

“I know I don’t often come to sit down for a chat. I’m sorry about that,” Charlotte murmured, as she carded a hand through her hair, tousling it back over her shoulders. “And I know that you don’t blame me for that. But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m sorry for it.”

Closing her eyes, she leaned back against the seat of the bench she sat on.

“I wish you were here. I don’t know what, exactly, I would do differently if you *were* here, but I still wish you were. That’s a part of why I don’t often come to sit here, you know. Because I know that if I did, I’d get so... bogged down, in missing you. And I knew that would make me feel this – this hurt, of you being gone, all over again.”

She stared intently at the jane magnolia tree she’d planted in her yard. The one she’d planted with her grandmother’s ashes – the ones that weren’t buried in the family mausoleum, anyway.

Charlotte hadn’t been aware of any of her grandmother’s post-mortem plans. She’d asked once, when Elizabeth had gone in for a hip surgery several years before she’d passed, what arrangements she’d want. It was a conversation Charlotte, herself, did not want to have, but she’d thought it was prudent to discuss when an eighty-eight-year-old was going to have surgery.

Her grandmother had waved away her question, with the response, “It’s all taken care of.”

Which Charlotte accepted, and never questioned it again. Of course it was taken care of; it was Elizabeth Thompson at the helm. She’d had a will and estate plans drawn up with her lawyers since she’d been in her forties, and – according to her lawyers – she’d carefully make updates and reviews as she aged, as their family had grown, as new events occurred.

She’d wanted to be cremated. And she’d had half of her remains go to the Thompson Mausoleum in Great Falls – where Charlotte was from – and half of them had been given to *her*, along with the letter.

Which had started by addressing: *I know, my dear girl, that you will miss me most of all. Perhaps more than anyone else in our family, combined. I know you and I align on the believe that death IS the end. I do not believe that my soul exists in my physical remains or in a spiritual afterlife, and I know you share that view. But this is about more than that. This is about you being able to have closure in my passing – something I want for you to have.*

The family plot is symbolic, a necessity for public image, and an agreement I made long ago with your grandfather for us both to be laid to rest, there. Never let it be said that Elizabeth Thompson didn’t keep her word, even in death.

I spent my life trying to make an indelible, intangible change in this country, in the world. I’d like, in death, to make a physical change. I want you to plant my remains, to make a beautiful, physical addition to the world. And I trust that you, more than anyone, will respect that wish for me.

Charlotte hadn’t known how much she’d needed that, not until she was entrusted with all of the information. And it had given her closure, even though she was of the same mind as her grandmother; she did not believe Elizabeth Thompson’s spirit existed in this jane magnolia tree.

But she had taken comfort when she'd planted it. A visceral sort of comfort, with her hands in the soil, as she'd remembered her grandmother showing her how to garden in her youth. It had been something they'd shared together, something before politics and current events and chess strategy.

Maybe the only thing they shared that was relaxing.

Her grandmother had left no instruction as to what plant, exactly, she'd wanted. Charlotte took that as another sign of trust. Her grandmother trusted her to figure that out.

After extensive research that she'd done herself, no outsourcing to assistants for something like this, she'd chosen the jane magnolia. Something that was, indeed, a physically beautiful addition to this world. Something originating in the south, much like Elizabeth had. But, unlike other magnolias, this one was able to flourish in not only the south, but the north. It was sturdy, strong, and versatile.

She blinked up at it, feeling a sentimental satisfaction at how well the tree was doing in the year since it had been planted.

"I suppose the truth is that because neither you nor I believe in an afterlife, speaking into the ether *at you* about my life seemed like... such a waste. Of time and emotional energy. And perhaps it still is." She rolled her eyes at herself, a dry laugh working out of her throat as she waved her hand. "But, the truth is, you're the only person whose advice—"

Charlotte cut herself off, then, because if she couldn't be entirely honest right here and now, when it was only herself present, then... when *could* she be?

"Whose *approval*, I need. To do – what I think I have to do. What I think... what I think I want to do." Her stomach churned as she admitted to the fact.

As her phone vibrated next to her, the sound jarring against the ornate metal bench in her garden, she nodded at it. With a deep breath, she leaned forward and pressed her fingertips gently to the tree – to the physical reminder of her grandmother left in the world – and nodded as she did so.

All she had left from her grandmother were weighty expectations – some spoken, many unspoken but just as heavy – and that letter. She'd never get her official seal of approval for any of her future choices.

And that...

Charlotte shook her head at the thought, as she grabbed her phone.

