

Charlotte couldn't quell the butterflies in her stomach if she tried.

Which was insane, really, because there had been so few moments in her adult life that caused her to feel *butterflies*.

But she felt them now, as she closed the door to her office behind her, and turned to face Autumn and Maya, who were both looking up at her from their respective desks.

As she smoothed her hands over the material of her jacket, she made eye contact with both of her assistants, and nodded at them.

"I'm leaving for the night, and – barring a true national emergency – would like very much to not be contacted."

They both, as she knew they would, nodded sharply back in acknowledgement. They both, also, seemed to be holding back small smiles.

Charlotte's butterflies fluttered once more, as she lifted her eyebrows at the both of them.

"Yes, I am going on a date with Sutton. I appreciate both of your... discretion in the last several months, and will continue to appreciate that support in the future."

Maya's smile widened, taking over her face, as she saluted Charlotte.

Autumn, in turn, gave her a much more reserved grin, but there was a twinkle in her eye as she met Charlotte's gaze and nodded.

In the days since returning to the office for the new year, nothing had really changed or shifted, after her personal day off spent with Autumn. Perhaps, Charlotte could admit, she felt a bit more affectionate toward her. She was maybe rooting more fervently than she had been, before, for Autumn to figure all of her own life issues out soon – while she was still at the age that Charlotte, herself, wished she'd figured her own issues out at.

"I'll be driving my own car tonight," she continued, "But Hamish is available, should either of you need a ride." Taking in a deep, calming breath, she finished, "So, have a lovely evening."

"You, too!" Maya returned as Charlotte started to walk away.

Charlotte very much intended to.

Charlotte, as she'd told her assistants, drove herself to Sutton's home.

She was going on a date with Sutton. She was picking Sutton up, for a date. Because they were going to *date*, openly and with all of their respective cards on the table.

Because they were finally starting to get it right.

Well, she admitted to herself as she parked outside of Sutton's home, because *she* was finally getting it right.

They'd seen one another at the beginning of this week, when Charlotte had showed up unannounced at Sutton's house and had then been, unexpectedly, grilled by Lucy. And though Charlotte had wanted to stay that night, she'd reluctantly forced herself to leave soon after Lucy had gone to bed.

Mostly because, as they'd sat on the couch next to one another, Charlotte had found herself drunk on their proximity. She'd found it so difficult to hold herself back from reaching out and touching Sutton, from wanting to turn to Sutton and kiss her.

She'd been bursting with energy and excitement and joy and desire, especially as she swore she saw those same feelings reflecting from Sutton. That hunch had been somewhat proven to be correct when Sutton had leaned in and captured Charlotte in a kiss.

A simple kiss that had quickly, easily escalated in intent and heat, and...

And Charlotte had had to force herself to pull back, and tell Sutton that she wanted to do this in the right order, this time.

"*Right order?*" Sutton had echoed, her voice low and raspy and undeniably amused.

Using every ounce of restraint that she'd had to stop herself from leaning back in and kissing that smile right off of Sutton's lips, Charlotte had dragged her hands through her hair. "Yes, darling. The right order. Given that we've done *this*," she'd gestured between the two of them, "Twice, now, and everything started physically rather than romantically. I want things to go differently, this time."

Especially given that Charlotte had never experienced that with anyone. She wanted to have the whole *experience* with Sutton.

Which was why she held a bouquet of sunflowers as she walked up to Sutton's front door, which swung open before she could even knock on it.

She blinked in surprise up at Sutton, who was smiling somewhat sheepishly at her. "I, uh, I saw you coming, so..."

Charlotte drew her gaze down Sutton, taking in her fitted black pants and the sweater she had tucked in at the front waist – dressy casual, matching the same type of clothing Charlotte had said she'd be wearing.

And *god*, if Sutton didn't pull the look off so exquisitely. Subtle but chic, with one side of her auburn hair swept up with a comb, and...

That swooping feeling with those butterflies returned even stronger than before, as she stepped closer and handed Sutton the flowers. Simultaneously, she leaned in and pressed her lips against the soft, warm skin of Sutton's cheek, deliberately catching at the corner of her mouth.

A familiar and easy want slid through her as she felt Sutton's warm exhalation against her own cheek. She could only hear the quiet sound in Sutton's throat as Charlotte lingered because she was *so close*.

