

Sutton laid in bed after having woken with the sunrise that morning, almost an hour ago.

Waking early wasn't abnormal for her. But lounging for so long in bed, that was.

She just – couldn't help it today. What *was* last night? Obviously, it had been the event launch for the Zones, and she'd been ready for that. Sutton had prepared her speech, she'd assisted in getting the event off the ground. But...

Charlotte.

It wasn't as though Sutton hadn't seen Charlotte Thompson at all in the last thirteen years; that would have been impossible, given how Charlotte's celebrity had steadily risen with every election. She was a liberal politician who stuck to her guns, and had drawn in a younger audience of voters, while her charisma and family name continued to win over older democrats – it wouldn't be reaching to say that Charlotte's name was a party unifier.

And it would be a lie if Sutton ever tried to say that she didn't follow Charlotte's career deliberately. Not in the beginning; no, back then, it was far, far easier for her to disappear to Rome, and then bury herself in academics, trying to ignore everything related to politics as much as possible.

But as much as her heart twinged years after their breakup when she saw Charlotte on CNN or in a debate, she rooted for her.

This was all Charlotte had ever wanted, and she deserved to have it.

Had Sutton quite literally dropped the dish she'd been washing last year, when she'd heard on the news that Charlotte had publicly come out?

Yes.

Had she paid special attention to the mentions of Charlotte's personal life for the months following that, attempting to spot a special woman in Charlotte's life who may have inspired that coming out?

Also yes.

But, so had Regan. That was human nature.

Speaking of her best friend...

Regan – 1:04AM

*CHARLOTTE FUCKING THOMPSON WAS AT YOUR
EVENT AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN TELL ME! YOU
SNEAKY B*

Regan – 1:05AM

*I had to see it on my current events app on my way home.
Some best friend you are*

Regan – 1:05AM

I was literally at your house when you got home after watching your lifeblood while you were out. I SAW you and we TALKED and you told me the event went WELL, and you just let me LEAVE?

Regan – 1:05AM

did she say anything to you? Did you see her? I assume you saw her there

Regan – 1:13AM

Since you haven't seen my message yet, I'm going to assume you are in bed. But I WILL be coming over for dinner tomorrow with the wife and you WILL be dishing

Sutton shook her head and dropped her phone back to her bed as she groaned and pulled her pillow over her face.

Seeing Charlotte shouldn't have her paralyzed in thought while she laid in bed, like this! It was just... it was the way she'd looked at Sutton. With that same slightly crooked smile, like she knew something Sutton didn't. Like she knew everything.

She'd looked at Sutton like they hadn't had a tumultuous history at all. Like they'd really been good friends who had just fallen out of touch, like the last time they'd spoken hadn't been the worst heartbreak Sutton had ever felt. Maybe Charlotte remembered it like that, though, since she hadn't felt the same way. Maybe, when Charlotte looked back on it, that was how she remembered them.

Like Sutton had been foolishly naïve to fall for her, even more foolish for believing Charlotte had fallen back, and that they could have been great friends if only that hadn't been the case.

And maybe that was what bothered her the most, as she'd woken up with it on her mind.

That Charlotte had been all genuine smirks and bright hazel eyes, and Sutton had felt sucked back right into being the awkward, fumbling grad student she'd once been, rather than the woman she now was.

The pillow was tugged off of her face, allowing the sunlight to stream over her face, as Sutton blinked several times as her vision came back into focus.

“Can I have cookies for breakfast?” Lucy asked. “Why were you hiding?”

Her daughter's dark blonde hair was messy from sleep, but her blue eyes were alight and curious as she looked at Sutton from the side of her bed.

“I was hiding so that my cookie monster of a daughter wouldn't find me and ask to have *cookies* for breakfast,” she whispered, taking a moment to shake her head and rid herself of absolutely pointless and ridiculous thoughts.

Okay, so, she'd seen Charlotte and had been surprised by it. And, okay, Charlotte had *seemed* to have a hold on her like she'd had thirteen years ago, but that could have also been the surprise speaking.

Mostly, though, it didn't matter. Because she wouldn't be seeing Charlotte Thompson again.

