

## GOALS FOR A SINNER

## CHAPTER 1

With the weight of her long blonde ponytail streaming out behind her through the loop in her black New Orleans Sinners football cap, Stevie Dowd raced down the sidelines toward the end zone. She stumbled to a stop, turned, braced her legs, and raised the Canon EOS digital camera to her eye. This was it. She knew this was it, a chance at the cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. No more being assigned to photograph rhythmic gymnastics or water ballet. No more being razzed by the guys about her “sensitive” portrait of the little, lame bat boy. Stevie Dowd was in the right place at the right time, and she knew it.

The long pass thrown by second-string quarterback Joe Dean Billodeaux sailed down the field past the other photographers who jostled each other at the fifty yard line. The football seemed to spin out on an endless trajectory. Then, just as Stevie had bet, wide receiver Connor Riley came charging down the field in a race to get under the ball. His calf muscles bunched under the tight leggings of the Sinner’s all black uniform. His arms reached skyward. “Let him fill the frame,” Stevie schooled herself with time-honored advice.

Riley was so close now that she could see his signature blonde curls sticking out from under his helmet and resting on his shoulder pads. He turned his head to search for the ball, and the red devils on his helmet seemed to wink at Stevie as she pressed the shutter at the very moment he leapt and connected with the pigskin. She had captured him going up and coming down with the prize. As the wideout touched ground and dug in to take a step towards the goal line ten yards away, Falcon cornerback, Revelation Bullock, rose up behind him, a black mountain all covered in white, and came crashing down on Riley like a two-hundred pound avalanche. Stevie surged forward and kept snapping.

The two men locked together arrowed out of bounds, and Stevie Dowd captured every nuance of it with her camera. She took one more step closer and was buried beneath four hundred pounds of football player.

Connor Riley shook his head as he rose. The Rev had removed his massive frame from Connor’s torso and was now offering a hand up. That was the Rev for you, always the good sport, but something else felt wrong. He had landed on a surface much softer than artificial turf.

“Couldn’t let you get away from me and score, man, but it looks like we done sacked ourselves a photographer, and he out cold,” the Rev remarked after spitting out his mouth guard.

“She,” corrected Riley, noticing the blonde pony tail fanned out behind the delicate head of an unconscious woman. The hair held the black Sinners cap in place despite the impact. She had made no attempt to save herself. Both of her arms were

protecting a fancy digital camera held to one side away from the blow. She was fair, probably paler than usual now, no makeup, and no color on her partially open pink lips. Her long, light brown lashes fluttered as if she were getting ready to wake from her bed after a long, steamy night of sex.

Riley shook his head again. This celibacy thing was getting to him. Thank God the season was nearly over. Still, there was something about this woman, something familiar that was not coming to him. His thoughts were interrupted by the medics who squeezed between the two players and knelt by the victim. The short, balding medic unsnapped the many-pocketed photographer's vest. Riley inhaled.

She wore nothing under the vest but a white Sinners t-shirt with its little red devil logo plastered by sweat against one full, braless breast. Her nipples were clearly delineated and peaked up in the cool stadium air. Riley swallowed his saliva. The Rev elbowed him. "You lusting after a knocked out woman, brother."

"I know, I know," Connor confessed. "This was all your idea."

"Best season you ever had, right?" the Rev answered.

"I know," Riley said again. "But there's something else about her."

The medics listened to the patient's chest, checked her blood pressure. When her big, blue eyes opened, the medic with the crew cut held up two fingers and asked her "how many".

"Ah, four. No, two. Three?" she answered faintly, trying to cooperate.

"She's guessing. Concussion. Do you know your name?" the balding medic questioned, speaking slowly and clearly.

"Ah -," was the only answer that came from the full pink lips.

The other medic checked her credentials. "Says her name is Stevie Dowd." He wrote that down on the chart he held.

"Not hardly a dowd," the Rev commented. The celibacy thing was wearing on him a little, too.

"Not Stevie, either," Connor Riley said. "It's Stephanie, Stephanie Dowd, my brother's old girlfriend, the woman I loved my entire senior year of high school."

"Get out," the Rev said, pounding Connor on the back. "A lost love. Good things come to those who wait. Didn't I just tell you?"

Stevie's pink lips were moving again, trying to articulate a whole sentence. Connor removed this helmet and walked around the medics to kneel by her side. "It's Connor, Stephanie. What can I do for you?" he asked with deep concern.

"My pictures. *Sports Illustrated*. Get them to - ." Her eyes closed again.

Connor looked up suddenly aware of the click and whirl of other cameras around him. He pointed to one of the sports photographers preserving the moment on a memory card.

