



Jae

Wrong Number

Right Woman



Chapter 1

DENNY MADE IT TO THE bus stop with two minutes to spare. Right before the end of her shift, a customer had dropped a bottle of ketchup in aisle three, and Denny's boss had sent her to clean up the mess, making her late. How fitting for April Fools' Day!

Still in her Grocery Port uniform, with spatters of half-dried ketchup all over her shirt and pants, she huffed to a stop at the corner where the bus would drop off her niece. She bent over to catch her breath. Christ, she really needed to get back in shape.

Not that she had ever *been* in shape.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket.

When she pulled it out, she wasn't surprised to see it was a text from her sister.

Did you do it?

Before she could ask for clarification, a new text bubble popped up beneath the first one. *You didn't, did you? Stop being such a chickenshit and ask her out already!*

Denny wiped the mistlike Portland drizzle off the small screen before typing, *Would you stop it? The bus isn't even here yet. Besides, who says I want to ask her out? Just because two women are gay doesn't mean they are interested in each other. If she even is gay.*

Her sister's reply was almost instant. *Oh, she is gay—and interested, trust me. I saw her smile at you the last time we dropped Bella off at the bus together.*

Denny stabbed at the keyboard on the phone screen as if that would finally make her sister listen. *I smile at customers all day long. It's called being friendly. Part of the job, nothing more.*

But what if it's more? Salem's predictable reply popped up within seconds. *Maybe she likes you.* She had added a row of kissy-face smileys.

Yeah, sure, Denny wrote back.

What have you got to lose? You haven't been on a single date since Bella was in first grade. That was more than four years ago, Denny!

Denny groaned and typed, *Thanks for keeping track.*

This time, it took a while before Salem's answer appeared. *I just worry about you. You're too amazing to end up alone.*

The last word made Denny grip the phone more tightly. She stared up at the overcast sky, then firmly shook her head. Bullshit. She wasn't alone, was she? She had her niece and her sister, as annoying as Salem could be. She was fine.

The big, yellow school bus rumbled around the corner, saving her from having to reply to Salem's text. It pulled up to the curb only steps from Denny, with its lights flashing and the stop sign extended.

When the bus door swung open, Denny sucked in her belly and plucked her shirt away from her hips, hoping to hide her love handles before she stepped up to the bus.

"Hi." The driver—Ms. Burkhart—smiled at her.

Denny froze, staring up at her. What was she supposed to say? Even if she wanted to go out with her, could she really ask the woman out while she was working, in front of about fifty kids? "Um, hi."

Two girls in the first row of seats nudged each other and giggled. Sweat trickled down Denny's spine. She reached up to adjust her glasses.

The giggling got louder.

Shit, had she just smeared ketchup all over her face?

Wrong Number, Right Woman

Ms. Burkhart's smile broadened. "Looks like you had quite the April Fools' Day."

"Uh, excuse me?"

Ms. Burkhart took one hand off the oversized steering wheel, ran it through her blonde locks, several shades lighter than Denny's sandy hair, and then pointed at Denny's ketchup-spattered shirt.

"Oh. Yeah. That. It's not blood—just ketchup," Denny blurted out. God, she was bad at this. So, so bad. It was almost as if she was watching herself from far away, witnessing the train wreck, but she still couldn't avoid making a fool of herself.

Bella bounded down the three steps and paused on the last one. "You're blocking the door."

"Oh, sorry." Denny stumbled back. It was a relief to have the eye contact between her and Ms. Burkhart interrupted.

Bella jumped out of the bus. "Bye, Ms. Burkhart," she called over her shoulder.

"Bye, Bella," Ms. Burkhart answered. "See you in the morning." She nodded at Denny and lifted her hand to press the button that would close the door.

It was now or never. Her sister's words echoed through Denny's mind. *What have you got to lose?* Ms. Burkhart seemed kind. Even if she wasn't interested in her, she wouldn't reject her too harshly... would she?

Denny gave herself a mental kick and opened her mouth to ask. "Um..."

"Yes?" Ms. Burkhart waited, her finger hovering over the button.

"Thanks for dropping her off safely," Denny finally got out. What? That wasn't what she had wanted to say!

Ms. Burkhart tipped an imaginary hat. "My pleasure."

A nod, then the door closed between them.

The red lights stopped flashing, and the bus pulled away and continued down the street.

Denny's shoulders slumped. Well, maybe it was better that way. Asking Ms. Burkhart out while she was at work might have gotten her in trouble. And even if she had said yes to having coffee with

her, Denny probably would have ended up embarrassing herself even more.

“What’s for dinner?” her niece asked from behind her. “I’m starving.”

Denny laughed and shook off the feeling of defeat that had settled over her. She joined Bella and loosely wrapped one arm around her shoulders as they walked the three blocks toward home. “What else is new?”

Bella leaned into her half embrace—a moment of closeness that had become rarer since she’d become a tween—and directed a puppy-dog look at her. “Can we get French fries?”

“Nope. Your mom will be home from work in an hour. We’ll have dinner then.”

“Please?”

From the first moment Denny had held her newborn niece, she knew she would always have a hard time telling her no. But because Bella and her mom were living with her, Denny had taken on more of a parental role, not that of an aunt who saw her niece occasionally and could spoil her rotten. She knew she had to be firm. “No, Bella. Not today. Getting takeout is a treat, not something we can do all the time. Besides, the zucchini will go to waste if we don’t eat them today.”

“Ew. Zucchini.” Bella wrinkled her nose.

She looked so much like the pouting three-year-old she had once been that Denny struggled not to laugh. “I’ll tell you what. If you finish all your homework tonight and don’t complain about dinner, I might pick up some ricotta cheesecake from your favorite Italian bakery after work tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Bella rushed ahead of Denny as if running would speed up the process of getting cheesecake.

