

Charlotte let out a deep breath and leaned her head back against the leather car seat as her driver shut the door behind her. She didn't mind being busy – honestly, she preferred it – but when she had so many meetings she didn't even have a half hour for lunch? It was a little too busy.

Thankfully, it wasn't her everyday schedule.

“I'm starving. Autumn, can you order that salad for dinner? The one from–”

“The bistro on 11th? I already took care of it...” Autumn, her perky personal assistant, promptly answered, but something was just a bit *off* in her voice.

Charlotte lifted her head to give her a questioning look. “What is it? Are they out of that soup you like? I've told you a thousand times you don't have to buy your dinner where you order mine from, you can still put it on my card.”

Her slight joking tone wasn't enough to make Autumn break her serious expression and Charlotte's stomach started to bottom out.

“Autumn, tell me what it is. I've had the longest day and you know I'd just prefer to have the bandaid ripped off.”

“It's not me you should be looking at, Senator Thompson,” Autumn deferred, tilting her head to the other person in the town car.

“Senator Thompson... well. Then I know my night is going down the drain, don't I?” Charlotte remarked and held back a sigh as she turned to face Maya, who was in charge of her schedule.

Since she'd won her senate seat last year, it had taken months to get Autumn and Maya comfortable referring to her as her first name, as her history and reputation preceded her. Now, a little over a year in, she knew that if they weren't referring to her as Charlotte, they had news she most definitely did not want to hear.

Maya cleared her throat and sat with her back up straight, even though Charlotte could see the weariness in her eyes as they met her own. Maya never fidgeted and she was a straight shooter – Charlotte liked that about her.

She lifted an eyebrow expectantly, because she didn't want to have to ask again.

Maya nodded. “There's an event at Georgetown University tonight that you've RSVP'd to.”

“I most certainly did not.” Charlotte held Maya's gaze, tilting her head. “I personally have not responded to any events at Georgetown, and I know for a fact that this was not on my schedule even just this morning.”

Maya grimaced, quickly flicking on her tablet as she explained, “Right, it wasn't on your schedule, which was – well, I was only notified about it a few hours ago, personally.”

She blew out a breath and roughly rubbed a hand over her forehead, before she deliberately sat up straight and centered herself.

This was life, and it was usually a life she loved. “And what exactly am I supposed to be attending?”

“It’s a benefit in honor of the three youth centers currently being built across the city? That promote healthy recreation activities, with a focus on after-school professional level academic assistance for underprivileged kids?”

Charlotte stared at her for a few long moments as she ran through her thoughts, but was coming up empty. “I may have been in nonstop meetings for the last thirteen hours, but I have no recollection of this being something that’s crossed my desk.”

Maya nodded again. “Yes, that’s because it’s not technically congressional business? Lily Balducci sent me a reminder today about the event, as the youth centers are being sponsored by the Thompson Foundation. It was...” She cleared her throat, “One of the last programs your grandmother personally signed off on last year.”

It had been almost ten months since her grandmother had died, and Charlotte still felt the reminder like a sting right to her heart. Ninety-three and still sharp as a tack, she’d worked at the charity organization she’d founded and nurtured until the day she’d died. Literally. Lily had been her replacement that Charlotte had personally chosen.

Those were the magic words, though. It had been her grandmother’s project and she would have personally been there to oversee it if she could. And now that she couldn’t, Charlotte would.

Her stomach rumbled and she pushed her hunger to the back of her mind with it as she shook out her shoulders. Her team, and specifically Autumn and Maya, given that they spent almost the entire day with her, had seen her at her weak points. Not the *weakest*, because Charlotte saved those for total solitude. But after a long, hard day when she just needed to sigh and let her shoulders slump, these two were there.

But she tried to not let it happen often.

“All right. When do I have to be there? Do we have time to get dinner?”

She could tell by Maya’s apologetic look that it was a *no* even before she said, “We’re on the way now... and you are fashionably late as it is.”

“And is my business suit, suitable?” She semi-joked, gesturing to the standard tailored pantsuit she’d been wearing all day.

Autumn met her with a bright smile and reached for the garment bag hanging up that Charlotte had just assumed was her dry cleaning. “Already grabbed this from your personal shopper!”

