



Sleeping With the Enemy (An Out of Bounds Novel)

By Tracy Solheim

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the *Out of Bounds* Novels

“Hot and heavy chemistry.”—*Smexy Books*

“The sexual tension was off the charts.”—*The Book Pushers*

About the Author

Tracy Solheim is the author of international bestselling contemporary romance novels featuring hot football players and the women who love them. In addition to writing novels, she is a regular columnist for *USA Today's* Happily Ever After Blog. She lives in Georgia with her husband, two nearly adult children, a Labrador retriever who thinks she's a cat and a horse named after her first novel: *Game On*. When Tracy's not at the barn with her daughter or working out with friends—i.e. lifting heavy bottles of wine—she's writing. Except for when she's reading, but that's just research.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One

Jay McManus had built his reputation—not to mention his fortune—in business by always keeping his composure and never letting his opponents see him sweat. That cool, ruthless demeanor had propelled him to the top of the dot-com industry before he'd even hit the ripe old age of thirty. It had also earned him enough begrudging respect and money to enable him to become, at thirty-five, the youngest owner of a National Football League team. Right now, though, he was beginning to sweat his decision to go public with his lucrative software company and sink his profits into the Baltimore Blaze.

“Let me get this straight—according to some obnoxious gossip blogger, the Sparks, our team's cheerleaders, are filing a lawsuit suing the team?” With two fingers, Jay pulled at the Windsor knot on the silk tie threatening to strangle him.

“As of this morning, there's only one cheerleader named, but it is a class action suit, which means any of the several hundred women who've cheered for the team during the past decade could potentially join in.” Hank Osbourne, the team's general manager, looked way too relaxed for having just dropped a bombshell into Jay's morning coffee. Instead of being the cool one, Jay wanted to strangle someone. “These types of cases are springing up throughout the league,” the GM said calmly.

Known as the Wizard of Oz throughout the NFL, Osbourne was a taciturn former military officer who'd been running the day-to-day operations of the Blaze football team for five years and was well respected among the players, the league, and other teams. Jay hadn't given a thought to replacing him when he'd taken over ownership from his godfather the preceding year. The guy had earned his pay and then some since Jay had arrived. As recently as this morning, the GM had been dealing with a kicker who'd been placed on suspension by the NFL after he'd violated the league's alcohol abuse policy one too many times.

Unfortunately for the player—and the team—the guy had just been enjoying a beer while on a family vacation. Not that it mattered to the league. Now, besides needing a kicker before the season opener this week, the team was apparently about to get hit with a sensational lawsuit by scantily clad women waving pom-poms.

This kind of bullshit just doesn't happen in Silicon Valley, Jay thought as he stood up from the round table in his large corner office at the Blaze practice facility. He began to pace methodically in front of the room's long picture windows, scattering the dust motes floating in the bright morning sunshine as he did so. "How many people know about this?"

"You know as well as I do, Jay, that this blogger is followed by every media outlet," Hank said. "I spoke with Asia Dupree in our media relations office before I came in here. She's already fielding calls from all the networks and major sports sites."

Jay swore under his breath. The *Girlfriends' Guide to the NFL* had been a pain in the league's ass for over two years now. Unfortunately, most of what the anonymous blogger reported was true. It was the sensationalistic spin she put in her posts that aggravated him—and every other person who'd found themselves mentioned on her site. Lately, it seemed, the Blaze had taken more than its fair share of hits.

"Not only that, but Asia says some women's groups have been calling, too."

He turned to face the other men in the room. "You can't be serious?"

Hank nodded solemnly as the others looked everywhere but at Jay. "Which means the commissioner will likely want to be kept apprised of what we're doing."

Which meant Jay's day had just gone from bad to worse. The NFL commissioner, Reggie Austin, thought Jay was too young and too inexperienced to own the Blaze, and wanted one of his cronies to take over the team instead. But he hadn't had the power or the votes to block Jay's ownership bid. So instead, the man took every opportunity to say "I told you so" to anyone who'd listen. Now, thanks to a cyberbully, this was apparently going to be another one of those opportunities.

"The cheerleader, what do we know about her?" Jay directed his question at Donovan Carter, the Blaze's chief security officer, who was seated at the opposite end of the table. A former college football star, the stocky African-American with the shaved head had once been an agent with NCIS before joining the Blaze staff.

Don scanned his tablet. "Not much yet. Her name is Jennifer Knowles. She was a student at the University of Maryland, but she's not enrolled there this semester. She cheered for the Blaze for two years beginning with the Super Bowl season year before last. The roster doesn't list her as a member now. I have a meeting with Nicki Ellis, the coordinator of the Sparks, at ten. Hopefully she can shed more light on this."

"What does she want?" Jay asked. Someone always wanted something from him. Especially women. Usually it was Jay the women wanted, and if they couldn't have him, they wanted money. Lots of money.

Hank released a long-suffering sigh. "We won't know for sure until Art gets ahold of the complaint being filed." He gestured to the man seated beside him: Art Langford, a tall man sporting a bad comb-over, who served as the team's general counsel. "We've got someone at the courthouse ready to grab a copy when it reaches the clerk." Hank steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. "In all likelihood, she's jumped on the bandwagon of other cheerleading squads who've filed similar suits against their teams. Most have claimed wage discrimination. That argument won't hold up in our house."

“Explain it to me,” Jay demanded. He made it a habit to know every detail of each business he owned, but it hadn’t occurred to him when he bought the team that he needed to familiarize himself with the operations of the Blaze cheerleaders. Jay was angry at himself for the slipup.

