

Charlotte read through the most recent edits made on a proposal that she'd had land on her metaphorical desk, initialling and signing on her tablet when appropriate. Doing her best to keep her mind on *work*.

Which, in fairness, she was doing a decent job at. This was a proposal she was soundly behind and had helped secure funding for, regarding building accommodations for the unhoused, and she'd already read over this proposal – thoroughly – several times.

It just so happened that she, presently, had... some other matters on her mind.

Maya cleared her throat from where she was seated perpendicular to Charlotte, gaining her attention. "I'm sorry to bring this up, but – you'd previously made certain I make sure that your schedule remain relatively light this evening, given that the Senate is in session tomorrow morning and it's likely to be..."

"Painful," Charlotte supplied, knowingly, still looking down at the proposal. So close to finishing it, as she initialled at the bottom of the second to last page. "Yes."

Maya was quiet for a few moments as Charlotte moved onto reviewing the last page. "Right. I'm just wondering if this event tonight is a priority and it should be treated as such in the future?"

Charlotte paused in her reading, shifting her gaze for the first time since getting into her town car to look out the window in thought. Before she could let herself get *too* deep in those thoughts, though, she shifted her gaze back down with a nod. "Yes, it's a priority."

There were a few beats of silence before Maya spoke again, "Does that mean – events from Georgetown or for the Zones in specific?"

Charlotte pursed her lips as she finished scanning the document and added her final signature, before signing the bottom and closing the document out before handing the tablet she'd read it on to Autumn in the seat next to her, who readily accepted it.

And she absolutely did not miss the look Autumn was shooting Maya as she did so. It clearly read *shut the hell up*.

She glanced back at Maya who was shooting Autumn a look right back that clearly read *NO*.

Their silent communication broke as soon as Charlotte settled back in her seat and simply answered with, "Yes."

"Okay, then," was all Maya said in response, and Charlotte knew they were giving each other *looks* again, as she took her phone out and scrolled through her emails.

And Maya was right; Charlotte *had* previously asked to keep her schedule clear tonight because tomorrow was absolutely going to be long and arduous. And she *had* never decided – on a rare evening that was work-free – to attend an event that she barely had anything to do with.

But she was currently living in unprecedented times.

It had been officially four days since she'd had sex with Sutton on Thanksgiving.

Four days since Sutton had completely and entirely shaken her right down to the very core of her being. Four days since she'd had the best sex of her life. Four days since she'd talked to Sutton, vulnerably. Truly, vulnerably. In a way that was difficult and rare for her to manage, even to herself at times.

Four days since she'd laid in Sutton's bed, both of them breathing hard and deliciously sweaty and her body was already starting to feel the effects of their second round, as they were both laying on their stomachs, facing one another on the same pillow.

Sutton's arm had been slung over her back, and she felt herself continuously shiver as Sutton's fingers traced invisible patterns over her skin.

Charlotte had so many thoughts spinning in her head in that moment –

When had Sutton taken such control over her sexuality? And, was this just who she was, in bed? And, most of all, this felt so *good*.

It felt so good to get fucked the way she desperately wanted but hadn't had, because on the rare occasion that she hooked up with or, even more rarely, casually dated someone after she'd come out, she couldn't really let go with them. Even if her body and mind wanted to really be *fucked*, she could never let that control drop fully with anyone else.

It felt so good to be in a warm, comfortable bed. In a warm, comfortable bed that smelled like Sutton.

And it felt so unreasonably good to be actually in bed with Sutton herself.

“You can stay if you want to,” Sutton murmured, her voice taking on a tone that told Charlotte she was very, very tired. Probably mere minutes away from falling asleep. The cute, drowsy look in her eyes said the same thing.

And the fact that she remembered these things didn't feel ridiculous, for the first time. Because... they were here, in bed together.

“I know you don't usually – or, you didn't...” Sutton trailed off, moving her hand from Charlotte's lower back to put it in front of her mouth and attempt to stifle or hide her huge yawn. “So that's fine, t–”

“I'll stay,” she whispered back, nodding her head where it rested on Sutton's pillow. She missed Sutton's hand on her back when it was clear that Sutton was keeping it tucked under her chin.

There was a cute, little smile on Sutton's face and a nearly imperceptible head tilt of acknowledgement, before she fell asleep.

Sleep didn't come for Charlotte as easily.

