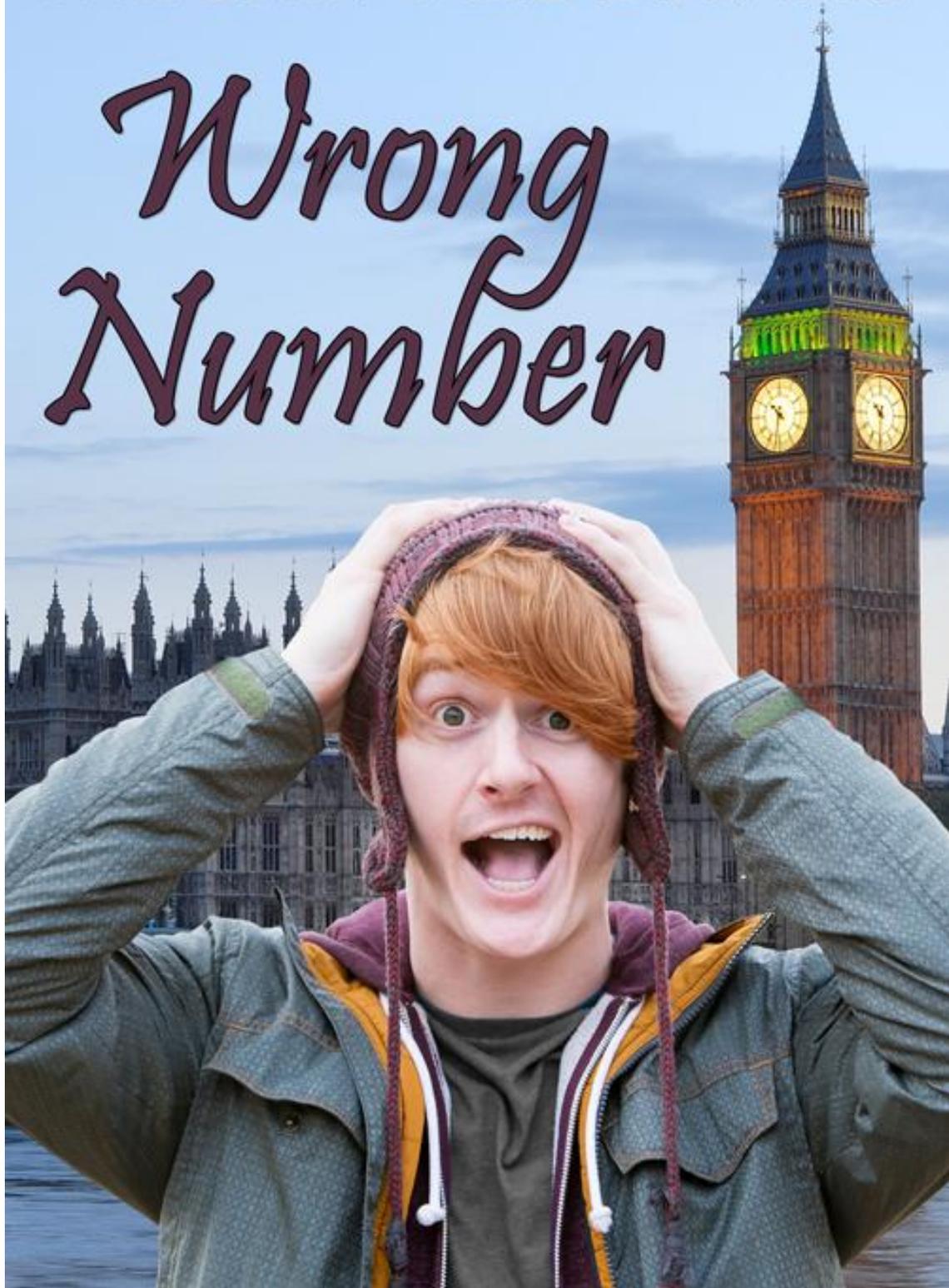


MEGAN REDDAWAY

*Wrong
Number*



WRONG NUMBER

BY

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Summary

Late one night, Connor calls his best friend, tells him he wishes he had a man, and explains exactly why. Or he thinks he's telling his friend. Actually, he's hit the wrong contact on his phone and laid out his sexual needs to one of his bosses, Gary Bayes. After that, Connor goes bright red every time he must face Gary in the office. Will his nightmare of shame ever end?

Author's Note

This story is written in British English. If you're not used to reading British English, please be tolerant of variations in spelling and usage.

The City of London (or the City with a capital C) is a small area of central London covering about one square mile, its boundaries corresponding to the walled city that existed from Roman to medieval times. It remains London's main financial district. The modern city of London (without a capital C) covers a much larger area, over six hundred square miles.

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WRONG NUMBER

I'd had a few drinks, to be honest. I'd had a few drinks, and I got home, and the cramped little studio flat in Croydon where I lived looked exactly the same as when I went out. Of course that was a good thing, really, because if the place had looked a lot different it could only have been due to a burglary, flood, fire, unannounced landlord visit, or similar disaster. But there's something so depressing about coming home and finding everything exactly the same. Especially when you are simply longing for your flat to contain another living creature such as a boyfriend, or at least a cat.

