

If there was one thing Charlotte had never envisioned herself doing, it was having dinner with the woman Sutton had once been married to.

And yet, here she was. Approaching the large, beautifully appointed home in Bethesda with Sutton at her side.

Sutton had picked her up from her office an hour ago, something Charlotte had found surprisingly and thoroughly... charming.

She'd never been picked up from work, before.

Yet, as she'd approached Sutton's car and Sutton had rolled down the window to send her a sweet, beautiful smile and a wave, Charlotte's stride had paused.

In that moment, the reality she was settling into washed over her.

She and Sutton weren't only late-night phone calls and fun dates and hot make-outs. They were *you'll pick me up after work and we will go to dinner with your ex to pick up your daughter and I'll show you the things I've never showed anyone.*

Charlotte wanted it with an intensity that startled her. She wanted it all.

Sutton paused as they climbed the steps toward the front door, giving Charlotte a tentative smile. It was far from the bright, unencumbered grin Charlotte was used to seeing, though.

"I just," Sutton paused, rolling her lips. "I know it's a little late to not go to this dinner." There was that self-deprecation. That, mixed with the earnest look in Sutton's eyes, made Charlotte think back to the woman Sutton had been when they'd first done this. "But I wanted you to know that I really appreciate it. I know that you're going to New York tonight, that your schedule is crazy busy. I really would have understood if you had to reschedule."

Everything Sutton was saying was absolutely correct – Charlotte's schedule was incredibly busy, particularly this week. She had meetings in New York starting tomorrow at eight in the morning, and she'd arranged for Autumn to send her already packed suitcase with Hamish, who was scheduled to pick her up at Sutton's house after dinner.

"I know I didn't have to do dinner tonight," Charlotte softly informed her, searching Sutton's gaze with her own. "Yes, I'm busy. But the simple truth is that you *are* my priority, Sutton. And I'll do whatever I can do spend as much time with you as possible."

It was the simple and utter truth.

Sutton's big, blue eyes went soft as her mouth opened on a quiet sigh. "I..." She swallowed, stroking her thumb over Charlotte's hand. "I want to spend as much time with you as possible, too," she admitted, before she flicked her eyes toward the front door. "And I really want you to know that having dinner with Layla and Arianne is *far* from a common occurrence, so I hope you know this isn't—"

"Darling, I'm aware of what this is," Charlotte gently cut into the oncoming ramble, feeling completely endeared by it.

Sutton's blue eyes searched hers, her eyebrows wrinkling as she hesitantly checked, "Are you sure?"

Charlotte nodded. "This is your ex-wife realizing that I'm not going anywhere and wanting an opportunity – a real opportunity – to size me up. I'm well-aware that this is not going to be a regular event."

Under no circumstances was she going to make it appear to Sutton's ex that Charlotte was uninterested or unavailable in being present and attentive in her or Lucy's lives. Not only because it was so far from the truth, but because she would be *damned* if she became the only reason Layla had to accuse Sutton of not doing what was in their daughter's best interest.

The smile on Sutton's face became softer, even as a slight blush tinged her cheeks. "I hate to have put you in this position in the first place, as I don't believe it is any of Layla's business who I'm with. But..." She bit her bottom lip as she explained, "I *do* think it's a good thing for Lucy to have dinner with all of us and see us together. It's the best thing for her to see all of her parental figures as a unit, no matter what's going on behind the scenes."

Her heart skipped a beat at Sutton's wording, as Charlotte was still very much adjusting to the idea of being a *parental figure*.

She waited for a second, wondering if any other nervous feelings would follow on its heels.

But she felt nothing other than an excitedly-nervous resolve.

Perhaps she wasn't quite stepmother status right now, but she *wanted* to get there, in the future. She wanted to be more and more of a presence in Sutton's life and in Lucy's life, to the point that she didn't have any possible doubts about herself as a parental figure.

And more than anything, Charlotte loved that Sutton felt that way. Sutton, putting her daughter first, was who Sutton Spencer *was*, as a person. If Sutton wasn't exactly who she was – empathetic, kind, thoughtful, loyal – Charlotte likely wouldn't be so head-over-heels for her.

"I think that you're exactly right," she easily agreed, squeezing Sutton's hand with her own. "And I want to show up for you," she promised, searching Sutton's eyes with her own.

