

LYNN PAINTER

MR.
WRONG
NUMBER

One wrong number
might just lead
to Mr. Right.



“Smart, sexy, and downright hilarious. *Mr. Wrong Number* is an absolutely pitch-perfect romantic comedy.”

—CHRISTINA LAUREN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE UNHONEYMOONERS*



Mr.
Wrong
Number



Lynn Painter

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For Kevin

I love you more today than when you swept me off my feet by photocopying your finger and talking in a stupid voice. More than when you stepped on my feet so I couldn't run away from you. Even more, I think, than that time you said I had Axl Rose hair.

Five kids and hundreds of meatballs later, you still make me cackle and I adore you.

Olivia

It started the night after I burned down my building.

I was sitting on top of the fancy granite island in my brother's kitchen, inhaling a bag of his pretzels while systematically knocking back the bottles of Stella that'd been in his fridge. And no, I didn't have a drinking problem. I had a *life* problem. As in, my life sucked and I needed to fall into a coma variety of sleep if I were going to have any shot at formulating a plan for my future when I woke up.

Jack had agreed (after much begging) to let me stay with him for a month—enough time to get a job and find my own place—as long as I agreed to be on my best behavior and stay out of his roommate's way. *He seemed a little too old to have a roommate, if you asked me, but who was I to judge?*

Big brother had given me a hug and a key and left me for fifty-cent wing night at Billy's Bar, so I was home alone and bawling to Adele on his Alexa. It was already woe-is-me music, but when she started crooning about a fire starting in her heart, it made me think about the fire that started on my deck, and I totally lost it.

I was full-on ugly crying when my phone buzzed and halted the meltdown. A number I didn't know texted:

So tell me exactly what you're wearing.

A pervy wrong number? I wiped my nose and typed: Your mom's wedding dress and her favorite thong.

No more than five seconds went by before Mr. Wrong Number texted: Um, what?

I texted: Seriously, babe, I thought you'd think it's hot.

Mr. Wrong Number: "Babe"? Wtf?

That actually made me snort out a tiny laugh, the thought of some dude getting cold-showered via text. It was super weird that *babe* was where he was getting tripped up, as opposed to the monstrosity of an oedipal-lingerie suggestion, but he'd also used the tired *what are you wearing* line, so who could really say about a guy like that?

I texted: Would you prefer something less mommish?

Mr. Wrong Number: Oh, no—it sounds totally hot. You cool with me rocking cargo shorts, socks with sandals, and your dad's jockstrap?

That made me smile in the midst of my full-on life collapse and resultant crying binge.

Me: I'm so turned on right now. Please tell me you'll whisper dad jokes in my ear while we bonk.

Mr. Wrong Number: Yeah, baby jokes and weather anecdotes come fully loaded. And bonk is the sexiest word in the English language, btw.

Me: Agreed.

Mr. Wrong Number: I texted the wrong number, didn't I?

Me: Yeah, you did.

I hiccuped—the beer was finally kicking in—and decided to give the guy a break. I texted: But go get after it, bud. Land that bonk. 😊

Mr. Wrong Number: This is the weirdest text exchange I've ever had.

Me: Same. Good luck and good night.

Mr. Wrong Number: Thanks for the support, and good night to you, as well.

• • •

ONCE THE STELLA started making me tired, I decided to shower—*bye-bye, smoky hair*—and go to bed. I dug through my duffel for clothes, but then I remembered—duh—the fire. All I had were the clothes that'd been in the bottom of my gym locker and some rando mismatched separates that'd fallen onto the floorboards of my back seat on multiple laundry days. I found a Cookie Monster pajama top, but discovered I didn't actually own a single bottom; no pajama bottoms, no jeans, no shorts—the only pants I owned now were the stinky gym shorts currently covering my ass.

Was not owning pants my rock bottom?

Thank God I had clean underwear. I had one pair of neon-yellow boy shorts that said *Eat the Rich* across the back, and their presence in my life kept me dangling from the balcony that hovered just above Bottom.

I took a thirty-minute shower, tipsily smitten with the pouring-rain showerhead and Jack's roommate's expensive conditioner. I accidentally dropped the slippery plastic bottle, which made the pump top break off and sent the majority of the luxurious crème slathering out all over the slick floor of the shower. I knelt down and scooped as much as I could back into the bottle, setting it carefully on the shower shelf and hoping no one would notice.

