



FIRST *and* FOREVER

He's about to make
his winning play ...



'Lynn Painter at her
FUNNIEST!' Haley Pham

LYNN
PAINTER

No.1
New York Times
bestselling author
of *Better Than
the Movies*



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First and Forever

Lynn Painter is the *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Better Than the Movies* and *Mr Wrong Number*, as well as the co-creator of five obnoxious children who populate the great state of Nebraska. When she isn't reading or writing, she can be found binge-watching rom-coms and obsessing over Spotify playlists.

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Praise for *Maid for Each Other*

‘*Maid for Each Other* has a classic rom-com vibe to it, with modern touches that make this fake dating romp between a millionaire and his house cleaner feel totally fresh.

As always, Lynn Painter serves up fun antics, great banter, and a perfectly swoonworthy happily ever after.’

Bridget Morrissey, author of *Everything She Does Is Magic*

‘Fun, fresh, and fabulously flirty, *Maid for Each Other* will have you falling from the first page. Lynn Painter delivers again with the trademark blend of humor, witty banter, and feisty yet lovable characters that makes her one of my all-time favorite rom-com writers.’

Libby Hubscher, author of *Heart Marks the Spot*

Praise for *Happily Never After*

‘A giggle-inducing romp that readers won’t be able to object to.’

Lana Ferguson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Mating Game*

‘Lynn Painter writes the rom-com banter of my dreams! *Happily Never After* is a sparkling, hilarious, sexy romance that leaps off the page and is just begging to be made into a movie.’

Sarah Adams, *New York Times* bestselling author of *In Your Dreams*

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Praise for *The Love Wager*

‘Painter follows up *Mr Wrong Number* with an equally cute friends-to-lovers romance . . . Their equally filthy sense of humor makes their connection feel real, and their game of constant one-upmanship is a lot of fun.

Painter’s fans won’t be disappointed.’

Publishers Weekly

‘A fun, flirty, and timely read from Painter . . . with likable characters to boot.’

Library Journal

Praise for *Mr Wrong Number*

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

Christina Lauren, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *The Paradise Problem*

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

Ali Hazelwood, #1 *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Two Can Play*

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By Lynn Painter

Mr Wrong Number

The Love Wager

Happily Never After

Accidentally Amy

Maid for Each Other

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For Kevin

...AGAIN...

... sigh ...

*It's probably getting boring, the way I dedicate all
these books to you. A better author would surely ditch
you to shout out an inspiring poet, right?*

*Maybe something like: THANKS TO MY MAIN MAN
KEATS FOR ALL THE AMAZING ODES.*

But the thing is, I'm not a better author.

*I'm just Lynn, Lynning all over the place, still as
nerdily obsessed with you as I was the night your cat
punched me in the head and you smugly said,
'So you don't like the Doobie Brothers.'*

*You're the center of my world, my whole heart,
and Keats couldn't hold your jock.**

**Disclaimer: Not that he'd want to. It's just an
expression. And no disrespect to Keats, he was a real one.*

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Author's Note

This book deals with some emotionally difficult topics, including grief and sexual harassment. Any readers who believe that such content may upset them or trigger traumatic memories are encouraged to consider their emotional well-being when deciding whether to continue reading this book.

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I

Duffy

‘Are you ready, Ms Distefano?’

Was I ready? I kind of wanted to throw up and my entire body was shaking, so yes – I was as ready as I’d ever be. For someone who hated public speaking and avoided it at all costs – *my career choice is tax accounting, bello* – it was surreal that I was about to willingly go onto a stage and be interviewed in front of an audience.

My entire *life* had become surreal as of late.

‘Yes,’ I said, nodding and getting out of the green room chair, ready to follow the intern to my idea of hell on earth. ‘I’m ready.’