She wanted Sutton to see how much she meant it.

When Sutton leaned down and pressed her lips to Charlotte's, she believed Sutton knew. Their kiss was soft and searching, Sutton's hand gently coming up to cup Charlotte's jaw.

Charlotte reached out with her free hand, sliding it into Sutton's un-buttoned jacket to settle over her hip. Sutton was wearing a pale blue button-down tucked into high-waisted jeans; it was a casual outfit, simply what she'd worn to her lectures today, Charlotte knew.

She also knew that if she'd ever had a professor that looked like Sutton, she'd have been the most attentive, focused student in class. Hell, she might have switched her major to English.

They both froze, breathing in each other's air, as the front door opened a foot away from them. Disengaging, they both turned toward the doorway to come face-to-face with Layla, who watched them with an arched eyebrow.

Caught making out on Sutton's ex-wife's front stoop was also not on Charlotte's agenda. Though she could see Sutton blushing, Charlotte felt a very real, very dark, and somewhat inappropriate satisfaction slide through her, her mouth curling into a small smile with it.

"I thought I heard something out here," Layla drawled, her own grin fixed into place. Unlike Charlotte's it was tight around the edges.

"We were just about to knock," Sutton informed her, clearing her throat as she slid her hand down and intertwined her fingers with Charlotte's.

They walked the rest of the way across the porch, toward Layla, with their shoulders brushing. As a pair. Charlotte squeezed Sutton's hand in hers as they came to stand directly in front of Layla.

"Nice to see you again." In lieu of offering her hand, she offered the bottle of wine she'd brought with her.

Her grandmother had taught her long ago that you never showed up empty-handed and unprepared to dinner, whether talking business, politics, or personal endeavors. Sometimes, her grandmother had told her, *the personal endeavors will be the most laborious, and you'll need to be the most prepared.*

Though Charlotte was certain her grandmother's personal endeavors were far, far different than her own situation, the advice remained the same.

Layla reached out to take the bottle of wine from her. "Nice to see you again, as well."

Charlotte appreciated that while they were both obviously lying, she believed her comment had sounded far more genuine.

"Come on in," Layla stepped back, letting them both enter into the mudroom.

Charlotte started to unbutton her jacket, peering around out of curiosity as she did so. It really was only in this moment that she'd remembered Sutton saying, months ago, that Layla had stayed in the house they'd owned together post-divorce, and it was jarring to realize that *this* had been Sutton's home.

With the woman that was watching the two of them with a very close, speculative look.

It gave Charlotte a bad taste in the back of her mouth. Then again, she was fairly certain Layla would always leave Charlotte feeling that way. The way she'd treated Sutton in their marriage was unforgivable, and Charlotte was pretty good at holding onto grudges. Even if she was able to carry them with grace and a smile.

She watched Sutton out of the corner of her eye, wondering how she felt whenever she was here.

But Sutton didn't outwardly give anything away – something that made Charlotte feel inexplicably, ridiculously proud – as she hung her own jacket up, and then reached to take Charlotte's, exchanging a small smile as she did so.

“Mama! I've been *waiting!*” Lucy's excited voice called out, moments before her running footsteps approached. She came to a halt as soon as she spotted Charlotte, her eyes going wide. Her smile grew, showing off the gap of her most recent lost tooth. “Charlotte! What are you doing here!”

Charlotte exchanged a brief look of confusion with Sutton – her presence at dinner had been confirmed for the last few days – before she shook it off, grinning easily down at Lucy. “I came to have dinner with you.”

“Yay! Are you coming over to mama's after, too?” She asked, nearly vibrating with excitement. “Be-because, um, we – I have a new game mom and Arianne bought me this weekend, and it's *so* fun and we can play it together?”

Before Charlotte could answer, Layla cut in, “Luce, before we make any plans for games, why doesn't your mama help you with your poster for school?”

Sutton's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “The poster that's *due tomorrow* isn't done yet?” She asked the question quietly, but the displeasure was obvious.

Layla's own answer was light, though clearly displeased, as well. “She was very insistent to me and Arianne that *you* had to help her finish, because *you're* the literature professor. We're merely surgeons.”