Spoiler: They always noticed.

But two hours later I was still wide-awake, lying on the floor of my brother's office on his squeaky old air mattress, staring at the ceiling through

puffy eyes and replaying over and over again all of the terrible things that'd happened before I fled Chicago.

The layoff. The cheating. The breakup. The fire.

And then I said, "Screw. This."

I got up, went into that shiny kitchen, cracked the seal on a bottle of tequila that had a smiley mustachioed sun on the bottle, and I made myself the world's biggest night-night toddy. I might have a headache in the morning, but at least I'd get some sleep.

• • •

"LIVVIE, IT'S MOM. I thought you were coming over today."

I opened my eyes—well, only one would open—and looked at the phone my mother was shouting at me from. Eight thirty? She'd expected me to show up at their house at dawn? God, the woman was like some kind of sadistic, dog-torturing serial killer or something.

Why had I answered again?

"I was. I mean, I am. My alarm was just about to go off."

"Well, I thought you were job hunting today."

Adele started blaring through the apartment again—*what the hell*—and I yelled, "Alexa, turn off music."

My mother said, "Who are you talking to?"

"No one." The music still blared. "Alexa, turn off Adele!"

"Do you have friends over?"

"Oh, my God. No." My second eye finally opened and I sat up, my entire forehead clenched in a massive ache as the music came to an abrupt halt. "I was talking to Jack's stereo."

She sighed one of her why-is-my-daughter-such-a-nut sighs. "So are you not job hunting, then?"

Someone please kill me. I said through wicked cotton mouth, "I am. The internet makes it okay to start at noon, I swear, Ma."

"I don't even know what you're saying. Are you coming over or not?"

I took a deep breath through my nose and remembered my wardrobe problems. Until I could wash my bottoms, I was hosed. So I said, “Not. Until later. The job is my number one priority, so I’ll swing by after I get some apps put in.”

And also after I found a pair of pants.

“Is your brother there?”

“I have no idea.”

“How can you not know if he’s there?”

“Because I’m still in bed, and the door is closed.”

“Why would you sleep with the door closed? That spare room will get really stuffy if you don’t open it up.”

“Oh. My. God.” I sighed and rubbed my temple. “I will get out of bed in a minute, and if I see your other-gendered offspring, I will tell him to call you. Okay?”

“Oh, I don’t need him to call me. I was just wondering if he’s there.”

“I have to go.”

“Did you deposit that money yet?”

I pressed my lips together and closed my eyes. Leave it to my mother. The only thing worse, at the age of twenty-five, than having to ask your parents for money because you rolled into town on fumes and literally didn’t have a dime to your name, was having a mom who wanted to talk about it. I said, “Yes, I did it online last night.”

As if I had any choice but to deposit that mortifying parental contribution as fast as humanly possible. Because after the smoke cleared (literally) and it became apparent that my building was no longer standing, I’d had to spend what little money I had on survival items like an oil change, new tires, and a whole lot of gas to get me home to Omaha.

Thank God I still had one final paycheck coming next week.

My mother said, “You did it on the computer?”

I gritted my teeth. “Yes.”

“Evie’s husband said you should *never* do that. You might as well just give your money to the hackers.”

My head was throbbing. “Who is Evie?”

“My bridge partner, the one who lives in Gretna. Do you never listen to me?”

“Mom,” I said, contemplating pulling the old *cutting out, I’m in a tunnel* cell phone trick. “I don’t memorize your bridge partners’ names.”

“Well, I only have one, dear, it’s not that hard.” My mother sounded deeply offended. “You need to stop with the computer banking—just go see the teller in person.”

I sighed. “Should I have driven *back* to Chicago to deposit it in person, Ma?”

“There’s no need to get snippy. I’m just trying to help.”

I sighed again and clambered to my feet from the low, low air mattress that’d bottomed out every time I’d rolled over in the night. “I know and I’m sorry. It’s just been a rough couple of days.”

“I know, hon. Just come over later, okay?”

“Okay.” I walked over to the door and threw it open. “I love you. Bye.”