"You, Dexter Sykes," he commanded, reading the name off the man's ID. "See this camera gets to *Sports Illustrated*, and I better not see your name on the photo credits."

Gently, Riley moved Stevie's hands off of her Canon. He unfastened the neck strap and thrust the whole piece of equipment at the man he had selected from the group. "And see she gets her camera back, too," he added with just the faintest threat in his deep voice.

“Sure thing, Mr. Riley. We all know Stevie. She’s been trying to get a shot like this for years. How about one for me, Connor?”

The photographer snapped without waiting for an answer. Connor blinked and gave a low growl. Dexter Sykes stepped back behind the other photographers and took off at a run, rushing the pictures to *Sports Illustrated*, no doubt.

The emergency cart arrived. The medics secured her head and neck, slid a board under Stevie, and strapped her down. On a count of three, they raised the board and placed her on the cart for the run to the waiting ambulance. Connor Riley watched Stephanie Dowd move out of his life again, this time on the Sinners’ meat wagon.

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In the broadcasting booth, sportscasters Al Harney and Hank Wilkes filled the dead air time with their patter once the commercials had run. “For those who are just joining us, we are experiencing a delay of game. An innocent civilian got in the way of the troops and was mowed down by wide receiver, Connor Riley, and cornerback Rev Bullock at the end of the most spectacular play of the game. The medics are checking out the victim now, and the game will resume once they get the meat wagon off the field. Say, Al, do you remember the time a cameraman got sacked?”

“I do, Hank. That one always makes funniest sports videos. Here’s another one for the show. But about that play, Billodeaux’s long pass set a new record for the Super Dome and for this relatively young expansion team, the New Orleans Sinners, who moved in here when the Saints were lured to Salt Lake to take up residence in a new stadium near the Jazz. I wonder how happy the Saints players are because I can tell you Temple Avenue ain’t no Bourbon Street. The Sinners are doing their best to fill the gap left by the Saints though.”

“Yes, they have quite a reputation, but that doesn’t seem to be hurting their play any this year. The next thirty seconds of the game will determine which of these teams goes on to win the wild card spot in the coming playoffs. The score is twenty-one, twenty with the Falcons in the lead. Three touchdowns to the Sinners’ two and two field goals, and thanks to Billodeaux’s long pass, the Sinners are now within easy field goal range again.”

“Give some credit to wideout, Connor Riley. This is a case of the receiver making the quarterback look good, Hank. Riley is the only man on the Sinners’ team that has the speed to get under a pass that was overthrown by a mile on the third down. Billodeaux has an arm, but not much control. The loss of veteran quarterback, Art Golden, with a broken leg at the beginning of the third quarter is going to hurt the Sinners in the playoffs unless Billodeaux settles down. But, the boy has potential. Could be Art might get his only Super Bowl ring sitting on the bench after playing out his last years on this young team.”

“There’s the whistle, Al. As the meat wagon goes into the tunnel, the Sinners’ field goal team takes the field. Ancient Andy Mortenson gets into position, kicks, and it’s good. At forty-two, he’s still got the toe. The Sinners go on to the playoffs.”

## CHAPTER 2

The night had been hellish. Every few hours, a nurse would enter her room and gently shake Stevie Dowd awake to the terrible pain of her concussion. Then, she would ask her patient some idiotic question like, “Do you know where you are, dear?”

“Hospital. Pain,” Stevie would answer.

“We’ll be able to give you something for that in the morning if the doctor okays it. Now go back to sleep.” Just about the time Stevie was resting again, the routine would start all over again.

In the morning, an orderly brought her a breakfast tray. The glassy eye of a poached egg in a cup made her stomach roil, but she did choke down the toast, a cup of hot tea, and a few spoonfuls of orange Jell-O guided to her mouth with a shaking hand. As a reward for her good behavior, an Indian doctor with slick black hair and a wide smile prescribed a mild painkiller which allowed Stevie to turn her head very slowly from side to side without the sensation that her brains were coming out through her nose. She dozed.

When she woke, Stevie found she could focus her eyes again. That was one worry out of the way. Carefully, she pulled out the front of her hospital gown and peered down into the aperture. A large bruise about the size of a football helmet was forming in the center of her chest. The inner sides of both breasts were prune purple. Below them, the white bandages that held her broken ribs in place covered her torso to the waist. The bruise seemed to continue beyond the bandages, but it was dark down there and hard to tell. The Indian doctor had said she was very, very lucky that her lungs had not been punctured or worse internal damage done.