Because it was so easy to remember back to when Sutton had referenced – Charlotte hadn't really spent the night at Sutton's place back then, even when Sutton had started sleeping over her house. And in the night she had, she'd “met” Sutton's sister in what she still thought of as a disastrous introduction.

She'd been so comfortable in Sutton's bed back then that it had scared her.

And as she laid in Sutton's bed now, thirteen years later almost to the day, she wished she could shake her younger self. She wished she could tell herself that even though she'd been scared, that right behind that fear was *this*. A comfort and softness that would be there for her at the end of the day. Right behind that fear was a time where Sutton wouldn't pull her hand away before sleep.

She'd blown out a deep breath, telling herself that upon releasing that breath, she was releasing those regrets and the wants and the missed time. Because she couldn't change those things.

She could only exist right here, right now.

And right now was pretty good. She had the career and the track she'd always wanted, and she was in Sutton's bed.

She'd fallen asleep, then, easily. Drifting into one of the most restful sleeps she could remember having, which was also ironic, given that she hadn't shared a bed with anyone to sleep in, since Sutton all of those years ago.

But she'd only woken when Sutton gently shook her, long fingers softly resting on Charlotte's shoulder. She'd blinked awake, feeling sleepy and pleasantly sore and so ridiculously cozy, snuggled in the warm blankets.

And Sutton had been sitting there, showered and dressed and smelling amazing, as her hair was just slightly damp still, falling over her shoulders. There was a sweet, gentle smile on her face that gave Charlotte feelings inside that somehow matched the comfort she felt physically.

She could only smile back for a few time-blurred seconds, because... yes. This was probably the best possible way in the universe to wake up.

"Good morning," Sutton said, her voice quiet and warm.

Which in itself was a relief, as Charlotte woke up a bit more. Because they'd had sex last night. And the last time they'd done that, Sutton had avoided her and wanted to act as if it hadn't happened. There'd been a small kernel of concern deep inside of Charlotte the night before that something similar might play out this time, too.

It didn't seem like it, though.

Especially not as Sutton trailed her fingers softly down Charlotte's shoulder, to her upper arm, seemingly unaware of her own movements.

"Good morning," she said back, clearing her throat as she pushed herself to sit up against the headboard. She reached up to rub the sleep out of her eyes as she looked at Sutton again, more awake and able to really register what she was seeing. "You've already showered." She turned to look out the windows.

The sun streamed in brightly – which was odd, given that even on weekends, Charlotte never slept in.

"What time is it?"

“Almost ten,” Sutton answered easily, following her gaze to the windows. “It’s supposed to be beautiful out today. I’m meeting my parents and Lucy for brunch at ten thirty, so I have to leave soon... just wanted to wake you up first and see if you wanted a coffee.”

Charlotte took in the information with a light frown as she shook her hair back and stretched, sitting up fully. “How long have you been up?”

She trailed her gaze over Sutton’s room, before dropping her arms and looking back at Sutton.

Whose gaze was fixated firmly on her chest. A satisfaction moved through Charlotte as she glanced down and saw that the blanket had well and truly fallen to her waist, leaving her torso naked.

A smirk slid over her face as she waited for Sutton to raise her gaze.

When she did, there was a blush high on her cheeks. And *that* made this morning even better; the fact that Sutton could fuck her brains out, but at the same time would blush when she stared at Charlotte’s naked body the next morning.

Yes, this was so very unique to Sutton Spencer.

“I – um, yeah, I only woke up at nine, myself,” she said, seeming to shake herself out of it. “I had a couple of messages from my mom; we were supposed to do lunch today, but my parents and Lucy have been up since six and are rearing to go, so...”

She gestured to herself, as if to explain why she’d then gotten ready.

Charlotte held Sutton’s gaze, grinning still, as blue eyes dipped again. “Coffee sounds great. Thanks.”

Sutton nodded and cleared her throat, looking like she just realized her hand was still resting on Charlotte’s arm, the backs of her knuckles now brushing against her bare stomach.

Coffee had been easy. It was the best word Charlotte had in her vocabulary to describe what it felt like to sit with Sutton in the late morning, as sun streamed in through the kitchen windows, making casual and light and in no way awkward conversation as they drank their coffee, after Charlotte had pulled on the pants she’d worn the night before, and gratefully accepted the Georgetown sweatshirt Sutton offered her.

She’d worn that sweatshirt the whole day, as she’d worked from home.