It was just after seven in the morning, which meant her day was truly underway. She had several calendar reminders – kudos to Maya – and a handful of texts from Autumn, regarding the day.

Charlotte didn't allow herself to review them, though. She knew she'd just get distracted and potentially sucked in, and that wasn't going to happen today.

Today...

She looked down at her phone, tapping her thumbs against the sides, before she bit the bullet and messaged Autumn and Maya.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to call in sick today. Should be a simple rescheduling for most things, let me know if there are any snags. I likely won't be up for getting any work done at home, today, but I'll be available for emergencies.

For a moment after she sent the message, she paused... before she added –

I hope you both had a relaxing time off from work.

There. She'd done it.

She'd called in sick to work for the first time in... ever. And she was faking sick for the *only* time in her adult life.

Today was, technically, Charlotte's first day back to work in the new year.

There was nothing pressing was on her schedule – she felt it was a kindness for those in her employ to take a day to ease back into the thick of things. In addition, many of the people she had lined up on her docket for meetings were also just starting back in the office today, and Charlotte had learned over the years that many people weren't quite as ready to jump into work with both feet after a few days off, the way she was.

Typically, when she was starting back at work after any break, Charlotte was *ready*. Typically, she'd have already had a jump start to work, because she didn't usually voluntarily take time off. Her days off were governmentally required and organized, leaving Charlotte with ample free time.

Which she usually utilized to the best of her capabilities. There was, truly, not a better time to delve into an initiative or write a motion or deep dive into campaign strategy, than on days off from work. On these days off, she wasn't inundated with meetings, or bogged down in paperwork, or spending entire days in congressional hearings. This was the time she had to really get shit *done*.

As Charlotte poured herself a cup of coffee, she thought about how much work she hadn't gotten done over the holiday break.

No, she hadn't missed any deadlines and there was *technically* nothing she had to do. But – there was always something she could be working on. If she wanted to get ahead, if she wanted to keep with the professional plan she'd been steadfastly climbing for the last twenty years, there was always something to do.

Being pro-active was the only way to accomplish everything she wanted to accomplish. She knew that.

And yet, Charlotte hadn't done that work, over the break.

Instead, she'd spent Christmas with Sutton. She'd seen Dean and Caleb. And then she'd gone to see Sutton for New Year's. She'd spent the holiday break focusing on... herself.

On her personal life.

She snorted at the thought as she took a sip of her hot coffee.

A personal life was the last thing she'd really thought about, let alone dedicated serious time to.

Which was perhaps why she'd had nothing to say when Sutton had challenged her, three days ago – *what does your life look like, without that plan in front of you? What will you do with yourself?*

She wanted to be angry with Sutton. She so truly did. For devaluing Charlotte's feelings for her, her words, a declaration she'd meant with every fiber of her very being.

But, on the same hand, she understood Sutton so deeply, that she *couldn't* have any real ire.

Sutton didn't – or couldn't, rather – believe that Charlotte could follow through on her proclamation of not running for president. That Charlotte wouldn't be able to give up her career to be with her.

Charlotte had been hurt and scared and – and an entire jumble of feelings that she couldn't quite put words to.

But the truth was, deep down, she knew that *she* didn't even know what to say to Sutton in that moment. She'd had no words to refute.

Because... she *didn't* have a personal life. She didn't have any clue where she'd go, after this chapter was over, if it wasn't forward in politics.

Charlotte knew she wanted Sutton. She knew she wanted Sutton from the very *core* of her being. With everything she had.

But what she didn't know was who she *was*... without her political aspirations. She didn't have a fucking clue who she was or what she would do, if she wasn't doing *this*.

Which was, frankly, a terrifying thought.

Who she was and what she was, without the backdrop of her career, was something she needed to figure out.

And *that* was even more terrifying to admit to herself.

But there was no better time like the present than to figure that out, she'd decided in the last couple of days. Because Sutton had promised her that there was no pressure, and she believed that. She believed Sutton wasn't pressuring her to figure everything out *right now*.

Charlotte felt the pressure, though, from herself. She needed to know, sooner rather than later. And right now, that started with... calling out sick from work. Deliberately taking a day off to sit with herself and her thoughts and reconcile what it was to exist without throwing herself into work when she was stressed or struggling.

Easier said than done, really.

She snorted at herself as she finished her coffee, glancing back down at her phone. Resisting the urge to text Sutton was not as simple as she wished it was. Especially after their time together in the last couple of weeks.