Denny watched her with a fond grin. *Good old bribery. Works every time.* Now if only her moves were as successful when it came to charming women. Sighing, she followed Bella up the driveway to the two-story townhouse complex where they lived.

Wrong Number, Right Woman

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Half an hour later, Denny spooned the tomato sauce filling into the scooped-out zucchini and sprinkled shredded cheese and a bit of basil over them. Once the zucchini boats sizzled away in the oven, she dropped onto a chair next to Bella, who was doing her math homework at the dining room table. *Whew*. It felt good to be off her feet.

Just as she reached for her phone to see if she had beaten her personal record of walking twenty-five thousand steps at work, the device buzzed with an incoming text message.

“Yeah, yeah. Bawk, bawk, baawk. I’m a chicken. I know,” Denny muttered. She tapped her messages icon to read her sister’s inevitable admonition.

But the new message wasn’t from Salem. Denny didn’t recognize the number, but the area code was 503, the same as her own. Maybe one of her colleagues had a new phone or something. She opened the message to read it.

A red SOS emoji jumped out at her, along with: *Help! I’m hopelessly overthinking my first-date outfit.*

Denny chuckled. Someone was asking her of all people for advice on fashion and dating? Everyone who knew her was well aware that she had no interest in the former and no talent for the latter. Was this an April Fools’ Day joke? Had Julie, her work wife, borrowed someone’s phone to prank her?

Another message from the same unknown number popped up beneath the first one. *What do you think? This...?*

A photo appeared on her screen.

That was definitely not Julie. The selfie, shot in front of a closet with a mirrored door, showed a stranger. A cute stranger, Denny had to admit. The young woman’s glossy chestnut hair was tucked behind one ear, while the other side grazed her shoulder. A pair of black skinny jeans hugged her narrow waist and slim hips, and an off-the-shoulder top revealed tantalizing hints of fair skin. Her lips

quirked up in a self-deprecating grin, and her dark eyes twinkled as if she was poking fun at herself for obsessing over what to wear.

After a couple of minutes, a second picture arrived, along with the question: *Or this one?*

The photo showed the same woman in a different outfit. A tight top stretched across her small breasts, and a flowing skirt that ended above her knees made her look like a ballet dancer, lithe and graceful.

Denny's gaze trailed down the stranger's slender legs—then she burst out laughing.

Instead of the sensible yet sexy heels she'd been wearing in the first picture, a pair of canary-yellow sneakers now graced the woman's feet.

Bella looked up from where she was trying to multiply fractions. "What's that?" She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of what was on Denny's screen.

Denny hesitated. But why hide the messages from her niece? It wasn't as if the stranger had sent her nude pictures. She turned the phone so Bella could see the photos. "Someone is asking for fashion advice. I think she has the wrong number."

Bella giggled and pointed at the baggy sweatpants and the worn T-shirt Denny had put on after taking a shower. "If she's asking you for fashion advice, she's *clearly* got the wrong number."

"Hardy-har-har." Denny gave her a playful nudge that made Bella giggle even harder. "If you think I'm so fashion-challenged, maybe you should have someone else make your Halloween costume this year."

The giggling stopped abruptly, and Bella pretended to be focused on the phone. "So what are you going to tell her?"

Denny shrugged. "Sorry, wrong number?"

Bella looked back at her with wide eyes. "But she needs help."

Aww. Now that Bella was getting closer to puberty, she sometimes acted cool and aloof, but she couldn't hide her big heart. "Okay, then let's see if we can help her." Denny still wasn't sure how helpful she could be, though. Unlike her, the stranger clearly

Wrong Number, Right Woman

didn't shop in the men's section. She held out the phone to Bella and scrolled back and forth between the two images. "Which one?"

"Sneakers with a skirt?" Bella burst into giggles again.

Denny studied the photo once more. The canary-yellow sneakers made her smile. "I don't know. I kind of like it."

"Mm-hmm, me too. Just be yourself, right?"

It was what Denny and Salem had told her when she had come home crying a few years ago after someone at school had bullied her because she wasn't wearing the right brand of clothes. Apparently, their words had gotten through to Bella after all. Denny smiled and nodded. "Right."

A string of new messages appeared on the phone, moving the photo up the screen until all Denny could see was the yellow sneakers.

Heather???

Hello?

Which one?

Help me out here, please. I really don't want to give the wrong impression.

Denny pulled the phone closer to her. Without letting herself overthink it the way she usually did when she talked to women, she typed, *I'm not Heather, and as someone just reminded me, I'm not the best person to ask for fashion advice, but I'd definitely go with the second one.*

Several seconds ticked by. They bent their heads over the phone, waiting for a reply, but none came.

Bella reached over and tapped the screen as if that would encourage the stranger to answer.

Still nothing.

Bella shot her an accusatory look. "Oh no. I think you scared her off."

Yeah, apparently, she had that effect on women. Denny was about to put her phone away when a new message arrived after all.

Heather? Please tell me this is an April Fools' Day joke.

No, sorry, Denny typed back. It's not a joke. You've got the wrong number.

Again, there was a short pause before the reply came. *Oh shit. I'm so sorry. My friend just got a new phone. She must have given me the wrong number, or I put it in wrong.*

Don't worry about it, Denny replied.

She waited for a few more seconds, but no answer came. None was needed. She had gotten accidental text messages a time or two before, and the short back-and-forth always ended at this point. But unlike the other times, she found herself a little regretful. She wanted to know more about the woman with the yellow sneakers.

Bella nudged her. "Tell her you think the outfit is cute."

"I already told her to go with the sneaker one. Anything more would make me sound like a creep." When Bella reached for the phone, Denny pulled it away and stuffed it into the pocket of her sweatpants. "Come on. Your mom will be home soon. Let's set the table. You can finish your homework later."

Bella got the plates while Denny took knives and forks out of the drawer. When she placed the glasses on the table, her phone vibrated against her thigh.

