

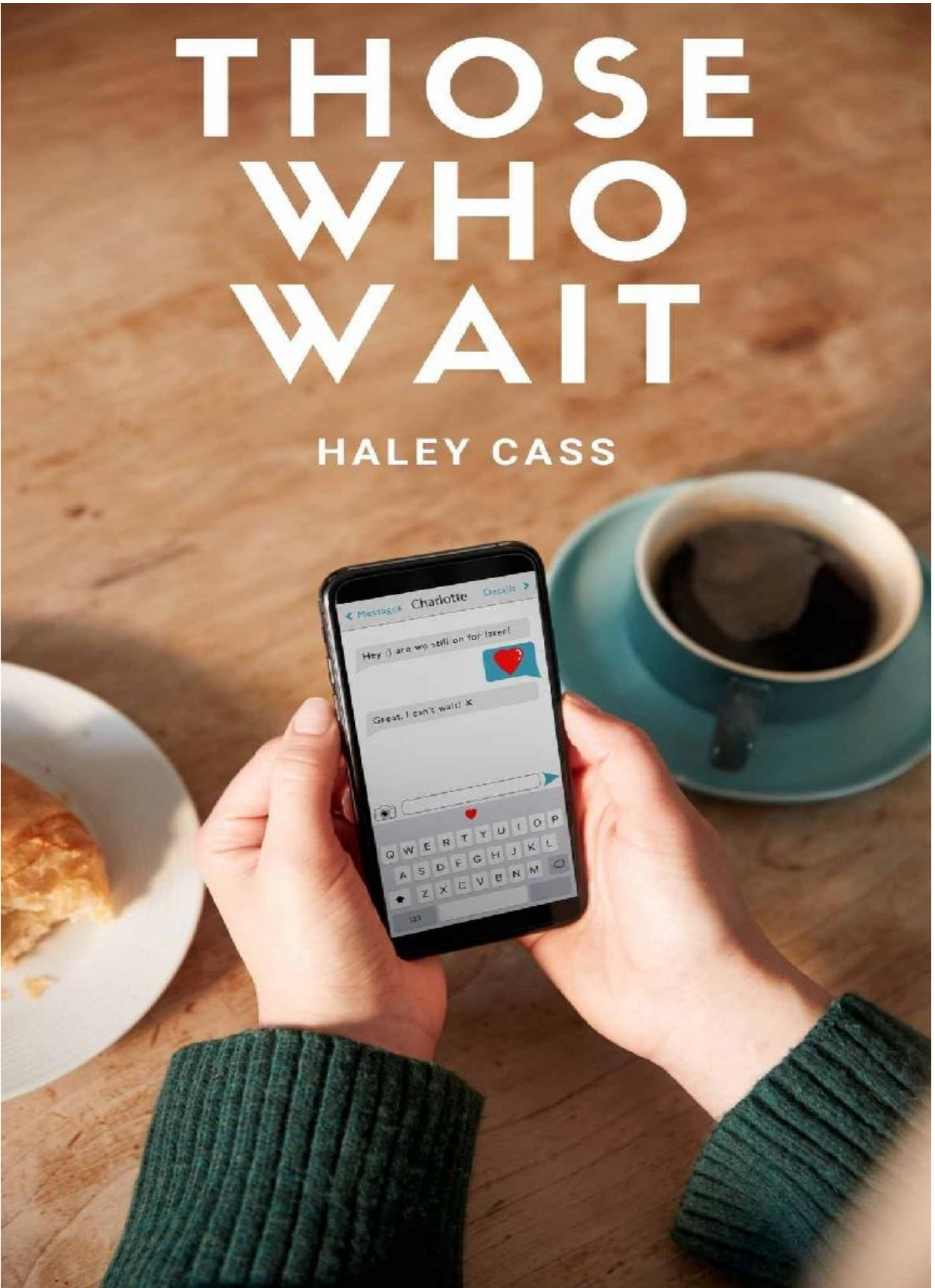
# THOSE WHO WAIT

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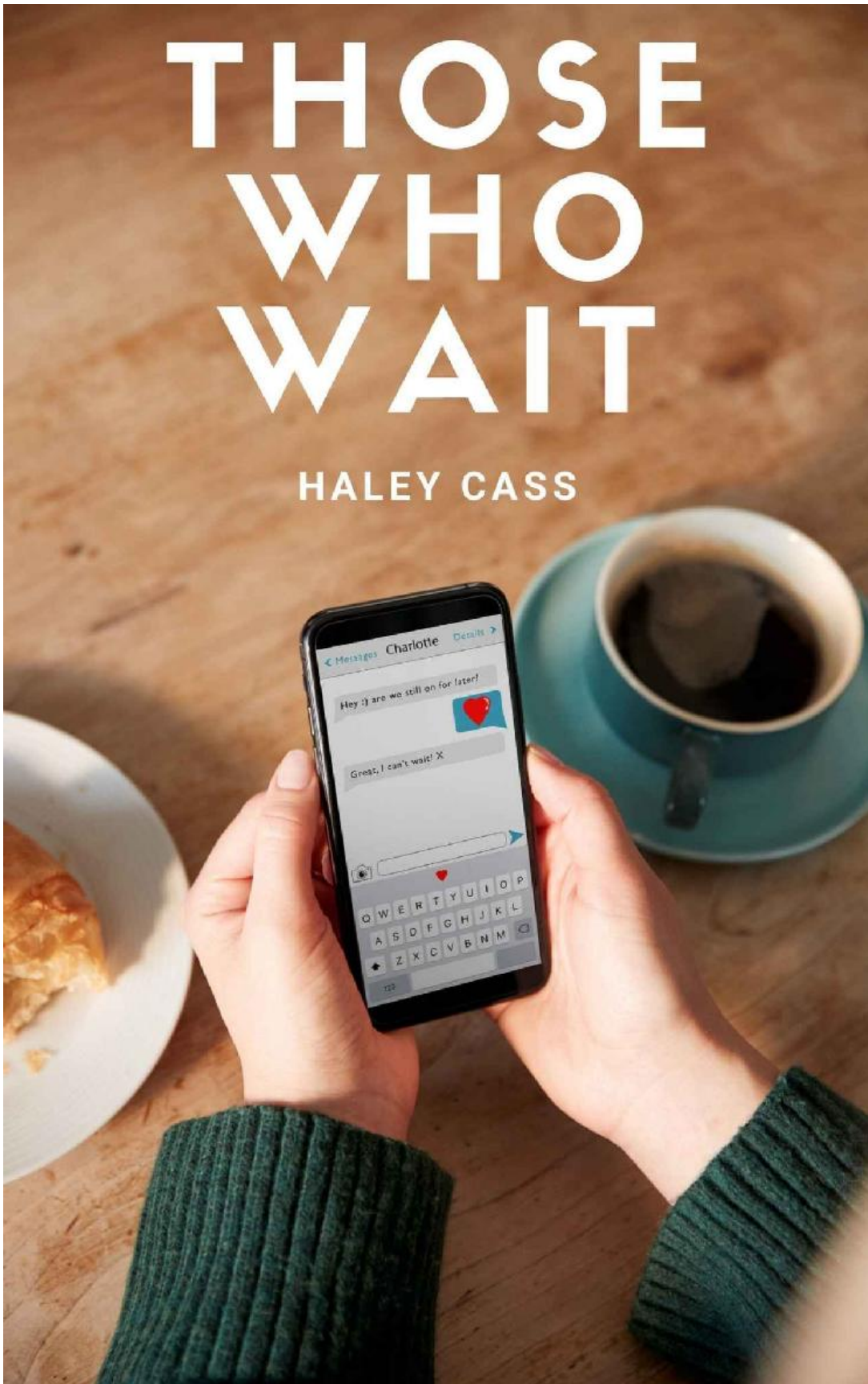


# Those Who Wait

Haley Cass

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

*This may not exist (definitely not in the same form) without Kate, Elizabeth, Isadora, and Sam. Thank you for letting me scream about this for what seems like decades.*

*Thank you to Monica for editing this monster (even if you hate my commas).*

*And forever thank you to Regina for making me feel brave.*

*A huge thank you to anyone who has read any bit of this through the years and thought it had potential to be... this.*

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# Chapter 1

“If you’re waiting for a beautiful woman to come out of nowhere and sweep you off your feet, you’re going to be waiting forever,” Regan stated as factually as if she was reading it from a manual.

Sutton Spencer rolled her eyes. “I’m not waiting for *anyone* to sweep me off of my feet.”

Maybe she had been, once upon a time. But that was a while – and several big romantic mistakes – ago.

With that, she slid off the stool at the breakfast bar in their shared apartment and went to sit on the couch, balancing the bowl of cereal she was having for dinner on her lap. She could still feel her best friend’s incredulous stare from the other side of the room.

“Sutton, you haven’t even been on a date in almost a year.”

“I’ve been busy,” she mumbled, even as she ducked her head.

Her friend flopped down onto the couch next to her with a sigh. “I’ll give you time off after being with Joshua. He was nuts.” The reference to Sutton’s controlling, emotionally manipulative ex-boyfriend was an understatement to say the least. “But you haven’t even gone out with *me* just to have fun in months – you refused to come out to the bar tonight! And you’ve been like this ever since you had your whole *revelation*.”