And she’d worn it a few times in the days since.

So, it had been four days since then, and she hadn’t seen Sutton at all.

She hadn’t heard from Sutton that Friday, which she understood; she was with her parents and daughter. Even if *Charlotte* was in that warm and lovely soft place after they’d had sex, she was alone and doing some work in her home office. Sutton was out and about. Busy.

Then she hadn’t heard from Sutton on Saturday, either.

Charlotte tried to not be an alarmist at the situation by Saturday afternoon, when there was still radio silence. After all, she hadn’t texted Sutton, either.

And so, Saturday evening, she had.

Charlotte – 6:02PM

Hey, just checking in and saying hi. Haven't heard from you since yesterday morning

She'd stared down at the message and then deleted it, her stomach churning. Seeing it in words made it even more obvious how ridiculous she was being. It had been literally less than two full days since seeing Sutton. Who was busy. It didn't mean anything that she hadn't texted her.

Sending *that* message felt – desperate.

Charlotte – 6:05PM

Just wanted to check in and see if we were still on for tomorrows' work on the notes for the editor. I'm not sure how long your parents will be in town, so I just wanted to double-check. I hope you're having a great time with them

She reviewed that for a moment before sending it, nodding to herself. That felt right.

And yet, she was unprepared for the disappointment she felt when she got the message back – and the fact that she didn't get a message back for over an hour.

Sutton – 7:33PM

Hey! Sorry, we've been crazy busy today, but I did want to text you to let you know that I won't be able to meet up tomorrow. My parents are leaving Monday afternoon and I'm just trying to squeeze in as much time as possible :)

Which – that was totally fine.

Charlotte had said as much.

Charlotte – 7:34PM

Totally fine! Have fun with them. Pass on my appreciation for letting me crash Thanksgiving dinner

Sutton – 7:37PM

Done... but for the record, you don't need to pass on any appreciation. I wanted you there

So, that part was nice, absolutely.

They'd had a little exchange about some notes on the next section of the book that had been sent to her editor, and Sutton had sent a picture of Lucy and her parents yesterday, right after Jack and Elizabeth had left.

Which had led to a very short exchange, wherein Sutton had informed her that Lucy was having somewhat of a meltdown that her grandparents were leaving and that things at home were “not going well” and that she would get back to Charlotte, later.

But then she hadn't heard back from Sutton all of last night, either.

Later *apparently* had meant early this afternoon, when Charlotte had gotten a phone call –

“Sutton! A nice surprise to hear from you.” She'd only let herself answer after the phone had rang a couple of times, even though she'd been *ready* to answer on the first ring.

“Hi,” Sutton's wonderfully husky voice warmed Charlotte from the inside out, even in just one word. “I'm *so* sorry I didn't get back to you last night. Lucy...” She sighed, and Charlotte could just picture the way she was rubbing at her temples. “We love whenever our family comes to visit, but it often inevitably leads to Lucy being deeply devastated that they have to leave, and questioning why we can't live closer to them, and – it's a whole thing.”

She could hear the exhaustion dragging at the edge of Sutton's tone. “I see. And I understand; I'm sure it's hard to live apart from the people who love you so much.” She paused, before confessing, “It was difficult for me to live away from my grandmother, and she was only about an hour away. When she was in the country, of course.”

It was strange, still, admitting to these feelings aloud. Things she'd long stopped thinking about, feelings she'd long put behind her. She only ever brought them up on occasion, in her meetings with Sutton, and even then, it was – odd.

“I can imagine how that was difficult for you. Especially given that your parents were often away for work, right?” Sutton asked, her voice quietly probing, but also just, soft. Wondering.

And this wasn't for the book, it wasn't for anything of the sort. It was just, her and Sutton. Charlotte leaned back in her chair, her stomach tying in strange nerves as she thought back to her childhood. “Yes. They were often... busy.”

She pursed her lips, thinking back to the solitude that echoed through her childhood home, especially when her brothers had gotten older.

It was a knee-jerk reaction for her to sweep it under the rug as if it were nothing. Mostly because, honestly, she felt like it *was* nothing, at this point. It happened, that had been life, and she'd been absolutely fine in the long run.

It took effort – emotional energy and an admitted courage – to stay in those emotions with Sutton, and admit, “It was difficult, at times. Lonely.” She swallowed hard, shaking her head. “But, yes. My grandmother was a savior to me in those times and being away from her was very difficult, so I understand Lucy's plight.” She paused. “Then again, I didn't have parents like *you*, so...”