Christmas Eve and Christmas and New Year's – they'd gone through so many ups and downs so quickly, and she just... she wanted to talk to her. Even if it wasn't about the serious shit they were dealing with right now. Even if it was just to ask how her trip back from Massachusetts had been, because she knew Sutton had arrived last night. Even if it was just to ask what she and Lucy were up to, today.

Anything.

She hadn't realized how much she'd lived for these small lines of communication in the last few months, but she found herself desperately missing them in the day-to-day.

But she'd agreed with Sutton that they'd take a cool-down period for a little while. Until they'd both thought about what the future looked like – *really* thought about it. Those had been Sutton's words.

So, Charlotte was *thinking*.

She perked up, confused and surprised, at the sound of her doorbell. And for a heart-pounding moment, she couldn't help but think – Sutton. That Sutton was thinking of her just as much as Charlotte was thinking of Sutton.

Even as she slid off her seat and made her way down the hall, though, she dismissed the thought.

Sutton had made it very clear, that they couldn't go forward without knowing the plan forward. So it *couldn't* be Sutton.

Caleb, maybe? He'd been blowing up her phone in the last few days to chat about what was going on between her and Sutton. Maybe he'd made the drive from New York to D.C.? Maybe –

She peered out of the hall window as she approached the door, confusion deepening as she did so. Huh.

Still, she opened the door, already speaking as she did so. "Autumn? What are you doing here? I'd sent you a message that I'm out of the office today."

It was *extremely* unlike Autumn to not promptly read a message. In fact, Charlotte had believed that between her light schedule today and her two capable assistants, her calendar would be entirely reshaped by now.

Instead, Autumn stood before her, a frown etched deeply into her features, as her eyes darted up and down Charlotte. Assessing her, it seemed like.

"Yes, I got the message. But – you *didn't* say you were out of office," Autumn corrected, her own confusion and concern apparent as her eyes bored into Charlotte's. "You said you were calling in *sick* and that you should only be disturbed for emergencies!"

All right, so Autumn had, in fact, received the message.

Charlotte stared back, dubious. “Yes?”

Autumn tossed her hands in the air, gesturing to the car behind her. “I came here, thinking you’d be on your death bed! That I needed to have Hamish ready to bring us to the hospital.” She narrowed her eyes, running a clinical look over Charlotte, again. “Do you? Are you ready? Have you taken your temperature?”

A disbelieving laugh worked its way out of Charlotte’s throat as she shook her head. “Autumn, I’m not going to the hospital. I don’t need to.”

Instead of alleviating Autumn’s concerns, though, it seemed her words had a perplexingly opposite effect. Her assistant’s eyes grew large, her jaw snapping shut, as her hand clenched where it held tightly to the handles of the bag she was holding.

“Oh, god,” she whispered. “You got terrible health news over the break. You’ve been strangely out of communication for the last few days – even on our days off, you usually have non-urgent messages you send. And you didn’t! Not a single one.” She lifted a hand, roughly drawing it through her hair as she shook her head. “It’s – it’s okay. Whatever it is, we’ll figure out a plan of attack–”

Charlotte felt like she had whiplash from the sharp turn this had taken as she cut Autumn off. “Autumn! I did not get terrible health news. Though, I appreciate your spring into action if it had been the case.”

Autumn blinked at her blankly, then, for several seconds. “I’m sorry, Senat – Charlotte. I don’t understand.”

Charlotte pursed her lips, before she took a step back and opened her door. “Care for a cup of coffee?”

Autumn’s eyebrows lifted even higher on her forehead. “Um – sure. As long as I don’t have to be at the office, I suppose?”

Charlotte nodded her acquiescence, letting Autumn walk into her foyer as she shut the door behind her. Both Autumn and Maya had been to her home handfuls of times in the last year, though usually it was brief. To drop something off or pick something off, in an off hour. Typically, their work was done at the office, even their late nights. But on the very, very rare occasion, they’d been here.

Still, it was unusual. Charlotte knew that. But she also knew that today was a particularly unusual day.

“If you wouldn’t mind letting Hamish know that he doesn’t need to be on call for a hospital visit?” She asked, leading the way into the kitchen.

Autumn nodded, already firing off the message.

“Appreciated,” she murmured, as she walked toward the coffee machine Dean had given her years ago as a housewarming gift.

“Yeah. Sure. No problem,” Autumn said, and Charlotte could feel Autumn concerned stare as she poured her a mug. “I’m sorry, but I’m just – I’m so confused?”

Charlotte arched her eyebrows in question, silently asking her to elaborate.