“The Sparks generate their own income in the form of special appearance fees, as well as through other merchandising such as calendars and posters. Last year that amounted to just over one point three million dollars.”

Jay’s personal assistant, Lincoln Harris, interrupted Hank’s explanation with a loud whistle before Jay locked gazes with the young African-American man. Linc quickly dropped his eyes back to his tablet.

“Most teams reabsorb that money into their own coffers, but we use it to ensure the young women are afforded a decent wage—keeping in mind this is only meant to be a part-time job.” Hank continued. “The women sign a contract outlining what they’re responsible for with regard to appearances, transportation, and practice time. All in all, the Sparks are among the highest paid in the league.”

“Yet, according to some malicious blogger, one of them is filing a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against this team.” Jay let out an impatient huff as he continued pacing. Something didn’t make sense.

The four other men in the room were silent. Art squirmed a bit in his chair.

Jay pinned the lawyer with his gaze. “Out with it.”

Art flinched slightly before pulling out a sheet of paper from a folder in front of him and handing it to Jay. “The suits pending haven’t all been strictly about wage issues.”

Jay scanned the sheet, his pulse squeezing at his neck despite his loosened tie. He lifted his eyes to the men assembled in the room. “For the love of Christ, tell me there is no one in this organization performing a *jiggle test* on the cheerleaders.” Somehow he managed to push the words out through his tight jaw.

“Whoa,” Linc said from beside Jay. “Is that really a job? Because if it is—”

Jay silenced his brash young assistant with a glare. Linc had been with him for four years. A three-time all-American wrestler from Duke, Linc had a sharp mind for software that usurped even his prowess on the mat. When Jay went public with his company, he’d intended to leave Linc in place to look after Jay’s remaining shares. But Linc was an athlete at heart and the opportunity to work in the NFL was every boy’s—and man’s—dream, so he’d convinced Jay to bring him along. Up until this moment, Jay hadn’t regretted that decision.

Linc gave him a sheepish look. “Not a joking matter. Got it.” He went back to his job of taking notes of the meeting.

“Not as long as I’m managing this team,” Hank said, his expression every bit as stern as Jay’s likely was. “That behavior will not be tolerated.”

Jay rubbed the back of his neck, feeling his tight muscles pinch beneath his dress shirt. He really needed a few rounds in the gym with a punching bag. But that would have to wait until this evening. “So how do we prepare and defend ourselves against this crazy case? I really don’t want the added negative publicity going into the season. Art, can we hand this off to the league? With so many other similar suits clogging up the courts, surely they have a standard defense prepared.”

“That’s the problem,” Art said. “Cheerleaders are not considered part of the NFL. Each group falls under the

purview of the individual team. Even if the league comes up with some standard policy now, it would be too little, too late. The teams are on their own to defend this.”

With a harsh sigh, Jay flipped the paper out of his hands and let it drift back toward the table. “Then do your best to make this go away, Art.” He picked up his coffee cup for a fortifying sip of caffeine, which he now wished was laced with Scotch. Art deferentially cleared his throat, causing Jay to nearly choke.

Jay arched an eyebrow at the lawyer. Art shot a pleading look at Hank. The coffee went down Jay’s throat painfully as he braced himself for what was yet to come, pretty damn sure that it was something he wasn’t going to like.

“Art isn’t exactly a trial attorney,” Hank said unapologetically. “He handles the player contracts, issues with sponsors and the unions, but whenever we’ve had a trial, we generally hire out.”

Swearing under his breath, Jay clunked his coffee mug back down on the table and resumed his pacing. “So we have a specious class action suit looming and—even if we can defend against the claims—I’m going to have to fork out a ransom for outside counsel?”

“Unfortunately, that’s the way these things work, Jay,” Hank said. “But I’ve already contacted our local counsel. Stuart and his firm have handled at least a dozen other court cases for the team with great success.”

Jay jerked to a halt. “*A dozen other court cases?* How come this is the first I’ve heard of them? Why weren’t they disclosed when I took over ownership last year?” If there was one thing Jay hated, it was being blindsided. He prided himself in having information long before his opponents—much of it information his business rivals wished he hadn’t uncovered.

It was Hank’s turn to arch an eyebrow. “I believe the words I used were ‘with great success.’ Stuart is discreet and very astute. He’s the one with eyes on the courthouse. In fact, if this case comes to fruition, Stuart already has a partial strategy mapped out, including a whopper of a lawyer to represent the team in court. His firm just merged with a big firm in Boston. The same one that employs Brody Janik’s sister. She just successfully defended a small Baltimore company in a major environmental class action suit. Between her trial success rate, her being a woman, and her connection to the team, Stuart thinks we’ll have an advantage in the court of public opinion, which is half the battle here.”

Jay moved to the large windows overlooking the Blaze campus, putting his back to the other men in the room because he wasn’t so sure he could maintain a stoic expression any longer.

“I’m sure you’ve met Bridgett, at the very least at Brody’s wedding this past spring,” Hank was saying. “By all accounts, she’s as brilliant in the courtroom as she is beautiful.”

The tension that had been torturing his neck and shoulders since the meeting began settled uncomfortably in another part of Jay’s anatomy as he thought of the “brilliant” and “beautiful” Bridgett Janik. She’d avoided him at her brother’s wedding, just as she had every time their paths had crossed in the past eighteen months. Always impeccably dressed in some expensive, figure-flattering outfit, the petite blonde with the light gray eyes hadn’t even graced him with a haughty look since he’d taken over ownership of the Blaze. It was as if he was invisible to the woman, while the short hairs at the back of his neck lifted *every freaking time* she entered the same room as him. Given his reaction to her, she couldn’t be as immune to Jay as she pretended. He allowed himself a moment to admire her ability to remain aloof—it was a skill he’d cultivated for years. But he needed to discredit her as the Blaze’s outside counsel. Because working with the alluring Bridgett Janik would be too much of a distraction for Jay, and he didn’t need any more distractions in his life.

