

One

“Well I’ll be doggone! Ain’t this a small world or what?”

Shane Devlin looked up from the screen of his cell phone, shaking his head slightly to readjust his thoughts. He’d been so focused on the text message he was reading, he’d tuned out everything around him. A lizard darted through the dahlia bushes bordering the bar’s patio where Shane sat. The ocean churned quietly beneath an inky night sky. Music and laughter from the nightclub drifted out amongst the strings of twinkling lights before being carried away to the sea by a quiet breeze. All in all, it was a night travel agents dream of on the Mexican Riviera.

“Kitty, get over here with the camera. I gotta get a picture with him to show the fellas at the rotary club.”

Or it would be if not for the loud, obnoxious bar patrons. Shifting uncomfortably in the plastic resin chair, Shane glanced around for an escape route as the heavysset, balding man with the booming voice lumbered toward him, a wide-eyed Kitty in tow. Both looked harmless enough: a middle-aged couple dressed in typical tourist garb, complete with sparkling white sneakers on their feet.

“Mort, I don’t think we should disturb him,” Kitty whispered as Mort rummaged through the oversize, leopard-print bag on her shoulder, presumably looking for a camera.

Ahh, so Kitty with the bouffant hair wasn’t as impressed by a down-on-his-luck NFL quarterback as hubby Mort. Perhaps it was the stay-the-hell-away-from-me vibe Shane was putting out. After all, he’d escaped to Mexico to lie low for a few days while his agent negotiated a new contract for him.

“Honey, do you know who this is?” Mort asked as he pulled a small digital camera from the depths of the bag.

Here it comes. This is where Mort tells Kitty she’s looking at the idiot who, in the final minutes of the last game of the season, threw the winning touchdown—except the guy who caught it was wearing the other team’s jersey. Shane felt his jaw clench as he shifted his six-foot-three-inch frame to a more defensive position, not an easy feat considering the small chair. Wringing her hands in front of her, Kitty shuffled her feet as Mort’s pudgy fingers struggled to turn on the camera. From the look of panic on her face, she knew exactly who Shane was—or more important, who the tabloid press made him out to be: the Devil of the NFL. Nothing aggravated him more than fans bringing up that botched game or his even more botched-up personal life.

“This here is Shane Devlin, the son of a football legend. His daddy was one of the best players in the game,” Mort said reverently. “Heck, if his old man hadn’t been injured, he’d be in the Hall of Fame for sure.”

Okay, *that* actually aggravated him more. Shane reached for the bottle of beer he’d been nursing all night, not sure whether he wanted to drink its warm contents or smash it over something. Being compared to his father never failed to make him angry. Or to remind him of how his plans had been derailed. Shane was a man with no team to play for next season. At thirty-one years old, he was at his athletic peak. Yet one ill-timed interception—along with several highly publicized scandals off the field—was enough for the San Diego Chargers to send him packing.

But Shane wasn’t ready to hang up his cleats. It wasn’t money he was after; he’d saved enough to live well after retirement. No, it was the records he wanted. Records set by his father—Bruce Devlin—when he’d played pro football. The same father who’d abandoned him. Shane would be damned if Bruce Devlin’s name graced any NFL record books. No, he intended to break them all himself.

Several teams out there were looking for a veteran quarterback, but Shane couldn't afford to just stand on the sidelines. He needed a starting gig. Hoping another player would blow out a knee tripping over his dog wasn't exactly good karma, but Shane was running out of options. And tonight, sitting in a bar in Cabo San Lucas after thirty-six holes of golf with a few sponsors, his luck may have just turned. He glanced down at the text on his cell phone again, the message on the screen his talisman:

Blaze QB out 4 season. Working on a deal now.

Shane sucked in a lungful of air to calm himself as Mort edged closer. Stuffing his cell phone in his shorts, Shane stood, squaring his broad shoulders and puffing out his chest. The move had the desired effect; Mort stilled in mid-motion.