After several long seconds, she drew back.

Sutton stared at her for a beat, her hand clenching the stems of the flowers, before she cleared her throat and shook her head. “I... just give me one second. I need to put these—”

The door behind her was tugged wider open, and Charlotte nearly jumped back in surprise at the sudden movement. Sutton *did* startle, and Charlotte reached out to steady her.

They both turned to look at Regan, who grinned brightly, mischievously, at the both of them.

Sutton’s hand was on her chest, undoubtedly over her racing heart, as she rolled her eyes. “What are you *doing* standing there like a creepy psychopath?”

Charlotte wordlessly mirrored that sentiment, as she arched a severe eyebrow up at Regan.

Who still grinned, entirely unashamedly. “Um, okay, first of all – I’d been coming to see you off at the door while simultaneously, smoothly slipping Stunning Charlotte some sort of a shovel talk. Secondly – I didn’t expect you two to be having a Victorian era pornography shoot out here.”

Sutton narrowed her eyes, even as there was a clear blush rising onto her cheeks. “It – we were *not*...”

Despite everything, Charlotte couldn’t help but chuckle. Because – same old Regan. “A shovel talk?”

Regan shrugged, settling against the door frame. “Well, Katherine would never forgive me if I didn’t.”

“And you won’t be,” Sutton cut in, arching her friend a look, as she handed her the sunflowers. “A vase, please and thank you.”

Regan diligently took the flowers from her. “Aye, aye, captain.”

“Goodbye,” Sutton pointedly said, shaking her head as she turned around to fully step onto the porch next to Charlotte. “Please, let’s escape.”

Charlotte felt Sutton’s fingers brush softly, deliberately against her own, and she immediately turned her hand around to interlace with Sutton’s. A perfect fit, as always.

As they descended the steps, Regan called out, “Be safe! Have fun! I’ll be here, watching my favorite spawn!”

Sutton shook her head, that blush still present on her cheeks as she cut Charlotte an apologetic look. “I really, truly am sorry. But I hope you know well enough that I cannot control her at this point.”

Charlotte gently squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry, I am *more* than aware.”

“In fairness, this was why I suggested I meet you at the restaurant,” Sutton said, a slight teasing edge sliding into her voice.

“And, in fairness, if you’d met me at the restaurant, there’s no way I could have done this,” Charlotte murmured, as she used their interlocked hands to twirl Sutton away from her at the same time that she used her free hand to open the passenger door, making it so Sutton was guided in a smooth motion into her car.

Sutton's surprised laugh, coupled with the way her blue eyes gleamed up at Charlotte made Regan's appearance at the door more than worth it.

By the time they'd arrived at La Saveur and put in their order, Charlotte's butterflies had returned roost.

"I've never been here, but I've always wanted to," Sutton commented, and she had this adorable smile on her face.

Charlotte had noted it when they'd walked in, but hadn't quite been able to place what, exactly, she felt that look reflected. It was something she hadn't seen on Sutton in a very long time, though. Not since they'd first known one another.

For some reason, it both bolstered her, made her feel the confidence she'd once felt with Sutton. Back when they'd first done this, and Sutton had been so sweet and a little naïve, and Charlotte had felt like she'd had everything under control.

Of course, she'd realized when she'd fallen for Sutton that she truly did not have everything under control, and hadn't felt quite so confident since.

On the other hand, battling with that confidence, was this feeling of... newness. This feeling like *she* was the one out of the two of them that was in brand new waters, and she didn't want to mess anything up.

"I've always wanted to come here, too," she agreed, looking around.

Sutton's gaze returned to her, her eyes wide, eyebrow arching skeptically. "You've never been here?"

Charlotte couldn't help but laugh at her incredulous tone. "Why do you say it like that?"

Sutton shrugged. "I guess I just believed that you'd been to all of the upscale establishments in the area."

Charlotte tilted her head, considering her words for a moment, as she acknowledged, "You're not incorrect, for the most part." She held Sutton's eyes with her own, as she said, "But this isn't quite the atmosphere you'd be looking for to take someone to a business dinner."

La Saveur was the most highly regarded restaurant in the district, known for its intimate setting. She hoped very much that Sutton understood what she hadn't said, which was that there'd been no one else she'd ever have wanted to be here with.