"Ooh! Is it Sneaker Girl?" Bella rushed around the table to stand next to her.

"Sneaker Woman." Denny wasn't great at guessing women's ages, but the stranger was probably at least ten years younger than her own forty-one, in her late twenties or early thirties.

"Yeah, yeah." Bella waved her hand. "Is it her? Check!"

Denny pulled out the phone.

Yes. It was a new text from Sneaker Woman.

So, she had written, *are you sure about that?*

That I'm not Heather? 100% positive. But I can check my ID to make sure, if you want. Denny added a grinning smiley face.

"Maybe you should send her a picture," said Bella, who had read the message along with her. "To prove that you're not Heather."

Wrong Number, Right Woman

Denny shot her a no-way-in-hell look. “Remember what your mom and I told you about putting pictures of yourself online or sending them to strangers?”

“But she sent you photos of herself already,” Bella pointed out. “By accident.”

Bella scrunched up her nose but gave up arguing and leaned closer to read the reply.

Sneaker Woman had answered with a rolling-on-the-floor-laughing emoji. *No, that’s fine. I’ll trust you to know your own name. I meant about the outfit.*

If you like wearing it, why not? Denny typed back. *You should wear whatever you feel comfortable in. If your date doesn’t appreciate you the way you are, they’re not worth your time.* She hesitated, but when Bella nudged her again, she added, *I, for one, would think it’s cute if my date showed up dressed like that.*

They waited, but again no answer came.

“See?” Denny muttered. “Now we really scared her off.”

“No, look, she’s typing.” Bella pointed at the three animated dots that had popped up on the screen.

A moment later, they disappeared, and Sneaker Woman’s reply showed up beneath the other messages. *Thank you. That’s good advice. I needed to hear that today. Despite your low opinion on your own fashion sense, I think you helped me more than Heather would have.*

Glad to help. Denny lowered her phone and glanced at her niece. She couldn’t have kept her broad smile in check even if she had wanted. “What do you know? We helped her.”

Bella poked at Denny’s upper chest. “You’re all puffed out. Like you’re waiting for a medal.” But she, too, was grinning proudly.

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

Denny poked her back. “Am not.”

When the front door swung open and Salem stepped into the dining room, they were racing each other around the table, poking back and forth. Salem put her hands on her hips and regarded

them with a shake of her head. “So this is what goes on here when you’re the one who picks Bella up? And here I was thinking you were my older, more mature sister.”

“Hi, Mom.” Bella slid to a stop in front of her. “A woman texted Aunt Denny.”

Salem let out a whistle and eyed Denny with an appreciative look. “Seems I underestimated you. Or my pep talk earlier really helped.”

Before Denny could answer, Bella added, “By accident.”

“Thanks a lot, kiddo,” Denny murmured. “When you put it like that, it does wonders for my self-esteem. Some of the people who text me actually *want* to talk to me, you know?”

“I mean, this woman got her friend’s number wrong,” Bella said. “But we gave her great dating advice.”

Salem opened her eyes comically wide. “Your aunt...giving dating advice?”

Denny shrugged. “Well, you know what they say. Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.”

“So that means you didn’t ask Ms. Burkhart out. You chickened out, didn’t you?”

“You wanted to ask out my school bus driver?” Bella scrunched up her face. “Ew!”

Salem gave her a stern look. “Bella! I know I taught you better than that.”

“Not because they’re both girls...women,” Bella said with a glance at Denny. “It’s just that... That’s like my aunt dating a teacher or something. My friends will make fun of me.”

“She’s right,” Denny said. “It’s not a good idea. It could get Ms. Burkhart in trouble with the school. That’s why I didn’t ask her out.” Well, that and because she *had* chickened out. “Plus, like I told you repeatedly, I don’t need to date anyone to be happy, so would you please stop meddling in my love life?”

“Nonexistent love life,” Salem muttered. When Denny shot her an I’m-the-big-sister-and-I-know-where-you-sleep look, she held out one hand. “All right, all right.” She lowered her gaze to the

Wrong Number, Right Woman

oversized purse she still held and examined it as if the battered old thing was about to spit out the winning lottery numbers. When she looked up again, the expression on her face was unusually timid.

A lump lodged in Denny's throat. She hadn't seen her confident, outspoken sister like this since she'd been a scared seventeen-year-old, confessing to their parents that she was pregnant.

Salem nibbled her bottom lip. "Um, what would you guys think if I did?"

"Did what?" Denny asked.

"Date someone," Salem said so softly that Denny had to strain to hear her.

Denny stared at her. Of course, her sister had dated every now and then in the eleven years she had lived with Denny. But she had always done so discreetly, without making it a topic of conversation in their everyday lives and without introducing Bella to the guy she was dating. But something seemed to be different this time. "Someone in particular?"

Salem nodded. "Matt has asked me to do a haunted pub tour with him next weekend."

"Matt?" Denny repeated to give her brain a chance to process the news. "You mean, your Matt...Matthew Kowalczyk?" Salem often mentioned her favorite colleague, and Denny had even met him a couple of times over the years, when there had been an open day at the garden center.

"He's not *my* Matt," Salem said. "But yes, *that* Matt."

"And you're going on a date? This time, it isn't just two colleagues grabbing a beer, right?"

"Right. It would be a date. I mean, if that's okay with the two of you." Salem looked back and forth between them, and her gaze ended up resting on her daughter.

A tiny wrinkle formed on Bella's brow. She seemed to think about it for a moment, then said, "As long as he doesn't think he can boss me around."

“He won’t. It’s not like we’re getting married, honey. It’s just one date.” Salem sounded as if she was saying it as much for her own benefit as for Bella’s.

The oven timer went off.

“Finally! I’m starving.” In her sock-covered feet, Bella skidded into the kitchen and tore open the oven door, even though she had declared her hatred for zucchini not even an hour ago. A cloud of steam and the scent of sizzling tomato sauce and melted cheese wafted out.