‘Wait!’ my dad said in a rushed panic, stopping his nervous pacing to hold up a hand and speak like he was trying to convince a hit man to spare his life. He’d insisted on accompanying me because he was certain without his guidance I would ‘sink us even deeper,’ and his face was so serious it was almost comical when he leaned in close and said, ‘Duffy Distefano, this moment is of the utmost importance. I don’t care how much it hurts, you gotta dig deep and conjure up *sweet*. Pin on a smile and pretend to be freaking perky, you got me? You know I love you, kid, but don’t be yourself this time – there’s too much at stake.’

‘Oh, that’s really nice, Dad,’ I said, my heart beating

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out of my chest as the studio audience applauded about something on the other side of the curtain. My father was the only reason I was doing this. If it were just me, I'd accept my fate as a pariah and go underground forever, but being excluded from Sundays was killing him.

Minneapolis Coyote football – and being a season ticket holder – was part of his identity.

The man had proposed to my mother at a Coyote game while buzzed and wearing face paint, for God's sake.

So when someone from the *Kel and Kell in the Morning* show called the house a few days ago and offered me the chance to tell my side of the story, my dad called them back (without asking me first) and accepted on my behalf.

“‘Don't be yourself’ is exactly what every child wants to hear from a parent during a stressful moment,” I said, trying to take deep breaths through my nose. “Very reassuring. Thank you so much.”

“Come on, you know you suck at people,” he said with a smirk.

He wasn't wrong, so I just kissed his cheek and said, “Get out of my way so I can do this, old man.”

I went around him and followed the intern, shaking out my numb fingers while desperately hoping I wouldn't fall down or pass out or get struck in the face with another hot dog because that shit was getting old.

And yes, the word ‘another’ was actually applicable in this instance. I'd been pelted with so many concession snacks over the past two weeks that I could probably nail a blindfolded test where I had to name which treat was bouncing off my forehead or which beverage was being thrown on me.

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That's a corn dog. That's popcorn. That slime is the butter from a superpretzel.

Not only is that beer, but it's the fall seasonal IPA that they serve only at the north end concession stand.

We stopped at the edge of the curtain and waited, and as soon as Kel said the words 'Please welcome Duffy Distefano,' the intern gestured for me to move and I was walking out onto the stage.

Surprisingly, I didn't hear a single boo as I went straight for one of the two stools sitting beside the sports talk show duo; I'd gotten used to being booed everywhere I went, so this applause was refreshing (but still terrifying). So far I'd been booed on the bus, booed at my cousin's high school football game, and I'd even been booed by some rando at Sunday Mass, although my dad gave the entire congregation his slow-searching *I will find and destroy you* scowl which made the booper go radio silent.

The guy probably started praying my father – and my three brothers – wouldn't find him.

So why does the general population of the Twin Cities hate me, you ask?

Because they'd witnessed me 'brutally attacking' Coyote Carl, the NFL team's beloved mascot, on national TV.

It was such bullshit.

Had I knocked him down? Yes.

Had I meant to? Also yes.

Had he deserved it? *Hell*, yes.

The oversized furball had stopped right in front of my seat to *dance* when the season opener was in overtime. It was third and one while his costumed ass did the Macarena and blocked my view, and when I tapped him and asked

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him to move – three times, for the record – instead of moving, he *bugged* me.

Which did nothing to improve my visibility of the field.

And as I struggled to break free of Carl's suffocating clinch, one of his gloved hands grabbed my ass.

Hard. As in, *not* an accident.

So I pushed that mangy pervert, which was a completely appropriate response.

Unfortunately, he lost his balance and toppled over backward, tumbling down quite a few of the steep stadium stairs. Like, a *lot* of stairs.

And he took out a popcorn vendor on his way down (which later led to the crazy-viral meme of his barrel roll set to 'Rollin' by Limp Bizkit).

Yes, the jumbotron cameras captured my 'violent outburst' just as it happened (though they missed the ass grab), so I was now the villain, public enemy number one – *God help me* – Football Karen.

Especially because we went on to lose that game.

Our star tight end who never made mistakes dropped a perfectly thrown pass just before time expired, but instead of blaming him for the loss, the entire city of Minneapolis was blaming me for giving the team 'bad mojo.'