She teased lightly, bringing them back to the present.

She wanted them to be in the here and now, largely because... well, she'd missed Sutton in the last several days in the here and now.

She'd missed her and she wanted her and she wanted to know what she was *thinking* and...

She cleared her throat. “I was thinking about what we could do for dinner, for when you come to my office later. Unless, you’d like to go out somewhere?” She only hesitated for a moment, her heart feeling like it was beating strangely strong in her chest, as she offered, “Or work from my home?”

Sutton’s beat of silence had Charlotte on bated breath. Before she said, “Actually, that’s the reason I was calling; there’s an event for the Zones tonight. The last three months have been a huge success, which has been amazing, and we have another fundraiser tonight for next semester. I meant to bring it up to you, earlier, but there’s just been so much going on…”

She trailed off slowly, the apology clear in her tone.

Charlotte found herself, stupidly, nodding, as a troubling feeling started swirling in her stomach.

“Right. Yes. That makes perfect sense, I’m glad the Zones have been doing well, obviously.”

“Yeah, me off. Obviously,” Sutton added with a little, light laugh. The laugh cut off after a moment, Sutton’s demeanor becoming more serious. “Ah, I have some students arriving for my twelve-thirty. I’ll talk to you later?”

Charlotte’s lips were already pursed in a frown as she hmm’d in agreement. “Sure. Have a good class, darling.”

And all she’d been able to think of after that was…

Was Sutton giving her a brush-off?!

She’d tried valiantly to think otherwise over the weekend, despite Sutton’s general reticent communication. But then blowing off their first in-person meeting after having sex?

And she first tried to tell herself otherwise, that Sutton wasn’t going to do something like that. Even last month when Sutton had fucked her on her desk, she’d not even waited twenty-four full hours before Sutton had come to her home, seeking her out to talk.

Even though Sutton had wanted them to only be friends, the fact was that Sutton had still sought *her* out to talk. She’d clearly been on Sutton’s mind.

This… this was something entirely new for Charlotte.

She’d slept with someone, had an *incredible* time, and had slept over. The woman she’d slept with had then been the one to be all dressed and put-together the following day.

Charlotte had never been the person left waiting on pins and needles to hear from a woman. She’d never been left like this… in this state of *emotional wanting*.

Or, she supposed, a worse state. A state of emotional *not knowing*.

The only woman she’d ever emotionally wanted before, was Sutton Spencer.

But the Sutton Spencer of twelve years ago was so emotionally open that Charlotte could read her like a book. No, not even a book; a picture book.

And now… now, Charlotte was tangled up in knots because Sutton was casually texting and being the opposite of clingy.

Which, honestly, was everything Charlotte had ever wanted in a sexual partner!

Unless, clearly, that partner was Sutton Spencer!

Was Sutton trying to put some distance between them before they saw one another again?
Was she going to act like that mind-blowing sex hadn't happened, like she wanted to the last time?

Charlotte hadn't really known what possessed her, other than these ridiculous *feelings* marching through her veins, to scour her professional emails – an account handled preliminarily by Maya, filtered before anything reached Charlotte's eyes – before... yes. There it was.

CC'd on an email about the Zones, to the Thompson Foundation. Lily Balducci, who ran the Foundation at present, had replied with her RSVP and would give the intended donation on behalf of the Foundation, which was how the Thompson Foundation had been handled since her grandmother had died.

Charlotte had tapped her fingers against the edge of her desk for a few moments, before she made the decision. Rather, honestly, it felt like her body made the decision for her. She'd stood and marched to the doors of her office, throwing them open and announced her intentions to attend the fundraiser for the Zones to Autumn and Maya – for Autumn, that meant obtaining an outfit for Charlotte to wear on short notice, given they'd need to leave in a few hours and Charlotte had back to back meetings all afternoon, and for Maya, to update Charlotte's entire afternoon and evening schedule, even if it was deliberately kept light.

The car slowed as they came to a stop in front of the building the fundraiser was being held at.

She took a deep breath and turned to address both Autumn and Maya. "You're free to come to the event with me. Or free to take the evening to yourselves..." She arched a knowing eyebrow at them. "But don't forget that you both have an early morning, whether I'm in session or not."

"I'm just going to go home," Autumn volunteered quickly, dipping her gaze pointedly to her tablet.