“Careful. Don’t burn yourself.” Salem followed her.

Denny stayed behind for a moment, only half listening to Bella’s protest about being treated like a baby. New people and new situations made her nervous, but she would deal with it for Salem’s sake. Bella was no longer a little kid, as she reminded them nearly every day, so after years of focusing only on her, Salem deserved some kind of adult life.

Denny’s phone dinged, jarring her out of her thoughts.

When she pulled it from her pocket, she discovered another message from Sneaker Woman. It was an upside-down photo of her navy skirt and the canary-yellow sneakers, as if she had pointed her phone down her body to take a quick snapshot. *My lucky sneakers and I are ready to head out*, the text said. *Thanks again and sorry to have bothered you.*

No problem, Denny replied. *Have fun on your date.* Without waiting for a response, she slid the phone back into her pocket. She didn’t care if everyone and their dog were going on dates while she stayed home. Bella and she would gorge themselves on ricotta cheesecake while Salem made boring first-date small talk with Matthew Kowalczyk. Who needed a date if they could have cheesecake, right?

She gave herself a firm nod. Right.

Chapter 2

LATER THAT NIGHT, ELIZA SLID her key into the door and exhaled as she stepped into her studio apartment. Before she could close the door behind her, the one to the apartment across from hers swung open.

“Hey, you’re home early,” her friend Heather called. “How was the date?”

Eliza turned and leaned against the doorjamb. “Don’t ask.”

“That bad?” Heather bridged the space between them with two long-limbed, graceful steps. “Or are you just being picky again?”

“I’m not picky. I have standards.” Eliza looked left and right. “Want to come in for a minute so I don’t have to pour out my dating woes to every tenant in the building?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

Heather laughed that deep, melodious chuckle that had made Eliza like her right away when they had first met five years ago. “On whether you have any of those yummy snickerdoodle cookies left.”

“I do.” Eliza waited until Heather had entered the apartment before she closed the door behind them and added, “Although come to think of it, I’m not sure you deserve any.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t let your best friend starve just because I made you go on one bad date.”

Eliza snorted. “No one ever died from a lack of cookies, and you won’t be the first.” Despite her words, she detoured to the

kitchenette, pulled the last package of snickerdoodle cookies out of the cabinet, and tossed them to Heather. “Here.”

Humming, Heather settled on the colorful braided rug that covered the bamboo floor and ripped open the package.

Eliza sank into her easy chair—the one she and Heather had found at a flea market last summer and dragged home to her favorite spot in her tiny apartment, by the bay window overlooking the South Park Blocks. She kicked off her sneakers without untying them first and curled her feet under her.

Heather glanced up from her impromptu picnic and raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow—a talent Eliza had always envied. Despite one cheek already bulging with a cookie, she somehow managed to look elegant. “Sneakers with a skirt?” Heather tilted her head and seemed to consider the daring outfit choice for a second before declaring, “It’s cute.”

“That’s what he said.”

“See? If he complimented your outfit, your date couldn’t have been that bad.”

“You’ve got no idea. The entire date felt like one big April Fools’ Day prank someone was playing on me. But I’m not talking about my date. I’m talking about the guy whose number you gave me.”

Heather blinked. “I gave you a guy’s phone number? When was that?”

“When you scribbled down your new phone number in that awful chicken scratch of yours.”

“What?”

Eliza pulled up her contact list and held out her phone. “Is that your number?”

Heather leaned forward and studied the contact details while gobbling down another cookie. “Yes,” she said with her mouth half full. “Oh. Wait.” She swallowed the remainder of her cookie and pointed at the small screen. “That last number should be a nine, not an eight.”

Eliza gave her a meaningful look. “And that’s how I ended up asking a perfect stranger for fashion advice.”

Wrong Number, Right Woman

Heather burst out laughing, nearly spewing cookie crumbs all over the rug. “You sent a stranger one of your first-date panic texts?”

“Yeah. And pictures of my outfits. How embarrassing is that?” Eliza bent down and slapped Heather’s knee. “Stop laughing.”

Of course, that made Heather laugh even harder.

“And to think you drive a school bus full of innocent little kids for a living,” Eliza muttered. “I hope you’re nicer to them than you are to your poor best friend.”

“Well, the transportation department frowns on drivers making fun of the kids, so I have to behave. I didn’t even laugh when Butch Auntie showed up covered in ketchup today.”

“Butch Auntie?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, an aunt of one of the kids. Butch, kinda cute, and painfully shy. I told you about her, remember?”

“Oh, her. Right.”

Heather eyed her. “What’s up? You seem distracted. I hope the guy you accidentally texted wasn’t an asshole about it.”

“No, he was the perfect gentleman. He appreciated my style and encouraged me to be myself—which is more than I can say about my actual date.”

“What did he do?”

“What didn’t he do?” Eliza shot back. “He could write a handbook on 101 ways to mess up a date. Please tell me I don’t have to go back out there again.”

“What, and have me waste my hard-earned money on that online dating service I paid for?” Heather firmly shook her head, making her blonde locks fly. “You promised you’d give it six months, so that’s what you’re going to do. Just because the first one was a dud doesn’t mean all the men on No More Frogs are going to be like that. The perfect guy for you is out there, I promise.”

“From your mouth to the dating goddess’s ears.” Eliza rescued the last cookie from Heather and pressed the phone into her hand instead. “Now please put in your correct number before I end up bothering that unsuspecting stranger again.”

Chuckling, Heather tapped the screen to edit her number.

Denny hated running the register. It wasn't the process of pulling the items over the scanner that she disliked, even though some of them were heavy. The pressure of being timed didn't bother her either. She had been doing this job for six years, so she could have scanned forty items per minute with one arm tied behind her back. The grocery store chain she worked for even allowed cashiers to sit at the register. But the constant interaction with customers often left her exhausted—especially if it was customers like the little old lady whose groceries she was ringing up right now.