It seemed Autumn didn't need much more prompting than that, as she tossed her hands into the air, obviously exasperated. "You *never* call in sick! Even when you actually *are* sick, you usually come into the office. Whenever you have a cold, you wear a mask into the office and cancel all in-person appointments. That time you had the flu really badly, you still worked from home and were available for communication like a normal day."

As Charlotte slid Autumn her coffee, she nodded at her words, affirming them. Very true.

Autumn placed the bag she'd brought with her on the counter, gesturing at it. "I have – I don't know, the entire aisle from CVS in there. A medication for every symptom I could imagine. Because... I don't know what's going on?"

There was a desperation in her voice that Charlotte sympathized with. She really, truly did.

So she admitted, "I don't really know, either."

Autumn stared at her, face scrunched up in wordless confusion.

She'd spent more time with Autumn than *anyone else* in the last couple of years. Not discussing her personal life with Autumn, admittedly, had been simple given her lack of one. But even when she went on the odd date or when her grandmother had died, she'd still maintained a very professional line with her assistant.

Today, though... Charlotte stared back at Autumn, and felt very strongly like she saw herself in her. Autumn was in her late twenties, was sharp and driven. Queer. Despite their lack of personal life sharing, she liked Autumn, and respected her.

And, for better or worse, no matter how pathetic it was, there was no one on the planet that knew Charlotte's life the way Autumn did.

That realization was jarring, but Charlotte took it in stride. As much as she could, anyway, as she nodded to herself.

"Can I tell you the truth, Autumn? Perhaps take today as a page out of our typical book? Because to tell you *what's going on*, I'm afraid it's more personal than professional," she admitted, the words feeling so foreign and so... strange on her tongue. "But I believe that I can trust you. In fact, I *do* trust you."

She couldn't work so closely with someone and not trust them – their opinions, their work ethic, their discretion.

Autumn stood several feet away, watching Charlotte as she seemed to think over her words, before she slowly nodded. "Yes. I – you *can* trust me. Professionally or personally. Like... a friend?"

Charlotte did *not* want to consider what it meant that her personal assistant was, actually, her closest friend. But it would be disingenuous to say that wasn't the truth.

"Like a friend," she confirmed, leaning against the island in her kitchen as she took a breath. She was about to share her personal life details, her sacred details – everything Sutton related – with Autumn.

Talking to Caleb and Dean hadn't gotten her anywhere. Her grandmother couldn't answer her.

So, it seemed this was the option.

Autumn nodded, her interest appearing more and more rapt as the seconds ticked by.

Charlotte summoned her courage, as she cleared her throat. "The truth, Autumn, is that for the first time in my memory, I'm playing hooky. Taking a personal day, if you will."

Autumn's eyebrows moved up on her forehead in question, even though she didn't voice anything.

She took it as her cue to continue. "And... the truth behind the reasoning for that, is..." God, where to even *begin*? She drummed her fingers against the marble countertop, as she thought it over. And even if she could think of where to begin, she couldn't even fathom how to break it all down to Autumn. How she'd be able to spill her innermost thoughts and emotions aloud.

Seeming to sense her issue, Autumn perked up. "Okay. I have an idea. Do you have playing cards somewhere? Or a board game? I figured cards would be a safer bet."

Confused – but, admittedly, intrigued – Charlotte had to take a moment to think. Because she wasn't someone who typically played games, honestly. Even if she had someone to play them with at her home, she never would have had the time.

Only, "Actually, I do. Have cards."

Because the last time Dean and Caleb had come for a visit, they'd all played poker, and then they'd left the cards when they'd gone home.

Charlotte gestured for Autumn to follow her into the living room, before she started pulling open the drawers at the base of her television stand.

She emerged victorious, holding up the cards as she slowly turned to stare questioningly at Autumn. "What would you like to do with said cards?"

"When I was younger, I had some trouble... verbally expressing myself," she settled on. "But whenever I had something going on that I didn't know how to talk about, my mom would play games with me. Whenever something good happened to me in the game, she had to share something *she* was thinking about, and when something good happened for her, I had to share." She frowned, then, at something much deeper, below the surface, before she shrugged. "I suppose it worked because it made me feel like there was no pressure. It was just a game. We were just... talking."

Charlotte figured it would be worth a try.

They started with rummy, and by the end of the hand, as Charlotte scored thirty points higher, she sent Autumn a questioning look.

She nodded, and bit at her lip, before she stated, "At Christmas, you asked me if I was going home to Rhode Island. And while you're right in that, I went to Brown for college... I'm not actually *from* Rhode Island. Home is in Ohio. And I haven't been back there in a long time."