“Wonderful.” The only question she really had about the evening was if there would be food at the event.

She could only hope.

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She *was* fashionably late.

Fortunately, people were still milling about and chatting freely – none of the speeches had started before her arrival – as Charlotte made her entrance.

She shook a few hands and gave perfunctory greetings mindlessly, as was second nature for her at this point, as her mind was on one single thing. The table of finger foods at the other side of the hall.

Her phone vibrated in her hand and she paused for only a few seconds to read:

***Autumn Alton – 7:57PM***

*Also a reminder that Marcy at Simon & Schuster wants a name for the author of your autobiography by the end of the week. Know you had a long day, but she's emailed again. I'll re-send you the writing samples we have of the top contenders.*

It was Charlotte's own fault for pausing, she decided, as a man in a chic blazer stepped up to the podium at the front of the room precisely as she slipped her phone back into her pocket and called for everyone to come to a halt.

“If you wouldn't mind settling in for a few words. I'm Zeke Heller, and it's my fault we're all here.” He flashed a charming smile and chuckled along with the room. “It's been my goal to fund these centers...”

She'd admit, in spite of her growling stomach, Zeke told a very inspirational tale about how his brother had failed out of school when he was fourteen, because he struggled academically and there was no affordable help for him while their dad worked two fulltime jobs, and this led to his brother being involved in gang activity in his teens. He outlined his solid plans for academic and recreational activities at all three of The Zones, and how he'd been working toward this since he'd been in undergrad. She understood exactly how and why her grandmother signed the Thompson name onto funding the project.

She was interested in listening, while still inching – as indiscernibly as she could – toward the food.

Charlotte clapped along with everyone else as he finished up his speech, starting toward the refreshments on the other side of the room. This was so far from her first rodeo; she knew that as soon as the dust settled, she would be swarmed with people who wanted her attention.

Not just to discuss tonight's benefit, but also her thoughts on the latest in congress, in the Middle East, on policy reform – that's how it always was.

She needed a bit more energy tonight before that all happened.

“And it is my immense pleasure to introduce the woman who responded to my outpour of requests for help in forming our academic programs, the reason why we are *here* at Georgetown tonight, Sutton Spencer.”

And just like that, Charlotte's world stopped.

The clapping that echoed through the hall dimmed under the roaring in her ears, and she swore that every light must have dimmed, save for the one up on the stage.

For all she wanted to tell herself that there had to be a different Sutton Spencer out in the world, her stomach was already clenching with the knowledge. She *knew*.

And – she was right.

There she stood. Tall, even taller by the slight heels she wore, with a long-sleeved dark blue dress that accentuated the light curve of her hip and showed off her long, smooth neck. Her hair, that vibrant, lively red, was slightly shorter now than it used to be. Cut to just below her shoulders now, instead of down her back.

Charlotte had the sudden wish that she hadn't kept to the back of the room, now. Because she couldn't see what she wanted to see – what lines had life given Sutton around her eyes or her mouth? Were her eyes still the most arresting shade of blue?

Was she wearing her wedding ring?

“Hi, I'm Sutton Spencer, an assistant professor of literature here at Georgetown.”

For an involuntary moment, Charlotte's eyes closed. Her voice, the timbre of it, still sounded exactly the same.

She hadn't heard it since that day they'd met in a café. When Sutton had proclaimed her love for Charlotte, denounced any sort of friendship they'd had, and walked out of her life. Totally shattering her heart in the process.

Thirteen years.

The thought bounced around in her mind as she snapped her eyes back open to take it in. To take *her* in.

Thirteen years, and she remembered that – and so, so many other moments – like snapshots saved to a hard drive in her mind.

Charlotte's hunger ebbed, her attention entirely captured now. Sutton fucking Spencer.

No longer an adorably awkward graduate student, but a an adorably less awkward... professor? She stood at the podium, poised and somehow endearing.

“Growing up, my family's standing gave me a very privileged life experience, with a deep appreciation for academics and literature in particular... clearly,” she grinned, sweetly and self-deprecatingly.

And Charlotte felt like she was flashing back, right back in time, to that same smile. It made her smile, even as it twinged at her heart.

It – her heart – did that, sometimes. When she thought of Sutton.