His eyes were still focused on the leaves changing color on the trees surrounding the practice facility as he spoke. "I'm sure that's a conflict of interest." He tossed the suggestion out, hoping Hank and Art would latch on to it.

"Actually, no, it isn't," Art piped up. "There's no prohibition on a family member representing another family member in a courtroom. Although, it's not always the best idea. I can quote several cases where it hasn't been effective." Hank cleared his throat and Art continued. "In any case, Ms. Janik will be technically representing you as the owner of the Blaze. Her brother's association with the team is irrelevant."

Great, Jay thought to himself, the guy can't try a case in court, but he knows all the intricacies of conflicts of interest.

"With any luck," Hank pointed out, "we won't need outside attorneys, but I think Stuart's plan is a good one. Having Bridgett in our corner will certainly give us some credibility with both men and women."

Jay hoped Hank was right, that this case would die out before the Blaze became the butt of jokes by late-night talk show hosts. More important, he hoped it would settle quickly so that he'd be able to keep his distance from Brody Janik's sister.

"Stuart is sending his team over this afternoon, as soon as they go over the court documents," Hank went on to say. "In the meantime, let's let Don see what he can find out about the Knowles girl. After that, we can come up with a defensive game plan."

He listened as the other men filed out of his office. All the while, Jay was formulating his own game plan on how to ensure Bridgett Janik would quickly recuse herself from the case.

• • •

The teakettle whistled with annoyance while Bridgett Janik carefully stirred the ingredients for chai tea into her cup. She tucked the cell phone between her ear and her shoulder and reached for the shrieking kettle.

"I'm sorry, Stuart, but I thought you actually said cheerleaders for a minute there." Bridgett stirred her tea before blowing carefully over the rim.

"That's because I did say cheerleaders, Buffy," the senior partner for her firm's Baltimore office, Stuart Johnson, replied on the other end of the phone. He'd dubbed her "Buffy the Class Action Slayer" two years ago when she'd persuaded the judge to quash half the designated class in a large environmental case weeks before the plaintiffs had even issued subpoenas. "Good to know you didn't leave your hearing over in Italy with all your hard-earned money. How was the shopping spree, anyway?"

Bridgett recognized a redirect when she heard one. And Stuart's were always among the best. It was what made him such a successful trial attorney.

"My trip to Italy was wonderful, Stuart. I slept until noon. I ate bread and pasta and I shopped like I had the money to spend. The best vacation a girl could want after eighteen months on a case. But you already know this because your wife was there for part of my vacation." Elizabeth, her boss's wife, had a bit of a shoe fetish. When Bridgett had mentioned she was headed off for a shopping vacation on the Italian coast, the older woman had looked so enthralled that Bridgett had invited her along. She hadn't minded the company because it gave her an excuse not to invite one of her interfering sisters. "Get back to the subject of stupid cheerleaders, Stuart."

“You say *cheerleader* as though it’s dirty somehow.” Stuart’s tone was teasing. “Naughty even.” He laughed at his words, and Bridgett let out an exasperated sigh as she carried her tea over to the large window in the living room of her condo in Boston’s trendy Back Bay area. Sunlight sparkled off the dew still glistening on the rooftops in the early autumn morning. “What have you got against cheerleaders anyway?” he asked.

Bridgett blew on her tea. “Nothing.”

“No, your tone says otherwise. Don’t tell me you always wanted to be a cheerleader but you just weren’t chirpy enough?”

“Funny.” She took a sip, letting the chai mingle on her tongue. The Janik girls had all been cheerleaders—all except for Bridgett. She’d tried out, begging her friend Jessica to audition as well. Given that two of her sisters had preceded her on the squad, Bridgett figured she’d be a sure thing. After all, she had the looks and the requisite pom-poms to fill out the uniform. Jessica—the one she’d had to coax into trying out—got picked instead. Stuart was correct. It was the chirpiness. The cheer sponsor and the two captains thought Bridgett was too serious to be an effective cheerleader. Well, she was a serious person. A girl didn’t get into Harvard without being one.

Apparently, the decades-old slight went deeper than Bridgett remembered, judging by her reaction this morning. She’d have to examine that little character flaw later, though. “Focus, Stuart. You said we’re taking on a case involving cheerleaders. Can you give me more detail than that, please?”

Stuart laughed. “Usually you only get snippy when I mention *conscious uncoupling*. I’ll have to add *cheerleader* to the list of words that make Bridgett lose her practiced cool.”

Bridgett was glad Stuart couldn’t see her bristle at the phrase *conscious uncoupling*. “Hey, Jimmy Fallon, do you want to call me back after you get finished with your monologue?”

He laughed again before sobering up. “I didn’t say we were representing the cheerleaders. We get to be the bad guys and defend the party they are suing.”

Now, that was more like it. Bridgett took another sip of tea as she considered the possibility of being retained by a school or a university against a bunch of girls in short skirts and ridiculous hair bows. “Oh, please tell me we get to defend against a group of helicopter parents who want their daughters to all win the first-place trophy?”

That got another laugh out of Stuart. “That tune will change when it’s your little darling sobbing that some myopic judge robbed her of the blue ribbon.”

