

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Mr. Wrong Number*

LYNN PAINTER



The

LOVE
WAGER

“I dare you not to fall in love with Lynn Painter’s writing!”

—Ali Hazelwood, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Love on the Brain*

Praise for *MR. WRONG NUMBER*

“The most sidesplittingly funny, shenanigan-packed, sexual tension–filled book I’ve read in a long, long time. I dare you not to fall in love with Olivia and Colin, but most of all I dare you not to fall in love with Lynn Painter’s writing!”

—Ali Hazelwood, author of *Loathe to Love You*

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

—Christina Lauren, international bestselling author of *Something Wilder*

“One of my favorite rom-coms, heavy on the ‘com’ and steamy on the ‘rom’!”

—Jesse Q. Sutanto, author of *Four Aunties and a Wedding*

“This book is an absolute blast, a classic rom-com setup with a modern twist. Lynn Painter’s clever, charming voice sparkles on every page.”

—Rachel Lynn Solomon, author of *Weather Girl*

“Filled with laugh-out-loud situations and moments of heart-fluttering swooniness, *Mr. Wrong Number* is a true romantic comedy. . . . I’ll read anything Lynn Painter writes and I’m already impatiently waiting for her next book.”

—Kerry Winfrey, author of *Just Another Love Song*

“Painter’s mastery of sexy slow-burn tension and whip-sharp banter will have readers smiling from ear to ear. Perfect for fans of Christina Lauren, this deeply relatable romance proves that love may be closer than you expect.”

—Amy Lea, author of *Exes and O’s*

“A delightfully messy heroine and world-class banter make this oh-so-sweet story of hidden identities and mixed (text) messages impossible to put down. *Mr. Wrong Number* is a sexy, hilarious, compulsively readable rom-com.”

—Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka, authors of *Do I Know You?*

“*Mr. Wrong Number* by Lynn Painter is the perfect rom-com. Charming, laugh-out-loud, and full of heart, it is a sheer delight of a reading experience. . . . Gorgeous, glimmering, and guaranteed to make you laugh!”

—India Holton, author of *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels*

“Olivia’s . . . chemistry with Colin sings. This is sure to charm.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“If you like your romances steamy, then *Mr. Wrong Number* by Lynn Painter is sure to leave you hot and bothered in a good way.”

—PopSugar

“Olivia’s journey will keep you eagerly turning pages.”

—*USA Today*

“A laugh-out-loud, sexy rom-com . . . Painter’s hilarious voice and vibrant characters are a breath of fresh air in this highly enjoyable romance.”

—BuzzFeed

“Readers have a rom-com sure to please—an especially good fit for fans of *The Hating Game* or television’s *New Girl*.”

—Shelf Awareness

Berkley titles by Lynn Painter

MR. WRONG NUMBER

THE LOVE WAGER



The
**LOVE
WAGER**

LYNN PAINTER

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for Kevin

~~*I love the way you always have a camping bag fully
packed & ready*~~

~~*Thank you for never overcooking my steak*~~

~~*Remember that time we brought vodka on the train to
New York*~~

~~*Because you can pick things up with your toes*~~

~~*2 words: Pam Anderson's car repairs*~~

~~*Your hands are big like Romance Man*~~

~~*Because I know that you would somehow know what to
do in a zombie apocalypse*~~

~~*Because you continue to choose me over a dog*~~

~~*You are the wind beneath my wings*~~

~~*I miss the newsie hats you wore when we lived in
Chicago*~~

You are my happy place. ♥

Chapter ONE

Hallie

“Can I get a Manhattan and a chardonnay, please?”

“Sure thing.” Hallie glanced over her shoulder as she handed one of the bridesmaids a Crown and Coke, and—wow—the dude shouting his order over the way-too-loud version of “Electric Slide” was *very* attractive. He was obviously in the bridal party, all tuxxed-up and looking fancy, and even though she’d sworn off dating, Hallie couldn’t help but appreciate the dimples and the Hollywood bone structure. “You want that with bourbon?”

He leaned on his forearms and stretched a little closer to the bar as the hotel’s ballroom hit peak noise level. “Rye, please.”

“Nice.” She reached into the gray plastic bucket and pulled a California bottle out of the ice. “Interested in trying it with orange bitters?”

His dimples popped and he raised his eyebrows, his blue(?)—yes, blue—eyes squinting. “Is that a thing?”

“It is.” She poured the chardonnay and set the glass in front of him. “If you’re not a moron, you’ll love it.”

He coughed a laugh and said, “I consider myself to be generally non-moronic, so hook me up.”