I tossed the phone on top of the desk and squinted as the living room’s natural light assaulted my eyeballs. God, the hangover. I had that equilibrium tilt going on, the one that let your body know you were still too boozed up to drive, and I stumbled in the direction of the Keurig, desperate for coffee.

“Well, good morning, sunshine.”

I froze at the sound and instantly felt like I was going to throw up.

Because Colin Beck, Jack’s best friend, was watching me toddle toward the kitchen. As if the universe hadn’t already beaten the living shit out of me, there he was, standing beside the fancy breakfast bar with his arms crossed, witnessing my walk of shame with an eyebrow raised in amusement. He was wearing his I’m-better-than-you smirk and dickish good looks while I traversed the apartment in underpants and a too-small shirt like some sort of Winnie-the-Pooh variety of dipshit.

I blinked. Had he gotten *more* attractive?

What a prick.

The last time I’d seen him was my freshman year of college, when I’d gotten kicked out of the dorms and had to spend the final month of the semester living at home with my parents. Jack brought him over for spaghetti

on a Sunday, and Colin had found the story of my stray-dog rescue turned mauling of multiple dorm tenants turned subsequent fire-sprinkler deployment turned massive dorm-wide flooding dismissal to be the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

Today he looked like he'd just come back from a run. His damp T-shirt hugged his über-defined *everything*, and some kind of tattoo snaked down his right arm.

Who did he think he was with that, The Rock?

Colin had one of those movie-star faces, with the perfect bone structure and a killer jawline, but his blue eyes had a mischievous spark that offset the beauty. Rowdy eyes. I'd fallen in love with that face briefly at the age of fourteen, but after eavesdropping on a conversation where he'd referred to me as the "little weirdo" at age fifteen, I'd taken an extreme right turn into loathing and never looked back.

"What are you doing here?" I walked around him to where the Keurig sat on the smooth counter, and I pressed the power button. The cool air reminded me that my backside was totally exposed in my idiotic vanity plate underpants, but I'd be damned if I let him think that he had the ability to faze me. I forced myself not to tug on the Cookie Monster pajama top as I searched the cabinets for coffee, telling myself that it was only a butt as I said, "I thought you moved to Kansas or Montana."

He cleared his throat. "In the cupboard next to the fridge."

I glanced over at him. "What?"

"The coffee."

He was *such* a know-it-all. He'd always reminded me of an East Coast mobster, the way he knew everything and was always right. So I lied and said, "Well, I wasn't looking for coffee."

He quirked an eyebrow and leaned against the breakfast bar. "You weren't."

"Nope." I bit down on my bottom lip and said, "I was actually looking for, um, for tea."

"Oh. Of course." He gave me a look that told me he somehow knew that I hated tea. "Well, it's in the same cupboard. Next to the fridge."

Holy God, how could this be happening? Am I seriously talking to Colin Beck in my underwear?

“Thank you.” I fought the urge to roll my eyes as I walked over to that cupboard, wanting coffee so bad I could cry. There was one kind of tea in there, Earl Grey, and all I knew was that I’d hate it as I pulled out a K-Cup and took it back over to the machine. “Where’s Jack?”

“Um.” I felt his eyes on me as he said, “He’s at work.”

“Oh.” *So why are you here?*

“He said you’re staying for a month.” He leaned his tanned forearms on the counter—how the hell did he have sexy *forearms*, for God’s sake—and started messing with his running watch. “Right?”

“Yep.” I grabbed a mug from the counter, filled it with water from the sink, and removed the lid of the near-empty reservoir on the Keurig. “Does my brother know you’re here, by the way?”

That made him look up from his wrist. “What?”

I leaned closer to the coffee machine and started pouring. “Is he expecting you?”

He made a sound in his throat that was a mixture between a cough and a laugh before saying, “Holy shit—you don’t know that I’m his roommate, do you?”

Oh, God. He couldn’t be serious, right? I searched his face, desperate for him to be messing with me, even while knowing he wasn’t. But before I could get more of a read on his expression, he waved his hands in my direction and barked, “Water. Watch the water, Liv.”

“Shit.” I’d missed the reservoir completely and poured water all over the counter. I grabbed a towel and tried wiping it up, but the bar towel wasn’t absorbent in the least and only served to push the water from the counter to the floor.