My landlord didn't allow cats, or I'd have had one. There was no clause forbidding boyfriends, but unfortunately you can't just grab the cutest-looking stray man from the nearest gay bar, take him home, feed him twice a day, and expect him to love you for it. All I had was pictures, of both cats and men. It wasn't the same.

So I decided to call my best friend, Gavin. I knew he'd be awake and alone, because I'd only said goodbye to him ten minutes ago outside East Croydon station. I sat on the edge of my bed and opened the contacts list on my phone.

"I need to get fucked," I complained as soon as the call was answered. "I want to feel cock plunging into me. I want to worship a big warm dick. I want to lick it all over and get it all wet and rock hard then take it in my arse, take it in deep and get fucked so hard I'm screaming!"

Then what was supposed to happen was that Gavin would be like, "Oh petal, I *know*, isn't it *awful* to have nothing but silicone to play with at the end of the night? Where have all the gorgeous hunks *gone*?"

Instead there was a short silence, and a drily amused voice that was definitely not Gavin's said, "Well, Connor, this is unexpected."

For a moment I was paralysed. Then I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it. Where it should have said "Gavin," it said "Gary Bayes."

"Oh my *God*," I breathed.

Gary Bayes was the partner who headed the commercial property department at the London estate agency where I worked. He wore Saint

Laurent suits and did multimillion pound deals on massive office suites in Docklands.

Me? I looked after their website and fixed their computers. And I wasn't even in charge of that. I was third-in-command in the IT team—and it was a team of three.

I clamped the phone back against my ear and started to babble. "I'm so sorry—please don't fire me—I didn't mean to ring you! Honestly, I'm so sorry. I don't know how this happened. I don't even know why I have your number in my phone."

The voice was drier now, and less amused. "You have all our numbers because you've been given the phone to help you do your *job*, although admittedly there's probably nothing in your contract to stop you using it to phone your boyfriend at 2:00 a.m."

"He's not—2:00 a.m.?" I looked at my watch. It was only 1:42, but I decided it wasn't worth arguing the point. "Oh my God, I am so—"

"Okay, you're sorry, it was a mistake, you covered that. Let's leave it there and forget it, all right?"

There was a beep and the call ended.

You know those moments when you simply cannot believe what you've done? When you're convinced there *must* be a way to roll back time or leap into an alternate universe where this thing never happened, because it's simply not possible that you just crashed the car, chopped off the end of your finger, or made an obscene phone call to one of your bosses? But there's like a glass wall between the world of now and the world of five minutes ago, and you're trapped with the terrible thing you just did?

It was one of those moments.

I dropped the treacherous phone on the floor as if it was made of molten lava. Then, instinctively aware that waking the neighbours would not help me, I stuck my head under the quilt and muffled my groans in the mattress.

*

I went to work the next day (or technically, later the same morning) suffering from a medium-strength hangover, lack of sleep, and sheer dread. I hadn't told anybody about the call, not even Gavin, and I didn't plan to just

yet. He was flying off to Rome with his sister for a long weekend today, and I certainly didn't want to discuss it on the phone.

In fact, I didn't want to discuss anything personal on the phone, ever again. My phone and I were barely on speaking terms, especially after I checked my call history on the train and found it had indeed betrayed me by making a call to Gary Bayes in the early hours. And please don't try to tell me it wasn't the phone's fault. In my view, a phone has a responsibility to split your contacts into categories to protect a person from making such a career-imperilling mistake.

I kept reminding myself that Gary had told me to forget it. If only I could. Unfortunately my total recall was going to be dazzlingly obvious, because I have a shameful tendency to go bright pink under stress. I'd already felt this happening in his presence once or twice, because he'd figured in more than one of my fantasies in the recent past. (I don't recommend indulging in fantasies about people you work with, by the way. Even if not inclined to blush, you might still find yourself stammering or tripping over a paperclip the next day.)

So a cunning plan for dealing with the situation was required, and my first-class brain came up with one in super-quick time: avoid him.

This seemed like an excellent scheme and very achievable, because I hardly ever saw him in a normal working week. I was based in the firm's head office above the Kensington residential showroom, while he spent most of his time on the other side of Central London in the City or Docklands offices. I'd even had a mad hope he might not be one hundred percent certain who I was, but it faded as soon as I saw myself in the mirror.

I don't exactly blend into the crowd. I have this fine, bright orange hair that goes into floppy waves when it grows. As a kid, I hated it, but when I grew up I found some guys actually like it, so I let it grow on top. It turns heads. Literally. People stare. And of course in IT we travel around the different offices updating hardware and software, and all the partners come to Head Office for meetings, and it's not a huge firm, and I'd been working there for nearly a year. So really, it was practically certain that Gary Bayes knew exactly who I was, although we'd probably never exchanged more than two words until 1:42 that morning.

Still, I thought there was a good chance I wouldn't have to face him for a week or two, and by then anything could have happened. Time might heal the shame (unlikely) or London might be hit by a meteorite, tsunami, or other

cataclysm (almost equally unlikely, but offering unlimited potential for daydreams in which I redeemed myself by rescuing Gary from certain death and was of course rewarded with his undying affection and hot sex).