And what *did* matter, was sitting up quickly enough that she snatched her six-year-old daughter right off of her feet, snuggling her into her lap and tickling against her sides. Lucy's giggles erupted, echoing off her bedroom walls.

Lucy wiggled in her grasp, gasping for a breath through her laughter. "No! Mama! Nooo!"

"Didn't you have enough cookies last night with Auntie Regan? Hmm?" She continued her tickle attack. She *knew* Regan gave Lucy more sugar than Sutton wanted her to. All. Of. The. Time.

"You can't have enough cookies! That's what Auntie Regan says!" Lucy managed to wiggle enough to escape the tickles and turn in Sutton's lap to look up at her earnestly.

Sutton slid her hands back and played with her daughter's messy hair. "Auntie Regan does say crazy things, though, doesn't she?"

Lucy nodded quickly.

"Okay, so let's pick out something else for breakfast instead of crazy Auntie Regan cookie breakfast." She hefted Lucy back onto her feet and stood up behind her, resting her hands on Lucy's shoulders as she directed them out toward the kitchen. "Did Auntie make sure you filled out your reading worksheet last night?"

Lucy nodded, before launching into a description of *The Magic Tree House* book she and Regan had started the night before, and the sound of it calmed Sutton.

This, right here, was what she needed to focus on. Lucy, her job, her work with the Zones, Regan and Emma... this was her life.

Not Charlotte Thompson.



Sutton had quite literally *just* finished her morning class – her only class of the day – when her phone buzzed on the corner of the desk she kept it on through her lecture.

And for a moment when she saw that the number was blocked, she wasn't going to answer –

Before she remembered the last time she hadn't answered a restricted number, which had turned out to be Lucy's school calling, six months ago, from one of the teacher's private lines, telling her Lucy had gotten sick.

They'd ended up calling Layla, which had resulted in a tense conversation between her ex-wife and herself regarding who Lucy's main school contact *should be*, even though Layla lived almost an hour away.

"Hello?" She picked up, balancing the phone between her jaw and shoulder as she started up her bag to begin her office hours.

"Is this Dr. Sutton Spencer, of Georgetown University?"

"I don't particularly like to be referred to as "doctor" but..." Sutton cut herself off from her usual spiel as she frowned in confusion, slowing her motions as she pulled the phone away from her ear and looked down as if it would give any explanation as to who in the world this was. "Um, yes. This is she. Um, who is this?"

"Great. This is Autumn Lindsay, Senator Thompson's personal assistant. She'd like to have a meeting with you, at the earliest possible convenience. Today, if you're available." The matter-of-fact tone informed her.

The papers Sutton had collected fell from her free hand to the desk. "I – she wants to have a meeting with me? Why?"

Her stomach flip-flopped in a way Sutton hadn't felt in a very long time. A mix of confusion and excitement and utter – *what?*

"She would like to discuss the matter with you, directly." Autumn sharply commented. "The Senator is in back-to-back meetings the entire morning, but will be available at one-fifteen. Are you able to meet then?"

Sutton stood in her classroom, utterly frozen in that moment.

No, was on her mind, wanting to work itself from her lips. No, because – today? A meeting on such short notice? She had to maintain her requisite office hours, she had to pick Lucy up by two-thirty, she had errands to run.

No, because Charlotte didn't have to right to... to demand her time after reconnecting last night for only a few moments. She didn't have the right to demand her time at all after over a decade has passed without a word. After she'd broken her heart.

No, because – just, no!

Then again, what if it was about the Zones? About the Thompson Foundation or something related to last night? Sutton supposed that made the most sense.

Yes. Okay.

The thought calmed her, as she nodded to herself. That *had* to be it.

"I'll be there."

"Perfect. I'll text you the details."

“Perfect,” she echoed faintly, before she hung up and dropped her arm down to her side, feeling the nerves work their way through her stomach.

Hardly a second went by before Sutton’s phone vibrated with a text from Autumn, with Charlotte’s office’s information.

No backing out now.



Sutton had to take a steadying breath before she opened the door she’d been granted access to by Charlotte’s secretary in the Hart building.

It was about the program, she reminded herself. It *had to be*. There was no other reason Charlotte would want a meeting with her.

