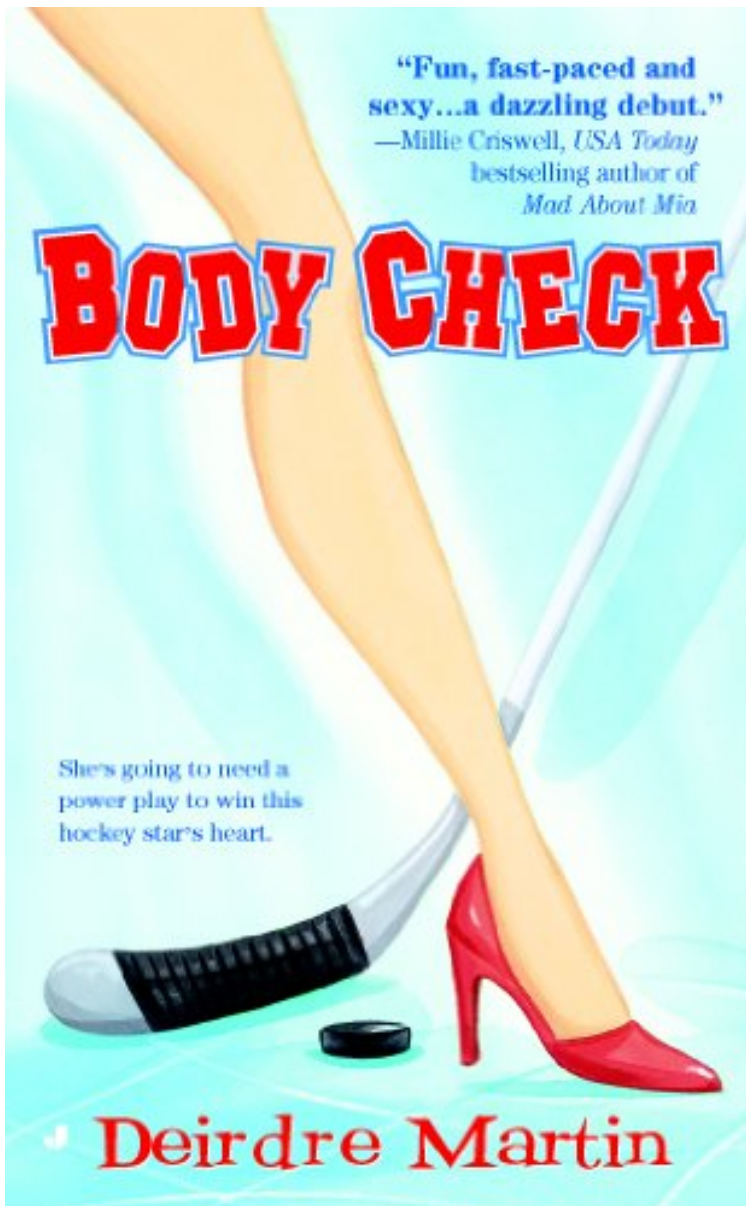


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Description : Description du produitWhen persistent sports publicist Janna MacNeil butts heads with hockey team captain Ty Gallagher, they don't just crack the ice-they melt it.

Prsentation de l'diteurThis games going into overtime.Janna MacNeil is a publicist on a missionto change the image of the bad boys of hockey: the Stanley Cup Champion New York Blades.Ty Gallagher is a captain on a missionto get his team to win the Cup againat any cost. His determination is legendary, as well as his unwillingness to toe the corporate line.When the persistent publicist and the stubborn captain butt heads, its hard enough to crack the ice. But they may end up melting it insteadExtraitChapter 01 Not many women could boast bossing around a locker room full of buff, naked jocks as part of their job description, but then

