

The following attachment is an excerpt from *Balancing Act* by Jill Blake, intended for promotional/review use only.

Copyright © 2015 by Jill Blake

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in any form, in whole or in part, without express written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This is a work of fiction. All characters and other entities appearing in this work are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, dead or alive, or other real-life entities, past or present, is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

“Heard your dad’s company is getting sued.”

Zach dove for the ball, slamming his shoulder against the floor. “What?”

Mike gave him a hand up. “I saw the CNS dinger on my way over. You didn’t know?”

Zach scowled. As in-house counsel for Stewart & Landry LLC, it was his job to know. That’s why he regularly monitored the Courthouse News Service alerts. It figured this would happen the one day he headed out the door without checking his email.

He swiped an arm across his sweaty forehead and readjusted his grip on the racquet. “Your serve.”

Another minute passed in silence, punctuated by grunts and the slap of the ball against polyurethaned hardwood and tempered glass.

“So who’s the plaintiff?” Zach asked when the volley ended.

Mike shrugged. “Some woman claiming CEQA violations.”

No surprise there. The California Environmental Quality Act was the bane of every developer’s existence, and a cash cow for any shady real estate lawyer who could find a tree-hugger willing to take up the cause.

“Damn leeches,” he muttered.

“What’s that?”

“You’d think people would be grateful that we’re infusing life into a sluggish economy.” He struck the ball with such force that it rebounded off the back wall and would have hit Mike if he

hadn't jumped out of the way. "If not for us redeveloping the area, they'd have nothing but urban blight on their hands. Some of those buildings are barely standing, with so many code violations they should have been razed decades ago."

"Hey, don't kill the messenger. If you want to be angry, take it out on the plaintiff's attorney."

"And who's that?"

"Judge MacDowell's daughter. Alice? Anna? Something with an A."

Zach drew up short. "Angie?"

"Angela. That's it. Pretty hot commodity in real estate law, from what I hear."

"Yeah." Zach forced his attention back to the game.

"Pretty hot in all respects, come to think of it." Mike grinned. "The ass on that babe..."

Zach gritted his teeth. "Grow up, would you?"

"Oh, please. Like you haven't thought the same thing?"

"Not about her."

"What, are you blind?"

"No. But her sister's a friend of the family."

Mike blinked. "Then what's she doing suing you?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure as hell going to find out."

~

The raised voices outside her office gave Angie a few seconds' warning before the door burst open and a glowering Zachary Stewart stormed in.

“What is this crap?” He flung a large manila envelope on her desk.

“Hello, Zach.” She got up slowly. “I see the process server found you.”

“What the hell are you trying to pull here?”

Angie took her time responding. It wasn't every day that six feet of ripped, fire-breathing male invaded her office. Her gaze slid down the broad shoulders and lean waist. *Oh, my.* The things he did for a navy pinstriped suit and oxford shirt should be illegal.

By the time she'd worked her way back up to meet his gaze, she could almost feel the anger rolling off of him in waves.

“You seem a little hot under the collar, Zach. Would you like an ice water to help you cool down?”

His blue eyes narrowed. “Knowing you, that water would likely get spilled ‘accidentally on purpose’ down my suit. No thanks.”

“You overestimate my aggressive tendencies.”

“I don't think so. I still remember how you negotiated your sister's settlement. You could teach a Doberman a thing or two about aggression.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Roger and your dad started S&L together. It was only fair that Roger's widow get compensated for his share of the company. And in case you forgot, there was no buyout agreement in place when he died. I wouldn't have had to push so hard if there had been.”

“A buyout agreement wouldn't have covered all the legal problems Roger caused,” Zach retorted. “In case *you* forgot, he was dabbling in suspect investments on the side.”

Angie bit her lip. Zach didn't even know the half of it. Luckily, Eva had managed to emerge—with Angie's help—from the legal and financial nightmare following her husband's

death. She'd had to sell her house and scramble for a job, but in the end, everything had worked out for the best.

Zach's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"In any case, that's over and done with. But this—" he leaned forward and jabbed a finger at the paperwork he'd tossed on her desk— "is ridiculous, and you know it. S&L has jumped through all the regulatory hoops mandated by state and local government. Your client had plenty of time and opportunity to voice her concerns. The Environment Impact Review was released for public comment over a year ago. And in that time, the city council, planning commission, and rent control board have held dozens of hearings. Everyone's objections were duly noted and addressed."

"You've got to be kidding me. The objections were swept aside and ignored. A *de minimis* change in your developmental agreement that doesn't trigger further review of traffic and environmental impacts makes a mockery of the whole process. The city council basically rubber stamped whatever plans you put in front of it, with complete disregard for the residents' concerns."

"Everything S&L did was by the book," Zach said.

"Maybe in your view, but my client sees it differently. And at this point, the only way to get the city council to sit up and take notice and hopefully redress her grievances is exactly this." She nodded toward the manila envelope between them. "And while the courts re-examine everything, the injunction we're requesting will at least prevent you from demolishing my client's home."

He scowled. "This is extortion, plain and simple. S&L made a more than generous offer for relocation payments to the residents. Your client was the only one who refused to sign."

“She had good reason.”

Zach took a deep breath. “Look, let’s cut to the chase here. What will it take for this to go away?”

“If you’re asking me that, you obviously haven’t read our complaint carefully enough. It’s all spelled out in black and white.”

“I read it,” he said. “And it’s complete bullshit.”

Angie shook her head. “For shame, counselor. Is that the kind of language they teach you at Harvard Law?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Angie…”

“You know the drill, Zach. Thirty days to file your answer.” She ushered him toward the door. “I’ll see you in court.”