“Yeah,” Lucy interjected, nodding sagely as she put her hands on her hips and looked up at her parents. “It's the project about the books we read together, Mama. The ones where the girl goes into the imaginary world!” She wrinkled her nose. “Mom and Arianne don't teach about books!”

Charlotte willed herself not to smile. Especially not as Sutton and Layla seemed to have a silent conversation for several seconds, before Sutton called up a smile as she looked down at Lucy. “Okay, honey, let's get to it. You have to make sure all your work is done before we have dinner here, just like you do when you're with me.”

Before Charlotte could move to follow her, Layla cleared her throat. “Charlotte, I thought that while they're busy, I could show you around the house.”

Sutton paused in the doorway, turning back to look at Layla with an obviously suspicious look on her face. One that Charlotte very much understood, as it was clear Layla had set all of these dominos in motion in order to arrange a few minutes one on one with Charlotte this evening.

“I don't think—” Sutton started, before Charlotte gently intervened.

“I'd love for you to show me around.” She met Sutton's apprehensive expression with one of reassurance.

If Layla wanted to have this opportunity to size Charlotte up under the guise of having a dinner together and giving her a tour of her house – fine. She would soon learn, if she somehow didn't already know, that Charlotte wasn't someone easily intimidated.

She'd been to state dinners, fundraisers with international heads of state, galas with any and all kinds of wheelers and dealers. The conversation amidst these events ranged from strenuous foreign affairs debates to the banalities of golf – having an evening with Layla was far from nerve-wracking.

“Did you just come from work?” Layla asked, looking her over and taking in Charlotte's well-fitted black suit, as she led Charlotte through the first level of the house.

“Well, it is a Tuesday evening, so... yes. I've had a rousing afternoon debating access to healthcare.” She arched a considering eyebrow at Layla. “Something I'm sure you have a stake in.”

Charlotte had come to the conclusion that she was going to do her best to remain civil and friendly with Layla... to the best of her ability. Building this relationship with Sutton – something solid and lasting – was her goal, and whether she enjoyed it or not, that goal had to include Layla.

Topics like Lucy and shared political views seemed like the best, safest ones.

The topics she could focus on rather than constantly think about how this woman had mistreated Charlotte's favorite person. *That* was not a safe topic.

She peered around the living areas she was being guided through, noting that the home – much like the outside – was well-appointed. Painted and decorated in neutral tones, brightly lit, with nothing out of place. None of Lucy's items littered the floor or were stuffed in little hiding places, unlike in Sutton's home.

As they walked by a home office that was decorated with a multitude of framed graduate degrees, Layla slowed to a pause and asked, “Where did you attend college, again?”

Charlotte slowly turned to face Layla, who was staring at her intently. Almost... competitively? Charlotte understood that look very well; she gave it to people she was – professionally – contending with.

It seemed Layla *wasn't* using their time tonight to build a politely civil communication with Charlotte. She found that she welcomed it, feeling the same anticipation she got before a debate pushing through her. Amping her up.

If Layla wanted to stand toe-to-toe with Charlotte and size her up, Charlotte had no concerns. She slowly turned to face Layla completely, tilting her head up at her. “Yale undergrad, with degrees in political science and pre-law. Followed up by a Columbia law degree. Why do you ask?”

Ah, there it was. The spark in Layla's eyes grew brighter as she shrugged. "Just... curious. Are you close to your parents? They live around here, correct? I mean – you grew up around here."

Like *hell* would Charlotte delve into anything regarding her relationship with her parents with this woman.

She maintained her own nonplussed smile. "I did grow up around here, less than an hour away in Virginia. They no longer live there, though; they retired to Florida several years ago. The Keys. Lovely area, right on the beach. I'm certain Lucy would have a blast visiting sometime."

Layla pursed her lips, humming quietly. "Right. Speaking of Lucy – I'd like to tell you, personally, how much I *appreciate* you being able to step in for me in the last minute. I'm sure Sutton was very pleased."

"She was," Charlotte agreed in confirmation, though she could read Layla's tone like a book.

The tone that said Layla was very much displeased with Charlotte having filled in for her at Lucy's school. The tone that said while Sutton may have been pleased, Layla was not.