Clearly, Sutton had only warranted a phone call from her *assistant*, too. She was low on Charlotte Thompson’s totem now. It wasn’t like Charlotte would *summon her* just – what? To see her again?

That thought, as ridiculous as it felt, made her lower stomach tingle even as she rolled her eyes at herself.

There was no way Charlotte would do that. Especially not when they were what they were to one another now – which was to say, nothing. They were nothing. Charlotte had proven long ago that she didn’t miss Sutton enough to contact her, and that had been in the middle of their – their – whatever they were.

As she opened the door and took her first step in, squaring her shoulders, she froze again at the sight of Charlotte pushing herself up to stand from where she’d been perched on the edge of her desk.

Her light brown hair was down today, not in the simple but classic up-do she’d worn last night. Instead, her loose curls hung past her shoulders, over the crisp white button-up she’d clearly worn under her blazer that was hung over her chair, with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

God, but was Charlotte Thompson ever the most gorgeous woman in any room.

Her smile – that slightly crooked smile that was all-knowing and just this side of mischievous – grew as soon as they locked eyes. “Sutton, I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Is this about the Zones?” She blurted out, before cringing at herself.

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows, the only outward sign of confusion or surprise or – Sutton didn’t know. She didn’t know Charlotte anymore. But her grin grew, and Sutton did know that meant she felt amused by Sutton, as she often had in the past.

“The Zones?” Charlotte repeated as she walked closer.

And with every step, Sutton felt even more off-kilter.

Charlotte didn't do – well, Sutton didn't even really know what she was “worried” Charlotte might do. When she reached Sutton, she reached out and placed her hand over Sutton's folded arms, establishing a quick, casual connection in that way that was so, so easy for her.

“I'm so glad you could make it. Let's have a seat. Would you like anything to drink? Tea?” Charlotte arched an eyebrow as she directed Sutton to the comfortable chairs at the cozy little setup near the windows.

Sutton shook her head as she sat. “No, I'm fine.” Her nerves buzzed right back to life as Charlotte sat next to her. So close Sutton could smell her subtle perfume. She squeezed her hands together in her lap, as she looked even closer at Charlotte.

The subtle signs of aging were there, in the lines at the corners of her eyes, her mouth. But mostly, she just looked – even *better*? The air she'd had around her in her twenties, the one that just made you want to lean right in to her and know everything she knew. Because she knew *everything*... it had only magnified with time, age, and experience.

In that moment, it didn't matter that Sutton was thirty-eight, that she'd been married and divorced, that she'd had a child. In that moment, all she *felt* was exactly like the twenty-five year old who fell into Charlotte Thompson's orbit.

Shaking her head at herself, she leaned back, pushing her back into the arm of her chair. “What am I doing here?”

Charlotte grinned. “Always cutting right to the chase.”

Sutton only waited.

As Charlotte crossed her legs and smoothed her hands over her thighs to clasp over her knee. “I'd like you to write my biography.”

Sutton was so, so glad she hadn't had any tea, because she choked on the air in her throat as it was.

She blinked at Charlotte, mouth agape.

Charlotte maintained a small grin.

“What?” She managed to splutter out.

“My biography,” Charlotte repeated, shifting closer to Sutton. “It's been somewhat in the works for a while now; I was approached during my Senatorial campaign. I was far too busy at the time to consider it seriously, but after I won the seat...” She trailed off and pursed her lips, clearly thinking of other details. “Ultimately, it was decided that the biography would only enhance my publicity and name recognition before my presidential bid.”

The words seemed to spin above Sutton's head in a confusing jumble, before she shook her head to clear the thoughts. "Charlotte, I – why?" The question was all that flattened everything else. "Why would you ask me? I've... I've only written academic pieces."

"But you always wanted to write a novel," Charlotte easily countered. "And I know you co-wrote one of the books in your mothers' series, as well. Not *only* academic pieces. There was a collection of essays, as well."

Sutton only stared. How did Charlotte – had she followed her career?

She sincerely hoped Charlotte hadn't read her essay collection, for which she'd come up with the idea and written several of the first pieces when she'd been drunk. She would never have done it, if she hadn't been encouraged by Regan that night.

