

Charlotte pursed her lips at herself as she stared at the full length mirror in the corner of her office.

No.

She slid the Marc Jacobs eggplant colored blazer off her shoulders and hung it back in the closet. She routinely kept several changes for “just in case” in her office, and had deliberately put a few extras in for this evening.

“I’ve arranged for your schedule to be cleared for the upcoming Tuesdays from four to six, as requested.” Autumn sat on the lounge, facing Charlotte but with her face buried in her tablet. “Saturday afternoons, as well, though those were easier. Generally. You’ll be sending Senator Lakshi’s wife a particularly lovely bracelet in lieu of not attending her birthday dinner.”

“Thank you.” She slid on the silk white Ralph Lauren blazer, tugging to adjust around her waist just right.

Maya, sitting across from Autumn, as always never next to her, cleared her throat. “I’ve already sent your schedule for tomorrow to your email, synced in your calendar as well. You have the Sustainability Committee breakfast at eight, so the car will be there for you by quarter past seven.”

“I’ve already sent out my notes for the meeting,” she murmured absently, turning to the side and brushing a miniscule piece of lint from her shoulder.

“... right. I got a copy this morning.” Maya shook her head. “You’re in on the conference call with the UAE at one in the morning, so I figured I’d give you a heads up for the early morning tomorrow, just in case.”

Charlotte put her hands on her hips as she stared at the two of them in the mirror, arching an eyebrow. “Did I not send you both a brief on that call only thirty minutes ago?”

She watched as they exchanged looks; of course, the only time they were willing to admit they got along was when they had something to discuss with her and they both agreed neither wanted to bring it up.

She chose Autumn, who was always more willing to fold, spinning around as she crossed her arms. “What is it?”

Autumn sat straighter in her chair, as if it were possible, exchanging a look with Maya. Who studiously stared down at her tablet again. Autumn glared, before slowly turning back to Charlotte, cheeks flushed. “Um, well. It’s nothing, really. None of our business, actually.”

“Then why are you two staring at me as if I’ve lost my mind?” This time, she stared down Maya as well, until she slowly looked up from the planner on her device.

“If you two exchange a look one more time—”

“Oh! Your brother is calling, Senator,” Autumn couldn’t have sounded more relieved as she hopped up and handed Charlotte her phone from where it was perched on the table.

Charlotte hummed as she slid her thumb over the screen to answer, watching both of her assistants scurry out of her office. “I’ll see you both in the morning and I either want normal behavior or *answers*.”

“Your reservation is at Gardenia, in twenty-seven minutes, so you might want to leave soon!” Maya poked her head back into the office before quickly pulling it shut.

Caleb was laughing into her ear already. “Ah, I love when you answer the phone and you’re terrorizing those lovely women who work for you.”

“If anything, today *they* are terrorizing *me*,” she muttered, tugging at the bottom of the blazer once more, before she gave up.

She looked fucking fantastic; she knew she did. This blazer had been tailored to her body, just as all of her wardrobe had been. It was just *Sutton*. Which was absolutely ridiculous because she’d never worried about what she was wearing, with just about anyone, even Sutton back in the days when they’d been sleeping together.

Because Sutton had always thought she looked fantastic, Charlotte knew it. It hadn’t mattered what she was wearing. And tonight they certainly weren’t doing that.

But after their last meeting, she felt more... *something*.

“What are they doing to you, my poor, poor sister?”

“They’ve been staring at me like I’m insane all afternoon.”

“Well, what are you doing?”

“Changing my blazer.” ... four times.

Caleb was quiet for a few beats before, “Does this have anything to do with Sutton Spencer writing your biography?”

Charlotte tossed her hand into the air. “I *told* your loudmouth husband to keep that to himself.”

“And he would never withhold that from me!” Caleb laughed raucously in her ear. “Oh, lord. You are going to meet Sutton Spencer today for her to write your biography and you’re probably standing in that ostentatiously large office and trying on all of your fabulous blazers.”

Charlotte forced herself to stop fidgeting with her fucking outfit, especially because her brother could clearly see what she was doing from states away. “Must you full-name her whenever you say her name?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because it makes you sound crazy. We are just two...” she stared at herself in the mirror, thinking back to a week and a half ago when Sutton had been in this very office professional women, with a bit of a personal history.

*I don't know you*, Sutton's words replayed in her head, as they had many times in the last ten days.

Charlotte didn't think that should have stung, but it had. Because to her, Sutton was the only person who had *ever* known her intimately.

"We're just two professionals."

Caleb scoffed so loudly, it rang in her ear. "Professional! The last thing you think about Sutton Spencer is *professional*."