Apparently, I'd cursed the Coyotes.

It was absurd and ridiculous, but I was slightly terrified to think what could happen if Minnesota had a shitty season.

We might have to move states.

'Welcome, Duffy,' Kel said with a blindingly white grin, crossing her legs as I sat down. 'You've had an interesting couple of weeks, yes?'

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‘You could say that,’ I said, and *of course* the microphone screeched in a way that made everyone cringe and cover their ears.

Fabulous. The way to Minneapolis’s forgiveness is definitely to damage their eardrums.

‘Well, we want to hear all about it,’ Kell said, his bright smile matching that of his cohost wife’s. ‘But first, we’re going to bring out another guest so we can discuss it together.’

Oh, God. Were they going to bring out Carl? I’d memorized all the nicey-nice things my dad wanted me to say in hopes of making us marginally less hated, but I had no idea how to play a conversation with the pervy mascot who’d ruined my life.

‘Who is it?’ I asked a little too intensely, wondering if I’d be able to deny the urge to push him again if he dared show his snout in front of me. ‘Who’s here?’

Kel shot me a weird look, as if she hadn’t expected me to respond like someone on the edge.

Am I sweating?

‘You’re about to find out,’ Kell interjected through his cheesy smile, his eyes slightly widened like he was worried – or excited – that I was about to have a meltdown. ‘Friends, can we give it up for Coyotes tight end Connor Cunningham?’

My mouth dropped wide open – I caught a glimpse of it on one of the many monitors mounted around the studio – as the crowd went wild and Connor Freaking Cunningham walked out onto the stage. Kel and Kell stood, so I stood, too, and I watched in disbelief as the man who’d single-handedly delivered my fantasy football championship last year grinned and shook Kel’s hand.

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Connor Cunningham was a massive human. Six five, 260 pounds, with size 15 feet and a hand size of 9.63 inches. I'd seen him on the field at every single home game, and on our TV for every away game, yet still he somehow looked even more enormous as he stood there within point-blank range of my eyeballs.

He was wearing a red Coyotes pullover and dark jeans, very casual compared to his usual suited-up high-fashion pregame fit, yet he still appeared wildly stylish compared to my Amazon Basics black cardigan, long black skirt that I borrowed from my neighbor because my dad thought all my pants looked too 'dodgy,' and three-year-old black flats that I'd Sharpied on the way to the studio to cover all the scuffs.

My dad and I had loved him since he'd been drafted by the Coyotes – the guy was a beast of a tight end – but we'd become superfans after he'd been the only person to *sort of* defend my actions.

At the press conference after the loss, when they showed him a clip of my 'attack' on Coyote Carl and asked him about it, he laughed his ass off.

But when he stopped laughing, he said the most amazing thing.

Kind of makes you wonder what ol' Carl did to deserve it, though, right? I didn't see him ask for consent before the hug, so he might've deserved to get laid out.

I would never forget those words, because it felt like there was at least *someone* in the city who didn't want to murder me for pushing down an oversized man-dog.

My breath caught in my throat when Connor looked at me, when he moved to shake my hand. *Dear Lord, that*

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is a handsome man. His blue eyes were all I could see as his big hand wrapped around my sweaty palm, and my breath was coming too fast as I attempted to speak but instead just moved my gaping mouth like a fish gasping for air . . . or water . . . How did fish breathe again?

The noise of the studio suddenly sounded far away, like I was in a bubble, and I felt light-headed and dizzy as Connor released my hand.

‘I can’t believe your hands actually *are* nine-point-six-three inches —’ I breathed out, unsure why I was saying it out loud — *Is the audience laughing?* — but unable to stop my words because his hand was ginormous.

‘Hey, are you okay?’ he interrupted in that deep voice of his, his dark eyebrows furrowing together as he looked down at my face.

‘— yet you still managed to drop that pass against the Raiders,’ I continued, wondering why I sounded like I was slurring. ‘How is that even possible?’