again, there weren't many women with a job like Janna MacNeil's. A publicist specializing in retooling clients' images as well as damage control, Janna had been hired by Kidco Corporation to help transform the reputation of the New York Blades, the NHL's Manhattan-based hockey franchise. To put it politely, the guys on the team were renowned for playing hard both on and off the ice. Never had this been more obvious than last season, after winning the Stanley Cup for the first time in twenty years. Everyone knows boys will be boys, but these boys brought the Cup to a number of strip joints around Manhattan, where they enjoyed the rare and singular pleasure of watching ladies with pasties and very little else "perform" with what many considered the Holy Grail of sports. Worse, rumors abounded that a photo existed of a group of players gathered around the Cup with plastic straws up their noses, heads reverently bowed to snort up a small mountain of cocaine. No wonder Janna's crusty new boss, Lou "the Bull" Capesi, guzzled Mylanta like it was spring water. The team was a PR nightmare. Janna was being paid big bucks to change all that. Edging her way through the boisterous cluster of beat writers hovering in the brightly lit, concrete hallway near the locker room door, Janna steeled herself, knowing what awaited her on the other side: naked, sweaty, male bodies. Lots of them. Big, muscled men laughing and joking with each other, flicking towels at each other's butts. Men sauntering off to the shower. Men stretching, massaging their battle-weary bones. She'd met these men—all but their captain, Ty Gallagher, who was a day late to training camp—in these very circumstances yesterday. Lou had introduced her around, and not one of them seemed fazed about parading buck naked or half undressed in front of a petite female publicist. Janna, on the other hand, had had to work hard to avoid the irresistible urge to stare, slack jawed and salivating, at the well-sculpted physiques of these guys. She made doubly sure she kept her eyes north of the equator, too. Once inside the locker room, the same scene she'd been initiated into yesterday greeted her. Some of the players lounged on the long wooden benches in front of their lockers, chatting, half dressed. Others stood at a large, rectangular table at the far end of the room, gulping down mammoth-sized glasses of Gatorade they'd poured from huge jugs. A few acknowledged her with nods; some, she thought, deliberately looked away. A boom box blasted music. The Who? Pearl Jam? She couldn't tell. The atmosphere was exuberant, almost adolescent in its giddiness. Though it was September, still pre-season, the Blades were clearly psyched about making another run for the Stanley Cup in the year ahead. She took a deep breath, trying hard to ignore the pungent odor of male sweat that was inescapable, and made for the bench closest to the center of the room, climbing up on it. Then, with all the power she could muster, she stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. The room fell silent as all eyes trained on her. "Listen up, guys: Now that I have your attention, I need your help." She looked around the room, carefully making eye contact with each and every player. "As you know, the Blades organization was recently purchased by Kidco Corporation, which prides itself on providing family entertainment." Boos and amused chuckles filled the room. "Kidco wants the Blades to be winners both on and off the ice, meaning they'd like each of you to give a little something back to the community you play in." She held the papers aloft in her hand. "This is a schedule of charity events going on all over the city over the course of the next year. I've highlighted those that don't conflict with your playing and travel schedule. I'd like each of you to sign up for at least three." "And if we don't?" a rogue Canadian voice challenged. "If you don't, then I kick your butt, and believe me, I can do it. I might be small, but I'm wiry." The players laughed appreciatively, and Janna relaxed somewhat. None of them could tell, but beneath her tailored suit she was a bundle of stomach-churning nerves, something she was a pro at covering up after years of practice. "Speaking of butt-kicking, I just want to remind you that no one is to talk to the press without clearance from the PR office, understand? I don't care if some reporter stops you outside Zabar's and asks if that's where you shop for groceries. Everything-everything-has to go through me or Lou. Not only that, but if God forbid you do find yourself saying or doing something stupid, you're to call me immediately. That's why I gave all of you my cell phone number yesterday. I expect you to use it, day or night, if you have a question about something or if an emergency arises. Now, back to the business at hand." She flashed them a quick, determined look. "Signing up for three events now will save you the aggravation of me following you around and nagging you to death for the rest of the season—which I'm paid very handsomely to do." More laughter. "So whaddaya say?" She didn't expect them to come forward in droves, but she was hoping a few might be willing to get the ball rolling. Instead, a stubborn silence filled the room. One second passed. Two, three. Janna's heart began beating just a little bit faster, her palms moistening. She took another deep breath, steadying herself. You can do this, she repeated in her mind. As the silence dragged on, she wondered if this was how comedians felt when they "died" on stage. "Come on, guys, don't make this any harder than it needs to be," she coaxed. "Either you sign up, or I start putting your names down at random. The choice is yours." She

watched as their collective gaze suddenly shifted from studying her to something on her left that was apparently fascinating. She looked. There stood Captain Ty Gallagher, a white towel knotted at his waist, his rock-solid body still glistening with damp from the shower. His blond hair was slicked back, and his deep-set, brown eyes were hard and unwelcoming. Feeling Lilliputian, despite still standing on the bench, Janna struggled not to let herself become overwhelmed by the nausea gathering force and momentum inside her.