Surprise slid through Charlotte at the blatant honesty, and she could admit that she appreciated Autumn sharing.

“Apologies for getting it wrong. The place where the person I spent at least eight hours a day with is from seems... egregious to not know.”

Autumn shrugged as she dealt their new hand. “It’s not something I like to talk about.”

When Autumn beat Charlotte by forty-five points in the next hand, she felt more relaxed. More settled in the fact that this was the time to be honest.

“I’m sure you’re aware of my personal relationship with Sutton,” she started, aiming a look at Autumn.

Who nodded quickly, a small smile playing at her lips, before she flushed and cleared her throat. “I – yes. I’m aware, that there is very likely something more to your relationship than is strictly professional.”

“Glad to confirm it for you,” she dryly responded, making Autumn laugh.

“I mean, it was *confirmed* for me a few ways, but...” She rolled her lips, before shrugging. “If we’re speaking plainly right now? I’ve had suspicions about you two since the first day she came into the office.”

Charlotte could only stare.

Which seemed to prompt Autumn to explain, “I just – you were *so*... excited? To see her? That she was even just coming in to have a meeting with you. I’ve seen you in *a lot* of situations, Charlotte. In meetings with people you respect and admire, speaking to people you loathe, and everything in between. I was even there the day before you went on a date with that woman, last year? The pharmaceuticals representative from Virginia?” She shook her head, wrapping her hands around her mug. “And *nothing* was like the way you looked the very first day Sutton came to our office. It’s only gotten even more intense since.”

Charlotte... holy hell, was Charlotte *blushing*?

“Ah,” was all she could say.

Which seemed to alarm her assistant. “Is that all right to say? Because I thought—”

“It was,” she cut in, resolutely willing her blush to go away. “Right now, what I need to hear is honesty. In all facets. So that... was good to know.”

Autumn looked relieved, her shoulders slumping slightly, as she blew out a breath. “Cool.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but grin, then. *Cool*. Something Autumn would never say to her during their workday.

She shuffled the cards as she started speaking, again. “Alas – so, you know Sutton and I are... engaged in a personal relationship. What you might not know, is that it began over a decade ago. When I was first running for congress.”

She admittedly did take some satisfaction from the way Autumn gasped in surprise.

“*What?*”

Charlotte nodded slowly, biting her cheek, before elaborating, “Yes. We met, and carried on a very discreet—” How did she explain that? They *hadn’t* been in a relationship, technically. But to reduce what they’d had down to a fling or an affair made her want to be sick. Screw it. To Charlotte, they’d had a relationship. The most meaningful one she’d ever had. “Relationship. Before a very, very messy breakup.”

Sutton telling Charlotte how she’d shattered her heart rang in her ears, making her stomach clench.

“Because I chose my career, and I wasn’t ready to come out publicly, then.”

It wasn’t easy to say that, it really wasn’t. But right now, she was going for broke.

And Autumn appeared to be utterly fascinated.

Charlotte paused, though, as they played their next hand.

And when Autumn edged Charlotte out by only five points, she gracefully accepted it.

“When we ran into one another again, I…” Charlotte’s eyes unfocused from Autumn, then, as she thought back to that evening, the first time months ago that she’d seen Sutton in so long. “I realized I’d never quite gotten over her.”

She stared intently at the cards as Autumn shuffled them.

“I realized, so acutely, that there was no one I’d ever met, who made me feel that way. And I didn’t want to lose her again. So, we’ve been seeing one another, even as we work on the book.”

“That was the *only* reason I had doubts about your relationship,” Autumn said, as she dealt. “Because you typically are so professional and so responsible, I thought *maybe* there was a slight chance I was reading into things. Maya *never* doubted it, though,” she grudgingly admitted.

Charlotte outscored Autumn by fifteen points on the next hand.

“Maya and I are still seeing each other,” Autumn confessed, a deep blush staining her cheeks. “I… I don’t really know what to do about it. I *definitely* didn’t expect for it to turn into what it is, now. I’m – I’ve tried to stay as focused on work and on my career as possible, that I haven’t really had a relationship since college.”

Charlotte tilted her head, unexpectedly extremely endeared, especially as Autumn fiddled with the pendant on her necklace.

“She gave me this necklace, for Christmas,” she whispered, as they both looked down at it. Autumn’s fingers toyed with it, delicately. “And she – god, she invited me to Philly! I don’t know what is going on, there.”

The words were hushed, seemingly to herself, before she gave Charlotte a look of wide-eyed concern.

“Not that – it’s *not* coming into play at work. I’d never let it. And neither would Maya.”