Anyway, as I said, anything could happen in a couple of weeks—but that couple of weeks was not to pass without me seeing Gary Bayes. It was barely eleven o'clock on that very first morning when Patrick's desk phone rang, and I heard him say "Okay" and put it down. Then he looked over the nose-high partition at me. "Could you nip into the boardroom? They're having some problems with PowerPoint."

I tried to sound casual. "Who's in there?"

"Partners' meeting."

Oh my God. I looked round in desperation. The other desk in our little nook was empty. Where was Sonja when I needed her?

I said, "I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"I thought you were setting up email for the new lettings manager?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm in the middle of."

He frowned. "She's not starting till Monday, Connor. Let's get our priorities straight. Boardroom."

My gut churned as I walked along the corridor. I considered faking acute gastrointestinal distress or simply disappearing down the stairs and making a bolt for the safety of Croydon, but I wanted to keep my job, at least until I found another one. So I forced myself to stop outside the boardroom and open the door.

There were nine partners, and between them they owned the firm. They were all relatively young. I glanced quickly around the table. Gary Bayes was probably in his early thirties, seven or eight years older than me. He had tousled dark hair, brown eyes with thick black lashes, and stubble. Looked like he worked out. And yes, he was there, sitting on the far side between Rashid Ali (residential) and Clare Hanson (planning).

Before he could look up, I'd made it to the blank projection screen where the managing partner, Sean Moorside, was trying to connect his laptop. I could feel my face going its trademark pink, so I knelt down and rootled about by Sean's feet, thinking that would explain the rush of blood. Fortunately, while

down there, I spotted a loose connector. I tightened it, plugged it back in, and the home page of the firm's website came up on the big screen. Problem solved.

The meeting seemed very hush-hush. Nobody'd said a word since I walked through the door, and Sean had closed a paper file on the table as I'd approached, obviously not wanting me to see the papers inside. I'd worked on the website design, so if that was what they were discussing, you'd think they'd have some questions about it, but when everything was working, Sean said, "Thanks, Connor," and they all waited for me to leave the room.

I might have thought they'd been talking about me, except I'm not quite that paranoid—and not that important. It wouldn't take all nine partners to decide to fire one IT assistant.

"But I'm sure they weren't talking about the website," I said to Sonja later, when Patrick was out of earshot. "It was something else, something top secret. Honestly, I was not allowed to see a thing. We'll probably all be out of work by the end of the month."

I could see a positive side to this. Mass redundancy would look a lot better on the CV than dismissal for telephonic obscenity. Sonja had more trouble with it. She gave a little wail. She and her husband had just bought a house.

Over the next week, the boardroom saw more action than a footballer's hot tub. The monthly partners' meetings seemed to have turned into daily partners' meetings, and sometimes there were other people in there too. Sonja had lunch with the downstairs receptionist and came back with the news that some of the visitors were the firm's lawyers. Something was definitely going on.

I passed Gary Bayes in the corridor once, and he totally blanked me. He evidently had other things on his mind than me and my stupid phone call, so my embarrassment began to fade slightly. Very slightly. I mean, I wasn't hoping for a meteorite any more. Even liquidation of the firm began to seem excessive. A small fire to divert attention next time our paths crossed would be fine.

On Wednesday, Patrick said the three of us would all have to work on Saturday. Our jobs, apparently, might depend on it.

I said okay. My goals for the weekend, in chronological order, were (1) catching up with Gavin, who was back from Rome, (2) hitting the clubs, and (3) meeting Mr. Right, or at least getting laid. All of these goals could be achieved after a day's work.

Sonja asked to have the request in writing so her husband would know she wasn't making it up to get out of visiting her in-laws. I think she was joking.

She also started calculating her redundancy pay entitlement. I hadn't worked there long enough to have any.

"If our jobs depend on it, that means there'll still be jobs," I pointed out.

"But for how long? You'll be all right—you can be a self-employed web designer."

"And spend my whole life in one room in Croydon? I'd go crazy."

Not that I wanted to diss Croydon, you understand. There were some lovely things in Croydon. Me, for a start. And Gavin. I have to say that, or he'll never speak to me again.

*

They told us nothing until Friday morning, when the whole Kensington office piled into the boardroom for a meeting with Sean. There were so many of us, we had to wheel in extra chairs. I'd steeled myself for the stress of seeing Gary Bayes again, but he wasn't there. None of the other partners were there. Sean said they were holding simultaneous meetings in the other offices.

We were merging with another estate agency, he announced. Ours was the bigger firm, and they were planning to keep our systems, although they would meld the two names together.

No one cared about the firm's name. Our minds were on our jobs. Somebody asked about the future of the different branches. Sean said, "It's possible we'll rethink some of the locations as the leases come up for renewal, but they don't have any offices in the west, so we'll certainly be keeping this place and the residential team here."

"What about support staff?" asked one of the young women from marketing.

"There's no need to panic. We're making some redundancies in the other firm today, but none here."

"Can you guarantee—" she persisted.