Sutton could feel her cheeks burning annoyingly hotter and she knew she was as red as her hair as she shot Regan a glare. “I hate when you call it that. I just don’t want to go out; it has nothing to do with my . . . self-discovery.”

She also hated that she didn’t have a better word to use.

“Yeah, well, you’re becoming a hermit. You’re sitting here on a Friday night, already in some pajama shorts, ready to – what, watch TV?” She fell back against the cushion with a groan. “You used to be slightly more fun.”

“I’m not going to watch TV, I’ll watch a movie.”

Regan nailed her with a look. “You haven’t gone out with a romantic intention since you came to terms with being into women. And if you think I don’t know it’s just because you’re scared, then I’m honestly insulted that you think I don’t know you at all.”

Sutton supposed twenty years of friendship gave Regan an insight to her that was almost too good.

“What’s the point of stepping out of the closet if you’re too much of a chicken shit to go on a date with a woman?” Regan looked genuinely quizzical, which made the sarcastic remark die on Sutton’s lips.

It was hard to describe, really.

Sutton *wasn't* in the closet. After a woman had danced – grinded, really – against her in a way that had surprisingly made arousal curl low in her stomach, and had then initiated a kiss in the club that Regan had dragged her to after her finals last spring, Sutton had spent the summer agonizing over her sexuality. She’d never thought of herself as anything other than straight, before. Because she’d always liked boys, and she liked to kiss boys, and she liked the way they felt. Then there had been the dancing and that kiss, and she’d liked that, too.