Instead of swiping her card or handing Denny a bill, she was digging through her purse for the exact amount—eight dollars and ninety-three cents—while the line of waiting customers behind her got longer and longer.

There goes my ring speed. Denny resisted the urge to tap her foot and hurry her along.

Finally, the lady gave a triumphant cry and pressed the last cent into Denny's palm.

With a polite smile, Denny handed her the receipt.

Before she could start scanning the next customer's items, Julie walked over with her cash drawer. "I told the boss I'd cover your register so you can finally take your break."

As if on cue, Denny's stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since before her shift had started at six. "Thanks. I knew you were my favorite colleague for a reason."

They switched out their cash drawers, and Denny watched with amusement as Julie pumped up the chair as high as it would go so she could reach the register. It wasn't that Denny was especially tall, but her colleague barely measured five feet.

"What?" Julie squeezed past Denny and slid onto the seat.

"Oh, nothing." Denny massaged her wrist, which had started to cramp after moving thousands of items across the scanner.

On her way to the back of the store, she grabbed a cheese twist and a chocolate croissant from the baked goods section. She

dropped her cash drawer off in the office, where her boss would lock it in the safe, then headed to the break room.

It was empty. Unlike other supermarkets, the Grocery Port's retail operations used minimal staff, with each employee doing every job. There were no produce stockers or cleaning staff, so all of her colleagues were busy at the register or on the sales floor. At least the job paid better than most others in retail, and being busy made each shift fly by and left no time for small talk with customers, which Denny was grateful for.

She got her cell phone from her locker to see if Salem had texted her any last-minute items she needed Denny to bring home. A red dot on the messages icon indicated that she indeed had a new text. She sat at the table in the break room, took a big bite of her chocolate croissant, and opened the app to see what her sister wanted.

The message waiting for her wasn't Salem's shopping list, though. Denny paused mid-chew. She had another text from Sneaker Woman. Had she forgotten to edit her friend's contact?

Denny tapped on the message to read it.

Turns out my friend Heather is your number neighbor.

Denny sat stunned for a second. Sneaker Woman hadn't sent her another accidental text meant for someone else. She was actually talking to her! Denny had never understood how people could start a conversation with a total stranger. She usually tended to keep to herself, but now she surprised herself by setting down the croissant so she could type using both hands.

My what? she texted back.

It didn't take long for Sneaker Woman to answer. Maybe she was on her lunch break too. *Her number is the same as yours, just the last digit is one off.*

Number neighbor. Who had come up with that term? Denny shook her head. God, some days she felt old. *Ah, got it.* She hesitated, unsure how to continue the conversation, but knowing she wanted to. Finally, she typed, *So how did the date go last night? Did they appreciate your outfit?* She wasn't being nosy, right? Asking how her date had gone was the polite thing to do.

Looks like the sneakers weren't so lucky after all, Sneaker Woman answered. He didn't even get to see them. I was already seated when he showed up twenty minutes late.

Denny scoffed. What an ass! Sneaker Woman had put herself out there and agonized over what to wear, and he hadn't even cared enough to show up on time. Before she could think of an answer, another text bubble popped up.

With his neck covered in the biggest hickeys I've ever seen.

Denny stared at the screen. *You're messing with me.*

No, I swear. He then proceeded to talk about nothing but his ex for an hour.

What on earth...? Denny whistled through her teeth. Sometimes, she didn't understand people. *Um, if he's got hickeys the size of a small country, maybe the ex isn't that much of an ex after all.*

That's what I figured, Sneaker Woman replied. So I told him we weren't a good fit and left. I'm too old for games like that.

Denny nodded her approval. *Good for you. But forgive me for saying... I saw your pictures. You're...what? Late twenties? That's hardly old.*

Finally someone who knows how to compliment a woman! I'm thirty.

Denny snorted around another bite of her croissant. Then she paused and studied the screen. Was Sneaker Woman flirting? And was she seriously considering flirting back? Finally, she decided she was imagining things and typed back, *Ha! Spring chicken!*

Hardly. How old are you? Sneaker Woman asked.

Denny started to type: *Didn't your parents teach you not to ask a woman her age? No wonder you're single.* But then she shook her head. Sneaker Woman was dating guys. Chances were, she was straight, so her manners around women didn't affect her relationship status. Denny deleted both sentences and instead typed, *I'm forty-one.*

Oh, so I'm practically talking to a senior citizen. Sneaker Woman added three crying-from-laughing-so-hard emojis.

Wrong Number, Right Woman

For a moment, Denny considered replying with a one-finger salute emoji, but then she reminded herself that Sneaker Woman was still a stranger, even though they had fallen into a surprisingly comfortable back-and-forth. Countering with an eye roll emoji was the safer option.

Before either of them could send another text, the store manager stuck her head into the break room. “Can you finish your break early? Apparently, the good people of the Portland metro area are preparing for an apocalypse. They are killing us out there. We need another person on checkout.”

“Be right there.” Denny shoved the remainder of her croissant into her mouth and hastily typed, *Sorry. This senior citizen needs to get back to work.*

The last thing she saw before she tossed her phone into her locker was, *Don't break a hip.*

For once, Denny grinned all the way to the register.

Chapter 3

ON FRIDAY EVENING OF THE next week, Denny sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched her sister put on makeup. She had never understood the need to use more than some lip balm, but the familiar ritual seemed to help Salem calm down. She had buzzed around the house all day, nervously anticipating her first date in ages, until Bella had rolled her eyes and disappeared upstairs, where she and Salem shared the upper level of the two-story townhouse.

Salem gave herself a once-over in the mirror above the sink, shook her head, and wiped off the lipstick before applying a different one that, to Denny, looked exactly like the first one.

Okay, maybe the ritual wasn't helping as much as Denny had hoped.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, but she ignored it to address her sister. "Calm down. You look great."