"It's been thirteen years, Caleb," exasperation rung through her tone. "I can be professional with her."

"But you'll want more. You're opening a door, Charlotte. That's why your assistants were looking at you like that. Because Dean told me that you requested Sutton Spencer after you saw her at that thing." He sobered for a second, before he asked, quieter, "What are you doing?"

"Having dinner with my biography writer," she shot back, smartly, even as her stomach turned momentarily.

Because the truth was, Charlotte didn't know. For the first time in her adult life, she truly didn't know what she was doing. She hadn't really thought it out when she'd requested Sutton to be her writer.

Her thought process started and stopped with this unquenchable desire to not lose Sutton completely before they could even *talk* or reconnect or – or... she didn't know.

The truth was that she just did not know what she was doing or what she intended to come out of this. At the very least, she did trust Sutton's insight and her writing abilities, and that was all she truly did have at the moment.

"Okay..." Caleb trailed off before he cleared his throat. "I mean, you *are* out, now."

"I'm aware." She really, really was. She glimpsed at the antique clock on her wall. "Shit."

She now only had twenty minutes to get to the restaurant and in this traffic? Charlotte never made a habit of running late, and the last person she wanted to be late for right now, was Sutton.

"I have to go. Tell your husband he's a rat and I'll talk to you both soon."



Sutton beat her to the restaurant.

Charlotte almost cursed under her breath, but her breath caught in her throat at the sight. The sight of Sutton sitting at Charlotte's favorite restaurant, her hair delicately tucked behind one ear, as she typed out a message on her phone.

"Senator Thompson! Your table is ready and the other member of your party is already seated," the host shook her out of her thoughts. "Would you like me to take you to the table?"

Charlotte blinked a few times, taking herself out of the moment as she shook her head. "I – no, that's quite all right. Thank you, Arnold."

That feeling fluttered in her stomach as she approached, the one she'd felt tinges of all day and – nerves. She was *nervous*! To have dinner with Sutton, even in a professional capacity.

The idea was so absurd to her, she couldn't help but chuckle minutely. She'd been nervous on her election night, but it hadn't felt quite the same. Professionally, Charlotte was solid. She knew she was. Even if she couldn't get a bill to pass or had she lost an election, she could control those things. She was capable.

Sutton looked up at her then, fingers freezing on her phone, as Charlotte stood a few feet away.

Shaking herself out of it, Charlotte cleared her throat. "Sorry I'm late."

Sutton waved her off. "It's only a few minutes; I assume you had some giant filibuster or congressional emergency?"

She was joking. Charlotte hadn't known what to expect, after their last encounter, but she hadn't anticipated Sutton's little jokes. It had been charged and entirely unexpected, their last meeting, though in all honesty, Charlotte couldn't have said what she'd expected, either.

As promised, in their contact since, Charlotte had personally reached out to Sutton to set up their twice a week meetings, but it had always been very short.

She relaxed into a smile. "Yes, actually. I've fixed the entire infrastructure of the country."

"Just in time for dinner," Sutton sent her a soft grin.

A piece inside of her relaxed and the feeling of it utterly baffled Charlotte. She hadn't known what to anticipate at all, and because of that, she hadn't been able to predict her own reactions, either.

Then again, she'd often not known what to expect with Sutton in their past, even when she thought she did. That was maybe a part of her appeal.

No, it definitely was. Charlotte just hadn't experienced it in so long.

Sutton's phone lit up again, and she watched as blue eyes looked down to skim the words on the screen, a smile tugging at her lips.

"Do you have to respond? It's all right if you do." Charlotte *wanted* to ask, desperately, who it was. Who made Sutton smile like that.

But Sutton shook her head. “It’s just Regan, telling me something Lucy said.”

“Your daughter,” Charlotte tasted the words the same way she had when she’d learned of the daughter in question.

She didn’t know why she’d been surprised; Sutton had always wanted children. It only made sense that she had one.

“Is she your only child?”

Sutton nodded, before she let out a soft sigh. “I would’ve had more, but—” She cut herself off, blinking as if catching herself from saying too much.

Only nothing could be too much. Not for Charlotte, because with every single word Sutton said, Charlotte found herself sitting more at attention.

“But?” She urged.

Sutton hesitated, before she shook her head. “It’s not important.”

“Of course it is, if it is to you.”

Sutton stared at her for a few moments, mouth slightly open, and Charlotte held those blue eyes with hers. In much too short of a time, Sutton’s eyebrows furrowed and she cleared her throat, shaking her head. “No, this is a business meeting.”

Charlotte had to bite the inside of her cheek. “Right.” She had agreed to it, after all. Clearing her throat, she gestured for Sutton to continue.