Bridgett paused with her teacup poised at her lips. She wondered if Stuart was right. But then, she’d never know, would she? Somehow she doubted that, even if she had a child, she’d want him or her not to think they had to be winners all the time. How would that prepare them for life? Life could be cruel. Bridgett knew that firsthand. There was no use sugarcoating it. The point was moot, however, and Bridgett swallowed her tea around the lump in her throat.

“Actually, these are NFL cheerleaders,” Stuart explained.

“The NFL has cheerleaders?” Of course there were the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. They were practically icons. But, Bridgett wondered, did the other teams have actual cheerleaders? She’d never really noticed.

Stuart was silent for a moment on the other end of the line. “You can’t be serious. Don’t you go to your

brother's football games?"

Bridgett's younger brother, the baby of the Janik family, was Brody Janik, a Pro Bowl tight end for the Baltimore Blaze and certified heartthrob to women around the globe. He was as much of an icon as the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. In fact, her brother's new sister-in-law had once been on the Dallas squad. "Sure I go to his games, but I don't go to watch the cheerleaders." She mainly went out of family obligation and because Brody was the one member of the Janik clan who understood Bridgett for who she was. The rest of the Janiks wanted to make her over to be more like them: settled. "I didn't think the Blaze had cheerleaders."

"They do," Stuart said just as an ominous feeling settled in the pit of Bridgett's stomach. "And they're suing team management for alleged workplace violations."

"Oh no," Bridgett whispered.

"Oh yes," Stuart said. "And the Blaze have hired us to handle their defense. And you, Buffy, are the perfect person to take the lead. Not only are you a woman—although it would have helped tremendously if you'd been a cheerleader at one time—but you're also Brody Janik's sister. Score one for us in the headlines when this goes public later today."

With a less than steady hand, Bridgett set her tea down on the antique marble side table she'd bought in Florence a few years back. Stuart wanted her to defend the Baltimore Blaze in a class action suit? Against cheerleaders? If that wasn't too insulting, she factored in the team's new owner: Jay McManus. The man was insufferable, arrogant, obscenely wealthy, and sex on a stick. And he made her stomach crawl every time she got within fifty feet of him. She did everything she could to keep her distance from the man at all costs. Working for him on his defense would violate her own personal restraining order and Bridgett couldn't go there.

"I'm sure it's a conflict of interest somehow," she said, adding a silent prayer after the words left her mouth.

"Come on, Bridgett. Second year law school. There's no conflict here even if the Sparks were suing your brother directly."

Bridgett softly banged her head against the warm window, scaring a pigeon hanging out on the other side. Of course Stuart would have thought this through. He didn't make a move without carefully considering all the options. She tried another tactic. "I don't know. I've been in Baltimore for over two years on the Pressler case. I'd like to hang out close to home for my next case."

"Hang out at home? Bridgett, before you left for Italy, you begged me to staff you on a case that was anywhere BUT Boston. Remember the nagging family whose radar you are trying to fly under? Brody's been married for six months. You're the only single one left. They're gunning for you, Buffy. But hey, if you want to deal with that, I've got an open-and-shut discrimination case filed by some fast-food workers in Worcester you can first-chair."

There's no such thing as an open-and-shut case that involved discrimination. With another headbang against the window, she cursed her entire family, including her not-so-favorite brother, Brody, and her sweet old Grandpa Gus, who had conspired together to marry her off to the first available orthodontist they could find. She'd be a sitting duck if she stayed in Boston.

"How long?" she said, her tone resigned.

“That’s the can-do spirit,” Stuart said. “I won’t know the particulars until we pick up the filing at the courthouse. I sent Dan over there to get it.”

Bridgett sighed. Dan Lewis had been her associate on the Pressler case. At least he was a good lawyer.

“That blogger who writes the *Girlfriends’ Guide to the NFL* made a vague reference to the case late last night—that’s what put it on Hank Osbourne’s radar. Since then, the media have run with it.” Stuart’s chuckle sounded amazed and annoyed at the same time. “Believe it or not, several women’s groups have already announced plans for protests of this Sunday’s Blaze game.”

Bridgett knew of the blogger. Whoever was behind the poison pen—or in this case, keyboard—had tortured her brother, Brody, last season, nearly causing him to lose his career and the woman he loved.

“I’ve set up a meeting for three this afternoon at the Blaze headquarters. Hank will be waiting for you. And, Bridgett, I don’t have to tell you what a client as wealthy as Jay McManus could do for this law firm—not to mention your partner earning statements.”

“Wait, you said Hank will be waiting for *me*. Just where exactly will you be?”

“On speakerphone. I’ve got to be in Manhattan to take care another of those conscious-uncoupling cases you love so much. But I’ll meet you back at the Baltimore office tonight and we can discuss strategy. Toni has you on the eleven o’clock flight, so you might want to pack those gorgeous Burberry bags of yours and hustle to the airport.”

As she hung up the phone, Bridgett gave the window another thump with her forehead. Her options were limited, really. She could stay in Boston and suffer her family’s futile attempts at matchmaking or head to Baltimore, where a meeting with the man she’d come to know as the Antichrist awaited her. Every nerve ending in her body screamed that she’d just made the absolute wrong choice.

Two

Dan was waiting for Bridgett at the airport. Instead of heading to the office, they took a detour to G&M restaurant for a working lunch.

“You know me too well, Dan,” Bridgett said as their server placed a fresh crab cake in front of her.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be happy to be back in Charm City, so I thought I’d sweeten the day with your favorite lunch,” Dan said with a laugh.