While that arrogant jerk watched with an amused grin on his face.

“You don’t have anything better to do than watch me mop up my mess?”

He shrugged and leaned into the counter like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Not really. I like what you’re doing with your hair these days, by the way.”

“Is that right? Do you?” I gave him a mocking smile that felt more like the feral baring of teeth. “I call this my moving-in-with-Colin hairstyle. Looks and feels like a dumpster fire.”

“Speaking of fires, I’m curious, Marshall. How the hell did you manage to burn down an entire apartment building?” He tilted his head and said, “I mean, you’ve always been a bit of a train wreck, but burning love letters on a wooden deck like some kind of pyro is next level, even for you.”

I tried to swallow but my throat was pinched.

Not because that jackass thought I was an idiot; he’d always thought that. My misadventures were a guilty pleasure for Colin, like a train wreck reality TV show that you didn’t want to admit you watched but always binged on when you came across it.

I was his *Sister Wives*.

But the fact that he knew the tiny details of something that’d just happened the day before yesterday, in a city eight hours away, meant that Jack had told him. And my brother had clearly told him more than just a vague my-sister’s-been-displaced-by-a-fire sort of disclaimer since he mentioned the love letters.

He’d shared with him the awful details.

The cheating boyfriend, the wine-and-letter-burning ceremony on the deck, the four-alarm fire . . . everything. I wanted to vomit at the thought of the two of them, laughing their asses off as Jack regaled him with the tale of my latest tragedy.

The words *it wasn’t my fault* hovered on the tip of my tongue, wanting to be shouted. I wanted to scream that statement to every person who was reading the story in the paper, clicking on the link, or watching the reporter grin and mockingly enunciate the words *love letters*.

Because it wasn’t my fault.

Yes, I’d been burning Eli’s poems. I’d been perilously close to wine drunk as I chain-smoked on the balcony and torched the letters from that cheating bastard, but I’d burned them in a metal pail. I had a huge cup of water beside the pail, just in case. I wasn’t an idiot. I’d been fully prepared for my Cheating Elijah exorcism.

But I hadn't been prepared for the possum.

I'd been quietly gazing into my tiny bonfire, contemplating the fact that being alone might not be so terrible, when that ugly little guy had run across the gutter and jumped onto my deck. My gasp had alerted him to my presence, scaring him. Scaring him enough for him to scatter and bump the table that the pail was sitting on top of, knocking the pail onto the deck.

The deck that was covered in an adorable straw mat.

"Listen," I said, trying to sound unfazed, "I'd love to stand around and discuss what a mess you think I am, but I have things to do. Can you please turn around?"

"Why?"

I sighed and wanted to disappear. "Because the more awake I become, the less happy I am to be talking to you sans pants."

His eyes crinkled around the edges. "I didn't think you ever got embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed." If it were anyone else in the world, I would laughingly admit that I got embarrassed super easily and all the time, which was what usually was to blame for my trips, spills, and general awkwardness. But because it was Colin, I said, "I'm just not sure you're worthy of an eyeful of this ass."

I walked past him and left the kitchen with my head held high, even as my face burned and I prayed my butt looked good in those ridiculous underpants. It wasn't until I slammed the door of my makeshift room that I allowed myself to whisper-scream nearly every obscenity I knew.

Olivia

The day didn't get much better.

I barricaded myself in the office and applied for ten jobs I was completely underqualified for. There were a few openings for technical writers, which I was qualified for but not excited about, and a slew of other copywriter jobs that I *almost* fit the profile for (but not quite).

In the process I managed to jam up the printer (that I'd used without permission) and spill toner powder on the white rug (spoiler: Cleaning it with water was a terrible idea and the rug was toast), so I was off to a great start.

After that, I drove over to my parents' house to grab some of the clothes I left behind when I went to college. While I depressingly dug through clothes that hadn't been trendy in a decade, my mother showed me the virtual scrapbook she was keeping of links to stories about the fire. You know, just so I could remember it years from now.

Then she fed me lasagna while my father lectured me on adult behavior and the importance of renter's insurance.