Hallie started making his drink, and she kind of felt like she knew the guy. He seemed familiar. Not his face, necessarily, but his voice and super-tall height and twinkly eyes that made him look like he was down for any wild adventure.

She glanced at him as the dance floor's disco lights lit up his dark hair. Shaking the mixer and straining the Manhattan into a glass, she struggled to come up with it; *think, think, think*. He was looking back in the direction of the head table when it finally hit her.

"I know how I know you!"

He turned back around. "What?"

It was so loud that Hallie had to lean a little closer to him. She smiled and said, "You're Jack, right? I'm Hallie. I was the one who sold you the —"

"Hey!" he said, smiling, but then he set his hand on hers and gave her hard-core eye contact as he leaned closer and said, "Hallie. Listen. Let's not mention—"

"Oh. My. God." A blonde appeared beside him—*where did she come from?*—and her eyes narrowed as she looked at Hallie and said, "Seriously, Jack? The *waitress?*"

"Bartender," Hallie corrected, having no idea why she felt the need or what was up Superblonde's ass.

"You leave me alone for ten minutes—at your sister's wedding, for God's sake—to canoodle with the *waitress?*"

"Um, I can assure you there was no canoodling," Hallie said, painfully aware that the woman's loud voice was drawing a lot of attention. "And I'm a bartender, not a waitr—"

"Can you just shut *up?*" Superblonde said it through her nose and with the last word pitched an octave higher, like she was a Kardashian.

"Would you relax, Vanessa?" Jack said through his teeth, glancing over his lady friend's head as he tried to get her to quiet down. "I don't even know her—"

"I saw you!" She was near-yelling as the DJ switched to "Endless Love," which did zero to mute the outburst. *Where is the damn "Macarena" when you need it?* Superblonde—Vanessa, apparently—said, "You were leaning in and holding her hand. How long has this—"

"Come on, Van, it's not—"

"*How long?*" she shrieked.

The guy's jaw flexed, like he was clenching and unclenching his teeth, and then he said, "Since this morning."

Vanessa's mouth dropped open. "You were with her *this morning*?"

"Not *with me* with me," Hallie said, looking around, horrified by the implication. She worked part-time at Borsheim's on the weekends. The guy, Jack, had come into the store that morning, and she'd helped him find a ring.

And not just any ring.

The ring.

The will-you-be-a-jealous-hag-for-the-rest-of-my-life? ring.

"She sold me this." Jack pulled the ring box out of his pocket and practically shoved it in the girl's face as he spoke through his teeth. "I bought this for you, Vanessa. Christ."

The box was closed, but Hallie knew a stunning square-cut diamond engagement ring was nestled inside. He'd seemed like a funny, charming guy when she helped him shop for the perfect ring, but if he thought Vanessa was soul-mate material, he clearly only thought with his penis.

Or he really was a moron.

"Oh, my God," Vanessa squealed, her face transforming into sunlight as she beamed at Jack and put her hands over her heart. "You're proposing?"

He stared at her with his eyes squinted for a solid five seconds before saying, "I'm not *now*."

Her smile slipped. "You're not?"

"Fuck, no."

Hallie snorted.

Which made Vanessa swing her narrowed, long-lashed—wow, those had to be extensions—eyes in Hallie's direction. She hissed, "Is something funny?"

Hallie shook her head, but for some reason, she couldn't make her lips straighten. She kept hearing the dude's *fuck, no* and it was just so *chef's kiss*.

Before she had a second to realize what was happening, Vanessa grabbed the full glass of chardonnay from where it was sitting on the bar,

turned her wrist, and threw its contents in Hallie's face.

"Gahh!" Cold wine splashed over her face and burned her eyes. Thankfully, as a bartender, she was surrounded by towels and happened to have one on her shoulder that very second. Hallie snatched it and wiped her face. "Hey. *Van*. What is your *problem*?"

"*You* are my prob—"

"I am *so* sorry," Jack said, looking pathetically apologetic. He grabbed Hallie's towel and started patting her dripping neck, which made Vanessa's eyes grow huge.

"Oh, my God, she's fine," Vanessa said.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Hallie said, giving him a weird look as she snatched back the towel. "She seems great, by the way."

He leaned in closer, so all Hallie could see was his worried face and blue eyes. "You're good?"

"Yeah." Hallie blinked and felt like she needed to take a step back. He was too attractive for human eyes, especially when giving that sort of eye contact. She ran her tongue over her freshly chardonnayed lips. "Well, actually, no, if I'm being honest. See, I recommend this chardonnay all the time because it's supposed to be oaky with a rich, buttery finish, but it's actually dry as hell with a bitter, stale aftertaste."

He pursed his lips.

"I've been perpetrating a lie this entire time."