She’d *really* liked it.

As the summer had gone on, Sutton finally admitted to herself that she liked girls, too. After months of poring over websites and dipping her toe into some lesbian fiction, Sutton’s sexuality clicked together like a puzzle she’d never even known wasn’t solved.

As someone who had never had debilitating shyness when it came to talking to a woman, it turned out that approaching a woman when she knowingly attracted to her was very difficult.

She placed her bowl down on the table before she settled back and admitted, “Fine. I might be scared.”

Might be, as in the idea of going out with a woman made her stomach flip-flop so intensely she thought she might vomit. It was both fear and excitement, but still.

Regan gave her a sympathetic look before she turned her attention to the phone in her lap and Sutton was grateful that the subject seemed to be dropped. Not that she thought it would be dropped for long, considering when Regan got her teeth into something, she held on tight.

Tonight, though, she was happy to relax and watch a movie before she had to start her outline for the first paper of the semester that she had to write for her Victorian Poetry class. All the while willfully ignoring the undeniably pitiful state of her love life.

“Done!” Regan announced a few minutes later.

“Done with what?” It was only as her question was ending that she realized Regan didn’t have her own phone in her hand, but Sutton’s. “What did you do?”

Her friend had a familiar bright-eyed devious look as she held Sutton’s phone up and wiggled it – but not close enough for Sutton to swipe it out of her hand. “I’m helping you out.”

“What in the world is that?”

Dread was already settling in her before Regan answered. “It’s a dating app. You’re welcome; you’ll be getting messages from hot girls in no time.”

For a moment, Sutton sat there, stunned into stillness. Only for a second, though, before she lunged forward, hands out and grasping. Regan eluded her, hopping off of the couch and running around the table as she started tapping at the screen.

Sutton jumped up. “Give it back.”

Regan shook her head, not moving her eyes from the screen. “If I give it back, you’ll never even browse.”

She calculated the size of the coffee table. She had long legs; she could jump it.

Once more, Regan knew her too well, because she held her hands out in a peace offering gesture. “Look. I’ll give you the phone. *If* you promise me you won’t delete your profile, *and* you browse through some profiles. Maybe send a message or two.”

She only hesitated for a moment, but it was enough for Regan to latch on to.

Regan crossed her arms, her hand still securely holding onto Sutton’s cell phone, but her tone was considerably gentler than before. “Okay, since you didn’t jump me, I know that there is at least a part of you that wants to try this out.”

There was no argument against it even in her head because she *did*. There was that part of her that wanted to get over her nerves and at least see what was out there.

She found herself nodding through the anxiety and reaching for her phone. As she wrapped her fingers around it, she shot Regan a look and cautioned, “Just to look.”

“Spoil sport,” Regan muttered, letting out a long suffering sigh but releasing her phone anyway.

Sutton scoffed as she settled back onto the couch, cautiously looking at the app. She narrowed her eyes when she read the name: *SapphicSpark*. “You’re kidding me.”

“It’s apparently a very reputable place!”

“How would you know?”

“You hear a lot of talk about people’s dating lives when you work in a café!”

Turning away from her, Sutton shook her head, red hair falling over her shoulder and curtaining her from her friend’s overly excited gaze from the other side of the couch. After a deep, calming breath, she looked over the profile her friend had created for her. She’d – thankfully – chosen photos that Sutton might have even chosen for herself. The rest was fairly simple – her age, likes, and a message option.

*Sutton, 25, New York City*

*Likes: literature, dogs, snow, knitting, running, and lemon cakes*

She couldn’t argue with any of that.

With trepidation, she pressed the button in the top right corner that was beckoning her to *Browse profiles!*

Not only had she never done this with women before, but she’d never done something like this with men, either. Men had always just . . . been there.

Finding a woman, who not only was she attracted to and liked but who also liked and was attracted to her was harder. And scarier.

It was somewhat comforting knowing that all of these women were out there and just as not straight as she was. And maybe some of them could be interested in her.

The thought of it made her heart beat a little faster.

Before it actually seemed to stop in her chest for a few beats upon her next swipe. Because the woman in the picture who was coyly smiling up at her from her phone made her stomach erupt in butterflies. Her light brown hair was perfectly tousled and even through a picture her piercing eyes were somehow flirty.

She was well aware that there were some people who simply took pictures really well or photoshopped them in ways to look better, but this woman was stunning any way she looked at it.

*Charlotte, 28, New York City*

*Likes: puzzles, Indian food, rainy days, designer shoes, dancing, and gardening*

“Oh, wow.”

Regan’s voice right next to her ear startled her, causing her to fumble her phone in her hands. She threw her friend a glare. “I thought you were going to give me time to look. *On my own.*”

“Well, I was. Then I noticed you were staring at someone and I wanted to see. And now that I checked, I have to say – you need to message her.”

The *Message* button seemed to taunt her and her mind ran amuck with the idea of seeing that face in person. Or even going on a date with her. Just the thought was enough for her heart to race.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not? She’s hot, you’re hot. You need an introduction to the lady loving world and she looks like she’d be a really good one.”