Maya bit her bottom lip, but held Charlotte's gaze. "Me, too."

"Her own home," Autumn cut in sharply, not looking up.

"Right," Maya quickly agreed, looking less sure of herself.

"Right," she echoed, arching her eyebrows at both of them. "Take the car back to your home...s, then. I'll call Hamish to return, later."

Charlotte nodded satisfactorily; romantically, she may be in the beginning of a tailspin, but professionally, there was no way she was going to let her assistants think they were getting away with teasing her with no return.

"Have a good night. I'll see you bright and early."

She smartly closed the door behind her as she stood and brushed her hands down the thighs of her the new Tom Ford dress that Autumn had procured for her this afternoon. Charlotte had to quickly style her own hair, which she'd done on the back-end of her last meeting, video off.

God, was that – her stomach felt full of *nerves*?

“You’re at a fundraiser at a university, for fuck’s sake,” she muttered to herself, before smiling and nodding at one of the groups milling on the large steps outside. “You’re not at a presidential benefit or making a speech at the U.N.”

And when she *was* at those events, she didn’t feel half this nervous!

Refusing to brush her hands over her stomach and fidget with her clothing, she resolutely kept her hands down at her sides, nodding her thanks at the doorman.

The room was bustling with activity. Several others were clearly dressed in their best, much like Charlotte – likely those who were there to make larger donations, while she could see that there were a handful of professors and other academics who likely worked hands-on at the Zones, dressed in their everyday wear, and there were younger people – teenagers – who likely attended the Zones, as well.

She hadn’t exactly had the time to research what exactly the atmosphere would be like tonight. She’d been more focused on making sure she’d be wearing something that made Sutton think she’d be crazy to cut off anything sexual between them.

That was, apparently, who she was right now.

And while she didn’t necessarily love it, she was finding that she couldn’t quite control it, either. She nodded at several people who recognized her, continuing in her scan of the room as she slowly – casually – started to circulate.

“Senator! We didn’t expect you tonight? I must have missed that memo.” A familiar voice came from her right, and she turned to face the man approaching her. She immediately placing his face from the first night she’d come to commemorate the kick-off of the zones, as the person responsible for coming up with the idea of the Zones.

The man who’d been responsible for bringing Sutton back into her life.

The smile she fixed on, for that reason, was genuine. She reached out and took the hand he offered. “It’s so nice to see you.”

“Zeke!” His name came to her more from the times Sutton had mentioned him in stories rather than remembering the night a few months ago. “Nice to see you again, as well. How are you?”

He exuberantly shook her offered hand. “I’m good – great, actually. Everything’s been going really well in the start up. A few hiccups here and there, but that’s all to be expected.”

“It’s sounded like you’ve been handling everything wonderfully,” she told him, sincerely.

At his questioning look, she hastened to explain, “Ah, Sutton has–”

“Right!” He cut her off, giving her that exuberant smile once again. “Right, she’s mentioned working with you on your book.” He shared a conspiratorial smile with her. “Not in detail, but – I think it’s incredible. She’s extremely talented.”

She could feel her own smile growing. “Yes, she really is.”

His eyes lit up. “I just saw her, actually, talking to Lily Balducci. Just over here,” he nodded over his shoulder, to the left. “If you want–”

“Yes,” Charlotte felt lit up from the inside, trying not to be *too* outwardly excited, but... She managed to get a hold on herself. “Yes, sorry. I have some... business I’d love to speak to both of them about.”

Zeke seemed pleased that he’d pleased her, leading her swiftly through the crowd.

And he was right – there were both Sutton and Lily in conversation, only a few feet away.

“Look who I found,” he announced in the effortless way he seemed to have, to break into groups.

Both Sutton and Lily turned to face her, and Charlotte met both of their surprised looks with a smile. A smile that, due to the widening of Sutton’s eyes, was tinged with the most ridiculous feeling of nerves, all over again.

“Charlotte!” Lily spoke first, her very intensely green eyes staring right through her. “Here I was thinking I was representing the Foundation solo this evening.” She laughed, lightly, though, shaking her head as she reached out to squeeze Charlotte’s hand in greeting. “It’s wonderful to see you, out and about.”

Charlotte smiled back at her, easily. She liked Lily; she wouldn’t have chosen her to fill her grandmother’s shoes if she didn’t. She squeezed Lily’s hand back. “Yes, even I have to leave the office sometimes.”