“Don’t worry. Just because I might be here for a few months doesn’t mean I’ll rescind my offer; my Blaze tickets are still yours to use this season,” she told him. “You don’t have to stuff me with food.” She took a moment to savor the delicious lump crabmeat. “Umm. These are so good, I might be inclined to ask Brody for a sideline pass for you this weekend, though.”

Dan had played college football at the University of Delaware and still loved everything about the game. Bridgett had never understood why grown men acted like giddy little boys when they got around professional athletes. Even smart men like Dan fawned over her brother, Brody, as though he were the crown prince of pizza and beer.

“Actually, just between you and me, I’m hoping the exposure to Jay McManus will open a few more doors

than just the sidelines.” Dan took a sip of his drink while Bridgett’s enjoyment of one of her favorite foods evaporated with the mention of the Antichrist’s name.

Dan misinterpreted her sigh as displeasure with him. “Oh, hey, I’m going to give everything I have to this case; don’t get me wrong. And I love working for the firm. It’s just always been my dream to work in the NFL somehow. Did you know the general counsel for the Blaze isn’t even a trial attorney? If I play my cards right, maybe they’ll place us on retainer and I can fulfill two dreams at the same time.”

Bridgett waved him off. “I get it. Trust me, you’ll have Stuart’s blessing, not to mention a big fat bonus, if you can pull that one off.” She didn’t mention that she’d rather balloon up two dress sizes before working with a football team—particularly one owned by Jay McManus. “Tell me what you’ve got so far. What was in the filing?”

Dan pulled the folder out from his briefcase. “It’s got all the earmarks of the other cases floating around the NFL: wage discrimination, lack of compensation for appearances, character degradation. Yada, yada. It looks like this woman is out for some publicity and maybe a little blood, too. She’s also accusing the team of sexual harassment.”

She wilted a little in her seat. Stuart hadn’t been shortsighted in naming her as lead attorney. A woman defending against a sexual harassment case was a common legal tactic, but it also put Bridgett in an extremely untenable position. The defense was almost always built on discrediting the supposed victim and her perception of the harassment. She never shrank down from these cases, but she didn’t enjoy them either.

“I know I’m going to hate the answer either way, but please tell me there’s something substantive to her case.”

“The case cites some incidents at the annual calendar photo shoot in St. Barts this summer. The one named plaintiff claims there wasn’t enough security in place and that the women were harassed by sponsors, fans, and—wait for it—a couple of players who also happened to be at the resort.”

Bridgett released an exasperated sigh. “Imagine that, players hooking up with cheerleaders.”

“Actually, it’s in their contract—the cheerleaders’, that is—that they’re not allowed to fraternize with players, coaches, or any of the staff.”

“Is it in the players’ contracts that they can’t date the cheerleaders?”

Dan looked a little stumped at her question. “Uh, I don’t know. But I can check.”

“Don’t bother. I’m pretty sure I know the answer to that one is a big fat no.”

He shrugged. “Most of the girls who sign up for this gig are dancers or aspiring models. I doubt any of them really want to marry an NFL player.”

Bridgett arched an eyebrow at him. “At least until they see the number of zeros in the guy’s bank account.”

“All the same, if this woman can substantiate the sexual harassment charges, it’s gonna make headlines.”

“Apparently it’s already gotten the attention of women’s rights activists.” Bridgett picked at the rest of her lunch. “What do we know about this woman?”

“Not much yet. I’m hoping the team will have something for us later today, although management of the

cheerleaders is actually subcontracted out, so most of the information will come from a third party.”

“Wow, and I thought environmental law was complicated,” she said, shaking her head. On the positive side, that little tidbit meant she likely wouldn’t have to deal with the Antichrist.

Two hours later, she made her way to the Blaze practice facility. Bridgett was glad it was Tuesday and most of the team had the day off. She’d always tried to maintain some anonymity within her large, nosy family and she wasn’t sure how she felt about invading her brother’s playhouse, as it were. *Stop kidding yourself.* Her anxiety about being in the Blaze headquarters had nothing to do with Brody and everything to do with seeing Jay McManus again.

Blaze General Manager Hank Osbourne greeted her with a smile and a friendly handshake as he led Bridgett, Dan, Scott Turner, the firm’s investigator, and a paralegal, Maureen, toward the large conference room at the corner of the building. Maureen had to be prodded a bit as she openly gaped at the poster-sized pictures of Brody and his teammates that lined the hallways.

“We’re glad to have another Janik on our team, Bridgett,” Hank said as he pulled out a chair for her across from a wall of windows looking out over the outdoor practice facility. The view had even Scott and Dan gaping now. “Please, everyone help yourself to some refreshments and I’ll grab Jay so we can get the meeting started.”

An assortment of candies, fruits, and drinks was laid out on a counter next to the conference table. Dan and Scott each grabbed a can of soda while Maureen busied herself setting up her stenotype machine in the corner of the room. Bridgett removed the jacket of her pewter Versace suit and draped it carefully over a chair before taking her seat. She doubted she could eat anything because her stomach was a knot of nerves. Fiddling with the sleeves of her silk blouse, she tried to calm herself down. She hadn’t felt this jumpy since her first case out of law school. Stuart was lucky he was participating via a conference call because Bridgett thought she just might strangle him if he walked into the room right now.

Her hands balled into fists at the tall, dark-haired man who did enter the room, however. Looking immaculate in Hugo Boss—*of course*—Jay McManus greeted everyone assembled with a cursory nod before taking a seat at the head of the table. He punched a button on the phone box that connected him with Bridgett’s boss.