She glanced at Charlotte’s picture again for a peek – yeah, she was that hot. “It’s not that easy. She’s – I’m not – I mean, just look at her. What am I going to say? *Hi, I’m a grad student who hasn’t even dated a woman yet, do you want to go out even though you can clearly date anyone you want?*”

Regan was giving her the Sutton-is-being-unintentionally-amusing look that she was very familiar with but couldn’t stand. “Well, I wouldn’t exactly phrase it like that. Have some faith; it’s not like you’re chopped liver.”

“I know that.” She groaned fell back against the couch, phone in her lap. “But I’m not *that.*”

That . . . confident, sexy-smile, flirty-eyed, my-picture-alone-can-seduce-you, was definitely not her.

When Regan *hmm*’d, Sutton should have known she was getting off the hook too easily. It was practically her own fault when her phone was snatched from her lap.

She jumped to grab for it, but Regan was already moving her thumbs quickly over the screen.

“Regan Marie Gallagher, give my phone back *now.*” She knew in the momentary pause of Regan’s typing that she did a pretty great job of channeling her mother’s reproachful tone.

In a determined, calculated leap, she closed the distance between them, grappling for her phone.

It was fruitless. Because only a moment later, Regan cried out victoriously, “Sent!”

The sound that left the back of Sutton’s mouth was nearly feral. “You *didn’t!*”

“Of course I did.” Regan’s smile spoke of no regrets. “Now, have you changed your mind about coming out with me tonight?”

The glare Sutton sent her was answer enough.

“Suit yourself. Stay home and obsess about Stunning Charlotte.” Regan slid the phone back to her.

Pointedly ignoring her, Sutton frantically navigated her own profile to see her sent messages. And then just about died.

***Sutton, 7:43PM***

*Hey there. I saw your profile and you look really interesting – and hot. Do you want to ~~hook-up~~ meet up sometime?*

Horrified, she didn’t acknowledge Regan at all as her friend all but ran out of the apartment. Sutton didn’t think she could possibly blush more than she already was and, as panic started to build, she went back to Charlotte’s profile to try to send another message.

Something where she would try to beg her to ignore Regan’s message that made Sutton out to be pleading for a freaking hook up. Only to be informed: *For our users’ well-being, SapphicSpark does not allow multiple messages to be sent to a user unless they allow it upon receiving your first message.*

What?!

Any other time, Sutton would have appreciated the step the app took to prevent forms of harassment. But not right now. Why couldn’t there be this one little exception?

With a groan, she brought her hand up to rub at her temples.

Peering again at the picture of the woman, she bit her lip as a small sigh escaped. Charlotte was almost *too* hot.

Which was a good thing, she reasoned with herself. She probably wasn’t even going to have to try to explain Regan and embarrass herself, because this woman – *Charlotte* – well, look at her. That woman was bound to have a ton of messages on here. She wouldn’t look twice at Sutton.

With that in mind, she put her phone down on the table and tried to shake off the whole ordeal.

\*\*\*

Two hours later, Sutton was very purposefully finishing Regan's favorite ice cream, rooted to the same spot on the couch. She wasn't a big fan of the coffee flavor, but it was a small strike back against her friend. She wasn't going to go far enough to exact Alex-level revenge – Sutton still shuddered to think about some of the pranks her sister had played on her as they'd grown up – but Regan should know there would be several small acts of justice coming her way.

When her phone vibrated on the table, she assumed it was either Regan, trying to get her to come meet her and some of their friends, or Emma, her fellow TA and closest friend from college. Maybe her mother or one of her siblings.

She wasn't expecting a notification from *SapphicSpark*.

The spoon she'd been holding clattered into the bowl as she hurriedly unlocked her phone and tapped on the notification. *New message from Charlotte!* Was displayed on the screen.

"What the fuck," she whispered.

She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself.

It didn't work and she clicked on the message anyway.

***Charlotte, 10:02PM***

*My, that is one of the less subtle approaches I've received on here, I must say.*

Why would Regan do this to her?

***Sutton, 10:04PM***

*God, I'm so sorry! I've been wanting to send this for hours, but couldn't message you again until you answered. That's not – I'm not the person who sent that first message! My friend created this account and sent that to you. I'm sorry, again. And incredibly embarrassed.*

Clasping her phone in her hand, she stared blankly at the movie on the television for a few moments. That was good, right? And now that Charlotte knew the truth, Sutton really shouldn't expect to hear from her again.

Which . . . was kind of disappointing.

She'd barely put her phone down when it vibrated again, sending a jolt of surprise – and excitement – through her.

***Charlotte, 10:06PM***

*I never said lack of subtlety was a bad thing. Perhaps in other matters, but not when it comes to this. So, your friend arranged this? Are you not looking for a sapphic spark, then?*

***Sutton, 10:06PM***

*Oh, I am. Yes. Well, kind of.*

What in the hell was that? She berated herself, letting her head fall back against the couch. For a literature grad student, she could be the least coherent person ever.

***Charlotte, 10:08PM***

*Kind of?*

***Sutton, 10:09PM***

*I meant to say, that I like both men and women.*

***Charlotte, 10:12PM***

*You haven't done this very much, have you?*

***Sutton, 10:13PM***

*No. Never, actually. Is it really obvious?*

Sutton rolled her eyes at herself; of course it was obvious. She only had a second to wonder why this woman was even still talking to her before she got an answer.