“Rarely,” Sutton cut in, her tone entirely joking, but in the way that said... familiarity. Scolding but light. Like she had intimate knowledge of Charlotte’s life and where she spent her time.

Which, of course, she did.

And it thrilled Charlotte that Sutton wanted it to be known.

“I’ve been working on it,” she shot back, teasing as well, turning to face Sutton face-to-face for the first time in the evening.

Her hair was up in a simple twist, leaving her perfect shoulders bare, a simple diamond necklace glinting against her clavicle. She wore a long-sleeved, form-fitting black dress and it took a lot of Charlotte’s famous self-control to not slowly peruse her frame. Even without it, she felt her heart start to hammer in her chest.

“Something tells me you could work on it a bit more. What did you get up to this weekend?” Sutton asked, arching an eyebrow at Charlotte.

Pined for you while you were out living your life.

Charlotte arched her eyebrow back. “Perhaps... you’re correct. But only because I’m in session tomorrow.”

There was a question on Sutton’s face, though, hiding under her smile. Charlotte wasn’t sure Lily or Zeke could see it, but she could, lurking just there in the tilt of her jaw.

Like that Sutton knew she was due in session tomorrow and would likely not want to come to an event the night before.

“Well, I for one, am amazed and grateful to see you beyond the walls of the Foundation. It’s a comfort to have you fighting for us politically, but on a personal level, I find it a bit alarming that I believe you may actually have a bed in your office,” Lily semi-joked, squeezing Charlotte’s hand again, before dropping her hand back down to her side down.

“Mhmm,” Sutton hummed in agreement. “It’s a couch, but it serves the same purpose.”

A smile tugged at her lips and there was a joke present in her voice, but... something felt *off* to Charlotte. Which did not help her in the sinking feeling she’d had about *them* in the last few days.

“Oh, god, that’s even worse,” Lily laughed, knocking her shoulder lightly against Charlotte’s in a little ribbing. “We, the concerned citizens, should pitch in for a cot, at the very least. Throw a fundraiser for your back.”

“Speaking of the fundraiser, do you mind if I steal Lily for a few?” Zeke asked, and Charlotte couldn’t have been more grateful.

“Of course,” Sutton and Charlotte both answered at the same time, nodding their goodbyes for now.

They watched Zeke and Lily go for a few seconds before Sutton turned to face her, asking, “What are you doing here tonight?”

She almost wanted to laugh, at the bluntness of the question – because that *was* Sutton. That forthright need to know and asking point-blank to satisfy that curiosity. A quality that had always been there, and always been one of her favorites.

Except, perhaps, for this moment.

Unfamiliar... embarrassment? Was that embarrassment? Crept through Charlotte’s stomach, making her want to squirm. But she refused to, holding her head high.

“Well, if you recall, this was a cause my grandmother cared deeply about, and thus, something I’d like to be involved in, myself, when possible. And tonight, I found myself with no plans, which made it possible.”

Not necessarily a lie, so that was great, really.

Sutton stared at her in question, slowly tilting her head.

“You didn’t mention it on the phone, earlier?”

Charlotte cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Right. I – wasn’t actually aware of it, given that Maya manages the preliminary rooting through my emails and my schedule.”

Once again... not necessarily a *lie*...

Sutton stared at her, hard, though, and Charlotte could tell she wasn't entirely buying what she was selling. Even if someone else might – even if most people would have – Sutton didn't.

And damn it if Charlotte didn't *enjoy* that, on one level.

A level of pleasure, under the twisting of knots in the bottom of her stomach. Like she was being caught out for being some desperate, needy... person.

A slow smile pulled at Sutton's lips, then, and Charlotte knew even before Sutton spoke that Sutton *did* see this for exactly what it was. "You came here tonight for me?"

The blood roared in her ears as she saw the two options presented to her. The road of honesty and the road of... less honesty. And maybe, in the past, she'd have chosen otherwise, but she felt – she felt different, now.

Charlotte huffed out a breath, baffled, one of her hands falling to her hip as she rolled the other in the air. "We had sex four days ago!"

Never let it be said that Charlotte Thompson couldn't be forthright, as well.

Her actual volume was a controlled whisper, but Sutton's eyes still widened, her mouth falling into an alarmed *o* as she blushed, deeply.

"Charlotte!" She hissed, reaching out reflexively and gripping Charlotte's hand in her own.

