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The Love Wager

Happily Never After

Accidentally Amy

Maid for Each Other

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LYNN PAINTER



PENGUIN BOOKS

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

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.

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

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?'

'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*

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.

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

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.

‘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

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.

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.

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

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 holstered "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