Charlotte found herself grinning as she shook her head. “I work with you every day; I’m well-aware that both of your work is up-to-par. Don’t worry.”

Autumn visibly relaxed, as Charlotte dealt the next hand.

“Besides, we’re being *friends* at the moment.”

“You’re the closest thing I have to one,” Autumn reported under her breath, before she gave another of those embarrassed, worried looks.

“Yeah, you’re the closest thing I have to one, too,” Charlotte murmured, feeling the same embarrassment with the words, but far less intensely than Autumn did.

At the end of the day, Charlotte was a workaholic. It wasn’t news to her and it wasn’t a secret. Who else would she be spending so much time with?

Autumn breathed out a soft laugh. “Wow. Cool. Okay.”

At the end of the hand, Autumn took a victory with fifty points, and Charlotte stared down at their cards, as the words bubbled up, “I told Sutton I wouldn’t run for president, if we could be together.”

“What?!” Autumn positively yelped the word.

When Charlotte met her gaze, her assistant stared at her in utter shock, her hand over her heart.

“I’m – I apologize.” Autumn visibly took in a deep breath, then slowly let it out, before clearing her throat. “What?” She repeated, far more calmly.

“Sutton has a daughter–”

“Lucy, who you have plied with a gift basket when she was sick, and video games, and that guitar for Christmas, and have babysat. Yes, I know.”

“Correct,” she affirmed, picturing Lucy. The way she’d given Charlotte the tour on New Year’s Eve, and her excitement at seeing Charlotte at the party. She couldn’t help but smile all over again, at the easy well of affection. “And Lucy... has not grown up in the public eye. Which is how Sutton wants to keep it. She doesn’t want to thrust Lucy under the microscope of public opinion. And I understand that.”

She really, really did.

Maybe it made her love Sutton even more, in an insane sort of way.

But Sutton would take care of her daughter and her daughter’s needs before anything and anyone else, and Charlotte wouldn’t want her to be any other way. She wouldn’t be *Sutton*, then.

“So, if you want to have a future with Sutton... you can’t do it by running for president,” Autumn quietly surmised, still sounding shell-shocked.

Charlotte nodded, the conflicting feelings battling out inside of her all over again.

“I love Sutton,” she confessed, and the words felt so – so *nice* to say. Freeing. Validating.

It made her laugh, strangely, wildly, as she carded a hand through her hair. “I do. I love her, and I want to be with her, in the very real, undeniable, not-discreet relationship kind of way. But... what *does* my life look like, without my career? Who am I without it?”

Her laughter faded as she technically stared at Autumn, but wasn't really seeing her. She was trying to see something far beyond her. Something she couldn't see, because Charlotte was many things, but she'd never claimed to be clairvoyant.

Pursing her lips, she refused to get caught up in the emotions – how scary, how lonely, how uncertain – her future looked, if she took away her plan. Even if she and Autumn were acting as *friends* right now, Charlotte was entirely unwilling to bare herself in that way to her assistant. To anyone, really.

Except for Sutton.

“In truth, I have no idea. I'm very certain that I wouldn't resent Sutton, no matter what the outcome. She isn't forcing my hand or being selfish, and her concerns aren't unfounded. But it's a daunting thought, admittedly, and I'm not exactly sure what to tell Sutton. What do I tell her about a future together, about myself in that future, if I have no idea what it entails?”

And that was where Charlotte had found herself stumped in the last couple of days.

“That's... definitely a pickle,” Autumn quietly conceded.

Her solemn confirmation of Charlotte's *pickle* made her chuckle. “You're telling me.”

The day was *utterly* not what Charlotte had anticipated it being. She'd anticipated calling out of work and toiling around her house – perhaps making some of Sutton's classic Pro/Con lists and researching potential career possibilities. Trying to figure out where she saw herself without a future in politics, what she could do with herself. Trying to figure out what she could say to Sutton. How they could overcome this, and come out on the other side, together.

She absolutely could not have predicted she'd spend her entire morning and early afternoon with Autumn Alton, her assistant-turned-temporary-friend, playing card games.

Then playing The Game of Life, which Autumn apparently had ordered to be delivered from somewhere? Charlotte did appreciate Autumn's resourcefulness; Autumn had never been presented with a task or a conundrum at work that she hadn't been able to figure out.

Charlotte had been dubious of the game, but Autumn had insisted they play – three times.

Every time they did, Charlotte was given a new career and different obstacles to work through in the game, but she and Autumn ran through them as if they were real possibilities.