“We can’t guarantee anything at this stage, but I want to emphasise that this is an expansion for us, so although there might be a few areas of overlap, we’re looking at growth, not cutbacks.”

By the end of the meeting, the buzz in the room was more excited than anything else. When we got back to our desks, I said to Patrick, “So that’s what we’re doing tomorrow? Something to do with this merger?”

“Yeah, we’ve got to link the networks, make sure all the software’s compatible, move email and website to the new domain name, all that.”

“I could do the website from home,” I said.

“Nah, they’ll want to be looking over your shoulder. You’ll have the backup. It shouldn’t take long. You don’t have to add their properties—we’re keeping their old site live, so that can be done next week.”

I didn’t like the sound of partners looking over my shoulder, but what could I do? I agreed to be at the other firm’s City office at eight the next morning.

*

But first, I met up with Gavin. We started out in a gay-friendly bar in Croydon to inject a little alcohol into our bloodstreams before heading for the bright lights.

He dismissed my remaining job insecurity in two seconds with, “Whatever, they’d be mad to sack you, and anyway you’d find something else, no probs.” Then he spent an hour telling me about a guy he’d met in Rome. By the end of that, we were in Soho. Then he required the lowdown on all my hot dates, and since they numbered zero, I finally confessed the details of my 1:42 a.m. phone call.

Gavin’s first question was, “Is he hot?”

“Scorching. Cool and controlled with smouldering dark eyes. But I have no chance.”

“What are you talking about? He was definitely up for it.”

“Come on, he’s probably straight, or—”

He put his glass down on the table and interrupted me with a wagging finger. “No way is he straight, petal. If you phoned a straight guy at that time of night and told him you wanted a jump, he’d be like ‘Fuck off, you gay bastard.’”

And if he was gay but not single, it'd be 'Sorry Connor, I've got someone.' But what does he say? 'This is a surprise?' You could have had him on your doorstep in two shakes if you hadn't ballsed it up by telling him it was all a big mistake."

That possibility hadn't entered my mind. "You think?"

"Totally."

"He doesn't act like he's interested."

He shrugged. "Be nice and see what happens."

He didn't know Gary Bayes, of course. He just wanted me to feel better. All the same, it made me think.

Gavin scored that night, a chunky Czech van driver. One of the driver's mates seemed to have an eye on me, but I was pretty sure he wasn't Mr. Right, and getting laid suddenly didn't seem so important. I made an excuse about having to work the next morning—true, of course, but it wouldn't usually have stopped me—and I was home by midnight. Alone again, but with my phone switched off this time.

*

When I turned up at the other firm's office, there was already a guy in overalls on a ladder painting out the old name above the doors. Upstairs, I found Patrick, Sonja, and the other firm's IT person, a woman called Carolyn.

She seemed a little tense. She clearly wasn't thrilled about having to work under Patrick instead of being in charge of her own little section. As she filled the kettle, she told us she used to have an assistant, but he'd been purged in yesterday's redundancies and sent off on garden leave.

We made sympathetic noises, but this was good news for me and Sonja. A team of four seemed exactly right for the combined firm. If there'd been one more, we'd have been looking at each other wondering who was for the chop.

After they sorted out passwords, I settled myself in a corner near the coffee machine and started cloning our website onto the new domain. Patrick had said casual dress was fine, but I quickly realised tight jeans might have been a mistake. After I'd been sitting for a while, the wallet, keys, and coins in my pockets started to cause discomfort, so I took them out and left them on the desk.

Around lunchtime Sean and Gary came in with a man and woman they introduced as partners from the other firm. Sean gave Sonja some cash and sent the two of us out for food. We came back with bags full of sandwiches and fruit, some for us and some for the partners. I plated it up, and Sonja took theirs into the meeting room where they were talking. I didn't trust myself not to drop it if Gary caught my eye.

Later Sonja and Carolyn went round the other new offices installing software, Patrick went to our Kensington office, and I stayed in the City working on the website, which was taking three times as long as it should have, the way websites always do.

When the partners came out of their meeting, I kept my head down, but they spotted me all the same. Gary and one of the new partners, the man, did come and look over my shoulder, just as Patrick had said they would. I felt my face burning up right away. I kept my eyes on the screen, but my neck goes pink too. So my blushes must have been visible from the side or even the back, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I was hyperaware of every little movement Gary made, but I tried to focus on the man I didn't know. He was older, balding, red-nosed like a clown, and a little paunchy around the middle. He was mostly concerned about the position of his profile on the commercial property page. I'd put it under Gary's, which turned out to be a faux pas. They should have been side by side, and I was supposed to know that by telepathy, apparently.

I resisted the temptation to ask how anybody with taste could object to having Gary on top of them, or to point out how much more aesthetically pleasing it was with only Gary showing above the fold. I simply rearranged the page as directed. Then they moved away, or I thought they did, because I saw the older guy heading for the door. I started to relax.

But a second later I heard Gary say, "Thank you for giving up your Saturday, Connor," and I realised he was still right behind me.

My face and neck burned even more furiously when he said my name. I wish I could report that I replied with something both witty and seductive, but in fact I stared moronically at the keyboard in front of me and mumbled, "It's okay. I wasn't doing anything."