"Being able to show up for her as the hero from time to time is amazing. And the way Sutton makes you feel about it feels... great," Layla settled on, crossing her arms as she lowered her voice. "I know that. But if you're thinking that you're going to continue down this road with Sutton, you should know that it's not all as wonderful as you think. Maintaining that standard, trying to constantly show up and play the hero, for women like us – busy and ambitious – is impossible."

Charlotte held her hand up, stopping Layla from continuing, as she stared at her incredulously. "I'm sorry, but... are you taking this time to try to warn me away from Sutton?"

Layla clearly bristled. "Of course not. I'm telling you the reality of the situation you're trying to walk into. A situation that my daughter is very much settled in."

"Great. I'm glad to hear that you're not trying to give me relationship advice around how to be with Sutton. I'm sure you haven't forgotten, but we've *both* been here with her, before. I don't need you to tell me who Sutton is or what she's looking for. Because it's not someone who can swoop in and save the day." God, Charlotte was seeing red at the implication.

"Sutton didn't need me to come and *save her* at Lucy's school, or in any other way. She never has. In case you're unaware of the person you were once married to – Sutton Spencer has more internal fortitude and the ability to carry on in spades. More than you or I do. And I didn't show up to that school just for Sutton."

And that was the wildest truth of all, when Charlotte said it aloud.

She hadn't put much conscious thought into the decision to take the afternoon off at the last minute; she'd simply heard Sutton's frustration and disappointment and had started moving around her schedule.

Because she could picture exactly what Sutton would be seeing when she went to Lucy's school and Layla didn't show up. Lucy, with her big, excited blue eyes – the same hue as Sutton's – with that excitement completely dashed. Replaced with the disappointment and sadness that Charlotte had briefly witnessed before Lucy had seen her.

It had felt so *good* to show up for both of them, and even though being present for an activity at a kindergarten was far from the most prestigious or professionally impactful event Charlotte had engaged in, it had made her feel happier and more satisfied than anything in recent memory.

With that in mind, Charlotte stared Layla down. "You aren't going to scare me off; nothing you say is going to change my mind. And no matter what you might say to yourself to justify having initiated this conversation, I know people like you. I'm surrounded by you all of the time."

Even as Layla's face flushed, her expression soured as she rolled her own shoulders back, defensively. "I imagine you're surrounded less by medical doctors trying to save lives, and more of those who are playing around with human rights."

"It's all mere mortals trying to play god, isn't it?" She challenged, before shrugging – because *that* was not the discussion right now. What was important was, "Regardless, it's not the profession I'm talking about; it's the *person*."

She could hear Lucy's pattering of footsteps upstairs, starting down a hallway, and she made sure to keep her voice down as she narrowed her eyes at Layla. "Seeing me with Sutton makes you wonder about what you did in your relationship. It was easier for you to feel justified in heaving left her when she was still single. While her only priority was raising your daughter. In a way, Sutton being *available* was easier to swallow."

Layla reeled back, clearly speechless and offended. "Excuse you; I *love* my wife—"

"I'm not saying you don't," Charlotte interrupted, swiftly. "I'm not even saying you wish you hadn't left Sutton. What I am saying is that you having an affair rather than simply leaving Sutton back in the day meant you got to have the best of both worlds – you didn't have to choose until Sutton found out and the choice was made for you. And perhaps you are happy in your life now. But seeing someone who's also successful and attractive and accomplished see the value Sutton has makes you wonder. And a part of me is happy about it."

Layla's mouth gaped, her cheeks darkening in either embarrassment or self-righteous anger or a combination of which Charlotte couldn't assess so easily. But she *did* know that she hit the nail right on the head.

She made a point of keeping her voice low, as she could now dimly hear Sutton and Lucy's voices as they walked down the stairs.

“I lost Sutton once, too. But some of the many differences between you and I? I never did anything behind her back, and breaking her heart destroyed me just as much.” Maybe – likely – even more.

Charlotte was able to see that clearly, now.

“So, perhaps you aren’t overly fond of me. I can’t imagine Sutton is overly fond of your wife, either, given how everything transpired. But I hope you can find only a fraction of the strength Sutton has, to be as cordial to me as Sutton manages to be with Arianne. Because I’m not going anywhere, and I’m not someone who is going to hold my tongue or shrivel into a corner, *especially* if I see anything disrespectful or unfavorable regarding Sutton. So, I’d recommend you get yourself in order.” Satisfied, Charlotte crossed her arms and leaned back, eyeing Layla as she did so.