Should she say that? She wondered, and haltingly cursed herself – this feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing the proper thing to say on a date – did this count as a first date? Did that change things? – was a terrible, unfamiliar sensation.

Sutton tilted her head, a small smile playing around her perfect lips, as she commented, "Charlotte... you seem nervous?"

Charlotte did *not* blush. She didn't do... that.

She rolled her shoulders back, prepared to give a dignified answer. Before she gave in to the blatant affection in Sutton's gaze.

"A bit," she admitted.

Sutton chuckled, then, as her eyebrows furrowed in obvious confusion. "I just don't understand *why*, I suppose. First of all," she held up a finger, "You're Charlotte Thompson; you don't get nervous. I've seen you take on other politicians in congress – you never seem like you're going to break a single sweat. Secondly..." She held up another, her gaze gentling, "It's just me."

"There is no *just you*," Charlotte corrected immediately, incredulously. "Sutton Spencer, there is nothing *just* about you."

This time, it was Sutton's turn to blush, and with it returned some of Charlotte's bravado. Thankfully, she still had that.

"I've never truly been on a *date*," she finally said, and felt the full reality of saying those words as a forty-year-old woman.

Sutton's eyes widened, her shock blatant, even before her mouth fell open as she searched for words. "But – I mean. You came out? And... I know you didn't have anything *serious*, but..."

"Even the women I'd talked to or," she paused, clearing her throat, "Engaged with... even after coming out, I still wasn't focused on doing *this*," she lifted her hand, gesturing around them.

After a few moments, Sutton spoke.

"I never thought this would happen," her voice was low and there was a wondrous note in her tone, combining to grab Charlotte's full attention.

"Even... back then?" Charlotte dared to ask.

She so frequently had avoided bringing up their past in the last several months, not wanting to stir up any bad memories or feelings. She'd ask Sutton about the past in regards to the years in which they'd been out of contact, but never about *their* time together.

And she found she needed to know.

Because she remembered, so vividly, that Sutton had wanted to be with her. That she'd wanted to make it work, even if they couldn't be public about it at the time. And she imagined that if Sutton had wanted to continue to be with her, had wanted to pursue a relationship with her, that Sutton had to have imagined what it would be like to go on a date with her.

She watched, hungry for the answer – maybe *too* hungry for it – as Sutton slowly shook her head.

“No,” she said, slowly, her face scrunched up, as if she was trying to sift through her twenty-five self-year-old’s thoughts. “No, I never really thought about dates, specifically, I don’t think.”

“Then, what *did* you think about?” Charlotte couldn’t help but press, finding – perhaps insanely – that she needed to know. “Because... you wanted this, then.”

She felt abnormally anxious after saying the words. Wondering, even though they were together – or, on the road to being together? – right now, if this was a taboo subject.

But Sutton softly stroked her thumb over Charlotte’s knuckles, the touch warm, even as she shook her head.

“I don’t think I ever thought concretely about things like dates. Not *official dates*, like going out for dinner and drinks or whatever else. I think...” Sutton licked her lips, her cheeks lightly blushing, “I think I was so satisfied with what we had, already. Even if they weren’t dates like this,” she gestured around them, “We had our things. We got coffee and tea, we had movie nights, we made time for each other in the little moments. That was what I wanted more of.”

Merely hearing Sutton talk about those moments together made Charlotte ache for it.

“And, when I was reminded of the reality that we weren’t *really* together, I never mourned the idea of date nights, either. I think, beyond the quiet, private moments, I wanted to do things like... attend events with you. Even if it wasn’t romantic, and the events weren’t about us in the least. Parties, like your grandmother’s gala,” her blush deepened, as her eyes slid up to meet Charlotte’s.

She felt her own pulse speed up, knowing they were both thinking of what they’d done at the French Modernism exhibit.

To date, it was one of the most intense sexual encounters Charlotte had ever had.

Sutton cleared her throat, reaching up to swipe her hair behind her ear. “But I knew that those public events were out of reach, then, so I tried not to think about those too much, either. So, to reiterate – I never thought this would happen.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, the truth of it turning her words hoarse. She squeezed Sutton’s hand in hers.

“I don’t want you to be sorry.”

