

Chapter One

Shannon ‘Shay’ Everett had been in some compromising positions in her life. Many of them even of her own doing. Growing up in a small town in Texas as the daughter of a down-and-out rodeo rider and a beauty salon owner, the rebellious tomboy had gotten into more embarrassing scrapes than she could reckon. That being said, she never envisioned herself stuffed into a cubby inside an NFL locker room late at night. A locker room that was supposed to be empty. Only it wasn’t.

Hell’s bells.

Shay would have kicked her own butt for this little escapade if it wouldn’t call attention to her presence. The guilt she felt over her task had already swayed her to abort the whole thing the minute she’d entered the players’ domain. Not to mention that she was risking her internship with the team and her scholarship along with it. She’d just have to keep riding her bike to work and the bus downtown to campus because the money to replace her car’s muffler wouldn’t be coming from some mystery Internet blogger who paid handsomely for personal information on professional football players. Shay was ashamed for even attempting it, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Now she just needed to quickly extricate herself from her perch huddled in a dark corner of the Baltimore Blaze’s state-of-the-art locker room. Unfortunately, her punishment was to endure painful pins and needles in her legs and feet as she waited out the room’s other two occupants, both of whom seemingly had all the time in the world. Not that any woman would complain, given the view. Standing twenty feet in front of Shay was Blaze tight-end and all-American heartthrob, Brody Janik.

A deliciously naked, Brody Janik.

Shay willed her stomach not to growl at the sight before her, but Brody was a spectacular example of Grade-A Prime athlete in all his physical glory. Her mouth watered as she took in six-foot-three inches, two hundred pounds of perfectly sculpted muscle standing beneath a single shaft of light, the scene reminiscent of a statue of a Greek god on display in a museum somewhere. All that was missing was the pedestal for him to stand on.

Not that she hadn't seen nearly this much of his perfect body before. The whole world had. As the spokesman for an international designer's line of men's underwear, pictures of Brody wearing nothing but his sparkling blue eyes and his skivvies had been plastered all over billboards and buses for months now. Except tonight, his BVD's were noticeably absent.

She licked her lips as he scrubbed his neatly trimmed brown hair with a towel, the muscles in his broad back rippling. Her eyes drifted lower to the two fine dimples on his backside—one that saw a lot of sun based on the lack of a discernible tan line. She slammed her eyelids shut as he turned to reach for something out of his locker. Surely this was an invasion of his privacy and she ought not to be looking. Except when would she get another chance like this one?

She blinked one eye open. *Dang!* He'd already pulled on a pair of skin-tight grey boxers, a noticeably abundant bulge hidden beneath the Egyptian cotton.

"It's going to be hard to keep this under wraps," a heavily accented male voice said from the shadows, a few lockers over.

Ain't that the truth, Shay thought. She mentally shook herself in an effort to refocus her attention from the sexy scene in front of her and tried to make sense of the conversation. The other voice in the room wasn't hard to recognize; the distinct accent belonged to Mr.-

Pomegranate-Smoothie-With-Extra-Flax-Seed, Brody's personal trainer whose last name was something Scandinavian and un-pronounceable. Shay only knew him by what he ordered in the Blaze commissary each time he visited.

"It won't be that hard, Erik." Brody tugged on a pair of jeans over his well-defined, long legs as Shay stifled a sigh. He sat down on the folding chair in front of his locker and pulled on his socks and sneakers. "The Piss Man only checks for banned substances. He's not checking my blood sugar."

Pardon? She tore her eyes away from Brody's still nude torso to concentrate on the words coming out of his wicked mouth. She'd heard the phrase "Piss Man" before; it was the players' nickname for the league representative who tested their urine for illegal steroid use. It was the second part of Brody's sentence that sent Shay's brain scrambling. *Was something up with his blood sugar?*

"That's not the point." The fair-haired Dane moved out from the shadows to stand beside Brody's chair. "What if you get disoriented on the field again and miss a route or a pass? It was only practice today, but it could happen during a game if you can't keep your sugar regulated."

Brody stood up from the chair, his chiseled body elegant and assured as he peered down at the stocky trainer. Good looks, superior athleticism, and an affluent upbringing gave him the confidence to believe he could beat anything. Even, apparently, a problem with his blood sugar.

"Not gonna happen." He pulled a black Lacoste polo over his head.

"You can't beat it by main-lining Pop-Tarts like you did before your training camp physical," his trainer persisted. "That ended with you nearly comatose two hours later."

Shay worried her bottom lip as she considered the implications of Brody's predicament. As a PhD candidate in nutrition, she knew full well how the tight-end's fluctuating blood sugar

could spell doom for his career. She also didn't want to contemplate the scenario of him trying to regulate it by himself.

Brody shoved his sweaty clothes into his gym bag. "You worry too much. I'll take precautions before and during games. Whatever I need, I can have on the sidelines or in the locker room during halftime. My plan worked fine during the opening game last week."

His friend shook his head. "I'd feel better if you told the training staff. That way, someone could keep an eye on you during the game. You aren't always aware that your sugar's dropping until it's too late."

"No. Nobody knows. Not even my family." The vehemence in Brody's voice echoed throughout the empty locker room. "I'm in the last year of my contract and my mom is a diabetic. If the team finds out my blood sugar is a little schizophrenic, the negotiations for a new deal will spin out of control. Besides, Nate the Narcissist is a pain in the ass. The guy's got a real Napoleon complex. He'd lord it over me and take over my life. No thank you, dude." Brody shuddered as he zipped up his bag.

Shay sucked in a breath. Nate, the team's head trainer, was her boss and she had to agree with Brody's assessment of him. As her mama would say, Nate was 'all hat and no cattle'. It was a relief to know she wasn't the only one who suffered under the man's delusions of grandeur.