“I’ve never been in the same position as Zeke, with a personal connection as to why we so desperately need more resources like these in the community. My life has been very fortunate, and – perhaps even more fortunately, I was given the tools to see that what I had was a gift not granted to many others.”

Charlotte stared from the back of the crowd, transfixed. And even as she concentrated on every single word, she couldn’t help her mind start to whirl, her thoughts forming in rapid succession.

What was Sutton doing *here*? Why was she in D.C.? What happened to Manhattan? Or even Boston?

Did she still blush? Was she still shockingly bold? Was she still best friends with Regan?

Was she still married?

All too soon, Sutton gave one final smile to the crowd, before she stepped away, and the audience clapped. Charlotte distractedly joined, even as she craned her neck to see where Sutton exited to.

Unfortunately, even with her heels, she wasn’t tall enough to see and – and what would she even *do* if she had seen her? Charlotte shook her head at herself, taking in a deep breath and drawing back her shoulders.

She hadn’t seen Sutton in over a decade. She didn’t know anything about the woman Sutton had turned into. There was nothing between them at all.

Charlotte repeated that to herself, trying to actually make herself believe it – normally, it wasn’t that difficult for her to do – as she turned back toward the refreshment table.

Sutton Spencer had nothing to do with Charlotte. She’d had... feelings... for her, years and years ago. And Sutton hadn’t wanted to continue their friendship anymore. It had been, admittedly painful for quite some time for Charlotte.

But when it came down to the line, when push came to shove and it was either come out or continue with her plan to remain lowkey until she’d gained far more popularity and wait for times to change to become even more accepting, she had waited. Sutton had gone to Rome and continued on with her life and Charlotte had continued on with hers.

It was that simple.

“Simple,” she repeated to herself, as she shook her shoulders and walked toward the refreshments.

And if she cut her eyes across the room to keep an eye on the people milling about as she put a few helpings on a plate, then... that was just human nature, wasn’t it?

It was normal to be curious.

And Charlotte was a more curious person than most.

“Senator Thompson! You came!”

Charlotte hadn't actually met him, but she knew that the owner of that enthusiastic greeting was the man who had just spoken – Zeke. She quickly swallowed the bite of the sandwich she was eating and put the plate back down as she turned with her professional smile fixed in place.

He was already reaching out to share her hand as soon as she'd faced him, which she accepted. A very, very enthusiastic handshake, she noted, unsurprised.

“I did, of course. As soon as I heard about the event, I knew I'd be attending,” she said, finding amusement in her not-a-lie. He didn't know, of course, that she'd only heard of the event less than an hour ago. Softening into a more sincere tone as he released her hand, she informed him, “After hearing you speak, I can see why my grandmother believed in all of this.”

He nodded. “Of course we have other donors, but without the graciousness of the Thompson Foundation, I'm not entirely sure we'd be here. I was so grateful for your continued support this year.”

The sympathetic look he gave her made her aware that he was referring to her grandmother's death and how she'd only just signed off on the donation to Zeke's proposal the week before she'd died.

She managed a smile. “Anything that my grandmother signed off on will have continued support. You don't have to worry about that.”

“I'm so, so grateful to hear that.” Zeke's eyes lit up as he peered over Charlotte's shoulder, then gestured quickly, waving at someone as he spoke, “The Zones also wouldn't be anywhere near what they are right now if it wasn't for this brilliant woman, either!”

“Zeke, please stop introducing me to people like that,” Sutton's exasperated whisper registered before Charlotte shifted to face her. “It's embarrassing.”

It happened again, she dimly thought. The din of sounds around them faded into background noise and – thirteen years.

Thirteen years, but Sutton Spencer, up-close and personal, still made Charlotte's stomach flip.

Sutton Spencer, and everything that came along with her.

The way her perfume still smelled absolutely incredible. How blue those eyes were – they were *so* blue. They really were. Sometimes... sometimes in nights after they'd parted ways, when Charlotte was lying in bed, she would think about Sutton's eyes. She didn't really have those nights anymore – not *really* – but she'd had them for, well, for far too long after their end.

But she'd convinced herself that she was imagining just how blue they were.

She hadn't.

And those eyes were so, incredibly wide as Sutton stared at her.