**Charlotte, 10:14PM**

*Only a little ;)*

**Charlotte, 10:16PM**

*Tell me, why did your friend deem it necessary to create this account and send messages from you that seem to be more suggestive than you would like?*

**Sutton, 10:17PM**

*She thinks I need to get out more, I guess. And she thinks that I should, um, go out and hook up with someone.*

**Charlotte, 10:20PM**

*And that's not what you want?*

**Sutton, 10:21PM**

*I – well, no. Not that I don't want to ever meet someone, it's just . . . I'm not wanting to go out and find a hook up just for the sake of hooking up. You know?*

**Charlotte, 10:23PM**

*Unfortunately, that is where you and I differ. Which is a shame, I might add.*

Sutton's eyes widened as she triple-read that. Did Charlotte mean what Sutton thought she meant? She had to. After all, she realized with a pleasant swoop in her stomach, Charlotte *had* seen her profile and decided to write back.

For a moment, she thought about what that might mean. Entertained the idea that maybe this gorgeous woman had seriously been interested in hooking up with her – and to say it was a major rush was an understatement.

Then the thoughts dissipated, because what that also meant was that Charlotte was someone who – as Sutton was sure many women on this app

were – only wanted a hook up. Which . . . Sutton really didn't think she could do, no matter how ridiculously hot the woman's picture was.

After a few moments of wondering whether or not she should just leave their interaction to end right then and there, because – well, she'd flat out said she didn't want a hook up, and Charlotte clearly did, so she couldn't imagine Charlotte wanting to keep wasting her time.

But . . .

Biting her lip, she was very grateful Regan wasn't here to witness this.

***Sutton, 10:25PM***

*Do you? Do this very often, that is.*

***Charlotte, 10:28PM***

*Are you insinuating something?*

Oh, God. This was why Sutton could never go out and meet a woman in real life; she couldn't even talk to one online without putting her foot in her mouth.

***Sutton, 10:29PM***

*No! No, no. I was asking because I was just, well, curious about how this usually happens?*

***Sutton, 10:30PM***

*I mean, you seem . . . like you know what to do, in situations like this. Unlike me, clearly.*

***Sutton, 10:30PM***

*God, that was probably a very silly thing to ask. You can just ignore me.*

***Charlotte, 10:32PM***

*Oh, sweetheart. I don't typically make it a point to reveal the inner-workings of my interactions on here, you know. A true lady shouldn't reveal her secrets.*

***Charlotte, 10:33PM***

*However, I could make an exception for a pretty woman in need. I only need to know one thing . . .*

Sutton's heart beat just a bit faster at that, as she flushed and bit her lip. *A pretty woman in need.* She knew she'd been correct in wondering if Charlotte had done this before; she definitely knew what to say to make Sutton lap up every word.

***Sutton, 10:34PM***

*Which is?*

***Charlotte, 10:40PM***

*Just to be completely clear, there is no chance of you being interested in – as your first message said – a hook up? Because I absolutely will not abide showing my hand in that case.*

Sutton hesitated. She thought of being that kind of person, who could go out and *hook up* with a gorgeous stranger and have that be it. No feelings involved. She was so very nervous about her first *everything* with a woman that maybe having sex with a stranger and getting it over with would be easier.

Then again, she'd already learned in life that easier was not always better.

***Sutton, 10:42PM***

*I can confirm that I don't think I will be prepared to hook up with anyone any time soon.*

***Charlotte, 10:45PM***

*Well, then, disappointed as I may be, I am now willing to answer what you'd like to know. Do you have specific questions in mind?*

***Sutton, 10:46PM***

*Do you only use this app for hooking up?*

She regretted it as soon as she sent it. Why would she think it was all right to ask that to this random woman?

**Charlotte, 10:48PM**

*Yes. Though in the name of honesty, I am always upfront about my not-serious intentions.*

**Sutton, 10:49PM**

*Okay. But what happens then?*

**Charlotte, 10:52PM**

*I do hope you aren't asking me to explain the proverbial birds and the bees, sweetheart. I was under the impression you wanted this to be PG . . .*

She rushed – by no means did she intend for this to become a makeshift first time foray into dirty messages. Well, first time for her. She had doubts about Charlotte.

**Sutton, 10:53PM**

*No! No, I know how . . . that . . . works. I meant, like, how do you go about doing all of this? When a woman messages you, what happens then?*

**Charlotte, 10:56PM**

*Well, it's all fairly straightforward, no pun intended. We chat a bit here and make plans to meet up. Typically at a bar or perhaps a club – always somewhere public. We spend a bit of time out to make sure we're . . . compatible. And from there, I see if they'd like to go back to my place for the night.*

**Charlotte, 10:57PM**

*Not to boast, but they usually do.*

**Sutton, 10:57PM**

*Oh, I can imagine.*

Her cheeks burned when she realized what she'd written.

***Charlotte, 10:59PM***

*That was smoother than I expected. Offense entirely unintended.*

***Sutton, 11:00PM***

*None taken, as it was actually inadvertently done.*

***Charlotte, 11:03PM***

*You're an . . . interesting woman. Unfortunately, however, it's getting late, and I have to get to bed. I have an early morning tomorrow.*

At least it wasn't a *complete* disaster; Charlotte seemed to be amused by her if nothing else.

She could do with getting to bed as well, she realized as she stifled a yawn. She had to grade the first assignments of the semester for her professor by Monday, plus her own paper to start working on, as well as going to see her sister.