"Um, you don't mind if the little lady snaps a photo of us, do you?" Mort asked, apparently finally finding his manners.

Hell yes, I do! Shane almost shouted. He bit it back, though, not wanting to listen to another lecture from his agent about playing nice with the folks who filled the stadiums, thereby funding his paycheck.

Shane grabbed the beer bottle, discreetly tucking it behind his hip. "Why not?"

It was all the invitation Mort needed. With a face-splitting grin, he handed the camera to a still leery Kitty and sidled up next to Shane, stretching up on his beefy legs so as to almost reach Shane's shoulder. The camera flashed twice, and while Shane's eyes recovered from the assault, Mort pulled up a chair to the table and sank down into it. Kitty dropped her oversized bag into another chair and dragged it toward Shane's table.

"Thanks, buddy. Let me buy you another beer and you can catch me up on what your old man's been up to lately." Mort flagged down a waiter.

No way was Shane sitting with Mort and Kitty to "catch up" on anything, much less his dear old dad, whom he hadn't spoken to more than a half dozen times in the last twenty years. Shane scanned the patio for possible options to exit gracefully. He really wanted to head back to his

room to wait for his agent's call. With any luck, he'd be signing with a new team tomorrow.

Peals of pleasant laughter drew his attention to a table next to the bar where two women sat sharing a pitcher of margaritas. He'd run into them frequently throughout the weekend since they occupied one of the VIP bungalows near his. According to the resort's golf pro, the dark, vivacious one was a famous wedding gown designer. She'd brought along a dozen or so Victoria Secret model-wannabes to shoot a photo spread of her gowns at a nearby ancient Spanish church. Shane had steered clear of her, figuring any woman who touched wedding gowns—much less designed them—clearly had fantasies of wedding bells in her future. His game was football, not serious relationships.

Avoiding her completely had become impossible because Shane was fascinated with observing the antics of the designer's assistant. She'd spent the weekend shuffling between the church and the resort's business office, all the while with a cell phone that, when it wasn't glued to her ear, chimed the theme to *The Wizard of Oz*. The taller of the two, she was also much fairer, her skin glowing a soft pink after several days in the sun. Her hair blew in long, chestnut waves, shimmering softly under the moonlight. But it was her eyes—the exact color of the blue Pacific waters caressing the sand along the Mexican resort—he found most interesting.

Too bad they weren't as warm as the ocean they reflected. Every time he tried to start up a conversation with her, he was treated to a cold brush-off. Twice he'd offered to buy her a drink, only to get a polite—but chilly—refusal. The situation was a novel one for him. He was a professional athlete, for crying out loud. Wherever he went, women fell all over him. But not this woman. He wasn't used to having to work to get a woman to pay attention to him, and he was surprised at how much the effort seemed to turn him on.

The magazine photographer joined the two women at their table, chatting in rapid-fire Italian with the designer. Laughing, he pulled her up and off to the center of the patio where couples danced under the stars. Shane took advantage of the opportunity for a speedy escape.

“Thanks, but my friends are waiting for me at another table.” Shane clapped Mort on the

shoulder, forcing him to stay in his seat. Nodding to Kitty, he tried to look casual as he dodged between the dancers and other patrons, finally sliding into the chair the designer had vacated.

Cool blue eyes framed by long, dark lashes fixed on him as he set his beer down on the table. Dressed in a sleeveless floral blouse that wrapped around her waist and a short denim skirt that accentuated long, lean, sun-kissed legs, she shifted back in her chair. Any surprise she might have felt by his abrupt arrival was quickly covered with an abundance of poise. Casually she flung her hair over a shoulder, slowly crossing her bare legs. If the move was meant to be provocative, it worked.

“Don’t panic. I’m not staying,” he said leaning back in the chair, crossing his own long legs at the ankles so as to present a relaxed image in case Mort and Kitty were watching. “I’m just avoiding that couple at the table back there.”