His face froze in a look of surprise, and then he disappeared as everything went dark.

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Connor

The girl fainted the minute the insult left her lips.

I caught her – *oh, the irony* – as the crowd gasped, but before anyone could even react to the situation, a silver-haired guy came running out from backstage, yelling, ‘She’s fine!’

What the fuck?

The guy – who was wearing a vintage Coyotes jersey that I was guessing he bought in the ’80s – rushed right up to me and said, ‘She’s fine. She always faints when she gets nervous. It’ll only be a second.’

As if on cue, her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at me.

‘See?’ the man said, both to me and to the studio audience, seeming desperate to reassure everyone that this was no big deal. ‘She’s fine.’

‘What happened?’ she asked, blinking fast as she began to reorient herself, her body still fairly slack against my arms.

‘You insulted me and passed out,’ I said, making a few people laugh.

‘I *insulted* you?’ she asked, sounding surprised.

Duffy Distefano was kind of cute in person. She looked like every photo I’d seen of her on the news over the past couple of weeks – dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, no

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makeup, no nonsense – but her brown eyes were wicked sharp, like she had a million things going on behind them.

‘You brought up the pass he dropped in overtime, *Duff*,’ the older man said accusingly, his disapproving tone hinting he was very unhappy she’d mentioned it.

‘Well, that’s not an insult,’ she said plainly as she looked up at me. ‘It’s just a fact. You *did* drop that ball, did you not? But I mean, I suppose you can’t catch *every* pass, so –’

‘So I have your permission to make a mistake?’ I said around a laugh, because I couldn’t believe she was giving me shit about the drop after I’d just saved her from a face-plant. Who the fuck was this girl?

‘Well, I mean, I would prefer you *don’t* drop the passes you’re intended to catch,’ she said with the perfect amount of sarcasm in her voice, ‘but –’

‘Can I butt in with a wellness check here?’ Kel interrupted. ‘Are you okay, Duffy?’

‘Oh, she’s fine,’ the jersey-clad man said again, waving a hand dismissively. ‘She’s totally fine. This happens all the time.’

‘This happens all the time?’ I asked, wondering if she realized she was still leaning into me.

‘*No*,’ she said in disgust, her eyebrows crinkling together. And then I saw the exact second she realized my arms were still supporting her because she literally jumped away from me, her cheeks turning pink.

Which I somehow just knew she would hate.

‘Only when she gets nervous or sees someone she’s got a crush on.’

‘Oh, really?’ I said, suddenly more entertained than I’d been in quite some time.

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‘Relax, Football,’ she said with an eye roll, tucking her hair behind her ear with one hand while tugging on the bottom of her sweater with the other. ‘There are a lot of people here. It’s nervousness, trust me.’

I heard a few laughs from the audience at that.

‘Yeah, you shoulda seen her the time she bumped into Bill Cowher at the airport. Her eyes glazed over and she went down like a grizzly with a tranquilizer dart. Hit the deck so hard she got a concussion.’

‘Dad, can you —’

‘Oh, you’re her father?’ Kell asked, grinning like the situation was hilarious.

‘Bill Cowher?’ I said quietly, looking down at her with a grin because what the fuck. She had a crush on the retired football coach who was probably the same age as her dad? ‘I’m going to need to hear this story.’

‘Absolutely not,’ she said.

‘Actually, we would all love to hear this story,’ Kel said. ‘Can we please get a chair for Duffy’s father, um . . . ?’

‘Tony,’ her dad supplied, smiling a cheesy first-day-of-school grin and holding up a hand to the audience. ‘Tony Distefano.’

‘I thought we were going to talk about the groping coyote,’ Duffy said, and it sounded like she was gritting her teeth.

‘You said you were gonna be nice, Duff,’ her dad said, pointing a finger at her, which made the entire place erupt into laughter.

‘I think this is where Kell and I should take over,’ Kel said with a giggle, ‘because it’s our show and we prefer to

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be the ones controlling the conversation. Is that okay with you, Tony?’