"That's what you said when I was five and insisted on wearing those ugly pink rubber boots to school."

"But this time it's true. Matt better appreciate you. And if he doesn't, I can always beat him up for you." Denny flexed her biceps, which was pretty impressive from lifting all the canned goods at work, even though the muscles were hidden beneath a layer of chubbiness.

Salem giggled nervously. She lowered the lipstick and met Denny's gaze in the mirror. "Are you really okay with this? If you'd rather not watch Bella, I can stay home and—"

Wrong Number, Right Woman

“Would you stop it? I’ve been watching her since the day she was born. Hell, I watched *you* since the day you were born! Why would I suddenly mind?” Denny got up from the edge of the tub and stepped up to her sister so she could study her. “What’s going on?”

Salem exhaled a long breath and turned to face her. “I know I’m being silly. It’s just... I think I’m freaking out a little.”

Denny gave her an affectionate smile. “A little?”

Salem pinched her. “Do you think it was a mistake to say yes when he asked me to go out with him? Matt isn’t some stranger that I never have to see again if we mess this up. We have to work together.”

“He’s probably aware of that, and that means he cares enough to take the risk. That has to count for something.”

“Hmm.” The wrinkle on Salem’s forehead smoothed out. “It does.” She looked down into Denny’s eyes, and even though she had been taller than Denny since she’d been fifteen, it was still mildly annoying that she was able to do that. “Thank you.”

“Any time, you know that.” Denny returned the pinch. “Now go get ready. Your daughter and I have a ricotta cheesecake to devour, and I have a feeling she’s hiding out in her room and won’t come down until you’re gone.”

Chuckling, Salem turned back toward the mirror, and Denny returned to her place on the edge of the tub.

Her phone dinged again.

When she pulled it out of her pocket, she discovered two new messages from the now-familiar number.

The first one, sent several minutes ago, said: *Should I try my luck with the sneakers again or assume they are cursed and wear something else on my next date?*

Beneath it was a second text, which she had probably written when Denny hadn’t replied: *Sorry. I don’t know why I’m messaging you again. I promise my parents did have that stranger danger talk with me.*

Denny couldn’t help grinning. If someone had asked her ten days ago, she would have said a stranger who kept contacting her

was a major annoyance, but for some reason, she wasn't bothered by it at all. *Well, I promise I'm not a serial killer, so it's fine*, she wrote back.

Hmm... Wouldn't you say the same even if you were?

Probably. But cutting up a body and hiding the pieces is too much work.

Sneaker Woman sent a wide-eyed emoji. *How do you know?*

I watch way too many crime shows.

Ah, so that's what kept you from answering. Central Precinct is on tonight, isn't it?

And you know that how? Denny typed, then paused with her finger over the *send* icon. Other than her sister and maybe Julie, she had never bantered back and forth with a woman like this. There was something freeing about having a conversation without knowing a lot about the other person. But now that she thought about it, her old self-consciousness returned, and she tapped the backspace symbol until the unsent message disappeared. Instead, she typed, *Sorry. I didn't mean to ignore you. I was busy calming down my sister's first-date jitters.*

Wow, Sneaker Woman replied. *Maybe you should do that for a living—become a professional first-date whisperer.*

Denny laughed. If only Sneaker Woman knew her track record, she would know how ridiculous that suggestion was. She could barely remember her last first date, much less the last time she had made it to a second date.

Salem looked up from her bottle of perfume. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Just something I read." Denny vaguely pointed at her phone. She wasn't ready to tell Salem that she was still talking to the woman who had sent her an accidental text. Her sister would probably think it was strange.

When Salem continued to get ready for her date, Denny returned her attention to the phone. *So, about your sneakers question... You aren't going out with Mr. Covered-in-Hickeys again, are you?*

Wrong Number, Right Woman

Sneaker Woman sent back a no with at least ten o's. *I've got some self-respect, thank you very much. I'm going out with another guy.*

The more she talked to Sneaker Woman, the more Denny admired her for putting herself out there so fearlessly. It always took Denny weeks—okay, months, if she was being honest—to work up the courage to ask a woman out, and when she finally did and the first date didn't go so well, she usually wasn't in the mood to repeat the experience anytime soon. But the same couldn't be said for Sneaker Woman, who, about a week after her last dating disaster, was getting ready to go out with someone else.

I'm not normally a serial dater, Sneaker Woman sent when Denny didn't reply right away.

I wasn't judging, honestly. More like in awe.

Well, don't be, Sneaker Woman replied. *This wasn't my idea. I hit my big three-oh last month, and my best friend—your number neighbor—gave me a six-month subscription for No More Frogs because she thinks I'm too picky and will stay single forever if left to my own devices.*

"No More Frogs?" Denny said out loud. "What the heck is that?" But she didn't want to ask to avoid coming across as clueless.

"It's an online dating service," Salem answered. "You should try it."

Denny barked out a laugh. "No, thanks. I have a feeling they are not screening their users very well."

It's an online dating service, Sneaker Woman's next message said.

I know, Denny texted back. Was there a haughty I-knew-that-all-along grin emoji?

Riiiiight.

Damn, was she that transparent, even to a stranger, or was Sneaker Woman that perceptive?

Another text arrived before she could think about what to write next. *Oh shit. I have to get going, or I'll be the one showing up late. So, sneakers or no sneakers?*

Sneakers. Denny stabbed the screen decisively.

A thumbs-up appeared beneath her message. *Thanks, oh great First-Date Whisperer.*

“Do I pass muster?” Salem tugged on her top, which revealed the tiniest bit of cleavage.

Denny put her phone away and looked her up and down. “You look great. But...”

Salem shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Yeah?”

“You’re missing a pair of pink rubber boots...or yellow sneakers.”

“What?”

Denny smiled. “Forget it.” She pushed Salem out of the bathroom, just as the doorbell rang. “Go and have fun.”