"Not meeting your boyfriend?"

"I don't actually have a boyfriend."

There was silence. I still couldn't look round.

It was all right for Gavin to say "be nice." He had no idea what it was like to be completely tongue-tied while your skin spoke for you in the most embarrassing way.

Then the other guy came back, holding a brochure and talking about pounds per square metre. They left soon after. I was profoundly thankful and a little bit disappointed at the same time.

*

Patrick called at five and said we had a choice: we could leave now and work tomorrow morning, or stay this evening and get it all done. I agreed with the others it was better to stay. I knew I'd rather be late meeting up with my mates than have to drag my sorry head into work at some horrendous hour on a Sunday morning.

Patrick and Carolyn came back to the City office separately, and it was after ten o'clock when we finished working and emerged onto the dark street. Sonja had gone straight home from wherever she last was. Carolyn set the alarm and locked up, then she and Patrick headed for Bank, while I went the other way.

So I was all alone, halfway down the steps to Mansion House tube station, when I discovered I'd never picked up my wallet and keys from the desk. I had no travel pass, no cash, no bank cards. I was stuck in the City with nothing but my phone.

I called Patrick, thinking he could ask Carolyn to come back and let me in, but it went to voicemail. They were already down in the tube. When he finally called me back, Carolyn had gone in another direction, and he didn't have her number.

"Try Bayesie," he said. "He only lives in Docklands. If he's got keys to that office, you could nip over there and—oh, you don't have train fare. Well, maybe if you took a cab, he'd pay it at his end."

"I'm not calling Gary Bayes, no way." Then I realised how weird that sounded and added, "I can't ask one of the partners to rescue me on a Saturday night when they're, like, scanning the offices looking for people to fire."

"Your job's safe, Connor."

“Whatever. I’ll be fine. I was planning to meet up with some mates anyway. They’ll sort me out.”

Gavin had been texting me as they moved from bar to bar. They were now in a club in Vauxhall, about three miles away. I could walk there in an hour max. The club might be full by then, but at least I could borrow Gavin’s keys and some cash and tuck myself up on his sofa.

But Patrick said, “Wait there a bit, let me see what I can do.”

He texted me a few minutes later to say help was on its way. I had a bad feeling about that, but I couldn’t set off for Vauxhall now. Whoever it was, it’d only be worse if I was missing when they arrived.

At last a taxi pulled up. I’d been desperately willing it to be Carolyn, but when Gary got out, I was so stunned I forgot to be embarrassed. He stood at the open cab door, all in black with a long leather coat and an eyeliner/stubble combo that made him a serious contender for Sexiest Man Alive.

Then I realised he couldn’t be all dressed up to meet me—there hadn’t been time. I’d interrupted his evening. Again.

I walked to the kerb. I must have looked like a shaggy lost dog.

He said, “So Patrick tells me you’re stranded. I don’t have the keys, we’ll have to sort that out tomorrow, but I can offer you some options for tonight. The cab’s on the firm’s account, so it could take you wherever you want to go, or I can book you into a hotel on the firm’s credit card, or you can stay in my spare room. Unless you’re allergic to cats?”

I couldn’t resist. Of course the simplest thing would have been to take the cab to Vauxhall, but if he said “my” spare room, he must live alone, and if he could have dealt with me using credit card and phone but chose instead to come in person and invite me home... I took a deep breath.

“I’d love to meet your cat, if it’s honestly not too much trouble. You don’t look like you were having a quiet night in front of the TV.”

He raised his eyebrows. “It’s fine. And how do you know what I wear to watch TV?”

I grinned and clambered into the cab.

“Marsh Wall,” he said to the driver.

We sat at opposite windows, not talking, but I felt as excited as a kid, being whisked through Wapping and Limehouse in a cab with Gary Bayes. It started to rain, and for more reasons than that, I silently thanked my fairy godmother I wasn't walking three miles in the other direction.

From the taxi we crossed stone paving to the glass doors of his building. He used no code or key—the doors opened with a *swoosh* as we approached, admitting us to a vast atrium containing actual trees and a live human porter. Gary nodded to him as we passed. The porter looked totally unfazed to see Mr. Gorgeous with a worn-out redhead in tow.

We took the lift up to Gary's floor. He opened his door and flipped on the uplighters along the wall. We were in an oak-floored white-walled hallway with modern art providing splashes of colour.

"That's the spare room." He pointed to a door.

Not having a bag to put in it, I just nodded.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked. My stomach gurgled on cue and he laughed. "What have I got ... fish in some kind of sauce ... or lasagne?"

I chose the lasagne and followed him into the living room, an oasis of dark colours and low lighting. Raindrops sparkled on the floor-to-ceiling windows reflecting the lights of the city below. This space alone was twice the size of my whole flat. Exactly the kind of place I'd pictured him living, the kind of place I hoped to live in myself one day. The only thing I hadn't dared imagine him having was the huge marmalade cat curled up on the chocolate-coloured sofa. That made everything so perfect it was scary.