“Those football players, they are like bulldozers,” he claimed. Stevie thought it was more like being hit by a fast moving SUV, then run over by an eighteen-wheeler coming from the other direction

Around one, the flowers and the guests began arriving. The Sinners’ organization sent three dozen red roses in an enormous black vase that took up most of the space on her window sill. A stuffed toy red devil was attached to its base with a red bow. A small, white winter bouquet made up mostly of spider mums and glittering curlicue thingamabobs had a card that read, “I’ll get your camera back to you, baby. Dex.”

She started to shake her head - no-no-no, this could not be happening again -but the inside of her head collided with her skull and forced her to stop. Up until that moment, her worst fear had been that her Canon had been ripped from her hands by the impact and was now in the possession of some groundskeeper who had found it after the game and thrown out the memory card. Stevie had just learned that there were worse fears than her worst fears.

The rest of the flowers were delivered in person. A flustered day nurse preceded them. She handed Stevie a disposable comb and a warm washcloth.

“You might want to clean up a little. Three of the biggest men I have ever seen are asking to see you. I tell you, that is some prime, grade-A beef on the hoof out there at

the nurses' station. Sinners players," she added as if Stevie might not get the drift of the conversation.

"My vest. Is it in the closet?" Stevie asked in a panic. "There's lipstick and some mascara and blush in the top right pocket."

The nurse checked and pulled it out on a hanger. She helped Stevie wobble into the bathroom. The little plastic container of blush was cracked and its contents scattered, but Stevie managed to brush up a little color for her checks. When she missed her eyelid and drew a row of lines down her cheek, the good nurse took the mascara wand and darkened her lashes for her. The eyebrow pencil was broken in two, but the tip still worked well enough. Stevie added some frosty pink lipstick, combed her hair back and secured it with a blue scrunchie from another pocket in the vest. "How do I look," she asked the nurse.

"As good as you are going to. Might want to use the potty while you're in here. Let me check for blood before you flush."

Stevie obeyed and hobbled back to bed. The last sounds of the flush were dying away when the room filled with Sinners. They came bearing gifts. She recognized Joe Dean Billodeaux, a Cajun quarterback who hadn't played much, but had a way with the ladies that kept him in the gossip columns regularly. He was the smallest of the three - if a man over six feet tall and weighing one-ninety could be considered small. He had well-developed shoulders, slim hips, a killer smile, and one red rose which he added to the enormous bouquet on the windowsill.

"*Comment ca va, cher?*" he asked.

"*Tres bien, merci. Et vous?*" The opening dialog of her high school French class came back to her in an instant. She just hoped he wasn't going to continue in that language because otherwise, she was drawing a blank.

"Why, I'm just great, and you don't look so bad yourself for someone who's been tackled by the Rev. You know, Billodeaux means 'love letter' in my language." Joe Dean was elbowed aside by the enormous black man hulking behind him.

"Get out wit' your Cajun crap. Let a man apologize for putting this pretty lady in the hospital."

The Rev knew what women wanted. He offered a two layer box of Godiva chocolates and placed it on her nightstand. The man was wide but tall. A small solid gut sat atop thighs the size of telephone poles, and when a smile spread across his deep brown face, his head and neck seemed even larger than they had a minute before.

Several inches taller than the Rev, a good six-five, the unmistakable Connor Riley hung back in the doorway. He gripped a small bouquet of daisies in front of the large chest that could push through a defensive line if he had to in order to gain the open space where his long legs would take him beyond the meanest blockers. His golden hair was brushed back behind his ears, and the long ends curled up on his wide shoulders. Connor was the only one of the group not smiling. He took a step into the room.

"Do you remember me, Stephanie?" he asked, almost shy.

"Certainly. Connor Riley, wide receiver for the New Orleans Sinners, last seen through my view finder yesterday with thirty seconds to play in the game. Your team did win?" she asked, trying to put him at ease.

He was the most stricken about her condition of the three, but then, he was the one who had landed directly on her and put that helmet-sized bruise on her chest. Thank heaven, her legs had splayed open, or both of them might have been broken.

“Sure did. Ancient Andy came through for us again,” Billodeaux answered for the tongue-tied Riley.

“Do you remember Kevin Riley?” Connor hinted.

“Of course, the first of my lying, cheating boyfriends. See, no brain damage from the fall,” Stevie answered glibly.

Then, she put a hand to her mouth and took it away again. “Oh, no! Kevin’s little brother. All this time following the Sinners, and I never tied the name to Kevin. I guess I put everything to do with Kevin out of my mind. We played football together once when you were just a high school kid.”