"I saw it all this morning when I did some research," Charlotte continued, and Sutton didn't know whether she was relieved or deflated. "We can work out quite a reasonable rate for your work, and a schedule that works for both of us – I'm thinking perhaps Tuesday evenings and anytime on Sunday that you might be available..."

As Charlotte kept speaking, Sutton could only stare.

What was she even *doing* here? Showing up as if they were old friends, as if they had anything to talk about? And of course, Charlotte had a plan already at the ready. When did Charlotte Thompson not have a plan?

And when in the world would such a plan that involved Sutton actually work in her favor?

Sutton shook her head, cutting Charlotte off. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Charlotte broke off, actual surprise working over her features as she blinked for a few long seconds. "You... can't?"

"I can't. I have my job at Georgetown, my work with the Zones, Lucy—"

"Lucy?" Charlotte asked, leaning forward.

It took Sutton a moment, because it was so – weird? For her to have someone, anyone, in her life who didn't know her daughter. But it only served as a reminder that Charlotte was not really in her life. "My daughter."

"You have a daughter," the quiet, reflective tone Charlotte took on was markedly different than the one she'd had since Sutton had walked into the office.

The Charlotte up until this moment was every once the charming politician. This Charlotte was taken a bit off-kilter.

Sutton smiled at that.

"Yes. She's six." Out of habit, she tapped her phone to show the picture of Lucy blowing bubbles on the lock screen.

“Oh. She’s beautiful,” Charlotte said, her voice quieter than before.

“She is,” Sutton agreed, a warmth spreading through her. It was confusing, though. Because she spoke of her daughter, while facing the woman she’d once fantasized so strongly about having a future with.

It was embarrassing, really, to look back on her life and know that even though her affair with Charlotte had been so brief, the breadth of the love she’d had for her, the want, the adoration, the daydreams toward a future – well, it was stronger than she’d felt for anyone before or after.

That knocked some sense into her. No – she should *not* be getting drawn back into this. Into Charlotte.

No.

“And, she’s a handful at times. So, as you can imagine, I don’t have much free-time as it is. I definitely don’t have time to write your biography, as illustrious as it will likely be.” And Sutton truly meant that. “So, if this meeting doesn’t have anything to do with the Zones or the Thompson Foundation, I think I should probably be going, since we don’t really have any business to do with one another. I don’t want to waste any more of either of our time.” Sutton pushed herself to stand. “And, if you need anything in the future from me – though I can’t imagine you will – I would ask that you call me yourself, and not have me summoned by your assistant.”

Okay. Perhaps she wasn’t entirely over everything that happened between them, in spite of the time that had passed. She’d always thought she was, and her own words shocked her, as she felt herself blush.

Charlotte, similarly, appeared surprised. “I had meetings nonstop all morning and the pressure to find an author is becoming fairly pressing; if we don’t really have any business either one another, also, then why would it bother you that I didn’t call you personally?”

In spite of her argumentative words, Charlotte seemed entirely too amused.

“I – you – you had time to research me this morning, but not enough to call me yourself? As if we’d never met?” Sutton clapped her hands over her burning cheeks, blowing out a deep breath. Charlotte did this to her. Of course, Charlotte would still have this power over her, even when Sutton had grown more confident and poised in so many other avenues in her life. “I’m sorry. Honestly, it doesn’t truly matter. Because I can’t do it.”

With that, she nodded to herself and turned to leave, feeling like an idiot for even coming to this... this summons. Like a fool, who hadn’t moved on with her life in over a decade, though she *had*. But, she saw Charlotte *once*, and...

“Sutton–” Charlotte was right behind her in a beat, her hand reaching out and falling to Sutton’s wrist.

The touch was tentative, so unlike the Charlotte she recalled, and she stilled completely.

“Why?” She asked, still facing the door.

“Why what?” Charlotte’s voice was only a murmur, her fingers so delicate and yet as though they were leaving a brand on her skin.

“Why me? Why this?” She finally turned around, gesturing between the two of them. “Why?”

“Ah. Well, I was reminded that I needed to make a final choice on an author just last night, right before I saw you, and it all seemed to align—”

Sutton shook her head. “No. I don’t care if it’s been thirteen years or thirty years or three days since the last time I saw you, Charlotte, you aren’t going to make a decision like someone *writing your biography* on a coincidental whim. *Why?* Why am I here today?”