***Sutton, 11:05PM***

*I don't think I'm quite as interesting as you are. But I should be going, too. Thank you, for this. You know, not mocking me like you undoubtedly could have.*

***Charlotte, 11:08PM***

*That's not really my style. But it was more entertaining for me than I might have anticipated. Goodnight, Sutton.*

***Sutton, 11:09PM***

*Goodnight, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 2

“As everyone here already knows, we’re celebrating tonight that one of our very own will be announcing her campaign for the House of Representatives special election!” Dean Walker, mayor of New York City, proclaimed, holding up a glass of champagne, as he made eye contact with her from across the room.

Charlotte shook her head slightly, even as a pleased grin tugged at her lips. She’d halfheartedly asked Dean to refrain from making a toast, but she couldn’t deny that she got a little thrill from it all.

“Though we will be inevitably sad to see her go, I can think of no one else who should be better suited to the position. Charlotte, I speak for myself and on behalf of the entire staff, when I say that we support you and believe in you unequivocally. So, though it means you’ll be leaving us at the end of it all, here’s to a successful election!”

He lifted his glass, cheerfully followed by the myriad of others who joined in with shouts and claps in her direction. She accepted them all with a nod and a smile, lifting her glass to them before taking a sip.

The entire mayoral staff was there, joined by a few of their fellow civil servants on the city council for the celebration. It wasn’t often that they held a party in their actual office but Dean had deemed it a special occasion.

He made his way toward her, lightly brushing off the cuffs of his suit. Despite the fact that it was after-hours, he detested being seen as less than pristine.

She quirked an eyebrow toward him, a playful smile on her lips. “That was quite a touching speech.”

“I believe the words you’re looking for are *thank you*.”

She laid her hand that didn’t have a light hold on her champagne flute on his arm. “Thank you.”

Despite her banter, she meant it. Dean had been her boss for several years now and in those years, he had become someone she could trust.

Someone who managed to maintain her respect, even after she’d seen him come running out of her brother’s apartment in nothing but striped boxers after sighting a mouse. That alone was a feat to be proud of.

Dean was a true friend, one of the only she'd made thus far in the game of politics.

It was why she'd been somewhat reluctant and even nervous to tell him about her plans to campaign for the recently empty House of Reps seat. She'd told him only a few days ago, because she could not stand that feeling of guilty nerves in her stomach; it wasn't something she was familiar with and she'd wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible.

“What? Did you think *I* thought you'd stay in our corner of the world forever? You should know better,” he'd told her when she'd informed him that she thought he would have been a little more shocked at her wanting to leave.

Charlotte *did* love the work she was doing now; Dean was one of the most level-headed, progressive, and change-effecting mayors in the history of the city. And as the Deputy Mayor for health and human services working for him in the last few years, Charlotte had been able to implement programs and develop actual systems to help people. To actually make change.

Despite her love of her current position, however, it was only a footnote in the grand plan she had for her future. And Dean knew very well what her ambitions were.

She'd been in politics since she was old enough to be employed. She'd graduated from Yale with dual pre-law and political science degrees. She'd then completed her law degree at Columbia – just in case – as she obtained full time employment at the governor's office. From there, she'd then been appointed Deputy Mayor. Even before that, she'd had countless internships with various departments in Congress throughout college. And she'd been *interested* in politics – the rise and fall and the rush and the adrenaline – since she was a child.

How could she not be, when her family was so deeply rooted in it all? She couldn't have grown up with the first female President of the United States as her grandmother without being dramatically influenced.

Charlotte planned to follow in her grandmother's footsteps since she truly understood what it was that her grandmother did. She intended to be voted as the President of the country, and she intended for it to happen at a younger age than it had happened for her grandmother. And regardless how much she enjoyed her life right now, there was no doubt that running for a notable elected office had to be her next step.

With a deep breath, she took another sip of champagne. She could feel a pleasant buzz from it, even as she nudged Dean with her shoulder to get his attention. “You’d better make an even better speech if I win the seat. I expect some tears to fall.”

“*If?* Where is the confident Charlotte I know and tolerate?”

“The Charlotte you know and *love*, brat.” She elbowed him, smiling despite herself. “And perhaps you should get your glasses, as I am right here. Confident in my abilities, yet realistic about the odds,” she corrected mildly.

She *was* confident that she would put up a good fight for the suddenly vacant seat in the House of Representatives. Confident that she had a very real chance at winning the special election for it; she wouldn’t go forward with the time and energy it was going to take to run a campaign, otherwise.

However, she also kept in mind that should she win this election, she would become one of the youngest people to ever do so, let alone the youngest woman. As it was still early, it was also unclear as to who she would be running against. Those were two variables that had the potential to either work in her favor or against her.

The seat had opened up unexpectedly a few weeks ago, upon the untimely death of John Kelvin, who had only just been re-elected. Charlotte’s original plan, the one that she had outlined and kept close to her heart, had been to campaign for one of the open seats in either the next election or the one after that, even.

Yet, despite the fact that she was young and that she wasn’t as prepared as she would have been for a campaign years from now, she couldn’t deny that this move felt like it would be the best thing for her. She knew without a doubt that she would be able to hold her own against anyone who underestimated her.

“Well, in the chance that you do not win the seat, I’ll try not to celebrate too much,” Dean informed her as he reached down to the table next to them to pour himself a glass of wine.

Slightly confused, and more than slightly offended, she turned to face him. “Celebrating my loss? What happened to those pretty words of support from only minutes ago?”