"I whispered," she reminded, still whispering, in her own defense. Charlotte was constantly aware of the people around her and what was being said and what could be overheard; she was confident in this.

"In a room full of my coworkers!" Sutton tugged the hand she was clutching and tugged, leading Charlotte out the main doors and down into the hallway, and then turned into a different hallway for even more privacy, where the lights were dimmed and the sounds of the event were a distant din.

"Why did you say that?!" Sutton asked as soon as they turned the final corner, rounding on Charlotte, the blush on her cheekbones still so very prevalent.

"Why did I say that we had sex?" Charlotte asked, certain her stare was incredulous but not as incredulous as she was feeling.

Sutton nodded, sharply, eyebrows high on her forehead as if she was totally baffled.

Which, honestly, made Charlotte feel even crazier, as she crossed her arms and angled her head up to stare at Sutton, as the words clawed up her throat.

"Because! We *did*. We had incredible sex and then I spent the night with you and everything seemed like it went well. There were no freakouts, no tears, no apologies, no verbal or visual regrets." She would know, she'd gone over it in her mind ad nauseum in the days since.

Sutton's teeth dug into her bottom lip as Charlotte spoke, her eyebrows furrowed as she nodded along. "Yes? I wasn't denying we had sex?"

“Well, you haven’t mentioned it. And it’s been four days.” Four long days.

“I’ve been busy!” Sutton whisper-shouted, her cheeks reddening.

“You’ve been so busy, that you haven’t thought once about the fact that we’ve had sex,” Charlotte somewhat echoed back, arching her eyebrows as that sentiment settled low and unwelcome in her stomach.

Exasperation pushed her further, before she could possibly delve into *that*. “Sutton, you can’t fuck a woman within an inch of her life and then not mention it for *days* afterward.” Charlotte felt like that was common sense, truly. “*Especially* given that the last time you fucked me so well my head spun, you then wanted to act as if it never happened— *mm!*” Charlotte’s words were cut off as Sutton’s lips descended to her own.

Instantly, it was like a hit of victory and salvation all rolled into one. Which was *ridiculous* and she knew that. Because she knew that Sutton wanted her, was attracted to her. That had never been up for debate.

And yet, Charlotte had spent the entire weekend feeling unsure and wanting and – and this horrible needy feeling. A feeling she’d never once associated with herself or understood.

The kiss was searching and needy, yet still exacting and keeping Charlotte right on her toes, as Sutton’s hands came to her waist and squeezed, bringing Charlotte right against her.

The skin revealed by the revealing – hip-level – plunging neckline of her dress rubbed against the softness of the material of Sutton’s, making Charlotte gasp into her mouth as her skin erupted into goosebumps.

She reached up, carding one hand through Sutton’s hair and holding, as she lightly scratched her nails down Sutton’s neck. She groaned in the back of her throat at the satisfaction that worked through her at the whimper that escaped Sutton’s lips at the sensation.

This is what she’d wanted. It was what she’d craved. What she’d been *needing*. For days. In ways she’d never truly, viscerally felt before. Not like this.

As she went to slide her hands down Sutton’s body, though, she was stopped.

The grip Sutton had on her waist tightened as Sutton pulled back. Just enough to disconnect, their chests still brushing as they breathed in deep.

The color was high on Sutton’s cheeks even in the dim light, her hair slightly mussed from Charlotte’s hand, and her eyes looked electric.

Charlotte almost shivered again just from the look alone.

“I’m not trying to pretend that it didn’t happen,” Sutton stated, her voice *nearly* perfectly firm, but Charlotte could hear the slight shakiness underneath. Like Sutton’s world was slightly off-kilter from the unexpected kiss as well.

“Less communication than we’ve had in weeks, not a single mention about anything between *us*,” Charlotte started to tick off the list to support her supposition.

“No, that’s – I–” Sutton blew out a breath, looking flushed. “I’ve thought about you, about *us*, so many times in the last few days. I can’t *help* but think about it.”

Charlotte arched a doubtful brow as she crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall behind her.

Sutton shook her head. “I’ve been genuinely very busy. First with my parents, and then this event. Which I—” she broke off on her own scoff, cheeks darkening as she admitted, “Somewhat forgot about, even though I’ve been doing quite a bit of coordination for it. Because I’ve been so mentally focused on... well. You.”

Charlotte didn’t quite have words for the pleasure that moved through her at the words.

