

LYNN PAINTER

MR WRONG NUMBER

One wrong number might just lead to Mr Right . . .



'Side-splittingly funny. I dare you not to fall in love!'
Ali Hazelwood, author of *The Love Hypothesis*

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Mr Wrong Number

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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.

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1

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?*

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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?

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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

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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.

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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?"

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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.

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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.

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"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 eaves-

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dropping 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

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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.

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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.

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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."

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"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.

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2

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

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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.

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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.

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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,

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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?

Mr. Wrong Number: How about I give you one of my stupid moments to even this out?
Me: I thought you said it wasn't stupid.
Mr. Wrong Number: Hush.

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Me: Please continue.
Mr. Wrong Number: In college, I proposed to my girlfriend without a ring.
Me: That's not stupid.
Mr. Wrong Number: She said no because—and I quote—"if you knew me at all, you'd know I want a ring."
Me: Oof.
Mr. Wrong Number: Right?
Me: I can't imagine having my life together enough IN COLLEGE to propose marriage. I was still getting floor-licking drunk every weekend right up until graduation.
Mr. Wrong Number: Maybe I should've tried that, instead.
Me: I'm guessing you're over it?
Mr. Wrong Number: Why are you guessing that?
Me: Because you're sending "what are you wearing" texts to randos.
Mr. Wrong Number: I AM over it, but you were a misdial, not a rando. I was sending that text to someone I knew, remember?
Me: Oh, yes—of course.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and looked up at the stars. It was a gorgeous night, and I was actually having fun.

Talking to a wrong number.

God, I was pathetic.

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Me: Listen, Wrong Number, you seem like a damned delight, but I don't have any interest in an internet

friend. I've seen Catfish and 90 Day Fiancé, and that is not my jam.

Mr. Wrong Number: Nor mine.

Me: So . . . have a great night, then.

Mr. Wrong Number: So that's it? It's either zero or Catfish?

Me: Afraid so.

Mr. Wrong Number: And this isn't the internet, for the record.

Me: True, but still the same.

Mr. Wrong Number: You don't find this kind of . . . entertaining?

Me: I do, actually.

Mr. Wrong Number: So . . . ?

Me: So . . . sticking with my original answer. These things always get weird.

Mr. Wrong Number: You're probably right. Especially with your bad luck.

Me: Yup.

Mr. Wrong Number: Well, good night, then, Miss Misdial.

Me: Good night to you, Mr. Wrong Number.

I put my phone away and it almost felt like I was waking up from something, like I'd just come outside after a month in a dark basement. I felt more relaxed than I'd been in a really long time as I stretched in the moonlight and stacked my hands behind my head.

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It was strange to think, but I kind of felt like it was because

I'd unloaded on Wrong Number. I felt *lighter*. Light enough to go back to the apartment, in fact.

Because really, who cared if Jack and Colin thought I was a loser? Why had I let that bother me in the first place? I loved my brother, but the reality was that theirs was just an apartment for me to sleep in for the next month.

A really nice apartment that I was going to enjoy, dammit. Like an Airbnb without the required payment.

I texted Jack: Are you guys home?

Jack: At the Old Market. Why?

Yes! Alone time.

Me: Just curious. Have fun.

I went down to my car, grabbed the trash bag full of high school clothes, and headed upstairs. I'd been so emotionally shredded the night before that I hadn't had a chance to get comfortable and explore the place. I hummed as I rode the elevator, feeling a little more like a functional, thriving adult than a cheated-on loser for the first time since Eli thanked me for introducing him to his soul mate.

When I got inside, I dropped my keys on the table by the door and dragged my garbage bag into the office. I dumped everything out onto the floor in the corner, digging through the pile until I found what I was looking for: the soft green plaid flannel pants I'd slept in every night in high school and my paint-stained CAT hoodie.

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It didn't matter that it was June. The apartment was freezing, so the outfit was like wearing a blanket. I burrowed into its softness, slid my feet into a pair of mismatched socks, and threw my hair up in a ponytail. Two quick flicks in my phone's Bluetooth settings, and I was headed for the kitchen.

"Alexa, play *Hit It Mix*."

"Sex Talk" started and I cranked the volume, bouncing a little across that swanky apartment. I'd made the playlist as a joke for Eli, filling it with nasty songs I knew he'd find offensive, but apparently I was tougher to offend because I fell in love with the potpourri of upbeat, über-sexual songs instead.

And now that he was the biggest bastard in the world, the playlist was my theme music.

I did a few pirouettes on the sleek kitchen floor, getting maximum spin in my socks, before wandering over to the windows that overlooked the city. I was obsessed with that part of the apartment. I could stand there—in front of those huge floor-to-ceiling windows—and watch the world for hours.

"Want a beer?"

"God." I turned around, my hand on my heart, and Colin was standing in the doorway of his bedroom, one side of his mouth slid up in a smirk. He was wearing a black shirt and a pair of jeans, his hair still perfect in its Ivy League style. "I didn't know anyone else was home."

He pointed toward the speaker above him in the ceiling. "I kind of assumed."

"I thought you were with my brother." I felt my cheeks get hot as Megan Thee Stallion started singing exactly how her man liked it. *Super* loudly.

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I nearly screamed, "Alexa, turn off music!"

Colin's eyes were smiling and he crossed his arms. "So, beer . . . ?"

Unaccustomed to his congeniality, I asked, "Are you offering, or just taking a poll?"

"Offering." He made a face like he knew he deserved that and said, "We've got a beer fridge in the laundry room."

"Um." I tucked my hair behind my ears and said, "Yeah. Thanks."