“I just wish I’d *realized* what I’d had, then.” How much Sutton had been willing to give to her, to them, and how much Charlotte, herself, had wanted to give it back.

“I don’t want us to live in the past, Charlotte,” Sutton murmured, her tone so imploring, as she met and held Charlotte’s gaze. In Sutton’s eyes was a concrete certainty. “Because... this is happening,” her lips tugged up into a beautiful smile, that wonder returning, as she looked around. “We finally figured it out, and what’s important is that we both want this, here and now.”

God, Charlotte loved her.

She loved Sutton, so very much.

Conscientious of this being their technical *first date*, though, she swallowed back the words. Not yet.

After dinner, as they walked back to the car hand-in-hand, Charlotte very much did not want the night to end. She didn't ever want her time with Sutton to end.

And, given that *their date* was going so well – they'd debated biopics of the last ten years, because Sutton had apparently remembered how much Charlotte loved them and kept up on them herself. Sutton had showed her a few videos of Lucy playing with her Christmas presents, and especially playing with the guitar Charlotte had finagled getting. They talked about Sutton's plans for her women in literature course coming up and how she was going to feature her mother for a section, which then followed into a lively conversation about the last few books Katherine had published that Charlotte loved – she very much wanted to enact the second part of the evening, especially as she was buzzing from how *easy* everything was with her.

“Do you have to be back for Lucy?” She asked, as they drew up to her car.

“Eventually, yes,” Sutton replied with a cute little smile. “But not immediately.”

“Perfect.”

Thirty minutes later, they got out of her car in the dark, abandoned parking lot. Save for the night security, they were the only ones there, as they approached the large building.

“Are we allowed in here?” Sutton asked, as she glanced over her shoulder, nervously.

Charlotte couldn't help the incredulous laugh that escaped her. “You believe that I would start my criminal career on a date with you by breaking and entering?”

Sutton snorted a laugh, slapping lightly at Charlotte's arm. “Obviously *not*. But I have no idea what is going on here, and the building is clearly not open.” She gestured at, indeed, the lack of lighting throughout the tall building in front of them.

Charlotte pulled the keycard out from her jacket pocket. “I am proud to inform you, that this is entirely legal.”

“Is this like when we broke into the toy emporium?” Sutton whispered as they walked toward the elevator. “Did you pull some strings for this, too?”

“No,” she answered, whispering back, as she pressed the button for the 42nd floor, the highest in the building. “This building houses the headquarters for the Thompson Foundation. The top ten floors, anyway.”

Sutton's blue eyes widened, immediately looking around, clearly trying to take in more through the glass exterior of the elevator and see into the floors.

As they stepped off the elevator, Charlotte took Sutton's hand in hers and led her down the main hallway, toward the back of the building.

They walked slowly, though, Sutton's free hand coming to lightly grasp at Charlotte's wrist. "Wow." The word was said so softly, awed, as Sutton took in the set up.

Which, Charlotte admitted, was inspiring. Her grandmother had had their offices re-designed ten years ago, in a collaboration with three of the most cutting-edge architects in the country. As a result, the work space was open and welcoming, with polished wood floors, a lot of open, airy glass, with conference collaboration spaces and offices all designed with a perfect, ergonomic flow.

Whenever she came here, she felt fairly inspired as well.

And, admittedly, she hadn't come here very frequently since her grandmother had died. Since her political career had ended, this had become her grandmother's focus, and her presence here was so incredibly strong.

Charlotte felt it every time she walked through the door.

Which was why it was very fitting to do what she intended to do, here.

She let Sutton into the room they'd been heading toward, turning the lights to a dim. Just enough to really illuminate it.

Sutton's soft gasp resonated with exactly what Charlotte felt settling inside of her, too.

Right in front of them, all of D.C. was laid out like an installation of living art. The Foundation building was one of the tallest in the city, and in this room, facing out at the city, there were floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

It was one of Charlotte's favorite spots.

"Charlotte, this is... just..." Sutton trailed off, shaking her head gently, as she turned to look at Charlotte, that wonderment having clearly returned.

And, at having caused it, Charlotte felt absolute pride.

"I know." She nodded. "It's incredible. And I thought that it would be the right place for me to do... what I'm about to do."