When she'd accepted the internship, Shay was told she'd be working with the training staff on the day-to-day nutritional coaching for the players. The information she obtained would be useful in the compilation of her dissertation, an examination of carbohydrates used during peak athletic performance. Instead, Nate had banished her to the team's cafeteria, telling her he needed the extra hands during training camp. Now the season was in its second week and he

showed no intention of allowing her to move up from food service. By the time Shay realized she wouldn't get the experience she wanted, all the other internships had been taken. She needed the credits to fulfill a requirement to receive her degree at the end of the semester. Worse still, she wasn't even getting paid for the work she did.

“I don't like the risk you're taking, Brody.”

“It's not a risk. I'll be fine as long as I make sure to eat a balanced diet every day. I wasn't diligent during the off season and I'm paying for it now, that's all.”

His trainer let out a harrumph of displeasure.

Brody's whole body tensed, his cover-boy jaw firm as he spoke. “I assume this is something we can keep between us. Or do I have to specifically invoke client-trainer confidentiality?”

The trainer bristled at Brody's tone. Normally laid-back and carefree, Brody was all business now, forcing his trainer to take a step back.

“Whoa.” He held his hands up. “I'm on your side, Brody. Of course this stays between us. But you pay me to train and advise you. I'm just giving you my opinion, that's all.”

Brody's face was cool and calculated for a brief moment before relaxing into the boyish charm he was famous for. “Duly noted, Erik.” He slapped the trainer on the back, leading him toward the exit. “Tell you what. You can *advise* me on what to order for dinner tonight to keep my blood sugar from taking a nose-dive.”

“Are you buying?”

Brody laughed. “Aren't I always?”

The room went dark and Shay waited a few minutes before letting out a pained breath as she eased her numb legs out from under her. She sat still for another moment, allowing her eyes

to adjust to the darkness and her mind to adjust to everything she'd heard. Her heart skipped a beat as her cell phone buzzed in her pocket, its noise loud in the now ghostly locker room.

“Holy shitake!” she whispered, nearly jumping out of her skin. “Good thing that didn't go off five minutes ago.” She hadn't thought to silence her cell phone, innocently assuming the locker room would be empty. Her hand shook as she checked the bright screen to scan her text message. It was from Ken Daly, the manager of Celtic Charm, one of Baltimore's newest night clubs.

I need a bartender tomorrow night. R U interested?

Shay exhaled a slow, cleansing breath. She'd entered the locker room earlier to do something nefarious, only to have her conscience remind her that the ends don't justify the means. Now, the answer to her financial woes had just landed in her lap—or on her cell phone, to be precise. Her mama would call it providence. Shay just called it dumb luck. Whatever it was, she needed to get out of there before someone else wandered in and spotted her where she shouldn't be.

She stood up slowly, her legs still tingling. Using the flashlight app on her cell phone, she carefully traversed the dark room toward the exit, happy that she didn't have to betray any of the team's players. The Blaze organization was known around the league for its professionalism and values. Aside from Nate, everyone Shay came in contact with at the training facility was friendly and she actually enjoyed the work—even if it wasn't what she'd expected.

Of course, the author of the blog *The Girlfriend's Guide to the NFL* would probably pay big money for Brody Janik's secret. But a Friday night tending bar at the hugely popular Celtic Charm could bring in a couple hundred dollars in tips—more if she dressed in a tight blouse and

the kilt the waitresses wore. That kind of money would buy a new muffler and a month's worth of cell phone service, if she was careful. She didn't need to sell anyone's secrets.

Shay made it to the door and listened carefully to make sure no one was lingering in the hallway. The building was supposed to be empty, but Brody and his trainer friend could still be wandering around. Leaning against the doorjamb, she thought about the Blaze tight-end.

Brody Janik was the epitome of a super-star jock; talented, rich, and gorgeous. Men wanted to *be* him and women wanted to be *with* him. Even more appealing, arrogance hadn't tainted his persona. Brody used his slow, wicked smile to charm everyone he met. He doled that smile out to everyone else like it was candy. Everyone except her. Instead, he treated Shay with his innate politeness. Almost as if he didn't put her in the same category as other women. And that stung. *A lot.*

Just like every other woman between the age of two and one hundred and two, Shay had a big-time crush on Brody. Of course, she knew it would never amount to anything. After all, she was the tall, awkward, brainiac with frizzy hair and a wide mouth who was used to being the last one chosen to dance. At twenty-four, she'd had a lifetime of experience being ignored by men like Brody as they scoured the room for the attractive, self-assured women.

A more callous woman, bent on revenge, might sell Brody's story. But Shay Everett wasn't that woman. Brody was just like every other man who'd looked through her at one point in her life. She really couldn't single him out for it. It wouldn't be fair to all the rest of the men who'd ignored her.

Slipping out the door into the deserted hallway, Shay resolved to forget everything she'd heard while hiding in the locker room. Brody Janik wasn't her problem. It's not like they'd exchange more than a please-and-thank-you in the cafeteria as she slopped his meal on a plate

each day. And she *wouldn't* worry about his blood sugar, either. At least that's what she kept telling herself as she crept out of the Blaze training facility.

Grabbing her bike, she donned her reflective vest and headed out for the ten-minute trek to her apartment, her conscience clear. She'd do some research for an hour or so before grabbing some sleep. She had swim practice to coach in the morning before arriving at the training facility at eight thirty. If she happened across information on hypoglycemia while she was scanning articles for her dissertation, so be it. As she pedaled along, she told herself it was professional interest making her curious. *Not* anything special about Brody Janik.