His eyes crinkled around the edges and his mouth twitched. He looked like he was about to smile, but Vanessa grabbed his arm, and his face changed to straight-up pissed. Hallie watched his throat move as he swallowed, and then he turned around and said, "We need to go."

Her perfect eyebrows went up. "We're leaving?"

"Something like that. Come on."

He led his pretty monster away from the bar, and Hallie mopped up before getting back to making drinks. The entire dustup had happened over the course of a mere three minutes, but it'd felt like an eternity.

The other bartender, Julio, asked out of the side of his mouth as he poured vodka into five shot glasses, "What the hell was that?"

“Just a batshit jealous girlfriend.” She moved to the other end of the bar and took an order for two whiskey sours. “I don’t even know them.”

“Oh, my God, Hallie Piper, I thought that was you!”

Hallie looked up and did a double take. *Seriously, universe?* “Allison Scott?”

Ugh. Allison. They’d gone to high school together, and she was one of those girls who was technically super nice but always managed to word things in ways that made people feel like shit. Hallie hadn’t seen her since graduation eight years ago, and she definitely hadn’t missed her.

“Oh, my God, you are the most adorable bartender I’ve ever seen.” Allison beamed and gestured toward Hallie’s damp black tank top and black jeans. “Seriously you’re, like, a cutesy-cute drink-maker in a movie.”

Allison was giving total Alexis Rose vibes, and Hallie pasted a smile on her face. “Can I make you something?”

“My boyfriend is one of the groomsmen,” she said, apparently not in want of a beverage. “And when he ran over and said there was a catfight at the bar, I never in a million years would’ve guessed it’d be my super-anal, buttoned-up friend Hallie.”

Did she just call me super-anal? Dear God. Hallie explained, “It wasn’t a catfight, it was more like a misunderstanding between a couple, with me as collateral damage.”

“I caught the end of it.” She smiled, and there was something kind of Grinch-like in the slow, satisfied climb of it. “So what’re you doing these days? Besides tending bar at wedding receptions. Are you still with Ben?”

A man behind Allison held up two empty Mich Ultra bottles, so Hallie grabbed two from under the bar, opened them, and set them down as she said, “Nope. I am living life Ben-free.”

“Oh. Wow.” Allison’s eyes got big, like Hallie had just declared herself a serial killer because she’d had the audacity to break up with the guy who had once been considered their high school’s star running back. She asked, “So what’s your sister doing?”

Hallie wanted to scream when she heard the DJ announce the bride-and-groom dance, because it meant there would be no mad rush for drinks;

people loved watching that sappy shit. Allison could loiter and make uncomfortable small talk for as long as she wanted, and that made Hallie daydream about chandeliers accidentally falling from the ceiling and crushing annoying ex-friends.

“Um, Lillie is engaged to Riley Harper—they’re getting married next month. Do you remember him from—”

“Oh, my God—she’s engaged to Riley Harper? He was our homecoming king, right?”

Hallie nodded and wondered if she was the only one who didn’t think of their high school’s homecoming royalty as *ours*. To her, the king was just some guy who wore the crown at a dance.

“Wow, good for her.” Allison looked impressed. “Does she work?”

“Yeah, um, she’s an engineer.”

“You have *got* to be kidding!” She gave her chic, bobbed head a little shake. “You guys are like *Freaky Friday* chicks now.”

“What?”

“You know. You were always the responsible, together one, and Lillie was the hot mess shit show. Now she’s an engineer with a fiancé, and you’re single and waiting tables and getting into bar fights.” She smiled like it was hilarious. “Crazy.”

Allison finally ordered a drink and stopped torturing Hallie, but as soon as she walked away, her words played on a continuous loop in Hallie’s mind. *Hot mess shit show. Hot mess shit show.*

God, *had* they *Freaky Friday*ed?

Hallie spent the next half-hour freaking out in her head while she continued slinging drinks on autopilot. *Hot mess shit show.* It wasn’t until “Single Ladies” came on that she embraced her inner Beyoncé and remembered that everything was going to be okay.

Because she wasn’t a hot mess shit show at all. Rather, it was just her “winter.”

After she and Ben split up (aka after he realized he didn’t love her at all), Hallie had decided to treat it as “the winter of her twenties.” A cold, dormant season that would lead to a bountiful spring. She’d moved out of

Ben's place and gotten a cheap apartment—with a roommate. She'd taken two part-time jobs, in addition to her career, to pay down her student loans in half the time.

The way she saw it, she was going to take advantage of her man-free time. She was going to live like a peasant and hustle her ass off. They were dark days, her winter season, but soon they would all pay off.

“YOU.”