He and Stuart carried on with their conversation as if the others weren’t in the room. That suited Bridgett just fine. She kept her eyes focused on her notes in an effort to avoid the commanding aura that Jay put out, one that made all of her nerve endings tingle. Eventually, Hank and Scott were brought in to discuss how they would try to discredit the claims being made against the team.

“We haven’t been able to locate Ms. Knowles,” Hank said. “According to her attorney, she’s returned to her parents’ home in Virginia Beach. Donovan Carter spoke to the manager for the Sparks today and she said that, by all accounts, the young woman had been happy on the squad. Ms. Knowles is trying to break into modeling, so she frequently volunteered for the additional appearances.”

“Was the manager with the squad for the calendar photo shoot?” Bridgett spoke for the first time since entering the room, keeping her gaze on Hank.

“I believe she was, yes,” Hank replied. “The trip is one of the perks to being on the Sparks. The entire squad goes, all expenses paid.”

“We really have no way of knowing whether the manager was a party to the alleged events of that week or

not, then. This is going to be one of those cases that boils down to the credibility of *all* the witnesses.” She tilted her head toward Scott, who sat beside her. “I’d like our investigator to be able to speak with the manager as well, if that’s all right.”

Hank nodded. “Of course. I’m sure Don would appreciate the help.”

“What do we know about the opposing lawyer?” Jay’s question seemed to be addressed to her and there was nothing Bridgett could do except meet his brilliant blue eyes. He leveled a hard stare at her and she had to work to keep from squirming. Jay McManus took no prisoners—especially when it came to his reputation. She knew this firsthand. But his words couldn’t affect her anymore. All she needed to do was tell her heart the same thing.

“She’s young and eager to make a name for herself,” she said. “I’ve no doubt she fed the information about the case directly to the blogger somehow. The *Girlfriends’ Guide to the NFL* has garnered some serious power in mobilizing public opinion, so it doesn’t surprise me that opposing counsel would make use of such a broad platform.”

Jay eyed her shrewdly. “I still have to wonder what the blogger gets from all this.”

“That makes two of us.” Hank sat forward in his chair. “That blogger has been a nuisance to this team for two years now. If nothing else, maybe we can compel this attorney to tell us who it is.”

“First things, first,” Stuart said from the comfort of his seat on an Amtrak train barreling toward Baltimore. “Let’s get these charges to go away and then we can continue your quest to unmask the mystery blogger.”

A discussion of logistics followed before the meeting finally broke up. Bridgett blew out a slow breath, releasing some of the tension that had been holding her body in check for the past hour. She was a professional, a partner in a law firm, for crying out loud. She could do this. Hank was saying something to Scott about introducing him to the team’s security chief, Donovan Carter, while Bridgett shoved her tablet into her red Marc Jacobs messenger bag and reached for her suit jacket. If she was lucky, she could get to her car without having to make any additional eye contact with the Antichrist.

“It’s good to see you, Bridgett. Let’s get the girls together for a glass of wine while you’re in town.” Carly Devlin, Hank’s assistant, gave her a brief wave from the doorway where she intercepted the team’s GM with another apparent pressing problem. Bridgett nodded back. “The girls” she spoke of would be Carly, who was not only Hank’s assistant but the wife of the Baltimore Blaze quarterback Shane Devlin; Julianne Connelly, wife of the team’s defensive captain, Will Connelly; and Shay Janik, Bridgett’s new sister-in-law. While Bridgett considered all the women friends, even the lure of a good glass of pinot grigio couldn’t entice her to share an evening with these ladies. Not when all of them would spend the entire time talking about babies.

The familiar lump in her throat that always accompanied the thought of babies and children was painful to gulp down, but Bridgett had become a master of enduring the pain. She’d had to be. Babies were not in her future. Her career was her life. The decision had been made for her years earlier and Bridgett refused to have any regrets about it.

Dan and Maureen were nearly out the door when the Antichrist deigned to speak to her.

“Miss Janik, a word.”

It wasn’t a request as much as it was a command. Jay McManus was used to his minions heeding his orders. Too bad she wasn’t one of those minions. Bridgett had every intention of ignoring his summons and

following the rest of her staff out of the door when he hit her with a rusty weapon from his arsenal.

“Please, Bridgett.”

She wasn't sure which stunned her more: his uttering the word *please* or her name rolling so easily off his tongue, as though it hadn't been years since he'd spoken to her. Either way, her body froze before she could safely clear the room. Silently cursing her dumb luck for insisting on bringing her own rental car to the meeting, she watched as Dan and Maureen, oblivious to her discomfort, made their way to the elevator. A moment later, Jay closed the door, cutting off her view and her escape route.

Sighing, she dropped her jacket and bag into one of the conference room chairs. If she was going to serve as part of his legal team, it was inevitable that she'd have to carry on a conversation with the man at some point. It was probably best to get everything out in the open sooner rather than later. “That's funny. I didn't think you knew the word *please*.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Or maybe it's just ‘I'm sorry’ that gets caught in your throat.”

He leaned against the door, mimicking her defensive pose as one corner of his mouth lifted slightly, giving her a glimpse of the dimple she'd once loved to trace with her finger and her tongue. She dragged in a rough breath as parts of her body went on alert thinking about not only that dimple but the ones on his very fine ass, too. *Don't go there*. With the futile hope of calming the tremors deep in her belly, she practiced one of her favorite courtroom tricks of looking through the witness.

It didn't work.