Ah. So, Sutton was just as surprised to see her, as Charlotte was to see *her*. That pleased her.

It pleased her even more that Sutton still wore her emotions all over her face.

Being face-to-face with Sutton, and the shocked look written all over her features, filled Charlotte with the most unexpected warmth. The smile that she felt slide over her lips was entire genuine.

Sutton was thirty-eight and fucking gorgeous, as she gaped at Charlotte.

“Sutton,” Zeke’s voice cut in between them. Charlotte would be lying if she said she remembered he was there. “Sutton Spencer, as you surely heard, spearheaded the academic side of the programs; she’s been a complete godsend. And Sutton, this is—”

“Charlotte,” Sutton breathed and Charlotte hummed under her breath as she *felt* the utterance of her name, all the way down her spine.

“Do you... oh! Sometimes I completely forget your own family background, Sutton,” Zeke chuckled congenially.

“Yes,” Charlotte confirmed in a murmur, but didn’t break eye contact with Sutton. She couldn’t. “We met in a café quite some time ago, getting coffee with her father.”

“Right,” Sutton confirmed, dimly. There was the lightest blush on her cheeks at the memory, and Sutton still blushed. She still did that.

Charlotte delighted in the fact.

“Ah. Friends, then?”

*We were never friends.* Sutton’s own words echoed in her mind, but Charlotte didn’t care. To her, they had been. To her, they were. To her, losing Sutton had felt like a far bigger loss than just sexual intimacy. It was closeness, and...

“For a time, before life got in the way,” she confirmed.

“Yeah,” Sutton’s voice was so soft. Her eyebrows crinkled and she brought her hand up, rubbing at her forehead roughly, and it was then that Charlotte broke eye contact to take note –

No ring.

No wedding ring.

That knowledge thundered through her, even though she didn’t quite have a place to file it.

Sutton had gotten married eight years ago, in April. Charlotte remembered it clearly. No, she hadn’t been there; they hadn’t been on speaking terms for four years at that point. It had been a busy year for Charlotte, as she’d been running for and won the governor’s seat for New York.

But she remembered seeing Sutton’s wedding photos to another woman on social media.

That night, she'd drunk a bit too much and it had been the last time she'd ever looked at Sutton's social media. She'd set a hard and fast rule for herself, forbidding herself from looking at it ever again – because four years was *long enough* to be holding onto anything, especially something that hadn't even been a real relationship, regardless of how shaken she'd felt right to her core – and had followed it to this day.

And not looking at Sutton's social media had done her well. She'd truly let go of her. Of those feelings. Of what they'd had.

But the fact that Sutton wasn't wearing a ring... Charlotte would be lying if she said it didn't ping her interest. Because Sutton Spencer was the kind of woman who would never take that ring off, if she was still married.

Zeke looked between them for a long moment, before he nodded. "Well, just another good thing that we're doing here! Bringing old friends together again."

Charlotte only spared him a look now because Sutton cleared her throat and looked away. "It appears the event is wearing several hats."

"If you'll both excuse me, I have to catch Rex Tally before he leaves. It was so lovely to meet you, Senator Thompson." He gave Sutton's shoulder a squeeze, before making his way through the crowd.

And Charlotte turned back to Sutton, running her eyes over her again, for a beat too long to be polite. Charlotte knew social rules to a T – how long it was appropriate to gaze, how long to shake someone's hand, what to say to break a silence... she knew it all.

But she looked now, uncaring, with so many questions swirled through her thoughts.

*What are you doing here? How long have you been a professor? What happened to your wife? Is spending time with you still like taking in the most refreshing drink? do you ever think about me?*

And Charlotte had to take a second to ponder what was appropriate to ask. What did you say to your ex-lover with whom you'd had such a deep affection, you thought of her for years later?

She settled on niceties, and opened her mouth to say one because she wasn't ready to let this opportunity go –

"What are you doing here?" Sutton blurted out, fidgeting slightly, before clearly forcing herself to stop.

Charlotte ate it up like she was starving. Still refreshing.

"I live in D.C. for the majority of the year right now; I'm a Senator for New York." She chanced a joke, winking as she rubbed her hand over her chest, "Also, ouch. I hadn't realized I would be so far down on current events."