Sutton's eyebrows drew down together in confusion, wordlessly watching as Charlotte reached into her jacket pocket. She lightly traced her finger over the edge of an envelope, before she drew it out of her pocket.

"I've debated showing you this," she softly admitted, nervous anticipation streaking through her veins, as she held the worn envelope out to Sutton. Worn from the last couple of years of repeated handling from Charlotte, herself. "No one else has ever seen the contents."

Sutton's eyebrows lifted in clear interest as she glanced down at the envelope. "Is it a state secret?" She teased.

"Something more important than that," Charlotte answered, seriously. "Perhaps not to, well, the government," she clarified, flashing a grin, "But it is, to me."

She swallowed hard as Sutton reached out to take the envelope from her, her stomach swooping low before devolving into butterflies, as she murmured, “It’s a letter from my grandmother. That she left for me, before she died.”

One of several, but this one... this was the one she read more than any other.

This was the one that changed her life.

Sutton’s eyes widened, whipping her head up from where she’d been looking at the envelope back up at Charlotte.

“I think, after you read it, you’ll be able to understand more clearly why I’m so certain in my decision to pursue you. Us.”

As soon as she said the words, Sutton was shaking her head, trying to give the envelope back. “You don’t have to give me this. You don’t owe me – or anyone – the right to see something so personal. This is *yours*.”

It was the tone of Sutton’s voice even more than the words themselves that settled warmly in Charlotte’s chest. That clearly told her that Sutton understood how personal this was, and how deeply she held her grandmother’s words.

“I know I don’t have to do it, but I want you to read it. Please.”

Sutton bowed her head as she started to read, and Charlotte had to swallow against the rampant nerves at sharing something so personal.

Even without having the pages in front of her, she knew what they said. She’d read that letter so many times, after her grandmother’s death.

Charlotte –

I think I will do us both a favor and skip over any qualifiers such as “if you’re reading this, I’m gone” as I think we both know – I’m gone.

I’m not quite certain when or how it will happen. I can only tell you that, as I write this letter, it’s the eve of my ninety-seventh birthday. And there are days that I certainly feel that age in my bones. Not every day, mind you. But... some days. The terrible reality is that we are all put on this earth to leave it, and no matter how indomitable I am, my time will come as well. Sooner rather than later, at this point.

There is nothing I can say to you to ease my passing, so I won’t even attempt to do so.

What I will tell you here are the things I very much need for you to carry forward in this world after I am no longer in it.

First and foremost – I love you, Charlotte.

Perhaps I have not said it enough in my life. In fact, I can guarantee this is a fact. As I get older, wiser, and reflect more on my life, I can accept that I should have told the people I love them how much I do. Because I truly do. For as much as I married your grandfather for purposes that served my career, I loved him. For as busy and admittedly, not incredibly physically present as I was throughout your father’s life, I love him. For as much as I hoped for different ambitions in William and Caleb, I love them.

But there has never been and never will be anyone on this earth that I love as dearly and as fiercely as I love you.

It's not just because of how much your life has mirrored mine, of how much I see myself in you. It's because, starting right in your youth, I saw you for everything you are. You have always been determined, and courageous, and stubborn, and willful, and brilliant.

There was something about you, even in your childhood, that struck me so deeply. Your existence, more than anyone else's, changed me as a person.

I've always had my goals. But when you came onto this planet, those goals shifted into something more than ambition. They became personal. I wanted to make a positive mark on this world, but more than that – I wanted the world to be a better place for you.

This is the part where I admit that I am far from a perfect person. Something I've always known, as everyone is fallible. But as I reflect on the meaning of life while nearing the inevitable end of mine, it's my personal failures that strike me the most hauntingly.

Professionally, I would have done nothing different. I have accomplished everything in that aspect that I could have ever dreamed of, and more. I will leave this world without a single regret on how history will remember me.

The aspect of my life that I fear I've failed the most is an ever-growing concern that I've failed you.

Make no mistake, my girl, I am intently and ardently proud of the person you are. All you have accomplished, as well as the future we can both see more clearly every day.

But, as we are both growing older, I'm starting to see beyond those aspects of life which we both hold dear.

I'm not going to abandon my propensity for bluntness in death, so I'll simply tell you – you are nearing forty as I write this, and you are alone. Not only alone, but lonely.

The more you accomplish in the professional world, it seems, the lonelier you become.