Layla narrowed her eyes, taking several moments before she opened her mouth to respond. “I – excuse you–”

Before she could say anything, though, Lucy called to them, “Mom! Charlotte! Arianne says dinner is ready!”

Charlotte watched as Layla sucked in a breath, before gritting her teeth and shouting back, “We’re coming!”

And, oh yes. That was a very dark satisfaction, indeed.

“Honey, why don’t you say goodbye to Charlotte and then get your toys together for bath time?” Sutton suggested gently as they all entered through Sutton’s front door, two hours later.

Lucy turned to Charlotte, her eyes wide and imploring. “Are you *sure* you gotta go? I got my new game.”

Charlotte knelt down to be on eye-level, feeling unbelievably remorseful from that wide-eyed look. “Just like you have to go to school, I have to go to work. Unfortunately for me, that means having to leave to do so.”

Lucy let out a put-upon sigh. “But... soon?”

“Absolutely,” she promised. “As soon as I’m back.”

Lucy studied her closely, as if trying to determine whether she could believe her. Charlotte believed she passed the test when Lucy nodded, firmly. “All right. As soon as you’re back.”

Charlotte offered her hand for a shake to seal it. “Deal.”

Lucy smiled, giggling as she slid her hand into Charlotte’s. “Deal!”

As soon as they disengaged, Lucy dropped the backpack she'd had hanging off her shoulders as she ran down the hallway toward her room.

Most importantly, as soon as she was out of earshot, Charlotte turned to face Sutton.

Dinner had gone... fine. She'd met Layla's wife, officially. Who was a lot more reserved than she'd expected and hadn't spoken very much throughout their meal. Mostly, the conversation had been carried for an hour by Lucy. Which, Charlotte thought, might have been for the best.

But something had been off with Sutton, and Charlotte had picked up on that very clearly as soon as they'd left Layla's house. She could see it now, the look on Sutton's face that seemed contemplative. Hesitant. And she didn't know why it was there, but she knew she didn't enjoy it.

"Is everything okay?" She asked, watching Sutton closely. "You were so quiet on the drive home."

"I heard what you said to Layla, before dinner," Sutton confessed, seemingly unable to keep the words in. "I heard... well, I'm certain not *everything*, but a decent amount. I came to find you as soon as I helped Lucy finish her project, because I hated feeling like I'd just left you to the wolves. But – but then, I wasn't sure I should interrupt, and Lucy shouted about dinner, so..." Her cheeks blushed a cute pink, as she reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear in a self-conscious move.

Surprise rocked through Charlotte, followed quickly by remorse. A peculiar kind of remorse, because she didn't regret what she'd said, precisely, but...

"Maybe I shouldn't have said everything I said to Layla, or made any... implications." Even if she was certain she was correct. "But I'm never going to lie to you, Sutton. So, I can't apologize for the sentiment I expressed but I *am* sorry if you're–"

"I don't want you to be sorry," Sutton cut in, and there was an emotion in her voice that Charlotte couldn't quite read. "*Please* don't be sorry."

Much like earlier, before they'd entered Layla's house, Sutton kissed her. She slid her hands into Charlotte's hair, angling her head up even as Charlotte was already moving toward Sutton on her own.

But she wouldn't deny that whenever Sutton directed her, she enjoyed it. She couldn't deny it, as the desire easily slid through her, even before their lips touched.

Unlike their kiss earlier, on Layla's porch, this one was intense. Immediately wanting.

And *god*, Charlotte wanted. Badly.

As Sutton had pointed out at the end of last week, this *was* the longest amount of time they'd ever existed in each other's worlds and not had sex. It wasn't the longest time Charlotte had been without sex, and she wasn't a hormone-addled teenager, so it shouldn't make her feel so desperate, so wanton.

But she *did*.

It was entirely the Sutton effect. This feeling, this hunger that ignited so easily inside of her every time she saw Sutton, every time they shared a simple touch, at every kiss – it was something that was so uniquely, chemically bonded with her feelings for this woman.

Sutton's tongue slid along hers, searching, finding, taking, and Charlotte, driven by her need to touch Sutton's soft, warm skin hurriedly tugged Sutton's shirt from where it was still neatly tucked into her jeans.