Hallie looked up, and the guy—Jack—was charging straight toward the bar. He looked intense—serious face, tie hanging untied around his neck—and his eyes were fixed on her.

“Me?” She looked behind her.

“Yes.” He stopped when he reached the bar and said, “I need you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Hallie tilted her head and said, “And what happened to that sweetheart of a girlfriend of yours? Van, was it?”

“We need a bartender in the back.” Jack ignored her remark, looking at Julio and saying, “Do you think you can spare her for a bit?”

Julio glanced at Hallie, trying to gauge her reaction, before saying, “Yes, but I believe the bride scheduled—”

“She's the one who sent me over. I'm her brother.”

“First of all, don't talk to *him* about *me* like I'm not here. Just because I have breasts doesn't mean I'm incapable of speaking for myself. Second of all,” Hallie said, irritated by the hot guy's obvious sexism, “I don't strip or give lap dances, so if ‘the back’ is code for something creepy, count me out.”

That made Jack smirk down at her, the kind of smirk that made him look both amused and irritated all at the same time. “First of all, I was told that Julio here is the banquet supervisor, so your breasts played no part whatsoever in my choice of conversation partner.”

“Oh,” Hallie said.

“And second of all,” he added, “you give off a strong no-creepy-lap-dance vibe, so I can assure you ‘the back’ is not code for anything untoward.”

Hallie pushed back the stray hairs that'd fallen out of her ponytail, feeling a bit like an idiot. "Well, good."

"Follow me?"

"Why not?" Hallie came around the bar and followed Jack as he walked through the throngs of wedding revelers—most of whom smiled at him like he was their favorite cousin, even though he appeared oblivious—and when they got to the kitchen door, he pushed it open and held it for her.

"Thanks." She walked through the door, only to see that the kitchen was absolutely deserted. "Um . . . ?"

She turned around, and Jack had dropped his jacket on top of a box of bananas and was rolling up his shirtsleeves. He raised an eyebrow and waited for her to speak.

"I thought you said you needed a bartender."

"I do." He casually hopped up onto the stainless-steel prep counter and sat so that his long legs were dangling in front of him. "You got me dumped, so now it's your job to get me drunk."

Seriously, dude?

"Yeah, um, you aren't the king," Hallie said, "and I'm not interested in being your personal serving wench. But thank you."

"Dear God, I don't want you to serve me." He pointed to the spot beside him on the counter. "I just thought since we both had drinks thrown in our faces by Vanessa Robbins tonight, it might be nice to drown our troubles and share a bottle."

Hallie tilted her head and looked at the bottle of Crown Royal next to him.

Why did that sound so damn appealing?

Jack

He could see it in her face the minute she decided. It was like her entire posture relaxed.

And then she smiled.

Not that it mattered, but she was cute. A short little redhead with a big smartass mouth. He actually *had* remembered her from the jewelry store, not because of how she looked but because she'd been funny as hell as she'd shown him a slew of engagement rings.

She came over and hopped up on the counter, crisscrossing her legs and reaching for the bottle. "First of all, please tell me *you* dumped *her* and not the other way around."

"Obviously," he said.

"Thank God." She rolled in her lips and said, "Second of all, I had nothing to do with the implosion of your relationship."

"Well, if you hadn't said anything . . ."

"Then you'd be engaged to a jealous psycho." She narrowed her green eyes and said, "I think you actually owe me a ginormous thank-you."

"Is that right?"

"For sure," she said, and then she raised the bottle to her mouth and took a big drink. After she finished, she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "Are you intentionally forgoing mixers? Because I'm okay with that, but since I'm only five feet tall, I'm going to get there a *lot* quicker without Coke."

He actually felt like smiling when he said, "Fine by me."

"And are you paying for the Uber that I will surely need when we're finished?"

Jack took the bottle as she held it out to him and noticed his fingers looked gigantic next to hers. He said, "If it comes to that, then yes."

"Oh, it will definitely come to that." She gave him another sarcastic grin and turned her body so she was facing him. "I plan on getting floor-licking drunk tonight, buddy. Like, can't-remember-your-own-mother, vomiting-in-the-elevator-phone-box, is-she-okay-or-should-we-call-someone hammered. Care to join me on the thrill ride?"

Jack tipped the bottle into his mouth and let the liquor burn through him, warming a path all the way down to his belly. She watched him the whole time, and he wasn't sure if it was the buzz or not, but he was

suddenly all-in on getting drunk with the funny bartender. He wiped his mouth and handed the bottle back to her.

“So . . . ,” she asked, wrapping her slim fingers around the bottle, “you in, Best Man?”

Jack couldn't help but smile as he said, “I'm all yours, Tiny Bartender.”