‘I’ll allow it,’ he replied, making the crowd laugh even harder.

I fucking loved him.

Since the Coyotes organization sent me to the morning talk show to smooth everything over and make nice with Duffy (and the public), this bizarro situation was perfect. I wasn’t sure what the fuck was going on, but as long as Coyotes fans were happy, things were going well.

Thank God.

Because I’d been in trouble with the front office ever since the press conference.

I’d stepped up to the podium that Sunday, expecting to be grilled about the goddamn dropped pass, but instead, the guys in the press room showed me footage of the mascot getting his ass handed to him by a woman and asked what I thought.

I was so relieved to not be on the hot seat about the pass that I’d laughed my ass off and made some jokes, gave my two cents without really thinking much about it. And suddenly, my comment about consent was getting me all sorts of good press. I was being called ‘the greenest flag’ (for being a decent human – hello, low bar) thanks to my comments and jokes going viral.

Jokes that management didn’t find remotely funny when multiple women started coming forward to share that they’d *also* been groped by the mascot. Apparently Carl was hella handsy, and suddenly the media wanted to know if the team – and management – had been aware of Carl’s behavior beforehand.

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They hadn't known. To be honest, though, if Carl was a disgusting asshole, I was glad that this all blew up so these women could get some form of justice. I knew the higher-ups were horrified by Carl's behavior, but at the same time, they were still mad as hell about the team's shitty publicity.

Which was why I was here.

I *really* wanted to stay with Minnesota after this season. I'd always looked up to the players who spent their entire career with one team, and the Coyotes had felt like home since the minute they drafted me.

Bigger than that, though, was the simple fact that Minnesota was the only team I'd ever wanted to play for. I knew the realities of my career and the nature of the business, and that was obviously the top priority, but my grandpa had been a die-hard Coyotes fan his entire life.

He *loved* that team and still recited stats from the old days, even though now he struggled to recite what he'd had for breakfast.

But last season had been yet another disappointment for the team. The Coyotes were like the football version of the Chicago Cubs with the whole 'lovable losers' label. The stadium was full every Sunday and the fans were rabidly faithful, but there hadn't been many winning seasons in the last decade.

Which led to the rumors.

Rumors of a reset at the end of this season.

They were only rumors, but it wasn't unheard of for a team in this situation to get rid of all the valuable players, like a massive fire sale, and start over with a fresh budget.

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And if that happened, I wanted to be the one they fucking kept.

So I needed to be kissing asses, not pissing people off.

Which, again, was why I was here.

‘Duffy, we are absolutely going to talk about the reason why you’re both here,’ Kel said as the extra chair for Duffy’s dad was brought out and we took our seats. ‘But first we’d all like Tony to tell us the Bill Cowher story.’

‘Wonderful,’ Duffy muttered, which made the crowd laugh and applaud as her father beamed.

‘Okay, so the kid’s been a die-hard Coyotes fan since birth, right?’ Tony Distefano had a thick northern accent that was reminiscent of the old *SNL* ‘Da Bears’ skits. He leaned forward and spoke to the audience like he’d been born to tell them stories. ‘So way back in the day, when she was in first grade, we were watching that game against the Steelers where the officials got it wrong so Cowher stuck a Polaroid in the ref’s pocket, right?’

It was Coach Cowher’s legendary power move. The Coyotes attempted a field goal and missed, but the refs threw a flag for twelve men on the field. Just as the coach was losing his shit because it was a bad call – there were clearly only eleven lined up – someone handed him a Polaroid so he had fucking proof the call was wrong.

But it wasn’t reviewable, so it stood.

As the half ended and the team was running off the field, Cowher – even more livid now that the penalty had led to the Coyotes converting for three – sprinted over to that referee and jammed the Polaroid into his pocket.

‘Little Duff was happy as a clam that they screwed up

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the call and we banked three points, but she fuckin' – *shit*, sorry, I mean freakin', he corrected, which got him a few more laughs. 'She freakin' caught a killer crush on the coach. The kid watched just as many Steelers games as Coyotes that year, I swear to God, and she made a collage of the man on her wall – in elementary school.'