* * *

A sense of déjà vu swept over Eliza as she trudged up the stairs to her second-story apartment later that night. *Why am I doing this to myself?* She could have spent the evening at home, finishing the cockatoo earrings she was making for her boss’s upcoming birthday. Instead, she had suffered through yet another date that consisted mostly of her throwing the waiter apologetic glances and trying to think of an excuse to leave early.

Wasn’t dating supposed to be fun? All it had done was make her feel humiliated.

She was tempted to delete that damn No More Frogs app from her phone, but she had promised Heather to give it a chance, so she needed to stick with it for the entire six months.

Sighing, she kicked off her sneakers and stared at the footwear. “I’m starting to think you’re really bad luck.”

Of course, they didn’t answer. The silence in her apartment engulfed her.

Maybe she should finally get a cat.

She changed into her favorite pair of yoga pants and the cozy sweater with the hole along the shoulder seam, then went into the kitchenette. When she opened the cabinet, she remembered that

Wrong Number, Right Woman

she had given Heather the last of the cookies and made herself a mug of cinnamon rooibos tea instead.

She settled in her easy chair, turned on the TV, and aimlessly flicked through the channels.

Oh, *Central Precinct* was still on. She put down the remote and watched Detective Linda Halliday lean across a small metal table as she interrogated a suspect, who was clearly starting to sweat.

Was her first-date whisperer watching too?

Eliza peeked at her phone. No new messages.

What did you expect? He was probably busy going about his life and wasn't interested in texting a perfect stranger. Was it weird that she kept talking to him?

Somehow, it was easier to tell him about her failed date than to talk about it with Heather—maybe because he didn't know her and didn't expect anything of her. He seemed nonjudgmental, funny, yet earnest at the same time.

Maybe I should go out with him instead. The thought made her grin. Knowing her luck when it came to dating, it would end in some kind of disaster. One of them would get food poisoning, or they wouldn't have anything to say to each other face-to-face.

No, it was safer to just keep texting...if that was what he wanted too.

He seemed like an honest guy, so if he didn't want to talk to her, he would tell her to go away, right?

Nothing about his answers indicated that he wanted to get rid of her, though. He had readily replied to each of her texts and had even answered her teasing with some jokes of his own. Maybe he was home alone in a too-silent apartment as well and would be happy with a distraction.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she opened their thread of messages and added a new one. *Is it just me, or is Linda crossing the line a little?*

She watched as the detective on TV moved her paper cup, filled to the brim with steaming hot coffee, dangerously close to the edge

of the table, where it threatened to topple over into the suspect's lap.

The scene ended, and still there was no reply.

Eliza clutched her mug while she balanced the phone on her knee. Maybe he did think she was weird.

Just when she considered giving up on this awful day and calling it a night, her phone chirped.

A grin spread across her face. It was a reply from Mr. First-Date Whisperer. She put her mug down to read what he had written.

Who's Linda?

And here I thought you're a fan of Central Precinct, Eliza answered.

Ah, that Linda. I missed that part of the episode. I had to go upstairs to make sure the kid is really down for the count, not reading under the covers.

Eliza paused with her thumbs already poised to type out a reply. For some reason, she had imagined him to be just as single and unlucky in love as she was. *Oh, she texted back. You've got a kid?*

No. I'm keeping an eye on my niece while my sister is out.

What a decent guy! After the last two dates she had been on, it was good to see that men like him still existed. *So, how was it? Your sister's date.*

I don't know. She hasn't made it home yet.

Then her date is probably going better than mine did.

Uh-oh, he texted back, making her smile. What happened?

He seemed like a nice guy when we were chatting online, Eliza typed. But when we were in the restaurant, he decided it was okay to order for me without asking me first.

Ugh. Mr. First-Date Whisperer sent a face-palm emoji. I'm sorry. That's really shitty.

Why do men do stuff like that? Don't they realize how condescending that is?

I have no idea, Mr. First-Date Whisperer replied. I'm probably the worst person to give you advice on men.

Well, you are one, right?

Wrong Number, Right Woman

So far, he had been typing as quickly as she, but now he seemed to take forever answering. Had her text offended him, or was he writing an essay about the male psyche?

But when his answer finally came, it was short. *Um, actually... no.*

No? No to what? Eliza re-read the last two lines of their conversation. Wait, what? Hastily, she scrolled back up to the face-palm emoji and studied it more closely. It wasn't the male emoji, as she had first assumed; it was the more ambiguous one that could represent a man, a woman, or a nonbinary person. She tried to remember why she had assumed he...she was a guy but couldn't remember. Groaning, she hid her hot face against the bend of her elbow. Just when she had thought her day couldn't get any worse...

Her phone chirped in her hand, making her look up.

You didn't know I'm a woman? Ms. First-Date Whisperer had written.

No. I just assumed... Sorry, I guess I jumped to conclusions. God, this was so embarrassing.

That's fine. No big deal. It's not the first time that's happened.

It wasn't the first time a stranger who had sent her an accidental text had mistaken her for a man? Before Eliza could find a polite way to ask what exactly she meant, another text bubble appeared.

Sorry, I have to go. My sister just got home and wants to tell me all about her date.

Of course, Eliza replied. For once, she was glad to finish their conversation because she didn't know what to say. She needed some time to adjust her mental image of the person she'd been talking to. *Good night.*

Good night.

Then nothing else came, as if Ms. First-Date Whisperer no longer knew how to talk to her either.

Eliza gulped down her tea, which had long since gone cold, and wiped her brow. Well, at least she hadn't made a complete fool of herself by trying to ask him...her out!

Denny and her sister sat at the dining room table, where most of their important conversations took place after Bella had gone to bed. A giant piece of cheesecake sat in front of Salem, but she hadn't even tried it yet, too busy raving about her date with Matt. She was glowing, and Denny had a feeling it wasn't an effect of the beer she had drunk at the haunted pub tour.