Charlotte would *never* act on a flight of fancy. But Sutton also knew there was no way Charlotte had considered her for this before they’d reconnected at the event. So, *why?*

Those big brown eyes searched Sutton’s before Charlotte whispered, “I want my biography done well, but anyone who is discussed as an option for me is a good writer. But I want it written by someone who knows me.”

“I don’t know you,” she whispered back, unable to look away from that arresting gaze or step away and put some distance between them, even though she *knew* she should.

“You do,” Charlotte insisted.

“I don’t.” She insisted. Because she’d been so wrong before, and it had taken so much work to get over it, so many months, that no matter how long it had been, she couldn’t forget it. “I thought I did, a long time ago. But I was wrong about so much back then, and that was before all of... this,” she gestured to the large office around them. “Before you had assistants to make your phone calls for you, before your office had a view out on Capitol Hill, before people were seeking you out for your biography!”

“And maybe you could consider that’s exactly why I want you!” Charlotte’s hold on her wrist tightened. Not hard, not hurting, but *there*. A grip.

Sutton honestly wanted a moment to just – hold her head in her hands and just wrap her mind around the last twenty-four hours. Instead, she only stared.

Charlotte’s touch gentled, her thumb stroking over Sutton’s hand, making it tingle, as she stared up into Sutton’s eyes, ensnaring her with only a look. “You have an insight into who I am, fundamentally. You knew who I was before all of this, and you did see me, Sutton. You knew me. You understood me in many ways better than just about anyone else. And more than anything, I believe that you’d be fair. You won’t pull punches, because you never did. You’ll write what you see and you’ll do it boldly and truthfully, and I want that. Maybe I hadn’t considered you before last night, but – who could blame me? But we’re both *here*, aren’t we? Isn’t that something to consider?”

Sutton would be entirely lying if she said Charlotte's words didn't hit somewhere right close to her heart. Especially as she read between the lines, "You trust me."

Charlotte's thumb froze with her words, blinking in surprise, before she grinned, slow and soft. "I suppose... I do."

Sutton didn't know why that made a difference to her, but it did. She didn't know why that made this deal more feasible, but it did.

"I trust you," Charlotte asserted more confidently. "And that's why I want you."

Sutton herself almost faltered at the words, before she coughed and added, "To write your biography. You want me to write your biography."

Charlotte's grin remained unchanged. "Yes."

Sutton chewed the inside of her lip.

"If I were anyone else, any other public figure, who approached you and wanted you – Sutton Spencer, a professor of literature at one of the top universities in the country who has a rich understanding of composition – to write a biography, would you turn me down?"

That definitely stopped her up.

But you're not, she almost said, before she stopped herself. Because Charlotte essentially was any public figure, really. If she *really* thought about it.

And she'd be lying if she said writing more wasn't something she wanted to do. She always longed for more time to write, more purpose to *make* time. And what was this, if not that opportunity falling right into her lap?

She stared closely at Charlotte's face.

Beautiful, brilliant, sharp, charismatic, successful, powerful Charlotte Thompson. She was dangerous. Sutton knew that, intimately.

But Sutton was no longer an inexperienced graduate student anymore than Charlotte was still a political underling in the mayor's office.

"Okay," she finally spoke. "I'll do it." She pulled her hand away from Charlotte's touch. "*But*, we have to figure out a consistent work schedule, and above anything else? We keep this professional."

Charlotte resolutely nodded. "Absolutely."

"All right. Well, then. I have to go and pick up Lucy from school, but it's been – uh, it's been very enlightening."

"I'll be in touch. Personally," Charlotte added with a wink.

Oh, good god. So, so dangerous.



Charlotte watched Sutton go, and felt more alive than she had in... she didn't quite know how long.

All she knew was that she hadn't stopped thinking of Sutton all night long, and that she'd spent thirteen years wondering about her. Charlotte Elizabeth Thompson was nothing if not opportunistically resourceful.

She didn't know what would come of this, but she also knew she was only speaking the truth to Sutton. She did trust her, after all of this time. She did believe in her writing skills.

And she did want her.