I didn't like to rush over and start stroking the cat, because it appeared to be fast asleep, so I stood and admired it from afar.

Gary tossed his jacket onto the back of a chair. Underneath he wore a designer-torn sleeveless black top showing off well-developed shoulders and a fiery dragon tattoo. I found myself admiring the rippling tattoo instead of the cat as Gary headed for the kitchen area, took something from the fridge, and put it in the oven. Then he reached for a bottle. "Glass of wine?"

"Please." I watched him pour the deep red liquid. "I think your cat and I must be related."

"Huh? Oh, the ginger gene." His eyeliner crinkled when he smiled. "That's Yoda. Go and say hello—he'll appreciate it."

I accepted the wine and went to sit beside the cat, who still didn't stir. Gary started assembling salad, and I took a moment to text Gavin: *Gone home with hot boss.*

The reply came in seconds: *Told u so, show him what croydon boys can do.*

The buzzing of the phone woke Yoda, who stretched out and sniffed my fingers. I tickled his tummy, and he grabbed my arm with all four paws.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Five or six, I think. I'm not sure exactly. They're both rescue cats."

"Both?" I looked around the room and saw another handsome animal, a black one, camouflaged on a dark rug near the TV. It blinked at me.

"The other one's Harley. He's a little harder to get to know."

He certainly had a disconcertingly cool gaze. "They're both boys? Don't they fight?"

"Not seriously. They're neutered, that helps. They have little tussles from time to time, but they seem to like each other. And considering how much I'm out, I think it's better to have two so they have each other for company." He leaned against the breakfast bar, sipping his wine. "They have to be kept inside because they have FIV. Like HIV, but for cats. Don't worry, humans can't get it."

"I know."

Yoda had decided my legs would make a good mattress. I let him circle and settle on me. I stroked his head, feeling sad. He seemed in perfect health, plump and strong. You'd never have known there was anything wrong with him. But looking healthy doesn't mean a thing.

Just like with HIV. I glanced up at Gary. "Are you HIV-positive? Is that why you give them a home?"

He shook his head and I felt a blush starting. I couldn't believe I'd just asked such a blatantly sex-related question. I hoped he'd think it was concern for his health or sheer nosiness.

When Gary put two loaded plates on the breakfast bar, I encouraged Yoda to return to his own place on the sofa, but he was not keen to move. I had to lift his heavy rump and slide out from under him.

I took my wine over to the bar. The top of the lasagne was perfectly golden, and in with the meat were identifiable slices of courgette, pepper, and mushroom. He told me he got it from an Italian delicatessen near our Docklands office. I served myself some salad, and we ate for a few minutes in silence. The food tasted as good as it looked. I wondered if the delicatessen would give me the recipe. Probably not. Trade secrets, and all that.

Thinking about trade secrets reminded me of the work situation, so I got Gary to tell me more about the merger. It did sound like a good thing, for our side at least. Then he talked about some of the property developments he'd been involved with and asked me a few things about myself. I started to unwind more than I'd have thought possible.

Then when I'd almost finished eating, he said mildly, "Let's get the elephant out of this room. What was going on with that phone call? Was it a practical joke?"

I went red instantly, I know I did, I could feel the heat in my skin. "Which phone call?" I stalled, picking out an olive and scrutinising it intently.

"You've only ever phoned me once, as far as I recall."

"Oh, *that* phone call. The one you said to forget about?"

"That one, yeah. In practice I've found it quite hard to forget, and you seemed uncomfortable with me in the office—"

"So you invited me here to talk about it?"

"Not exactly, but you're here, and I don't like undercurrents."

Nor do I, to be honest. I prefer to have things out in the open. But there are limits.

As is my wont when nervous, I took another sip of wine and tried to make a joke of it. "It was just a horrible mistake. I thought I was phoning a friend to complain that my sex life's like Salisbury Plain—not a hump in sight—and then it turns out I've been revealing all my intimate needs to one of my bosses. You can see why a person might panic and sound horror-struck?"

"Yeah." He put his fork down. "So it wasn't a boyfriend? Not even a hookup?"

"No way. It was my best friend, Gavin. His name's right next to yours in my contacts." I stole a glance at him. His mouth curved up in a half smile. "So

that's why I freaked out," I went on. "I mean, you were one of my employers, and we'd barely spoken before. You seemed so ... unapproachable."

"Is that how I come across?"

"Well, perhaps just a tad. To me, anyway. A little distant, elegant, and self-possessed—rather like him, in fact." I pointed my fork down at Harley, who'd come a little closer now the smell of food was in the air.

"Perhaps we're just shy, me and Harley?"

I put my head on one side and considered him. I was warming to this guy on a whole new level. "You don't need to be shy with me."

"Are you like Yoda, then? The uncomplicated, affectionate ginger one?"

"Totally."

He pushed away his plate, holding my gaze. "Well, if you enjoy cuddles as much as Yoda does, I can see why you don't like going to bed alone." His smile was wicked now. "Remind me, what was it you said exactly? Something about wanting to get fucked?"

"I honestly don't remember. Merciful oblivion." I was starting to blush again. I stood, grabbed the plates, and headed past him. "Where's the dishwasher?"