He shot her a look of apology. “I *do* support you, of course. But when you leave, whether it be in a few months or in a few years, both myself and the local government will be losing a big asset.”

She shook her head with a smirk. “You choose the most roundabout ways in order to tell me you’ll miss me.”

She lightly squeezed his forearm. Dean rolled his eyes at her but brought his hand up to squeeze her hand in return.

After a few moments, he tilted his head toward their coworkers, who were milling about. Some dancing, some just chatting. All seemed to be having a good time, though she supposed, of course they would be. Free food and drinks, supplied by their boss, who was letting loose at the office in a celebration that didn’t have to do with anything unfortunate happening to precede it.

“Now, come and partake in the festivities. This party is in your honor, after all.” Dean handed her another flute of champagne, before stepping slightly away to gallantly offer her his arm.

It was things like that, she knew, that had made rumors buzz about the two of them. Predominantly in her earlier years of working together, though there were still a few people who didn’t entirely believe they were only platonic.

Charlotte knew that was one of the side-effects of keeping her sexuality a topic that she did not discuss at work. As a result, talk like that – about her love life and any male friendships she kept – would be speculated about the more she rose in the political ranks.

However, she also knew that a bit of speculation and wonder, as long as there truly was nothing salacious being hidden, was an angle that would prove to be beneficial in her burgeoning career. And she certainly had no scandalous tales involving men of any kind to be hidden.

With that in mind, she bit back a small sigh as she fixed a smile on and shook her head. “I have to grab something from my desk first. I’ll be out there and asking you for a dance soon, though.”

“We’ll see if you can keep up.” Dean started to unbutton his cuffs and crisply start to roll them up as he gave her a nod.

“Excuse you. Historically, only one of us ever needs assistance on the dance floor and it’s not me.”

He walked away with a wink that made her chuckle under her breath, before Charlotte made her way to her desk. It was far enough away from the center of the office that the festivities were not in her immediate area, which she was thankful for.

Brown eyes scanned for people as she took her phone out of her purse. She unlocked the device and scrolled until she got to the app that had been on her mind for days now.

*SapphicSpark* had served her very well in the past few years. She'd first made an account when she'd been fresh out of college and looking for a way to find women who wouldn't know her on a personal level. Who didn't know Charlotte Thompson, politician. Looking for women who wanted the same thing she did: a short, casual, discreet hookup before moving on.

Charlotte knew that she already had a long road ahead of her if she was to accomplish her goals and that road had enough obstacles. She had no intention of adding the fact that she was a lesbian into the mix. At the very least, not for years to come. As far as she was concerned, it was unnecessary. Her sexuality had nothing to do with her ambitions.

Especially given that she had no intention of entertaining a so-called "love life" in the near future, regardless of the gender she was interested in. She prided herself on being able to read people, and it didn't take a genius to see that people could make foolish decisions when their hearts were involved. Charlotte intended to stay clear- and level-headed for her time in office, whether that office be a member of the House or the Senate or President, or even Deputy Mayor.

She'd found many a pleasurable night because of this app, and if she was being entirely honest, she didn't *want* to give it up. But it was in her own best interest. Now that she'd unofficially announced her intention to run for Congress, the ball was rolling. Within the next few weeks, she would officially begin her campaign, and her name would start to garner more public interest.

Depending on who would be opposing her, Charlotte had to be prepared for them to dig up anything, even her profile on a gay dating app. Though she would miss the hookups, they were not worth jeopardizing her dreams.

Last Friday, she had resolved to herself that she would run for the election and she'd decided then that she had to delete the profile. That was when she'd seen that she had a message from a woman whose profile she'd never come across before.

The woman with the red hair spilling over her shoulder in long waves, with startlingly blue eyes lit up with a candid smile that revealed straight white teeth. It was a picture that was clearly snapped while the redhead had been in mid-laugh. Something genuine, where Charlotte could see the flush

of laughter on pale cheeks, and she'd almost been able to *hear* laughter through her phone.

Charlotte had scrolled through what must have amounted to thousands of profiles over the years, had messaged and met up with a good amount of them. She'd seen stunning women, women who were gorgeous both in and out of their pictures. The woman – Sutton – was someone she would put into that gorgeous category, but mostly, she'd liked that she looked so . . . open.

So, even though she'd intended to delete her account that night, she'd been extremely pleasantly surprised to see the message proposing a hookup from Sutton. It couldn't hurt, she supposed to have one last *SapphicSpark* hurrah. It would be almost symbolic, in a way.

She hadn't been lying when she'd said that she'd been a bit disappointed about the fact that it hadn't actually been Sutton herself who'd proposed said hookup. But she *had* been surprised at the fact that she'd found herself a bit charmed by Sutton herself.

A bit awkward, a lot amusing, adorably naïve, almost alarmingly honest.

Shaking her head, she tapped her inbox. There were three new messages since she'd checked the app the previous afternoon, and as the first two popped up, she debated reading them for a few seconds, her thumb hesitating over them . . . before she hit delete, instead. Tonight was the night that she actually had to delete this little portion of her life.

However, the third message popped up, and she paused in surprise. Truthfully, the last thing she had expected was for there to be another message from Sutton in her inbox.

Despite the fact that she'd only opened the app in order to delete it . . . well, curiosity killed the cat.