Even all these years later, Jay McManus was beautiful. Perhaps more so now that he'd matured. He was definitely sexier. Gone was the tall, loose-limbed, carefree boy with the lazy smile; the guy who always seemed to have her hand in his. The man in his place was now chiseled to perfection, his designer suit barely containing the athletic body that likely rivaled many of the players whose paychecks he signed. His smile was hidden behind a carefully crafted veneer of aloof arrogance. But his blue eyes were nearly her undoing. She remembered the fierce determination reflected in them when he'd been inside of her, when he'd been talking about being with her forever. And then again when he'd left her. That fierceness was in them now, but she refused to be cowed by this man. Not ever again.

“That's exactly the reason we need to have this conversation,” he said, that silky smooth voice of his making her insides sit up and take notice. “I need to know if you're professional enough to handle this situation.”

Her insides were definitely taking notice now, but not in the same way. The anger and hurt that he'd left with her more than a decade ago roared up her spine, practically jerking her shoulders back and her chin up. “That naïve starry-eyed girl you left at an Italian airport doesn't exist anymore. I won't have a problem handling this case. Or my interactions with you.” She didn't need to worry about any lingering attraction for this man. His arrogance had seen to that. Bridgett was relieved to be over him. As long as she ignored the small part of her that was weeping right now.

• • •

Jay almost believed her. The key word being *almost*. After years apart, they had inadvertently been thrown together when he'd bought the team her brother played for. She'd been to games, including the Super Bowl, but on every occasion had avoided him like the plague. He'd watch her as she cheered Brody on, safe in the bosom of the large, boisterous Janik family, all the while maintaining her distance, keeping that poised, polished smile solidly on her face as if they'd never been acquainted, much less lovers.

Bridgett was wearing that cool look now. The one that screamed she was untouchable, but made him want to touch her. *Thoroughly*. To familiarize himself again with the soft planes of her body. She was still petite, her frame a little thinner—more brittle—than it had been that summer, when her curves had been filled out with good food and even better wine. Her blond hair no longer hung free down her back, yet his fingers itched to twine through it anyway. Jay couldn't complain about how she wore it now, though. The sleek style only enhanced the classic beauty of her pert chin and gray eyes—eyes that looked like sterling silver when framed by her long, dark lashes. She'd dressed in her uniform of a hip-hugging pencil skirt and a silk blouse that hardly compared to the peekaboo tank tops and shorts she'd favored years ago, yet still the outfit made her look sexy as hell.

"Perhaps it's you who has the problem," she was saying, and Jay suddenly wished her lips were doing something a lot more fun than talking. "If that's the situation, you shouldn't have asked Stuart to put me on the case."

"I didn't."

The truth stung her. He watched—not quite as satisfied as he ought to be—as she flinched slightly at his words. Her reaction was telling. She'd thought he had wanted to work with her. The knowledge spurred him on.

"It was Stuart's suggestion." He took a step toward her and she countered with a step back. He took another step and she was suddenly pressed up against the conference table. "I didn't think you'd want me to tell your boss all the reasons that was the mother of bad ideas." He closed the gap between them, his hips practically pinning her in place.

"Wow, chivalry and the word *please*. This is certainly a red-letter day." She jerked her chin up. "Get to the point, Jay. I have to get back to the office."

Jay had to admire her backbone. The sweet girl he once loved never would have stood up to him like this. She was the champion of the little guy and she wouldn't have appreciated—or put up with—his bullying. But she'd changed. She'd become more like him. The thought both saddened him and aroused him at the same time. Glancing down, he had a bird's-eye view down her silk blouse, and he saw he wasn't the only one aroused.

Maybe it was this tactic that was the mother of bad ideas. But he had to find out. If she was in fact over him, he'd bury his own lust deep inside and let her take the helm defending him against these ridiculous charges. Stuart was right; it was a brilliant move that made the most sense. But if she reacted to him, he was counting on her turning tail and running. It was what she did, after all. He'd find another lawyer and beat the trumped-up charges, because losing was not what Jay McManus did.

Reaching up, he traced his thumb along the tender skin beneath her jaw. "I'm just wondering why you didn't immediately recuse yourself, Bridgett."

She shivered beneath his touch but her voice was steady. "Why bother? There's nothing between us any longer. I can certainly defend my brother's team against the baseless allegations."

"It's not your brother's team. It's my team. Your brother works for me."

"How naïve I must have been not to notice the arrogant autocrat that lurked beneath your shiny surface."

His thumb moved over her full bottom lip. "That's because you were too busy putting your hands and mouth

all over my shiny surface.”

Anger flashed in those gorgeous eyes of hers as a soft flush spread over her cheeks. “My hands—not to mention the rest of me—have learned self-control.”

“Have they?” His mouth drifted lower and he swore he could taste her.

“Don’t even think about kissing me,” she hissed as her fisted hands made contact with his chest.

“Babe, I’ve done nothing but think about kissing you ever since I saw you again,” he admitted before his brain could stop the words from escaping.

“Well, I haven’t.” She gave his chest a shove, but her pulse had ratcheted up beneath his thumb, and her hips arched toward his. Jay was having difficulty keeping his body in check and his head spun as he inhaled the familiar scent of her. He needed to rethink his strategy here, but his brain didn’t seem to be in control any longer. His lips replaced his thumb along her jaw and he finally—*finally*—tasted her. That and the sound of her sighing his name were his undoing. Jay had to know if she still had any power over him. Or if he could let her go again.

