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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 the youngest owner of a National Football League team at thirty-five. 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 apparently was 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 Girlfriend's Guide to the NFL had been a pain in the league's ass for over two years now. Unfortunately, most of what she reported was true. It was the sensationalistic spin she put in her blogs that aggravated him—and every other person who'd found themselves mentioned on her blog. Lately, it seemed, the Blaze had taken more than its fair share of hits from the anonymous blogger.

"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 means 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, instead wanting one of his cronies to take over the team. 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 cyber bully, this, apparently, was 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 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 onto 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 a hold 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. 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 slip-up.

“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 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 meant to be only 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 multi-million 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’s sharp mind for software 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.” And 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 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 that 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 opponent—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 crossed the past eighteen months. Always impeccably dressed in some expensive, figure flattering outfit, the petite blonde with the light grey 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 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 importantly, 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.