***Sutton, 4:24PM***

*Hi, it's just me, again. Obviously. I just wanted to say thank you, again, for humoring me the other night.*

Quirking an eyebrow, Charlotte looked around her once more. When she was satisfied to see that no one was particularly interested in what she was doing, she turned her attention back to her phone. She had no idea what it

was about Sutton's seemingly earnest thanks that made her endearing, but she found herself answering anyway.

**Charlotte, 7:06PM**

*As I said, I'm always happy to talk to a pretty woman in need. I'll admit, I'm a bit surprised to see you still here.*

She'd somewhat expected Sutton to have deleted her profile after having been so flustered about its existence.

Even though Sutton's message had been sent a few hours ago, Charlotte had a tiny kernel of hope that she'd answer back as quickly as she had on Friday. Especially because she had an inkling that Sutton hadn't messaged her *just* because she'd wanted to say thanks, again, four days later.

She nearly jumped – would have, if she hadn't had a lot of practice at maintaining her composure over the years – when she felt two hands land on her shoulders, and a familiar voice ask in her ear, “And who is that?”

Quickly, she locked her phone, as she grinned widely. “Caleb!”

She spun in her seat to face her brother, still dressed in his police uniform, a wide smile on his face. His thumbs were tucked into his belt, a knowing smirk on his face that she knew was very similar to her own, brown waves hanging over his forehead. He gestured to her phone. “Another one of your ladies?”

“Something like that. Tell me, officer, what are you doing here?”

“Well, you're breaking the law, you know. We *are* in an official government building, and I've heard a rumor that there is an obscene amount of alcohol on the premises,” Caleb shifted back on his heels. “I don't want to make this into a big deal, but . . .”

Standing up, she shook her head in adoration as she tucked her arm through his. “I don't suppose an esteemed officer such as yourself can be swayed with the promise of indulging in said alcohol.” She stood on her tiptoes and leaned in a bit to whisper in his ear, “Or with the promise to go home with a slightly inebriated mayor who is currently enjoying himself on the makeshift dance floor.”

Her brother's eyes lit up and sought out Dean, who was indeed dancing. “I think I might be able to be persuaded.”

“I thought so,” she laughed quietly, and led him to the desk that was acting as a bar, “How did you find out about this little party?”

“I received a little message from the dancing queen,” he informed her, and they shared a smile, as they reached the liquor, and he reached out for a bottle. He looked at her over the top, “I bet grandmother is thrilled that her little flower is following in her footsteps earlier than expected.”

His tone was teasing, but with an underlying seriousness that she might have missed if she hadn’t known him so well. He wasn’t wrong, though. Their grandmother had praised her efforts and her plan to run now rather than later, especially given that she scorned half of the current Congress it seemed, and often gave thanks that she didn’t regularly have to work with them anymore.

Still, she rolled her eyes at him. “Come on, you know she’s proud of all of us.”

The exasperated look Caleb gave her made her throw her head back in laughter.

“She called me a trained monkey with a gun last Christmas,” he replied dourly, which only spurred on her laughter.

“That’s just her way of showing love. You know that.”

He continued to grumble for a moment, before he sobered, clinking his glass with hers. “Well, you already have my vote. I think you’ll have it in the bag.”

“We’ll see,” she murmured back, but couldn’t deny the rush she got at the words. She’d had the feeling that her future was truly starting since the night she’d decided to run.

Caleb tipped his head back and finished his wine before placing his glass on the table, and he grinned down at her. “Now, lead me toward the dance floor.”

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A few hours later, Charlotte was still grinning as she let herself into her apartment. She wasn’t drunk, but pleasantly buzzed and tired, and she had Caleb and Dean’s goodnight calls still ringing in her ears. They’d walked her back to her apartment, all of them in fairly high spirits. And for a few moments, she’d stood back to watch the two of them walk down the sidewalk, walking close but careful to not be *too* close.

There were times when Charlotte felt that she was luckier than her brother and Dean. While Dean wasn't *as* secretive about his sexuality as she was when it came to work, he was still private enough to keep from dancing with Caleb in front of their coworkers. She was lucky, because unlike her brother and her boss, she didn't have the inclination to be in a relationship. She didn't have someone to make eyes at from across the room, while being unable to dance with them, to really *be* with them.

She dropped her purse on the counter, keys on the hook right next to it, before she started to take off her light jacket. As she made her way into her bedroom, she felt her pocket buzz. Blearily, she pulled out her phone, placing it on her dresser, as she pulled off her fitted dress pants. Once she was stripped down to her bra and underwear, she reached for her phone again.

Much of her grogginess disappeared when she saw that it wasn't a text from Caleb, as she'd expected, but instead a *SapphicSpark* notification.

She'd nearly forgotten that she'd messaged Sutton earlier, before the drinking and the dancing.

***Sutton, 11:13PM***

*I'm actually a bit surprised that I'm still here, too. I've told Regan I deleted it, out of spite.*

Charlotte leaned back against the dresser, shaking her head at herself – because she'd meant to delete her own damn account *again* tonight, yet, here she was. And it didn't stop her from responding.

***Charlotte, 11:17PM***

*Regan?*

***Sutton, 11:18PM***

*Yes. Regan is my roommate and friend, who created this account for me. I want her to suffer.*

She grinned, and wished – not for the first time, clearly – that Sutton would be interested in something casual. It wasn't like she was hurting for a hookup, but she enjoyed that thing about Sutton that rang . . . unique. Certainly unique to any of her other interactions on a dating app, because most of the women she encountered were more like herself.

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