They both sighed into each other's mouths as she dug her nails into either side of Sutton's spine, before scratching down. Using her grip to pull Sutton more intently against her.

She vaguely registered, as Sutton pushed her against the back of the door, a vibration coming from her jacket pocket as it pressed more intently against her thigh, trapped between herself and Sutton with how closely Sutton held her.

One of Sutton's hands slid down, using her thumb to press under Charlotte's jaw, holding her in place. As if Charlotte wanted to leave. As if Charlotte didn't want, more than anything, to exist in this moment.

As her phone vibrated yet again, signalling another phone call, Sutton hummed against her. A vibration that was much more pleasant.

Disappointment rolled through her as she lolled her head back against the door, breathing heavily.

"This was *your* decision, I must remind you," Sutton breathed, still so close that Charlotte could feel her speak as much as she could hear it.

Everything inside of her yearned to lean into Sutton. For *more*. To keep going, even as she knew – as her phone vibrated yet again – that the calls were coming from Hamish to inform her that he was outside of Sutton's home, ready to take her to the airport.

She groaned, the sound as painful and pathetic aloud as it felt inside. "I *know*. Trust me, I know."

As she felt Sutton's hot breath on her mouth, she'd never wanted so badly to tell Hamish to go home. To forfeit her position in the world and all responsibilities that came with it, so that she could stay right here.

The feeling was so *visceral*, Charlotte swore she could cling to it.

"I have to go. I *hate* that I do, but..." she trailed off, closing her eyes on a quiet sigh.

"I know," Sutton murmured, reaching up and stroking Charlotte's hair behind her ear. The touch was light, and Charlotte still shivered from it.

Sutton's blue eyes were so dark, so hungry for her, even as Sutton pulled back, putting some space between them. "I want you to know that everything you said to Layla was... it was beautiful. I don't enjoy going back to that house, even though this place feels far more like

home than that one ever did. But being there with you, knowing that you truly have my back is – it meant the world to me. And I’m already looking forward to seeing you when you come back, before you’re even gone.”

The words and the earnest way Sutton said them made everything in Charlotte absolutely *sing*. For so long – months, now – there was a part of Sutton that was held back from her. She’d been able to feel it. That sweet, sentimental, whole-hearted part of Sutton had been reserved, and Charlotte had wondered if she’d ever see it again.

She’d found that she was head over heels for Sutton, regardless, but... *god*, having that back felt like something slid into place inside of her.

Sutton bit her bottom lip, her eyes searching Charlotte’s before she whispered, “I–” She cut herself off, though, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “I hope you’ll call or text whenever you can.”

“It was already a plan,” Charlotte assured her, meaning it with every fiber of her being.

She was obsessed with talking to Sutton whenever she could. So much so that it would have been embarrassing, had Charlotte... well, been embarrassed by it.

“I’ll see you soon,” she promised, already mentally calculating when she could be back from New York down to the hour. “And talk to you even sooner than that.”

Sutton ducked down and kissed her once more, this time brief and sweet. A promise of the future, before she pulled back.

“Goodbye, darling.”

“Bye, love,” Sutton echoed the sentiment, as she opened the door for Charlotte.

As soon as she shut Sutton’s front door behind her, Charlotte saw that Hamish was, indeed, waiting for her. She waved at him, an apologetic – as apologetic as she could muster, anyway, given that she was late due to kissing Sutton – smile on her lips.

She’d only taken a step, before she paused, replaying Sutton’s term of endearment in her mind.

She hadn’t registered it as soon as Sutton had said it, but now – thirty seconds later – she was.

Love.

She wasn’t sure Sutton had ever called her that. In fact, she *knew* she hadn’t.

“Don’t jump the gun, Thompson,” she muttered to herself, shaking her head as she started toward the steps. “She will get there when she gets there.”

The door behind her opened, and Charlotte paused again, turning around in surprise as Sutton stepped onto her small porch. She hadn’t put her jacket back on, and they could see her breath puffing in the night air.

Concern washed over her, and she gestured to Hamish that she needed another minute as she turned to face Sutton. “Is everything all right, darling?”