He laughed. "Next to the sink. Do you still have those needs?"

"There haven't been any mergers in my personal life recently," I said, focusing intently on the machine. "I've changed my mind. I liked it better when you were shy."

"Too late, I'm over it. Cock in your mouth and your arse, I think you said. Would that require two cocks?"

"Not necessarily. One orifice at a time is fine. This?" I held up the lasagne dish.

"Yes, but not the glasses. Your mouth first, I imagine?"

"Preferably."

I closed the door and pressed the start button. With all this talk of cocks after a big plateful of lasagne, my jeans were beginning to feel uncomfortably tight, even without a wallet inside them.

"You forgot the detergent."

“Oh, shit.” I tried to open the door but it was too late—the water had started running.

“Finding it hard to concentrate?” Gary asked.

“Might be.” I stared at the dishwasher.

“I wonder why that could be. Oddly enough, you do the same to me. I’ve been bringing home papers every night this week and hardly taking in a word. All your fault.”

I looked round in surprise. He was watching me with one arm stretched along the counter. He said, “Come here ... if you want to.”

I wanted to. I definitely wanted to. He swivelled round on the stool and parted his black-clad legs so I could stand between them.

“I didn’t think it was a great idea to get involved with someone from work,” he said. “But your call made it much harder for me to get you out of my mind. It’s been a hell of a distraction. Especially with the way you go bright red whenever you see me. I love having that effect on you.”

This was good news, because he was having that effect right now. He put his hands on my hips and drew me in until our noses were only a few inches apart. He reached out with one finger and touched my hair.

“And these tendrils of gold. When I first saw you, I had to sneak a look at your eyebrows and lashes to check it was natural. Then I started wondering whether there’d be more here.” He rucked up my T-shirt on both sides, running his hands over my ribs.

“A little bit,” I said shakily. I pulled the T-shirt off over my head, and he began brushing his fingertips against the sparse red hairs on my chest. It felt like a breath of wind. I wanted more. Much more.

“It’s gorgeous. Perfect. With this fiery tiger line, leading my fingers down.” I watched his hand drift between my nipples and over my flexed stomach.

His lips were full and glistening. I put my hands on his shoulders and moved my head to kiss him. Our mouths bumped and then locked. I licked around the soft, moist oval of the inside of his lips. He touched my tongue with the tip of his and enticed it deeper into his mouth, running his fingers through my hair.

At the same time, he slid three fingers of the other hand inside the front band of my jeans until they caught in the hair there. He broke away from the

kiss and said, "I want to see." He undid the button and pushed the zip down, then pulled the two sides apart and pushed down my underpants to show the ginger hair peeking out. There was no hiding the solid bar of my cock, either.

He dipped his head right down and ran his tongue below my navel, making me quiver. Then he straightened up and pulled me in against him so our cocks bumped together, straining through the fabric. I thrust a hand into the mass of dark hair on his head and closed my mouth over his. He pressed his tongue into my mouth and moved his hands around to grip my arse, rubbing us together hard.

"Say it again, what you said on the phone," he murmured in my ear.

"I need you to fuck me," I told him. "I want to worship your cock, I want to suck it and lick it all over and then feel it plunging into me, fucking me deep and fast."

He bit the lobe of my ear. "I'm going to make you come so hard you can't think."

He took me into his bedroom and closed the door so the cats couldn't join us. I saw a big bed with white sheets and a dark cover, cupboards in dark wood along one wall, mirrors. Another wall was all glass with the blinds up, nothing but the night and the city lights from the ceiling to the floor.

He pulled off his black vest in one motion and turned on a lamp beside the door. Its light reflected in the mirrors and the uncovered expanse of glass. I ran a hand over his chest and reached around to feel the ridges of muscle on either side of his spine. Our mouths met, and he began to push at my jeans.

We shrugged off the rest of our clothes, and he led me into his shower. He turned the water on and gave me one of a handful of coloured soaps. I teased his nipples while he gripped the cheeks of my arse and ground our groins together. He ran his slippery hands up to my armpits and down, down to my cock, circling it, making me gasp. I pushed one of my hands between his legs, rubbing his muscular thighs, caressing his balls, and with the other I started to clean his cock. Then I pushed one soapy finger against the tight ring behind, until it opened to let me slide in.

He said "Connor" in a breaking voice and pulled me against one of his legs. I pushed my finger in deeper and added another as my cock rubbed against his wet thigh. Then suddenly he groaned and pulled my hand out of him. He drew me down to the floor and unhooked the shower head.

I was kneeling on all fours with my legs apart. Water started playing against my arse, then my balls, as he washed me. He let me see what he was using: a long cylinder of soap. I felt the head of it circling my hole, slipping around and over and in, not deep, just twisting in the entrance, cleaning me inside and out. My cock ached for something to push against but he wouldn't let me touch it. Then he put the soap aside and used the shower head to rinse me, probing with wet fingers, rinsing the soap from every millimetre of skin.

At last he turned off the shower, and we dried each other. I met his eyes for a moment, dark and intense, focused on me.

Back in the bedroom, I pulled him onto the bed, kissing him hungrily. We rolled, first one on top then the other, flesh on flesh, limbs tangled.