Before he could stop her, she whipped her head around to look back across the dance floor at Mort and Kitty. Mort gave him a thumbs-up sign just as she turned back to Shane. *Ah, hell.* He took a long pull on his beer to buy some more time. It was nasty and warm, but he was heading for his room, so no point in ordering another one. The silence stretched.

“Shane Devlin,” he said finally.

She said nothing, continuing to stare at him, her full lips forming a brief, patronizing grin. Shifting in his chair, his gaze zeroed in on her smile, and he couldn’t help wondering what her mouth might taste like. Forcing his eyes up, he noticed the constellation of freckles crossing her nose. His perusal stopped as his eyes met hers, still incredibly blue, but with a slight twinkle that Shane hoped wasn’t a result of the bar lights. Other than a slight lift of her brow, her face revealed nothing.

“And you are?” he persisted, trying to remember if he’d heard her speaking English at any time this weekend.

“Allergic to jocks.” A hint of an accent wove through her crisp voice.

Shane bit back a grin, finally relaxing in his chair. So she knew who he was and decided to

play hard to get. The game just got a lot more interesting. Maybe not as easy as he'd like, but he lived for a challenge. Besides, this was a lot more fun than waiting on his phone to ring back in his room. Why not stay and chat her up, seeing as how she'd shot him down all weekend.

“How 'bout I just call you Dorothy?”

Both eyebrows arched in question. Shane nodded toward the ever-present cell phone lying on the table. She laughed softly and he felt it all the way to his groin. Leaning forward, she rested her arms on the table, giving him an excellent view of a silver chain dangling between two pert breasts. A dusting of perspiration glistened on her skin, courtesy of the humid evening. Her breasts were no rival to the silicone boobs adorning the models circulating the bar, but he didn't care. Suddenly, he wanted them in his hands. In his mouth. *Whoa there, buddy! Just killing time, here. Harmless flirting and nothing more*, he reminded himself.

“So, what is it you want tonight, Mr. Devlin?” She lifted her margarita glass to her mouth, flicking a piece of salt with her tongue. The simple action made him hard.

What did he want? Apparently, if he was listening to the plays his body was calling, he wanted her. But he'd be damned if he could figure out why. She was nothing like the women he normally found attractive. Nonetheless, she'd captivated his attention since he'd first laid eyes on her lounging beside the pool. Surrounded by a bevy of enhanced female perfection, she somehow stood out from the models. She was real.

Shane wasn't sure how to handle real.

His entire life, people had been sucking up to him, first to meet his famous father, then to meet him. It was one of the reasons he kept to himself. He trusted no one. Sure, he could turn on the public persona when his contract called for it, but for the most part, Shane was a private man. The women he got involved with knew the rules up front. They used him for publicity and he used them for sex. Simple. Or at least it had been up until recently.

Perhaps Dorothy's unpretentiousness attracted him. He couldn't say. All he knew was he was enjoying himself for the first time in many weeks. Nothing could come of it. He had a score to

settle, a team to pursue, and records to break. His game plan didn't allow for the strong attraction he immediately felt for a strange woman in a bar.

"I just thought we could get to know each other better." The line sounded corny even to him. He was definitely rusty in the flirtation department. And she wasn't going to make it easy for him. In spite of that, Shane felt a slow smile spread across his face.

Rolling her eyes at his adolescent attempt, she fiddled with a strand of hair and leaned back against the chair.

"You jocks are all alike." She fingered the chain around her neck. Shane took a slow breath. The gesture was more erotic than her licking the ice off her glass. "You think any woman will be flattered by your attention."

"You could flatter me with a little of yours."

His lines were bordering on pathetic, but at least she didn't break out in hysterics. He thought he saw the beginnings of a real smile, but before she could say anything, the fashion designer and photographer returned to the table. The designer's eyes went wide as she noticed him sitting there. The photographer recognized Shane immediately.

"Hey, you two do know each . . ." Before he could finish his sentence, Dorothy grabbed Shane's arm, yanking him up from the table.