Truthfully, it was far more thought provoking than Charlotte would have thought, more creative than Charlotte ever could have come up with herself, and... fun, as well.

Though, she didn't believe firefighter, IT technician, or teacher were viable options for herself. But working through hypotheticals made her brain work.

As they came to the end of their second game of MASH in the early afternoon, Charlotte couldn't help but laugh as she leaned back against her couch.

"Autumn, I've always seen myself in you, but particularly today, with the realization that you are taking my personal life and treating it the same as we would treat a problem solving brainstorm session in the office is truly the confirmation I never knew I needed."

Autumn shrugged. "It just felt right." But she had a pleased smile on her face, as she accepted Charlotte's words.

Charlotte drew out a deep breath, her laughter fading, as she looked down at her latest result in the MASH game.

Owning a mansion, single, president, no children, driving a station wagon – her car with Hamish as her driver had been crossed off in the second round of cuts, living in New York.

Other than the station wagon and the living in New York – though, granted, she owned a home there, obviously – it was... an accurate representation of what she could expect, if she stayed the course.

"I've always stayed the course," she murmured, lightly tapping at Autumn's neat handwriting. "Ever since I *made* the course, in high school, I've never strayed. There were moments, like when I'd been with Sutton back in the day. Moments that I nearly changed direction. But I never did."

"And... did the course go the way you expected it to?"

A wry smile played on Charlotte's lips as she lifted her gaze to Autumn's, and nodded. "Yes, actually. This *was* the course. Steady and direct." She lifted her arm and held it out straight in front of her. "No wavering. Hold to the strength of my convictions. I'm exactly where I'd always thought I would be when I came up with the plan."

Funny, really. How she was just where she'd always thought she'd want to be, but looking at it laid out for her in this MASH game didn't make her feel any pride.

"Charlotte – can I speak to you as we've been speaking today? As... friends?" Autumn asked, tentatively.

Charlotte met her gaze again, giving her permission with an inquisitive look.

"From what I've heard today, you're unsure of what to do without your career in politics. That seems pretty clear," Autumn verbalized. "Because, clearly, it's all you'd ever planned for yourself."

Thus far, Autumn was only summarizing Charlotte's own words, so this couldn't be the *point* Autumn was trying to make. She waited.

Autumn paused, though, looking more and more unsure about saying exactly what was on her mind. "I really just don't want to overstep. Because I know today has been – er, personal bonding."

Charlotte snorted.

“But I also know that tomorrow, we will be back to business as usual, and I don’t want to speak out of turn,” she finished.

“Understood,” Charlotte validated. “But, short of some sort of assault or heinously disrespectful comments, I want you to tell me what’s on your mind. I assure you, Autumn, I have heard a lot of remarks thrown my way over the years in this profession. I have a fairly tough skin.”

Autumn nodded, toying with her necklace briefly, before she stated, “So, when it comes to a future without your career, you’re – uncertain. Maybe a little scared.”

More than a little, but Charlotte appreciated Autumn splitting the difference.

“But... whenever we’ve talked about the possibility of things going the other way? The possibility of you keeping your career and *staying the course*? You seem – lost,” Autumn’s voice dipped to a whisper, but Charlotte felt the impact of that single word, land in her stomach like a fucking stone.

She inhaled sharply at it.

And Autumn continued, “When we played that game of Life, the second one, where we had you bypass having a partner as you drove through life, you weren’t engaged *at all* in the hypotheticals. Not the same way you were when you had the fake-Sutton next to you. And when you talked about her earlier? About how you two met and then you lost her, it’s...” She rolled her lips, before delivering the true assessment. “You seem *devastated* at the idea of letting her go, again.”

Yes. God, Charlotte hated it, but – yes. Autumn’s observation struck such a chord inside of her, because it was the honest truth. Reflecting the way Charlotte felt, even if she hadn’t voiced it in so many words.

Autumn shrugged, then, finally dropping her hand from her necklace. “I just think that, in the grand scheme of things, that aimlessness and devastation is worse than the uncertainty.”

It seemed, though, that Autumn wasn’t quite done, there. Apparently, she’d hit her stride.

“You’re gifted with a dedication and ambition and intelligence that so many people would *die* for,” Autumn stated, a passion blazing in her words. A passion so strong, frankly, it was surprising to Charlotte to hear from her typically very controlled assistant.