She smiled at him politely. "Captain Gallagher?" "The one and only." The voice was polite but guarded, giving away nothing. Janna gingerly climbed down from the bench and extended her hand to him. Gallagher took it, briefly, for a very firm shake. Her hand grasped in his looked doll-sized; the thought flashed through her mind that with one quick squeeze he could easily ground her bones to powder if he wanted to. Which, thankfully, he didn't. Yet. "I'm Janna MacNeil." "I know who you are." He folded his strong arms across his chest and continued staring at her, challenging, expectant. "I was just telling your teammates that as part of our effort to improve community relations, Kidco Corporation would like it if every player signed up for at least three charity events. Maybe you could lead the way and sign up first." "No." Janna blinked. "But-

"No." He strode toward his locker and began dressing. She'd heard from Lou that he was an arrogant, uncooperative bastard. Here was her proof. Determined to play his dismissal down, she turned back to the players. "Moving right along," she continued smoothly, "is there anyone who would care to sign up?" "I'll sign up," a voice called out from the back. Relieved, Janna stood on tiptoes and peered over the sea of heads to see who had spoken. It was brawny, curly-haired Kevin Gill, one of the team's assistant captains. Janna had met him yesterday and had been utterly charmed by how articulate he was. Truth be told, she hadn't been anticipating too much in the brains department when it came to dealing with these guys. They were hockey players, after all. They made a living chasing a little rubber biscuit around an ice rink. How smart could they be? Kevin came forward, took Janna's list from her, and after skimming it, signed his initials next to three events. "Who's next?" he asked. Janna noticed that he shot Ty Gallagher an annoyed glance, which the captain responded to with an indifferent shrug. When no one moved, Kevin sighed. "I tried," he said to Janna, heading off in the direction of the shower. Clearly, the guys on the team took their cues from their beloved leader. If the great Ty Gallagher didn't think signing up for charity events was worth it, neither did they. God help me, Janna thought. It was going to take a lot more work to polish these guys up than she'd anticipated. Especially if she had to work through Captain Gallagher to do it. "Well," Janna called out to no one in particular, "if you don't sign up today, I'll be here tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, until you do sign. I'm not going anywhere, guys." Her threat hanging in the air, she found herself approached by the Russian prodigy, Alexei Lubov, which surprised her. Lou had warned her that many of the foreign players were hesitant about doing PR, because they were unsure about their command of English. They had great trepidation about involving themselves in anything that might embarrass them. Lubov was obviously an exception to the rule. "Hello," he said carefully in a heavy accent, his innocent baby face serious. "I am Alexei Lubov. You will call me Lex." Lex? Janna thought, biting her lip. Lex Lubov? Who was he, one of Superman's archenemies? "Hello, Lex," Janna said cordially. "Nice to meet you." He gestured at her sign-up sheet. "I wish to sign." "Do you have any idea what kind of events you prefer to be involved with?" "Girls," he declared, his baby blue eyes lighting up. "Something with many, many girls." Janna laughed. "There are usually women at all of them. Do you want to participate in a golf outing? A black tie dinner?" "Yes, dinner." He leaned closer to her, as if he were about to impart a secret. "You will be there, yes?" "Yes." "You would like to go out with me?" It took Janna a moment to realize that what he had meant to say was, "Would you like to go out with me?" At least, she hoped that's what he meant. She patted his arm. "Maybe some other time. But for now, I have work to do." "Yes, all right," he said somewhat impatiently, and walked off. He was adorably cute. And God knows Kidco was confident he was destined for stardom. But he seemed a bit...boyish. Definitely not her type. And his name! Lex Lubov! She couldn't wait to tell her roommate Theresa that one. Things began to wind down, and the locker room started emptying out, players departing in groups of two and three. Out of the corner of her eye, Janna caught sight of Ty Gallagher, now dressed, swinging his gym bag onto his shoulder. He donned sunglasses and was about to leave when Janna approached him. "May I speak with you a minute?" Lowering his sunglasses ever so slightly, Ty peered down at her with an irritated gaze. "What's on your mind?" "Well, it's this. Since you're the team's captain, I'll be honest with you. I've been hired to help make over the team's image." "We don't need a makeover." "That's debatable. Kidco Corporation, which now owns the team, as you know, was less than pleased with how you guys behaved when you won the Cup last year." Ty suppressed a smirk. "We shared the Cup with the city. What's wrong with that?" "You brought it to strip clubs." Janna saw

immediately that she'd hit a nerve—the wrong one. The chiseled features of his handsome face stiffened, and she got the distinct impression that he was struggling to keep his infamous temper in check, a temper that once supposedly drove him to threaten to push a player off a moving bus if the guy didn't improve his game.