Salem beamed. "God, I had forgotten how much fun it is to flirt with someone."

Denny gave a noncommittal hum. "I wouldn't know." By the time she usually figured out someone was flirting with her, the poor woman had given up because she assumed Denny wasn't interested. But maybe she hadn't misread the occasional flirty undertone of Sneaker Woman's texts after all. If she had thought Denny was a man, maybe she had indeed been flirting.

"God, and the way I felt when he put his hand on the small of my back." Salem fluttered her fingers over her heart, then paused. "Do two women on a date do that?"

"Hmm?" Denny's gaze veered from where she had watched Salem excitedly wave around her fork to her face. "What?"

"Do two women guide each other inside a pub with one hand on the other's back?" Salem asked.

"Yeah, sure. Well, at least I do it. But never on a first date." Usually, Denny needed at least three dates before she felt confident enough to touch the other woman in any way.

Salem put her fork down. "What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

A frown line carved itself between Salem's brows. "You don't have reservations about me going out with Matt, do you?"

"No. It's not that, I promise. He seems like a great guy."

"Then what is it? And don't try that *nothing* bullshit on me again. You've been distracted ever since I got back."

Denny sighed. "I'm older by thirteen years. How come I sometimes feel like the baby sister?"

Wrong Number, Right Woman

“Twelve years, nine months. And don’t think I didn’t notice you’re trying to change the subject.” Salem pinned her with the glare she normally reserved for Bella when she tried to get out of doing her chores.

Denny reached across the table and stole the chocolate leaf garnish off Salem’s wedge of cheesecake to buy herself a few more seconds. “You remember the woman who accidentally texted me last week?”

Salem nodded.

“We, um, kinda kept texting.”

“Kinda?”

Denny ignored her interruption. “And I just found out that she thought all this time I was a guy.”

“Huh. Awkward.”

Another sigh escaped Denny. That was what she had enjoyed most about her text conversations with Sneaker Woman: they hadn’t been as awkward as her usual attempts to talk to women. But now that had changed. “Yeah.” She could imagine how embarrassed she would feel if the situation had been reversed. She would want to crawl into a hole and never come out again. “She’ll probably stop texting me now.”

Salem studied her across the table. “And you don’t want that to happen.”

“No.” Denny surprised herself with how fast and decisively she answered.

“Well, I guess then you’ll have to be the one texting her,” Salem said. “Phones work both ways, you know?”

“Smart-ass.” But maybe Salem was right. So far, it had always been Sneaker Woman who had initiated a conversation. This time, it might be up to Denny to contact her. If only she could figure out what to say.

* * *

Eliza pulled out her bed that was hidden in the bottom compartment of the cabinet during the day—one of the best features

of her tiny apartment. Yawning, she flicked off the light and crawled beneath the covers. Then she remembered that she had to get up at eight tomorrow to set up the booth she and Heather shared to sell their craft items at Saturday Market, so she reached for her phone and set her alarm, just in case she didn't wake up on her own.

Just as she had settled down again and tried to shut off all thoughts so she could go to sleep, her phone chirped.

Her eyes popped open, and she stared at her phone in the near darkness. For a moment, she considered ignoring it, but she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep without finding out what Ms. First-Date Whisperer had written.

If it was her. After all, other people sent text messages too.

But somehow, she knew who had contacted her. Finally, she gave up, turned the light back on, and swiped to unlock her phone.

She had been right. It was a text from Ms. First-Date Whisperer, whatever her name might be.

Look, the message said. I don't want you to be embarrassed. It was an honest mistake.

A glimmer of anger flared up in her. She wasn't even sure why. *Damn straight it was, she replied. How was I supposed to know? Since you didn't send me a picture or tell me your name.*

Um, my name is pretty gender-neutral, so it wouldn't have helped even if I had told you, Ms. First-Date Whisperer answered.

Eliza's annoyance vanished as fast as it had appeared. *Maybe we should do it anyway, she typed back. Exchange names. I mean, if we keep texting, I'll need a name to put in my contacts.*

It surprised her how strong the urge to know was, but she decided to follow her gut. With a tight grip on her phone, she waited for the answer.

* * *

Sneaker Woman wanted to keep texting! Denny flopped onto her bed and pumped her fist. Yes!

Another text arrived. *So? Want to tell me your name?*

Wrong Number, Right Woman

Denny stopped in the middle of her little celebration and dropped her fist to the bed. Slowly, she raised her hand back up to answer. *What, and ruin the mystery?*

You're really not going to tell me your name?

Denny hesitated. Not because Sneaker Woman was a stranger and she didn't trust her with personal information but because real-life Denny was awkward and didn't know what to say to women. The nameless person Sneaker Woman had been talking to didn't seem to have that problem. She bantered back and forth as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Denny wanted to remain that person a little while longer. *Not right now. If that's okay.*

All right. But what do I put in my contacts, then? Senior citizen?

Don't you dare!

Sneaker Woman sent a grandma-with-silver-hair-and-glasses emoji. *Yep, that sounds good. It could be SC for short.*

If you call me that, I'll have to come up with a mean nickname for you too, Denny replied.

Like what? Queen of Disastrous Dates? Is that what you have me saved as in your phone?

Denny chuckled. *No. I've been calling you Sneaker Woman.*

Cute, Sneaker Woman replied. *I admit I kind of like it.*

As much as I would like to take the credit for your nickname, it was my niece, Bella, who came up with it.

She knows we're texting?

She was with me when you sent the photos, Denny typed back. *She thought the sneakers with the skirt were cute too, btw.*

Seems good taste runs in the family. Sneaker Woman added a winking smiley face.

Laughter burst from Denny's chest. There it was—that snarky banter she had come to associate with Sneaker Woman. It was good to get it back.

TO CONTINUE READING,
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WRONG NUMBER,
RIGHT WOMAN

BY JAE

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