I left their house with heartburn, leftovers, and a chip on my shoulder that was a hell of a lot bigger than the *Kennedy Marching Band* T-shirt that I was going to have to get reacquainted with until I got a job and earned new clothes.

I wondered how far the closest plasma donation facility was.

When I got back to Jack's building, I just didn't feel like going up yet. The day had been so filled with one horrendous thing after another that I wasn't quite ready to deal with Colin. Or my brother, for that matter.

Definitely not their irritation when I told them about the white rug.

So I went up to the roof instead.

I'd noticed the sign in the elevator about the rooftop patio, and it did *not* disappoint. It had a ridiculous view of the city below, framed with overflowing pots of bright petunias and fancy chaise longue chairs.

I sat down, tucked my legs under me, and took in a deep breath of summer air.

Ahhhh. It felt like the first time I'd breathed since Eli had shown up at the coffee shop and told me how much he didn't love me.

Had that really been two days ago?

My phone buzzed, and when I looked down, I saw a text from the same unfamiliar number from the night before.

What are you wearing?

Wrong number dude was at it again? What a loser. I texted: Haha. Did that actually work for you last night, btw?

A couple laughed around the fire pit that was glowing on the other side of the rooftop, and I wondered what the possum population was like in this part of town.

Mr. Wrong Number: After the cold shower your mental image dumped on me, I didn't even try. I went home and went to bed.

Me: Oh, poor baby. So sorry I ruined the world's cheesiest attempt at action.

Mr. Wrong Number: You don't know I wanted action. I might've been taking a survey on female attire.

Me: Sure you were.

Mr. Wrong Number: On that note, I'm taking a survey on female attire. Can you describe your current outfit?

I glanced down at my gym shorts and texted: Valentino gown, Ferragamo pumps, and the kickiest little feathered hat you've ever seen. Might've belonged to the Queen.

Mr. Wrong Number: So you're in pajamas.

Me: Basically.

Mr. Wrong Number: Antisocial by choice or bad luck?

Me: Choice. But my luck is, in fact, the baddest.

Mr. Wrong Number: Can't be that bad.

Me: Oh, you have no idea.

Mr. Wrong Number: Three examples, please.

I smiled. It felt wildly freeing to talk to someone who didn't know me.

Me: In college, I was clipping my toenails and ended up having to wear an eye patch for a month.

Mr. Wrong Number: Disgusting, but impressive. #2?

Me: I once got stuck in a tipped-over porta-potty.

Mr. Wrong Number: Good Lord.

Me: Music festival, strong winds. The thing blew over, door side down. I still have nightmares.

Mr. Wrong Number: I want to move on to #3, but I have to know how long you were trapped.

Me: Twenty minutes but it felt like days. My drunk friends lifted it enough for me to squeeze through the door crack.

Mr. Wrong Number: I'm assuming you were . . .

Me: Absolutely covered in waste.

Mr. Wrong Number: I just threw up a little in my mouth.

Me: As you should. And just to add a cherry to the top of your entertainment sundae, the story ends in me being doused with gallons of high-powered water that were dispensed by a fire hose.

Mr. Wrong Number: Wow. You definitely can't top #2.

Me: Oh, you ignorant little fool. #2 is but a warm-up.

Mr. Wrong Number: Well give me #3, then.

I thought about it for a minute. I mean, there were hundreds of embarrassing bad luck moments I could've shared with him. The time I dropped a bowling ball on my toe on my first date, the time I fell into an empty pool and broke my elbow; such was my life. But since I didn't know him and he didn't know me, I shared the rawest one.

Me: Not only did I introduce my boyfriend—now ex—to my stunningly beautiful coworker, but I encouraged him to collaborate with her on a project that required them to spend countless hours alone together in her apartment.

Mr. Wrong Number: Oof.

Me: Right? Probably doesn't qualify as bad luck when it's pure stupidity.

Mr. Wrong Number: I don't know you, so you could be a raging psycho. BUT. If you're not, I think it makes you unbelievably cool, the fact that you'd trust them both that much.

I hadn't actually told anyone in the world what'd happened with Eli yet, so it felt good, having someone say that.

Me: You say that, but would you ever be that stupid?

Mr. Wrong Number: No comment.

I snorted. See?