“But you also seem to have found yourself in love with someone, who knows all of you and loves all of you. Who couldn’t help but fall back into feelings with you even after you broke her heart. Who you’ve spent over a decade never getting over. So – to be entirely honest – who cares? Who *cares* what you’ll do, after this?” She gestured at Charlotte’s work laptop on the table. “You *are* brilliant and ambitious and dedicated; you don’t have to do this *one career* – this one in a *billion* career – to utilize that. You will figure it out.”

Autumn caught herself, then, demurely coughing, before she fixed her posture the way she usually sat at her desk. “All I mean is... it doesn’t actually seem that difficult a choice as you’re making it. Sutton – is understandably scared. It’s scary, to trust people that hurt you so

badly. But if she is what you want, then it's time to stray from the course, and put your ambition and dedication into making her see what you've let *me* see, today."

Charlotte could only stare for several moments, before she realized why. Before she realized the role-reversal she'd found herself in, with a woman ten years her junior, who worked for her.

But *damn it* if everything she said wasn't exactly what Charlotte had needed to hear. If those words didn't make Charlotte's heart pound faster in her chest. If she didn't feel that sense of purpose inside of her, something she'd been missing in the last few days.

"Autumn, you are a very intelligent person, yourself. I've never regretted hiring you, not for a single moment, but right now, I think it might have been one of the best decisions I've ever made."

A breathless hour later, Charlotte found herself knocking on Sutton's front door.

She shifted restlessly from foot to foot, her stomach alight with butterflies. With hope, with nerves. Hoping that whatever words she managed when Sutton opened the door were the right ones.

Her nerves settled – bafflingly so – when Sutton opened the door.

Those blue eyes widened in clear surprise. "Charlotte? Hi. What are you doing here?"

"I called out of work today," was what she found herself stating, startling both of them. *What?*

Sutton's eyes seemed to widen even more, though, concern washing over her expressive face. "Are you all right? I can't even imagine how terrible you must have felt to take a day off of work for it?"

Quickly, she reached out and landed her hand on Charlotte's wrist, pulling her inside, before she quickly shut the door behind her. She ran her eyes down Charlotte, as if trying to silently assess her ailment.

"You can't be standing out there in the cold when you must be feeling like you're on death's door. What are your symptoms? Do you—"

Charlotte stopped her, quickly shaking her head. "No. I'm not actually sick; I just called in sick. Funny, you aren't the first person to think that way."

There was a clear relief that laced through Sutton, then, her breath pushing out of her in a rush, as she rested her hand over her stomach. "Charlotte, you are *not* the kind of person who calls in fake sick."

"I am, though. I am, when I'm more invested in thinking about *us* than I am in working," she insisted, and – wow. That was entirely the truth. A truth that felt good to say.

Especially when she could see that it rendered Sutton speechless.

Standing in Sutton's hallway, only a foot away from her, engulfed in the warmth and the feeling of home that lived here, quieted all of the deafening anxieties and uncertainties that had plagued Charlotte in her own home in the last few days.

It was that feeling that she had with Sutton. That feeling like the world was all right.

For once, maybe the weight of the world wasn't on her shoulders. She knew how to describe it, now. The freedom from that feeling was something Sutton, and only Sutton, gave her.

If she'd needed another reason that she was doing the right thing, there it was.

"I know you don't believe that I can reconcile giving up the future I've spent my life working towards, Sutton. I understand that, and I know why. Because, part of *me* wasn't even sure. Not really."

She gamely shrugged, lifting her shoulders before dropping them again. Not for a single second taking her eyes off of Sutton, though.

"And maybe I'm still not entirely certain. Because, yes, I did say those words to you on New Year's without truly knowing. And the truth is, I'm not sure when I will find my next career step. I have four more years in my senate seat to figure that out."

Terrifying. But far less terrifying than looking at a future without Sutton.

"That's what I can offer you right now." She gestured at herself, that quivering of butterflies working through her when she hoped – for the first fucking time in her life – that *she* was enough.

"No, I'm not certain exactly where I will end up, professionally. But I do know that I can live without being the president, and I know I can be happy without it. I know I can."

There was a strength in her voice that she just – *felt* coursing through her veins.

"What I don't know, is that I can live my entire life without you and be happy without you. I told you on New Year's that I made a mistake in giving you up, last time. And I can admit that. But I know who I am, and I learn from my mistakes. I spent over ten years wondering what life could have been like, if I'd been brave and chosen you, before. I will not spend the rest of my life wondering what we could have been if I'd been brave, this time."

The utter *shock* on Sutton's face was palpable. It felt very in-line with the way Charlotte could feel her heart pounding, her blood rushing in her ears.

"My life is – and always has been – the result of my choices. Let me choose you, Sutton."