He pushed my shoulders down on the bed and turned, presenting his cock to my mouth. I gripped his hips and ran my tongue around its base and over its length. Despite the shower, he tasted of musk and minerals.

He grabbed a pillow and, lying on my back, I lifted my hips so he could push the pillow underneath. Head to tail with me now, he pushed my legs apart. Then suddenly his mouth was everywhere, on my cock, in my crack, and pressing on my hole. I raised my head to take the tip of his cock between my lips, sucked on it, and held his hips as they began moving above me, allowing slow thrusts into my mouth, not too deep.

I felt his tongue licking around and around, wetting my hole, and his teeth pushing down on the skin around it. I trapped his head between my thighs and felt his hair against my skin. Then his tongue was inside, twisting and curling in that dark secret place, sending sparks through me. At the same time, his hand closed on my cock, and I pushed up into it, feeling his tongue probing deeper inside me with every thrust.

Then his tongue slipped out of my hole, and his hard wet cock pulled out of my mouth. He reached across and grabbed something from beside the bed: a condom, lube. I started to turn over, but he pressed my shoulder down. He wanted me on my back, my hips on the pillow, my legs in the air.

Now he was leaning over me, urging my legs back towards my chest to tilt my pelvis up, pushing fingers in, opening me up.

And at last his cock. I felt it press against the hole, and I moaned, wanting it in, wanting its whole length inside me. The muscle gave, and the head

slipped in, stretching me. He inched in deeper with jerking movements, slowly filling me. Then he began to move, long slow strokes pushing in all the way.

I put my hands behind my neck and crunched up, straining for a better view. I could see the base of his cock surrounded by his curling black hair, the shaft disappearing as he pushed into me.

“Does this hit the spot?”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“You look gorgeous. Just like I always thought you would. You want to watch in the mirror?”

“I can see in the window.” We were reflected in the glass, the two of us making one contorted shape, exposed to the world. If there’d been anyone hovering two hundred feet from the ground outside, they’d have seen every move. The thought made my cock throb.

“Okay if I go harder?”

“Yeah.”

We stopped talking. I let my head fall back onto the bed as he began fucking me with a stronger rhythm. I had one leg up on his shoulder, the other bent in the air. I reached for my groin, but he got there first, closing a hand over my cock, looking down at it and watching himself fucking me.

His hand was slick with lube and slid up and down my length in time with his thrusts into me. I closed my eyes. All my consciousness was in my cock and my arse. Fireworks began to splutter inside me.

Then he shifted gear. He was really pounding into me now. The feeling intensified until my arse was a mass of burning delight, and I hardly knew if he was going in or out. But his hand on my cock lost focus, so I gripped it and guided it, making him stroke me hard and fast.

I made a noise, my head turned to the side, and my hips jerked up as I started to come with a rush of heat and glory. He cried out and thrust into me once, twice, between the pulses as I spurting onto my stomach and our hands.

After, we lay on the sweat-damp sheets with the light from the lamp and the lights from the window pulling us back into the world. I waited for my thudding heart to calm.

“Wish I could have had a picture of you when you came,” he said sleepily, snaking an arm around my waist. “So fucking hot and sweet with your eyes screwed shut and your hair all over the pillow and your skin bright red all the way down to your chest.”

I mumbled “Come for you again any time you want,” and interlaced my fingers with his.

We were woken at dawn by Harley scratching on the door, wanting his breakfast. Gary fed the cats, made coffee, and came back to bed. His plan was to have a courier collect Carolyn’s keys and deliver them to us so I could pick up my stuff and go home, but we never got to it. I didn’t want to go home, and he didn’t want to let me. We had more interesting things to do. So we didn’t leave the flat—hardly left the bedroom—and on Monday morning I went to work in borrowed clothes, picking up my wallet and keys from the City on my way.

I forgave my phone, even though it went on calling Gary Bayes. In fact, it was soon calling his number more often than Gavin’s.



About the Author

MEGAN REDDAWAY lives in England. She has been entertained by fictional characters acting out their stories in her head for as long as she can remember. She began writing them down as soon as she could.

Since she grew up, she’s worked as a secretary, driver, waitress, and flower-seller, among other things, but she always has a story bubbling away at the same time.

For news of Megan’s male/male romance releases and another free story, visit her website: <http://meganreddaway.com>

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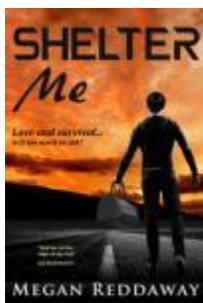
Kyle is English and he's lucky. He's going to Dublin for St Patrick's Day, and his boss is paying.

Declan is Irish and he's unlucky. His friends are off to Tenerife for a weekend of gay clubbing, and Declan will be stuck in Dublin alone on St Patrick's Day. But bad luck is nothing new for Declan. He's been plagued with it ever since he was cursed by a leprechaun on the night he was born.

When the two of them meet, there's magic as well as mayhem. But can Declan escape his bad luck long enough to make a real connection with Kyle before Kyle has to fly home to England?

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