Even more... alarming, perhaps, was that it wasn’t just pleasure. It was – it was – it made her nearly *giddy*. And so relieved, feeling like it wasn’t only her who’d been obsessed with thinking about *them*.

She controlled the wide smile that wanted to break out across her face, keeping it small and easy.

“You look absolutely stunning.” She finally let her eyes wander the way she’d wanted to minutes ago, now that she felt like she could breathe normally.

For maybe the first time in days.

Which... god, when she really thought about it, she *did not* enjoy that. What was that about?

“I’m not the one who showed up here in a designer dress with a neckline that plunges to my hips,” Sutton challenged, eyes glinting as she ran them over Charlotte.

The look was unsubtle but... deliberately so. Something she wasn’t used to seeing from Sutton in the past, but something that shot fire through her veins all the same.

“This? I’ve had it in my closet forever. Just waiting for the right occasion to let it breathe,” she murmured as she found herself swaying closer, right into Sutton’s gravitational pull, even as she drew her own hand lightly down the plunge of her dress just to watch the way she knew Sutton’s eyes would follow.

Starting at the hollow of her throat, down between her breasts, over her stomach...

And she felt the sparks of Sutton’s gaze like they were Sutton’s own hands again. Perfect.

Sutton cleared her throat and Charlotte watched the elegant line of her neck as she swallowed, before she spoke, her voice an octave lower, “Mmhmm, and your life doesn’t afford you that kind of luxury. So often trapped inside, nary an event that would grant you the opportunity to wear such a thing.”

Charlotte didn’t understand it. Maybe she couldn’t. Maybe it was just something cosmic, not meant for her mind to be able to comprehend. This fact that when she was with Sutton, she just wanted so badly, it turned to need.

And not only physically, sexually, but in every way. She wanted to be close, she wanted everyone to know they were associated together, she wanted that soft look Sutton’s eyes seemed to hold for her.

“Yes, darling, you’ve nailed it. Especially,” she tilted her chin up, her eyes inches away from Sutton’s again, as she reached out to touch Sutton’s arm, stroking her thumb softly over the

skin there. “Because, as you yourself pointed out, I have a couch in my office that I sleep on from time to time.”

A round of clapping and someone speaking into a microphone echoed down the hallway and made its way toward them, breaking through whatever spell was here.

Sutton dug her teeth into her bottom lip as she took a step back. “I have to get back in there. I’m supposed to be speaking soon.”

“You cannot pretend it didn’t happen. Again. *I* can’t,” Charlotte confessed, before Sutton could truly back away.

It made her feel ridiculous – her behavior this entire evening did – but especially the truth in her words. But more than that, the bigger feeling, was that she *had* to say them.

She needed to let Sutton know where she was, in this. This time around, things were going to be different. *She* was going to be different. Even if it scared her.

Bit by bit, she would make herself be brave. She would follow the example Sutton had set for her years ago.

Another round of applause erupted again.

“I wasn’t pretending it didn’t happen. And I’m not.” Sutton confirmed. “I don’t think that’s a possibility, anymore. I think about the way you look, the way you sound, the way you feel...”

Sutton trailed off, holding Charlotte’s gaze, and Charlotte felt that want spring right back, moving through her so intently.

“We’re both adults – real adults – now,” Sutton said, nodding shortly, seemingly to herself. “And we work together, which could make sleeping together... complicated. But we’re also friends, and I think we both are finally on the same page, for this.” She gestured, a little awkward and a lot adorably, back and forth between them with her index finger.

“Right,” Charlotte murmured, softly, taking in what Sutton was saying.

“So... we can keep doing this. As friends. And just, enjoy ourselves.”

Sleeping together. Friends. On the same page... as in – Sutton was on *her* page. At least, the page Charlotte used to be on.

As people clapped again, Sutton swore lightly under her breath. “I really have to go. But – if you’re going to stick around until later, we can...” Sutton trailed off, blushing even as she arched her eyebrows and dropped her gaze.

And Charlotte’s body answered easily. “Yes,” her mouth did, too.

Because of course she would stick around.

The grin flashed over Sutton’s face and made nonsensical butterflies act up in Charlotte’s stomach.

“Awesome,” Sutton breathed and leaned in to kiss Charlotte briefly, before she turned to head back down the hall.

Charlotte fell back against the wall, blowing out a deep breath.

She was living in unprecedented times, indeed.