“I wasn’t going to say this. I’ve been actively *trying* not to say it, for the last couple of weeks,” Sutton said, wrapping her arms around herself as she came to a stop inches from Charlotte.

Charlotte’s eyebrows furrowed as she reached out and gently rubbed her hands up and down Sutton’s arms, trying to give her some warmth. “What are you talking about? Do you want to go back inside?”

Sutton shook her head, jerkily. “No, I – I mean, I *do*.” She laughed, reaching up and running one of her hands through her hair. “I really do, if it meant you’d be coming in and closing the door behind you, too.”

“Sutton, are you ok—”

“I love you, Charlotte.”

Everything stopped. She could no longer see Hamish’s headlights in her periphery. She no longer felt the chill in the air around them.

All she could see was Sutton’s face right in front of her, all she could feel was the strong, steady warmth of Sutton under her palms.

“You...” She trailed off, her heart starting to pound in her chest as she stared up at Sutton. Searching. Needing. Wanting to hear it again, needing to make sure she hadn’t heard something imaginary.

“I love you,” Sutton repeated, sounding even more certain of herself. “I do, Charlotte. I really do. I am in love with you, and that’s never changed. I loved Layla, truly, I did. I wouldn’t have married her otherwise. But it’s been over a decade, and *nothing* has ever felt like this. Nothing – no one – has ever come close to feeling the way I feel when I’m with you.” A crazy, wondrous laugh broke from her beautiful lips, before she reached up and pressed her fingertips against them.

“For so long, I’d tried to chalk it up to a “first love” sort of feeling, but it’s not.” Sutton shook her head, intently staring into Charlotte’s eyes. “It’s so much *more*. I don’t know what it is; I wish I did. I’ve wished – even when I’d moved on from you – to understand what this feeling is. This feeling of being drawn to you, wanting to be around you, to be with you. Because everything makes more sense, with you. I don’t understand it, and I don’t think I ever will, but that’s exactly what the feeling is. You make things make sense, even when you make things more complicated.”

Charlotte knew precisely what Sutton was saying. So precisely, down to every last damn letter. She stood, frozen and rooted to the spot, as she felt like every emotional dam was breaking open inside of her.

“And I’ve been trying to hold that feeling back as much as I possibly could for months. Trying to avoid falling right into you. I’ve been *really* trying to hold it off for the last few weeks. Because – because... I don’t know.” Sutton lifted her hands into the air before unceremoniously dropping them down to her sides. Her eyes searched Charlotte’s as if she could provide an answer. As if she *was* the answer. “Because we’ve only been *back together* for a month? Because I have a daughter, and you’re still figuring out what you want to do, going forward. And I know you have to leave. I know this might not be the best time to tell you, but – I needed you to know. I want you to know that when you’re not here, I’m here, loving you.”

Sutton broke off, then, taking in a deep, tremulous breath. But the smile that illuminated her face was anything but tremulous. It was bright and luminescent, it was all Charlotte could see.

“I love you, Charlotte Thompson. And I wanted to tell you, this time, without being in tears or accusing you of being afraid to love me back.”

Charlotte hadn’t realized she was crying until Sutton reached up to gently wipe her thumb over Charlotte’s cheek, coming away damp.

“You don’t have to say anything right now. You don’t–”

“Are you kidding me?” Charlotte cut in, laughing emotionally, incredulously. “I love you, Sutton. I have loved you for so long, it’s a part of me, now. I love you wherever I am, at any time.”

She’d never said those words to someone, and she thought it might be scary to do so. Even to Sutton.

But it didn’t.

It felt *good*, and she found herself grinning with them, shaking her hair back. “There’s no way you don’t know that, right? I loved you back then, and I’ve never stopped. I’ve all but said it.”

Sutton blinked, her own tears falling down her cheeks before she hurriedly reached up to wipe them away. “I knew,” she admitted, “Even if the exact words hadn’t been said that way. But... it’s different to hear it, like that. It’s better,” she whispered. “It’s so much better.”

They stood on Sutton’s front porch for... Charlotte didn’t even know how much longer. All she knew was that her heart felt so full and her future seemed so *bright*.

And as she got into her car to go to the airport to fulfill her career responsibilities, she’d never been less wanting to leave anywhere or anyone in the world.

Sutton Spencer still loved her.

It was the most glorious thing she’d ever heard.