He walked over to the door next to the bathroom, and when he went inside, I adjusted my hoodie so my bralessness was less apparent. I assumed he'd bring out a beer, but instead he yelled, "You should probably pick your poison. Your brother likes a lot of weird shit."

"Oh." I walked over to the tiny laundry room, where he was leaning down into the fridge and presenting me with—wow—just the finest ass. I mean, his posterior looked as if he was forever doing squats and lunges; perhaps that was his sole method of mobility. Maybe Colin lunged everywhere he went.

He glanced over his shoulder. "See anything you like?"

Good God. I cleared my throat, pointed, and managed, "Is that a Vanilla Bean Blonde over by the Mich Ultra?"

"Yep." He straightened, gave me the blonde, and grabbed a Boulevard for himself. I exited the laundry room with him following behind me, and I wandered toward the kitchen, where I knew the bottle opener lived. "Thanks for the beer."

"Sure." He went around to the other side of the breakfast bar, opened a drawer, and pulled out the opener. Colin held it out to me and said, "By the way, I owe you an apology."

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That captured my attention. I grabbed the opener and asked, "For what?"

His eyes were serious when he said, "For what I said about the fire this morning. I was an asshole about it, and it's really none of my business."

I popped the top and lifted the bottle toward my mouth. "And . . . ?"

A flash of irritation crossed his face before he said, "What does 'and' mean? You don't accept my apology?"

"I just don't get it." I noticed his hands were nice—*Stop it, Liv*—as he opened his beer. I watched his throat move around a swallow, and I said, "You're actually apologizing to me?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Well, yeah, but you've always been a jerk to me and you've never apologized." I finally took a sip of my beer then, looking at his slightly confused expression over the bottle.

He sounded outraged as he said, "I've apologized."

"Nope."

"Well, if I haven't, it's because it's always been in good fun." His eyes moved over my face, like he was trying to reconcile the whole of our lives together. "We've always messed with each other. That's kind of our thing, right?"

Did he actually think that? That his Liv-is-a-moron attitude was just our friendly wordplay? For some reason that irritated me, the fact that he didn't even know that I didn't like him; I mean, shouldn't he *know*?

I decided to let it go, though, because we were roommates for the next month. It would run a lot smoother if I played nice.

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And for me, nice meant avoidance. Steering clear of Colin was the only way to ensure a peaceful, rent-free month.

"Sure." I got off the stool and pushed it in. "Thanks again for the beer. I've got a million things to do tomorrow, so I should probably start settling in, even though I'm totally wide-awake. It's weird how when you decimate your life, you get wicked insomnia."

He smirked and his eyes were actually smiling. "I bet."

I shrugged. "I'm sure I'll start sleeping like a baby soon, once the smell of soot finally leaves my body."

He actually coughed out a little laugh. "One can only hope."

I started to walk away when he said, "Hey, can I quickly use the printer before you go to bed? I just need to print a three-page doc—"

"No!" I turned around and cursed myself for sounding so panicked. "I mean, can you maybe just use it tomorrow? I'm really, really tired."

His eyebrows furrowed. "You just said that you have insomnia."

I bit my bottom lip and said, "I just have a lot of stuff in the office, all over the place, and I—"

"What happened?" He sounded like a detective who knew I was guilty as he crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes.

I reached up and pulled my ponytail tighter. "Nothing happened. Um, I just don't want—"

"Spill it, Marshall."

I sighed. "Fine. Your printer broke when I used it this morning. I didn't do anything wrong, it just broke. I'm sure I can fix it."

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"Can I see?"

I so didn't want him seeing the heaping mountain of old garbage clothes, but it *was* his apartment. "Sure."

I followed him into the office, and as soon as we walked in, I saw him looking at the trash bag and massive clothing pile. It was embarrassing, but at least the mess was covering the stain on the rug. I said, "I know what you're thinking."

"You couldn't possibly."

"I went to my parents' house, and my mom sent me home with a bag full of clothes. She didn't have any luggage, so I had to put them in a Hefty bag."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"Bullshit."

He just winked, and my stomach dropped to my ankles.

He leaned down and looked inside the printer, where the cartridge door was ajar. "What the hell happened to it?"

"I had to pry off the door with a flathead screwdriver. Don't worry, I googled it first."

He squinted into the printer. "Oh, well, if you googled it."

"I knew what I was doing."

He looked over at me like I was insane, and pointed at the broken door. "Seriously with that?"

I just shrugged.

He started digging inside the machine, and he pulled out two crumpled-up pieces of paper. After a few minutes, he had the printer up and running and the machine back together. He straightened and said, "Boom."

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I rolled my eyes, which made him smile. Those wild eyes twinkled as his deep voice purred out, "Need anything else fixed, Liv?"

I knew he wasn't flirting—I knew it beyond a reasonable doubt—but it still shook me. It made my voice sound kind of breathy when I said, "I think I'm good."

His eyes stayed with mine for a split second, like we were both wordlessly acknowledging the spark of flirtation, before he said, "Well, good night."

I swallowed and dropped down onto the air mattress. "Well, good night."

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3

Olivia

"DUDE." JACK WAS SITTING ON A STOOL, EATING WHAT looked to be a breakfast burrito and scrolling through his phone. He said, "Why are you awake?"

"I'm going for a run." I put my foot up on the other stool and tied my shoe. His shock was no surprise; I was shocked, too. I usually slept until twenty minutes after my alarm went off, wherein I would scramble to get ready and ultimately end up putting on makeup while driving. This early-morning thing was brand new for me.

I cringed at the smell of the burrito. "God, that smells disgusting."

"Since when do you run?" He looked at me like I'd just said I was going to run *for president*. "You used to have Mom call you out of gym every time they had the national physical fitness test."

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