'No shit?' I said to her, loving this story.

'I was in first grade.' Duffy looked like she couldn't quite decide whether to kill her father or run off the stage, but ultimately, she shrugged and said, 'I simply chose football over unicorns; not a big deal.'

'But Bill Cowher?' I said, unable to suppress my grin because this was fucking hilarious.

'The man had an . . . *intensity* that spoke to my six-year-old heart, what can I say,' she muttered.

'But you had a *twentysomething*-year-old heart when you got the concussion,' her dad said, working the crowd like a comedian with killer timing. 'It was last year and we were in the security line at MSP. Neither of us noticed him in front of us, but when Cowher turned around and offered a bin for her laptop, it was like her eyes glazed over. She said, "Holy shit, you're Bill Cowher" and then she went down like someone hol-lered "timber," banging her head against Mrs Cowher's steel suitcase on the way.'

'And this resulted in a concussion?' Kell asked.

'Yeah, and the kid bled all over the place because Cowher's wife had one of those really solid suitcases, the ones that cost like a grand, you know?'

'Can we maybe move on from this story now?' Duffy asked her father as the entire place laughed. It was funny

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as hell, the way these two were almost oblivious to the audience as her dad referred to her as ‘the kid’ when she was in her twenties. ‘I’m pretty sure you set up this interview to discuss something other than my unfortunate airport head wound.’

‘How about I jump in now,’ I said, ready to make the Coyotes organization proud while noting that she’d just admitted her dad set up the interview, not her. Which actually made perfect sense somehow. ‘Because I’m dying to apologize to Ms Distefano.’

‘I already told you that sometimes people drop passes, so you don’t have to apologize,’ she said with the wave of a hand, and I couldn’t tell by her straight face if she was being a smartass or if she genuinely thought I was apologizing to her for the loss. ‘I mean, it was *right there* and definitely catchable, but Brown was also wearing you like a shirt so there probably should’ve been a flag.’

‘Oh, there *definitely* should’ve been a flag,’ I agreed as the audience laughed at her criticism, ‘but I’m actually talking about Carl’s behavior.’

‘You think Carl should’ve gotten a flag?’ she quipped.

More laughter. Again, who the fuck *was* this girl? It was like I was being roasted – and flirted with – by some random sports fan who had a lot of opinions.

I kind of loved it.

‘What I think is that the Coyotes organization would like to apologize for the actions of our *former* employee and assure you we don’t take fan safety lightly,’ I said, forcing myself not to fall into jokes because not only did I need to nail this PR shit, but this was genuinely important to me. ‘We value your attendance

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at our games and have zero tolerance for this type of behavior.'

'Um, thank you,' she said with a wrinkle between her brows.

'And we'd like for you – and your father, of course – to be guests in the owner's suite for this weekend's game.'

'Hot *damn*!' Tony said with a grin.

'That's really nice and I accept the apology,' she said, shaking her head and clearing her throat, 'but I think it's best if we watch from home this week.'

'Duff,' her dad said sharply. 'Are you nuts?'

'Are *you*?' she said, once again forgetting the audience when speaking to her father. 'This is nice and everything, but I'm not going back to that stadium until I know we're not going to get hit in the face with hot dogs and hooshed with beer. We're staying home until we clinch a spot in the playoffs and are no longer considered a jinx.'

'I'm sorry,' Kell interjected. 'Did you say you were hit in the face with hot dogs?'

'And what exactly is "hooshed"?' Kel asked with an amused smile.

'So you think we'll make the playoffs this year, huh?' I asked, turning in my seat to face Duffy. 'Even with my butterfingers?'

She rolled her eyes and said, 'Spare me the false humility after 1,263 receiving yards last season, Cunningham.'

'Oh, someone knows my stats by heart,' I teased, clueless as to whether she was a fan or a hater.

It was impossible to tell.