His lips found hers and for the first time in years, Jay’s brain shut down. All he could think about was sinking deeper into Bridgett and letting her warm, silky mouth wash over him. A soft moan rose from her chest just as her lips parted, and Jay wasted no time. Dragging one hand through her hair, he shifted her head to give himself greater access to her mouth, plundering deeply with his tongue, groaning when her own swept against it. His other hand wrapped around her sweet ass, pulling her in against the part of his body that was suddenly doing all the negotiating.

Even more surprising, she was kissing him back. Bridgett released her fingers from their fists and slid them up his chest and over his shoulders as her hips rolled against his restlessly. Jay had his answer. He needed to end this little experiment before it got out of hand. And he would. In a minute. After he savored her mouth a little longer. A soft keening sound escaped the back of her throat and something snapped inside Jay. He kissed her as if he still had the right to, delving into her mouth and taking what was no longer his.

He nudged her back against the conference table with every intention of taking her there. Fortunately, Bridgett was right about learning a little self-control over the years. With a sudden ferocity, she broke their kiss. They both stood there a moment, avoiding each other’s eyes as they tried to tamp down their heavy breathing. This time he took a gentlemanly step back when she pushed at him. Without looking up she snatched her obnoxious red bag and her jacket off the chair and walked, albeit a little unsteadily, toward the conference room door.

“I’ll call Stuart and recuse myself,” she said, her back to him and her hand poised on the doorknob. “Just . . .” He heard her swallow harshly. “Just stay out of my life. I’m better without you.”

She didn’t wait for his acknowledgment or his agreement before she purposefully closed the door behind her. Good thing, because Jay’s plans had changed dramatically. No way was he going to stay out of her life now. Not after having her in his arms again, after tasting her once more. Jay made few mistakes, but when he did, he never made the same one twice. He’d let Bridgett slip out of his life once before. That wasn’t going to happen a second time. Only this time, he wouldn’t make the stupid mistake of letting her have his heart.

He punched a button on the intercom. “Linc, call Stuart Johnson and tell him if Bridgett Janik isn’t the lead attorney on our case, I’ll find another firm to represent us.”

It was a gamble, but he knew Stuart wanted the team's business. Jay also knew he wanted Bridgett. Badly.

Three

"Can I say that I truly hate whoever is behind that stupid blog?" Shay Janik reached across the kitchen counter and poured a generous serving of pinot grigio into Bridgett's wineglass. "I honestly don't get what her motivation is."

Coming up behind his wife, Brody Janik wrapped his long arms around her before bending his head down to nuzzle her neck. "Wasn't it your theory that the blogger might not be a she at all, Shannon?" he asked.

Bridgett tried in vain to ignore her brother's PDA. She was beginning to regret her decision to stop by his house, but Carly had already alerted Shay that Bridgett was back in Baltimore. Her sister-in-law had wasted no time texting and inviting her to dinner. Besides, Shay, a PhD in nutrition, was a genius in the kitchen. Brody suffered from reactive hypoglycemia, a condition that affected his blood sugar, but the meals Shay prepared for him were not only incredibly healthy, but delicious, as well. After a month in Italy, Bridgett figured having Shay prepare her meals might be the one upside to being back in Baltimore.

"I did say that, yes." Shay swatted Brody away and began furiously julienning carrots. "But the posts are just too bitchy to be a man. And God help her if I ever find out who she is." Her whiskey eyes narrowed as she concentrated on her task.

Brody carefully edged away from the counter, his trademark grin lighting up his face. "Don't mess with Texas." He winked at Bridgett as he took a seat on the stool next to hers. "Call me crazy, but this is one time I'm glad for her latest installment."

Shay froze with the knife poised in midair. Both women stared at him. Brody shrugged before leaning over to kiss Bridgett on the head. "I missed you. If her nasty words are the reason you're back in Baltimore, then I'm glad." He took a swig from his bottle of water. "Of course, for all we know, *you* could be the blogger and you set this all up just to get away from the wicked wedding planners in Boston."

With an exasperated sigh, Shay shook her head at her husband and went back to cutting carrots as Brody laughed beside Bridgett.

"I guess this makes you unofficially part of the Blaze team," he continued, snatching a sliver of carrot from the cutting board. Bridgett took a fortifying gulp of wine. When she'd arrived back at the office, Stuart had been adamant that he didn't want to listen to any reasons for her recusal from the case. That was probably a good thing, because Bridgett had no idea how she was going to explain herself to her boss.

I just had my tongue down our client's throat? I almost let him take me on the conference room table? Hell, I wanted him to take me. Or, I gave him my heart years ago and he destroyed it?

Apparently, the Antichrist had gotten to Stuart first because he'd threatened to fire the firm if Bridgett didn't remain on the Blaze defense team. His logic made no sense. Jay knew as well as she did that they couldn't work together. Their little make-out session in the conference room proved they were still as combustible as oil to a flame. Not to mention the fact that neither one trusted the other. She'd trusted him once. Never again. Of course, Jay believed she was the one who'd betrayed him. Somehow, that part hurt the most.

Her brother's lightning-fast hand pilfered another carrot, distracting her from her painful thoughts. "I'd be careful there, Brody," Bridgett warned. "If Shay slices off your finger, you might have to actually grow up

and get a real job.”

Brody smiled fondly at his wife. “That threat doesn’t scare me as much as it used to. But since McManus would likely castrate me in court for not fulfilling my end of a contract, I’ll be a good boy and wait until Shannon puts the knife down.”

Shay finished slicing up the vegetables, handing Brody the remainder of the carrot before eyeing Bridgett shrewdly. “Will you be working directly with Mr. McManus, Bridgett?”

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