She waited, held deep in the prolonged freeze of what was now, unmistakably, a glare. "Let me explain something to you, Miss MacNeil." His voice was a low rumble, carefully controlled. "Last year, my guys busted their asses out there on the ice night after night, and for one reason: they wanted to win the Cup. When they did win, it was their right to do whatever the hell they wanted with it, whether it was take it to a strip club or let their dog eat Alpo from it. You understand?" "How about snorting cocaine from it?" Janna asked sharply. "Were they free to do that?" "That story is bull, and you know it." "I don't know it, and neither does Kidco. Ultimately, it really doesn't matter if it's true or not. What matters is that a rumor like that hurts the team's image. It's unacceptable." "And so your job is to—what? Turn us into choirboys?" "Kidco doesn't expect the players to go home at night and bake cookies, no. But they do expect all of you to give a few hours to do some good old-fashioned PR to help offset the party animal image dogging the team." "No offense, but none of the guys on this team, especially me, owe Kidco anything." Janna chuckled, almost a snort. "Oh, really? Who do you think signs your checks now? Who do you think pays that mega salary that makes it possible for you to squire models around? Kidco owns the Blades, which means they own you, whether you like or not." Now it was Ty's turn to laugh, and it was a contemptuous one. "If it wasn't for me, all those soft boys in their suits wouldn't know who the hell the New York Blades were. The only reason they bought the team was because we won the Cup, and the only reason we won the Cup is because I was brought to New York specifically to turn this club back into a winning franchise, which I did. So don't tell me I owe them. I already did my part for the suits upstairs." Momentarily stunned into silence by his colossal ego, Janna merely blinked in reply. She stared up into his rugged face, which bore small, telltale marks of how he made his living—a tiny scar beneath the chin, another across the bridge of his nose—and then shook her head incredulously. "You don't get it, do you? Kidco Corporation has very deep pockets, captain. Their money could buy the best talent out there come trade time. But there's no way they're going to shell out to build a team that embarrasses them off of the ice. My suggestion to you is that if you want to keep winning Stanley Cups, you'd be wise to play it their way." The icy glare returned. "Are you threatening me?" "I'm giving you the lay of the land. Your teammates clearly respect you, to the point of asking 'How high?' if you ask them to jump. You do PR, and the rest of the guys will follow suit. I don't think it's too much to ask." "Yeah? Well, I do." He pushed his sunglasses back up so his eyes were once again obscured. "Do me a favor, will you? Tell Kidco to take their 'involvement in the community' and shove it. If I feel like doing a good deed, I will. But in the meantime, my humanitarianism isn't a commodity. You got that?" "Got it," Janna replied tersely. Against her will, the nausea she'd been keeping at bay began bubbling in the back of her throat. "Good. Enjoy the rest of your day." "You, too," Janna returned through gritted teeth as he strode past her. She waited until she couldn't hear his footsteps echoing anymore through the empty concrete hallway. Then, gathering up her papers, she hustled briskly out of the locker room and slammed through the door of the nearest ladies room. Quite unceremoniously, and with a force that frightened her, she threw up her breakfast. --from *Body Check* by Deirdre Martin, Copyright 2003 by Deirdre Martin, published by Jove, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., all rights reserved, reprinted with permission from the publisher."

Booklist Janna MacNeil is a publicist with a tough assignment: transform the hard-drinking, hooker-soliciting, Stanley Cup-misusing New York Blades hockey team into family-friendly cash cows for Corporate. Her prime adversary is the competitive, gorgeous, brusque team captain Ty Gallagher, to whom public relations means dating a different model each weekend. Ty's stubborn refusal to do anything resembling a United Way commercial collides with Janna's professional persistence, so of course they despise each other, until they end up discovering each other's hidden virtues and making out on the kitchen floor. Tentative romance ensues, as do hockey-themed double entendres: "Don't come crying to me," says Janna's roommate, "when you find out he's shooting his puck into some other woman's net." Whether Janna and Ty's love can survive the playoffs depends on how well they can overcome stubborn gender clichés, and how well readers can weather the infrequency of board-crashing, Zamboni-shaking sex scenes. A lively plot keeps things interesting, however, and Ro-bear, Janna's poetic poseur ex, are downright hysterical. Martin's debut may not melt the ice, but it is heartwarming. Brendan Driscoll Copyright American Library

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