Your friendships with Caleb and Dean have taken a backseat in your life, and I believe I am your closest confidante and friend as of the last few years.

This is not a mantle I dislike or don't value; it's quite the opposite. Knowing you so far into your life gives me immeasurable joy.

It also means that I'm so very concerned for your future, when I'm gone.

I've tried to bring this up to you over lunches a handful of times, to no avail – inquired about your personal life, encouraged you to seek companionship in ways I never did throughout your twenties.

And I blame myself for this. I was so focused on your ambitions and urging you on professionally that I let your personal endeavors fall entirely to the wayside.

This is not a judgment in any way, so I do hope you do not take it as such. I, myself, was not romantically attached for much of my life and I was very fulfilled.

The simple truth of the matter is that I do not believe you're fulfilled, living your life the way you are.

Work alone cannot sustain you, Charlotte. This is the sentiment that I've voiced to you and has fallen on deaf ears, so I hope in my death you will take it more seriously. You can be the most accomplished, successful human being on the planet, but if you have no deep, emotional connections, real happiness will evade you.

And I so very desperately want you to be happy.

I should have told you that, more. I should have focused on that years ago, before this path seemed so set in stone for you.

You were in love, before. With the Spencer girl. I was too dismissive of it at the time, because of how little I valued romance in my own world. These days, I think back on that time in your life, and I think about how... happy you were. How light you'd seemed. And how you haven't had that lightness ever since.

My work made me happy, but as I reflect on my life, it's you that I think of most often. I think of you, your happiness, your future.

I need that, for you.

Make no mistake – you have worked too hard, too long, and too passionately pursuing your dreams to abandon them.

But I need you to make the time and space for happiness. I need for you to reach the night before your ninety-seventh birthday, and think not about your work, but your loved ones.

I implore you to do whatever you can to find that lightness again, Charlotte. You deserve it.

*Love,
Grandmother*

She waited until Sutton lifted her eyes up to meet Charlotte's at the end, to speak again.

"I miss my grandmother. I miss her so much, and I've had a loneliness in my life even before she died, just as she pointed out in that letter. But after she died, it..." God, the stabbing hollowness of it ached in her chest, whenever she allowed herself to go there in her mind. "It became something visceral. Something undeniable and painful and so *present*. Isn't that crazy? How loneliness – emptiness – can be so vast?"

There were tears glistening in Sutton's eyes, she realized as she felt her own well up.

"I look to her for the answers, even now. Even when she isn't here to properly give them. I look to her for approval, even when she isn't here to grant it. Even when I'm not sure if she would, even if she *were* still here. Because we didn't have such honest, personal conversations when she was alive."

It was something Charlotte regretted, very deeply. But something she'd never be able to change, and she'd had to work on making peace with that fact.

“I worked on making myself... available, after her death. After receiving the letter. Trying to open myself up to more possibilities. Because she was right; I was alone. And I was not happy.”

She stared at Sutton, intently. “Seeing you again felt like some sort of sign from the universe. A phenomenon that I do not even believe in,” she laughed, feeling only a little bit self-conscious as she admitted that aloud.

“Charlotte—”

She shook her head, though, needing to finish what she’d started. “My grandmother was right, as she so often was. Being with you had been the happiest I’d ever been in my life. So when we ran into one another again, I couldn’t let you go. I didn’t know how we could possibly get where we are right now, but I knew that... you really are a light in my life, darling. That’s how I feel about you. And why I’m so sure about pursuing this, despite—”

She was cut off as Sutton surged forward, pressing her lips against Charlotte’s.

The kiss was slow and searching, not igniting anything so much as keeping the heat that had built between them all night smoldering. She leaned fully into Sutton, the softness and steadiness of her, of them, so easy for her to fall into.

She sighed into her mouth, arching in for more as Sutton leaned back only a few inches. Enough that her warmth breath washed over Charlotte’s damp lips, making her shudder, as she whispered, “You changed everything for me, too. Both times you’ve come into my life.”

The emotion in her words echoed through Charlotte, and she moved to pull back, to be able to really look at Sutton, before Sutton’s hands fell to her waist and pulled her back in, pressing their lips back together.

Charlotte returned the kiss, eagerly.

Anything else she wanted to say could wait. They had time.