A fleeting smile lit up Sutton's face, delighting her, before Sutton shook her head and brushed her hair behind her ear. "As if anyone could escape that headline; I know that much, thank you. I just meant, what are you doing *here*?" She gestured around them. "We were told there would be



a representative from the Foundation, but I never..." She cleared her throat. "I didn't think it would be *you*."

"This program moved my grandmother. I wanted to be just a little part of it. For her," Charlotte's voice dipped to a whisper, surprising herself. She wasn't surprised with her own motivation of being here, but she was damn shocked to show it to anyone who wasn't Caleb, Dean, or William. She took a deep breath and blew it out shaking her head and smiling. "Sorry, a little too serious for this."

For this event, for this unplanned reunion.

But Sutton shook her head. "No, it's – I'm really sorry." Sutton's hand landed on her arm, squeezing gently. "I was really sorry when it happened. I mean, she was incredible, but I... I know what she meant to you."

Charlotte's eyes searched Sutton's and felt the genuine sympathy in them. It wasn't what she was given from the hundreds of people who'd given her condolences just after; it felt more personal than that.

"Thank you." She wanted to put her hand over Sutton's, but Sutton slid her hand off as soon as it came.

Sutton gave her a ridiculously charming embarrassed half-smile. "Of course."

Charlotte arched an eyebrow, feeling more at liberty to ask, "And what are *you* doing here?"

Sutton waved her hand. "Oh, I'm the head of the academic organization of the Zones."

Tilting her head, a slow grin pulled at her lips. "No, darling, I heard your speech. *I* meant, what are you doing here, in the broader sense. I never expected you to be this far from your people."

The endearment slipped from her lips without even thinking, and she could tell Sutton caught it as well.

Neither of them acknowledged it.

"Oh. Well, I got a job offer at Georgetown at a fortuitous time; my – my, um, ex-wife was from just outside D.C., in Maryland, and so, it just made sense."

Ex-wife.

Ex-wife? About a thousand questions entered Charlotte's mind right in that moment. Who ended it? Why? What –

She couldn't ask any of that.

"Georgetown is lucky to have you."

"I'm lucky for to be at such a great university."

Charlotte shook her head slowly. “No, I had it right the first time. I’m so glad you figured it all out.”

A small, adorable smile curled at Sutton’s mouth, and she took a deep breath before starting to speak, and –

“Sutton! Your speech was perfect, honestly. I have to ask you about our next meeting before I leave. Am I interrupting?” A woman Charlotte had never seen before sidled up to them out of what appeared to be nowhere.

But she had the presence of mind to know that she hadn’t really been keeping an eye on the rest of the room.

Sutton looked startled herself, looking between Charlotte and the woman, then back again. “Um, hi Cleo.” She looked back at Charlotte, searching her face, before she shook her head. “No, we were just catching up. I got your email earlier if that’s what you’d like to discuss.”

The woman – Cleo – grinned brightly. Charlotte made a concentrated effort to not purse her lips in disappointment and annoyance at the interruption.

“Oh! You’re Charlotte Thompson,” Cleo stated, eyebrows lifting. “That’s – wow, it’s nice to meet you. Cleo Myers. I work with Sutton.”

Charlotte fixed on a smile. “Very nice to meet you, as well.”

If she knew anything, it was how to make a graceful exit, and – unfortunately – she knew that time was now.

She extended a hand, much too wanting to feel Sutton’s hand in hers for the first time in thirteen years. She wondered, almost desperately, if it would still feel like that... spark. That certain *something*.

Sutton slid her hand, skin so soft, into Charlotte’s and – yes. It was still there. Miraculously, somehow, there it was.

Charlotte smiled softly in wonder, and it turned into the slightest smirk when she saw Sutton look down at their hands, wide-eyed. Yeah, she felt it, too.

“It really was lovely to see you, Sutton.” She meant every word, and she stroked her thumb over the inside of Sutton’s wrist.

“It was... you, too,” Sutton managed out, clearing her throat as she withdrew her hand from Charlotte’s and pressed it against her thigh.

She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding as she watched Sutton walk away.

Thirteen years.

Sutton Spencer.

Who was divorced, and living in the same place as Charlotte.

So very interesting.