running her eyes over her face.

That flawless, perfectly put-together face, that only got better with age.

“And I couldn’t swipe on you, myself. Because I know I’m not unattractive, but I’m not... this,” she murmured, lost in the memory and in Charlotte’s face, as she slowly lifted her hands when she was close enough, drawing her fingertips lightly over Charlotte’s jaw, then her cheekbones.

“You are, actually,” Charlotte whispered back, her eyes hooded as she stared right into Sutton’s. There was a fire in them, and in her words, like she refused to let Sutton think anything else. “You are so much *more*, Sutton. You always have been.”

She couldn’t help but let her eyes fall closed, then, taking those words to heart in a way she didn’t know if she ever could have, before. The sincerity in them was undeniable, and she was so, so tired fighting it.

They were no longer fighting it.

“I did not think that the first time we labelled our relationship as *something* would be in conversation with my daughter.” The words came, unbidden, accompanied with a disbelieving laugh, as she opened her eyes.

Charlotte had her own small, charming smile playing on her lips. “It wasn’t quite what I’d envisioned, either,” she admitted, before that smile gave way to something far more serious. “But everything we said, I meant. I still wouldn’t take the chance to leave, darling, even if you offered it to me, now.”

“I think it was incredibly sweet of you to take her feelings into account, and ask if she was okay with our being together.”

“If Lucy wasn’t okay with our being together, I don’t think you would be,” Charlotte reasoned, easily, before she paused, blinking rapidly, and slowly said, “And... I just realized, I don’t think I would have been, either.”

Sutton felt herself speechless, as she stared at Charlotte.

She reached out, much like she had earlier, only this time she didn’t pull Charlotte in for a kiss.

This time, she wrapped her arms around Charlotte and tugged Charlotte up against her. Right up against her, their bodies aligning from shoulder to knee. And she held.

She simply held Charlotte in her arms, so closely, feeling her heart beating strong and steady in her chest. Feeling Charlotte's beating against her, as Charlotte reached up and wrapped her arms around Sutton, clutching just as tightly.

"I'm still scared," she confessed in a whisper, right against Charlotte's ear. She squeezed her eyes closed, breathing in the scent of Charlotte's perfume, feeling it both soothe her and excite her. "I'm still so scared of you, Charlotte Thompson. But I also want you. Want this. More than I've ever wanted anything."

"I do, too," Charlotte's words were a promise.

It was exactly the promise Sutton needed to hear.

Either this would be the most devastating thing to ever happen to her, or it could be the best decision she'd ever made for the future.