"Let's dance." Her warm fingers manacled his wrist as she dragged him to the other side of the bar.

She didn't have to ask him twice. As luck would have it, the jazz trio was playing a cover of a John Mayer ballad, allowing Shane to gather her close. So close he detected the citrus scent of her shampoo. She smelled good enough to eat. Her soft, bare arms glowed beneath the twinkling patio lights. He stifled a groan as her hips swayed against his groin.

"Aren't you afraid of an allergic reaction?" he teased. She shivered as his breath brushed her neck. He took it as an invitation to lean in closer and trace his lips along the shell of her ear.

"I'll risk it." Dorothy breathed against his chest.

Carly March looked behind the gorgeous hunk of athlete she'd dragged to the dance floor to where her friend Julianne Marchione was waving frantically at her.

What are you doing? Julianne mouthed.

Good question, Carly thought to herself as she stepped into Shane Devlin's arms. *What was she doing?* She knew she shouldn't be touching him, much less dancing with him. But Marco had almost blown it back at the table and could have let it slip who she was. She didn't think about the consequences before rushing off with Shane. Clearly, the testosterone oozing out of his pores was wreaking havoc on her normally solid common sense. That and a weekend spent Googling everything ever written about him. Carly had stared at his photo so many times in the last few days, she dreamt about him at night. Now her dreams had become reality. And the real thing was oh so much better. She shivered as his mouth grazed her ear. Oh God, she needed to keep a hold of her senses and remember who she worked for.

Shane Devlin was no random stranger at a resort. Anyone who followed sports knew he was an out-of-work NFL quarterback looking for a team to play for. Up until a day or two ago, his prospects had looked bleak. But then, Gabe Harrelson, the record-breaking young quarterback for the Baltimore Blaze, broke a hip and a femur hang-gliding in Australia. As assistant to the team's general manager, Carly knew Shane occupied a spot on the team's short list for replacing Harrelson.

The search for a replacement quarterback had encroached on her getaway since the day she arrived at the beach resort. She'd tagged along with her best friend, Julianne, to rest and relax for a few days during the team's off-season. Instead, the only surfing she'd done was on the Internet. The dossier she'd compiled about Shane Devlin could fill a tabloid magazine. In fact, that's where she'd gotten most of her background on him. His play off the field was as notorious as his play on the field. Despite the fact that most of the reports about his behavior outside of football looked to her to be rumor and innuendo, she didn't think Blaze management would see it that way. Hank Osbourne, the team's general manager, was a stickler about his players being role

models for the fans. If you played for the Blaze, you must be above reproach. The same could be said for those who worked for the team.

Earlier in the day, Carly made a strong case to management via a conference call that the exploits reported by the media of Shane's "extracurricular behavior" had been greatly exaggerated. One woman's claim that he was the father of her child had been easily refuted a few weeks later with DNA testing, but the stigma of his playboy reputation still lingered. A more recent claim by a San Diego Charger's employee that Shane had sexually intimidated her was never substantiated. However, the stink associated with both incidents was a red flag for Blaze management.

The tabloid press was notorious for blowing things out of proportion—Carly knew this firsthand. *They even turn on their own.* She felt a kinship for anyone crucified by the paparazzi, and it was one of the reasons Carly felt she needed to defend Shane against the sensational articles. Heck, she'd stuck her neck out for Shane this morning. The same neck his lips were skimming over right now. Oh, this was not good. *It's just a dance,* she told herself as he moved her slowly around the patio. Unfortunately, her body wasn't listening to what her brain was saying as she pressed dangerously closer.