And continue she did. Sutton pulled out her iPad, a brand new voice recorder, a notebook and two pens. The page she flipped to in the notebook was already covered in her neat and tidy handwriting, and she tapped her long fingers against it.

“All right, I’ve done a bit of research in the last week around how to best write this manuscript. Obviously, we need to start with my getting your information. I figure that we can – at least for the first bit – do our info sessions and then I can write a bit in my off-days to see what style we’d prefer.”

Charlotte gamely nodded; truthfully, this... biography was not her idea nor was it something she’d particularly wanted to do. In fact, she’d turned it down multiple times when she’d first been approached during her campaign.

She had no idea how to properly do this.

“You’re the creative genius; I will defer to you.”

“You deferring to me... that’s a new twist for us,” Sutton murmured as she uncapped a pen. It seemed she didn’t realize what she’d said, her eyes widening as she cleared her throat and deliberately stared down at the notebook.

Charlotte leaned back in her chair, saying her thanks to their waiter for delivering the water, wine, and chef's special that was always pre-arranged for her, even as she kept her eyes on Sutton. A slow smile tugged at her lips.

Oh, yes.

Sutton closed her eyes, shook her head slightly, and pursed her lips. "So," she reopened her eyes, "I want to know – would you rather go chronologically or topically?"

"I think topical would suit best, for my memory purposes."

Sutton nodded. "I thought so, too. I have a plethora of areas to cover..." She hesitated, her gaze landing on Charlotte, seeming hesitant. "Though, I should ask how personal you want to get. I know that," she paused, clearing her throat in an adorably awkward way. "You aren't – your personal life – it used to be... private."

Charlotte couldn't help but smirk. "And here I thought we didn't know one another."

Sutton's eyes rolled and Charlotte reveled in it. For a moment, before she relented, speaking softly, "My private life is still relatively private. But I suppose that's why I chose you for this... I will need to be a bit more open."

Sutton's mouth ticked into the smallest of smiles, before she nodded. Their eyes caught and locked... before Sutton's phone vibrated again.

Charlotte observed the small smile, before Sutton turned her phone to show her. The adorable little girl with Sutton's unmistakable bright blue eyes smiling through the screen... it was the second time she saw the young girl, but every time she did, it felt like a punch to the stomach.

Sutton had a *child*. A daughter. A very adorable one at that.

Then her eyes flicked to Regan, who was holding the hold, making a ridiculous smile as the two of them held up bowls of ice cream.

Charlotte arched her eyebrow. "How in the world did Regan end up here with you? Did she pack herself in your suitcase?"

Sutton laughed, before she started to explain, "She might've. Honestly, moving here it was a – it was a hard decision, but... well, it was right for me, Layla, and Lucy. But after..." she trailed off, her eyebrows drawing together, a look in her eyes that seemed so conflicted and pained, it made Charlotte ache. It was gone a second later. "After my divorce, I was really struggling here by myself, and I couldn't move across states with Lucy, and so – Regan and Emma became my saviors."

"Regan and... *Emma*?" Charlotte drew out, in disbelief. She hadn't met Emma much, but she remembered faces well enough to have a clear enough picture. And she knew that they didn't get along. "I must be thinking of a different Emma."

Sutton chortled. "You're not. Emma Bordeaux."

Charlotte leaned back in her chair and stared. “I would have never seen it coming.”

Sutton shook her head, “I know, right! But...” She seemed to realize what was happening as she shook her head and cleared her throat. “We should talk outlines. We have a pretty strict schedule.”

Two hours later, they’d made plenty of headway, and it was the first time in a very, very long time that Charlotte didn’t want a business meeting to end. Because it *was* business, she reminded herself, as she watched Sutton slide into a light jacket, standing from their table.

“Where would you like to meet on Saturday afternoon?” Charlotte asked as they walked out, very aware of every time Sutton’s arm brushed against hers. “My office? My home? Or a café, perhaps.”

Sutton hesitated, and Charlotte wished she knew the thoughts rushing through Sutton’s mind before she said, “I’ll be dropping Lucy off, so I’ll be on the road no matter what. So, maybe at your office?”

Charlotte nodded, relishing the chance to be with Sutton in a more private place. “Where will you be bringing her?”

“Um, Layla, my ex, lives in Bethesda, so I’ll be dropping her off for the night.”

Charlotte had *so many questions*. Why was this idiot woman not married to Sutton anymore? What had happened? Why hadn’t they had more children, as she knew Sutton would have wanted at least two. She loved having siblings far too much to not want that for her own children. How long had they been divorced? How had Sutton dealt with it all?