'Only because you were on my fantasy team,' she replied, but she was smiling.

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‘And how’d you do?’ I asked, not surprised in the least that she played.

‘I won the championship, of course,’ she said with a huge grin, looking cocky as hell.

I couldn’t stop myself from saying, ‘Well, you’re welcome, Distefano.’

‘Oh, thank you so very much, Man-Doing-the-Job-He’s-Paid-to-Do,’ she said, and even as she rolled her eyes, I could tell they were sparkling with mirth.

‘Seems like you should have to buy me dinner or something,’ I said with a laugh, ‘since I’m basically responsible for your win.’

‘Down, boy,’ she scoffed. ‘You were important, but it was actually the *kicker* who sealed my dub.’

‘But you don’t want to go to dinner with a kicker, do you? I mean, I don’t even think they eat meat.’

‘How do you know *I* do?’ she replied, tilting her head like she’d scored a point.

‘Oh, she eats meat,’ her father interjected. ‘The kid loves a T-bone so much that I have to remind her to take small bites.’

‘Really,’ I said, unable to look away from Duffy. She was watching me with a smartass grin. ‘The kid inhales her food, does she?’

‘Like a lion on a wildebeest,’ her dad replied.

‘Kill me now,’ she said with a helpless laugh, and I couldn’t stop myself from joining her.

‘Wait, wait, wait – back up,’ Kel said into the microphone, standing up and holding out her free hand, silencing the audience. She looked like she was about to break the story of the century when she looked at the

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crowd with wide eyes and said, ‘Connor Cunningham, did you just ask Duffy here out on a date?’

That made Duffy’s mouth close and her eyebrows knit together in confusion. I don’t think she meant to say it out loud, but as she looked at me, I heard her quietly mutter, ‘*Did* you?’

Holy shit.

I looked back at her and shrugged helplessly.

Did I?

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Duffy

‘You need to take shorter showers.’

‘Good morning to you, too,’ I said as I opened the fridge and reached for the orange juice. ‘And that was, like, five minutes.’

I shook the carton, and it was about a third full. I made a mental note to go grocery shopping soon.

‘Sixteen, actually,’ my dad said, not looking up from the newspaper.

‘You timed my shower?’

I mean, of course he did.

‘Hot water costs money.’

As much as I loved my dad, the memories of the apartment I’d lived in last year beckoned to me like the sentimental recollection of a past tropical vacation. College and the year of independent life that’d followed graduation felt like a glorious fever dream now.

But after my mom died, I wanted to move back home. My dad became a quiet recluse, leaving the house only to go to work every day. He stopped calling, stopped going to the Moose lodge, stopped watching football; it was like he’d checked out of the world. My brothers tried helping, which usually just devolved into arguing because they knew nothing of subtlety, but my mother had taught me

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something important about my dad – he needed to be needed.

So I might've started needing him a *lot*.

Because when I called and described the weird sound my car was making, he drove to my apartment and spent hours poring over the Honda. And when I mentioned I'd been too busy to eat, he took me to Tom Reid's Pub for a burger and we stayed to watch the entire Coyotes game that was playing on the mounted TVs.

And when it was time to renew my apartment lease and I called to whine about rent increases and my student loan debt, he had said, 'You're welcome home anytime, Duff, if you need to save up some money.'

So I moved back home.

My dad could rewire a thermostat and make any car – in any condition – start, but he was a helpless child when it came to living alone. Getting groceries, setting up automatic bill payments, remembering to take his blood pressure medicine; those were things he'd happily ignore if I wasn't there.

'Well,' he said, folding up the paper and crossing his arms as I took a sip of juice. 'In spite of the fact that you told Cunningham he sucks, the press thinks we're charming. Not a single word about the jinx or your violent behavior, just an article on how cute you two were.'

'Cute?' That was definitely *not* how I'd describe it. Embarrassing, awkward – those were much better adjectives.

But I wasn't going to let myself think about it. I had an entire workday in front of me and I couldn't waste another minute dying of mortification.

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