The photos on the Internet didn't do him justice. He wasn't glamour-boy gorgeous, but his dark, intense looks definitely drew the attention of most of the women at the resort. And when he'd smiled at her a few minutes earlier, she'd been lucky to be sitting because she was sure her legs had turned to jelly. Unlike most of the men at the bar, he had eschewed the resort uniform of khaki shorts and a golf shirt. Instead, he was dressed in a pair of well-worn jean shorts, flip-flops, and a white linen shirt unbuttoned to reveal enough skin for her to know he spent a lot of time outdoors. Sun-kissed brown hair curled around his collar, one stray lock hanging in front of eyes so dark, she couldn't make out their color. A hint of stubble along his jaw gave just the right amount of danger to his look. His presence was . . . intoxicating, to say the least. And he was focusing all that dark, brooding intensity on her.

Strong arms held her against his tall, athletic frame and she sighed softly as his chest came in contact with her breasts. His lips brushed her hairline; the beginnings of his beard gently rubbing against her skin sent shock waves to the pit of her belly and below. He smelled of shea butter and soap. Clean and sweet. Definitely not the words most people would use to describe Shane Devlin, the Devil of the NFL. He shifted her against him again and she felt the heat and strength of his arousal.

Okay, this was definitely a bad idea, she thought to herself. Letting a player kiss you would likely be frowned upon by management. Anything more would probably lead to dismissal. Carly really liked her job. She didn't want to jeopardize her position with the Blaze in any way. It gave her an excuse to live in Baltimore where she could help take care of her sister. Besides, she was through with jocks. With all celebrities, for that matter. If she was going to have a fling, it had to be with an accountant or podiatrist. Someone who didn't have paparazzi hiding in his bushes.

If she were being honest though, it was nice to be held in a man's arms again. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed it these past months. Shane had been watching her all weekend—either through the pages of a magazine or in person. She couldn't help but be flattered by his attention, especially with twelve bikini-clad models running around on the beach.

If he were any other man, she'd be tempted to let her inhibitions run wild for one night of sex. Judging by the attraction humming between them, she knew it would be an interlude she'd not likely forget. She wished the team had already picked someone else so she could let him have his way with her on the makeshift dance floor. Or on the beach. Or in his bungalow.

But he was who he was, and she'd been down this road before. Carly couldn't let this get out of hand.

Shane had somehow maneuvered them off the edge of the patio to a dimly lit alcove beside the pool. She looked up into his shadowed face as a lock of hair fell past his left brow. Intense gray eyes blazed with hunger as his hands gently rubbed her back, one hand roaming lower to lightly skim her bottom. Her body continued to betray her as Shane's potent chemistry wore down

her defenses. When he nipped at her collarbone, heat ricocheted through her belly and beyond.

Maybe just a kiss. Surely she could stop at one?

“What is it you want, Mr. Devlin?” she asked again, lifting her eyes to meet his.

“I want whatever you’ll give me,” he whispered, lowering his head.

She closed her eyes as her stomach quivered in anticipation, waiting for his lips to make contact.

But they never did. Instead, the *Wizard of Oz* ring tone grew louder. Julianne emerged from the shadows somewhere behind them, Carly’s ringing cell phone in her hand. Carly leaped out of Shane’s arms, a wild jumble of nerves, nearly bowling over her friend.

“You told me not to let you miss a call.” Julianne handed her the phone.

“I’ve got it!” Carly said, annoyed that her friend seemed to be enjoying the moment a little too much.

Julianne failed to hide her grin, and, offering Shane an elegant shrug, retreated back into the shadows.

Carly turned to Shane, who stood, hands on hips, that single lock of hair obscuring an eye. Aside from his breathing being a little ragged, he stared nonchalantly back at her.

“I’m sorry, but I have to take this call.” She spoke softly, embarrassment warming her cheeks. “I really have to go. Good night.”

He said nothing, his lips compressed in a thin line. Quickly, she crept away before she changed her mind.

Mortified by her behavior, she felt a tinge of guilt for leaving him in a state of potent arousal. But as she glanced at the text message on her phone, she breathed a deep sigh of relief. She’d just dodged a bullet. Shane Devlin was her team’s new quarterback.

Now all she had to do was find a way to avoid him altogether once he arrived in Baltimore.