She was starving for the information, she found. She supposed it didn’t shock her; she was a curious woman.

As they walked to the curb, Charlotte slowed and turned to face her. The slight breeze allowed for Sutton’s scent to waft to her and she allowed herself to breathe in deeply.

It was the same scent.

God.

“Do you need a ride?” She murmured, as her driver pulled up to the curb.

Sutton fidgeted for a moment, before she caught herself and crossed her arms. “Ah, uh. No, thank you. I’m parked just across the street. But I’ll see you in a few days?”

“I’ll be there.”

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It was the uncertainty of it all, she decided after the first couple of meetings. It was the uncertainty that had her changing her jacket a handful of times and feeling unsettled.

She hadn't known what to expect with Sutton, how could she?

She *hadn't* known what she wanted from Sutton. She'd been telling the utter truth to Caleb on the phone.

But she was able to decipher some things that she wanted –

First, she wanted to *know* Sutton, again. She wanted to see everything Sutton had grown into, wanted to witness the young woman who had so much potential and what she'd made of herself.

She supposed that was maybe what had driven her to this in the first place.

But she didn't know where to start with that, and Sutton didn't make it easy. Once upon a time, the Sutton of her memories, would have been so simple. She would have let Charlotte bring her a cup of impeccable tea and sidetrack a meeting and delve into personal questions. She *knew* that, as certain as she knew anything.

However...

Sutton was not the young woman she'd once known, that much was clear within the next few weeks. Time changed everything, Charlotte knew that better than just about anyone.

Time had changed things. Sutton didn't blush or fumble nearly as much as she used to, Charlotte learned over the following weeks. She also was very fastidious at keeping things *professional*.

Much to Charlotte's dismay.

It didn't matter *what* topic they were on, it didn't matter that these meetings were designed for Charlotte to disclose her own information. Charlotte always tried to turn it back to Sutton. She couldn't help it; the more she saw Sutton, the more she was hungry for the information she'd missed. She wanted to fill in every gap she had in the last decade.

And she learned some things –

Sutton enjoyed living in D.C., despite the fact that she'd never planned to be here.

She'd written a dissertation on the romantics (and she'd eventually given Charlotte a copy. Which was delightful). She'd also tracked down a copy of Sutton's book of personal essays entitled *Tales of a Literally Hopeless Romantic*. They'd been humorous and emotional... Charlotte had skipped over a few. (*The Benefits of Friendship* and *It's Not You It's Us* and *Ill-Fated From the Start* and *First Time (Redux)* and *Sapphire with Eyes to Match*... which she feared were about herself).

Regan and Emma indeed were married and were happy?! Regan watched Lucy every Tuesday during their meetings.



Her favorite part of the week was picking Lucy up from school on Mondays; their custody agreement saw that Sutton had Lucy from Monday afternoon to Saturday morning.

Her ex-wife was a doctor. (But could she face down the Speaker of the House about civil rights issues at seven in the morning on a Monday?)

Katherine and Jack came to visit every other month and stayed for at least a week every time.

She adored her job.

These were some of the facts Charlotte had managed to squirrel away into her memory over the first month of damningly professional meetings.

But before she could get more information out of Sutton, she always seemed to catch herself, before aiming a *look* at Charlotte. “This is about *you*.”

She learned that Sutton took careful deliberation to make sure they did not touch in any way. She was very careful as to where she sat in relation to Charlotte.

And Charlotte also learned that she had this intense drive to *prove* herself to Sutton.

She found this as she divulged anecdotes from her childhood, tales from the last decade. She... she needed to prove that she was reliable and good-natured – as much as she could be – and determined and that...

And to prove that it was worth it. That the pain they’d both suffered, the sacrifice she’d made – *I’m in love with you. I think you could love me too but that you’re just too afraid* – had been worth it, for her to get where she was. For her to have made the advances she’d been able to make in the last decade.

She had to *prove* that to Sutton.

And perhaps to herself, as well.

“You were approached then for the first time regarding writing a biography. Right?” Sutton asked, three and a half weeks into their meetings.

It was the sixth meeting – Sutton had to cancel one, when her ex had canceled on taking Lucy for the weekend at the last minute – and they were discussing her successful run for Governor in 2024.

Charlotte blinked from where she’d been focusing on Sutton’s right ear, where her red hair was carefully tucked back. She’d had an errant thought if she was still sensitive when kissed just there.

Those thoughts happened a bit more frequently than she’d like during these meetings, Charlotte found. Especially because with every meeting, she felt it became increasingly clear that Sutton did not have the same thoughts.

Charlotte cleared her throat as she took a second to process the question. “Right, yes. That was the first time. This deal, the one I accepted, was the third attempt to sway me.”

Sutton arched an eyebrow. “Why did you agree, now?” She made an *I know, I know* gesture, holding up her hands. “Publicity, sure. But... *something* happened.” She stared so astutely at Charlotte, that it stole her breath.

How did Sutton still know her like that? How did Sutton still see her so clearly?

She swallowed hard. “Yes. I... my grandmother,” she cleared her throat. “She left us all these letters, that she’d written about six weeks before she died.” Charlotte closed her eyes tightly, warding off the sting behind them.

“I didn’t think she was sick?” Sutton’s voice was low and caring. In a way that she knew was genuine, something she wasn’t sure other people would be capable of.

God, that *was* why she’d chosen Sutton for this. She was still genuine. Time hadn’t changed that.

“She wasn’t,” Charlotte cleared her throat and opened her eyes. “She wasn’t, but – she was... I think she knew she wasn’t quite well.” Her voice lowered beyond her control, as her eyebrows furrowed and the memories took over.

Her grandmother never said a damn word that she hadn’t felt one hundred percent, but that didn’t shock Charlotte.

“She would never slow down.” Her throat felt tight, a whisper working out. “Not at all, not even for a day. The last time I saw her, she had to use her walker to get around, and I made a comment about her hip.” She attempted a smile. “It was two weeks before she died.”

Silence settled and she stared hard down at her knees. This was the kind of stuff she was so reticent about sharing, but... she had to.

She startled when Sutton sat next to her, on the loveseat in her office. Sutton always deliberately sat across from her, in one of the armchairs. Charlotte stared at her in surprise as Sutton gave her the smallest smile, her hand falling onto Charlotte’s, grasping and holding tight.

Charlotte clung back, her heart pounding at the same time that it warmed with the comfort.

“We can come back to this, if you want,” Sutton murmured. “The bit I have outlined for your grandmother isn’t for a while; I figured we should ease into that.”

But Charlotte shook her head; she’d rather just get it out now. Pull off a band-aid.

“I had been joking. About her hip.” She dug her teeth into her bottom lip. “But I should have maybe been a bit more serious. I was too focused, though, on my Senatorial campaign, that I didn’t *think*—” She broke off, pursing her lips as she shook her head. “Yes, sorry. Perhaps we should put this off a bit.”

She didn’t want to let go of Sutton’s hand, though. Didn’t want to lose this contact.

Sutton didn't drop hers, either. Instead, she squeezed, her long fingers feeling like they encased Charlotte's hand as she nodded. "We can do that. But... Charlotte? Your grandmother was the strongest willed woman in the world. I don't think she wanted you to know that she wasn't well, and I don't think there's anything she would have let you do if you did."

Charlotte hadn't known just how much she'd needed to hear that. But Sutton's words, coming *from Sutton*, felt – they felt...

Like the only comfort she'd had about her grandmother. At all.

She managed to blink away any oncoming tears – thank *god* – as she nodded softly. "Yes. Well, you're probably right."

They sat in silence for another couple of seconds and Charlotte was weary about bringing it to an end. It was the first contact from Sutton in weeks, and it was the first contact in years that made her feel so many things just from a simple touch.

So she made herself speak before Sutton could move to pull away, once she realized what they were doing. "In the letter she left me – five pages – she dedicated a section to professional advice. And one of her points talked about how doing the biography and doing it the next time it came up was the right timing. And so, I agreed the next time it came up."

Sutton took in her words with a considering nod, as she searched Charlotte's gaze.

They were so close, closer than they'd been in just a quiet moment in... so long. She could see the way Sutton's eyes had the brightest sparks of blue around the pupil. She hadn't seen that blue in a long time.

Her grandmother's letter also discussed how she didn't regret her choices. How she felt fulfilled with everything she'd done and that when she looked around in her life, she would go in peace knowing what she'd left behind.

Knowing that she'd left *Charlotte* behind. That Charlotte was her legacy.

And that she'd seen Charlotte struggle in terms of loneliness in the past years. The more she'd climbed up the ladder, the more isolated she'd become. And that she wanted Charlotte to find her whole happiness.

She stared at Sutton.

"Thank you for sharing that with me."

She only nodded, thinking about Sutton's words from their first meeting about the book. *You trust me.*

She hadn't even consciously put it together, then, but... yes. She did. She trusted Sutton. In ways she trusted no one else, and it didn't matter that thirteen years was wasted between them. It

didn't matter; nothing mattered except for Sutton's hand in hers still feeling the way it had felt a decade ago.

She wanted so much more.

And Charlotte, for perhaps the first time in her life, was entirely unsure of how to go about getting it.