Connor sidled up to the bed, seized the only chair, and presented his bouquet. “You said you liked daisies because they were simple and cheerful.”

“And you remembered that? We only met the one time when he brought me home to meet your parents, but they were out of town. Your brother dumped me the next weekend because we’d dated three months, and I hadn’t put out for him. But you remembered that I liked daisies?” Stevie took the flowers and gave Connor a friendly smile.

“You were the most beautiful, most fun, most talented girl Kevin ever brought home, and he went back to Merrilee even though she cheated on him. I sacked you into a pile of leaves that afternoon,” Riley said earnestly.

“I shoved pecan leaves down your shirt. We were supposed to be playing touch football.”

It was all coming back to her now - a lovely home on Lake Pontchartrain with a big wooded lot and an open area to play football, the rewards Kevin’s father had earned with his engineering company building bridges and bypasses across the Louisiana swamps. Kevin was supposed to get his degree in the same field and join the business. Stevie supposed he had. She knew he had married Merrilee the following spring just before he graduated.

“So how is Kevin doing?”

“Married, works with my dad, has four kids,” Connor recited.

He did not want to talk about Kevin - Kevin who had lured Stephanie to the house when he knew their parents were away visiting Aunt Helga, who was recovering from surgery. The only snag was his little brother who had decided to stay home. Instead of the planned seduction, they had played touch football, ordered pizza, and watched a video. So, Kev never did sleep with the wonderful Stephanie. He had wondered.

“Oh my, four children, and Kevin only thirty,” Stevie replied.

“The big family was Merrilee’s idea. They got an early start. She knows how to hang on to a man.” By getting pregnant and staying pregnant, he wanted to add, but this wasn’t the place or time to tell Stephanie all about Merrilee.

“Well, I’m glad someone knew how to hang on to Kevin. Would you pour a glass of water for me?”

“Sure.” Connor’s hand shook as he poured from the squat pink plastic pitcher on the bedside table. Water dribbled from the bottom of the cup as he held it out for her and

made splotches down the front of her white hospital gown. He pulled a wad of tissue from a handy box and was about to swab Stevie's chest, but she waved him away.

"Bruised, very bruised, don't touch. It will dry."

"Do you want me to hold the cup while you drink?" Connor asked.

"No." Stevie poked the bouquet of daisies into the water and set them by the Godiva chocolates. "Another thing I like about daisies is that they are tough and long-lasting, but even daisies need water."

Connor nodded as if she had said something very profound. "Where have you been all these years, Stephanie?" he asked, gazing into her eyes.

At the foot of the bed, Joe Dean shifted uneasily and exchanged looks with the Rev. The man might as well have said, "Where have you been all my life?" It was an old pickup line, but said in that tone of voice, might have been a proposal rather than a proposition.

"Let's see. After Kevin, I did my senior year abroad in Italy. I liked it so much over there I stayed on for graduate work. I was doing serious black and whites of wrinkled, old women and coloreds of the Tuscan landscape, nothing too original. Then, Marcello suggested we go to see the horse races in Siena, a once a year, no-holds barred event. That was the first time I covered a sport."

Stevie's eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed as she talked with enthusiasm about her profession. "There was something about getting a split second shot at a critical moment that grabbed me. I sold a few of those pictures, then started going to soccer games, bicycle races, anywhere there was action to be captured."

Connor said, "Marcello?"

"This guy I lived with for a year or so. Anyhow, I came back to the States with a nice sports portfolio, but found out it's quite a boy's club - very hard for a woman to get a start. I did get a few assignments to cover women's sports, gymnastics, golf, that kind of thing, but never the big three, football, basketball, or baseball, unless I did it on spec. Finally, finally, I get in on the ground to photograph the Sinners, and I wind up in the hospital thanks to my own carelessness." She shrugged, then winced as her broken ribs shifted.

"Would any of you happen to know what became of my camera? There were some surefire cover shots in it."

"No worries, Stephanie. I gave it to one of the press people named Dexter Sykes and told him to get it to *Sports Illustrated* just the way you wanted. I said it better be your name on any shots they used or else he could deal with me." Connor patted her hand.

"Ah, thanks, Connor. I was a little worried. Dex and I have a history, a bad history. He sent me a note saying he had my camera, and I wasn't sure if it was just a nasty joke or the truth, but you've eased my mind. Dex wouldn't cross anyone as big as you. Heck, he probably wouldn't cross me again. I blacked his eye just before I threw him out."

"You and Dexter have - been together, Stephanie?"

"Yes, I have no talent for finding honest men or keeping them, okay? And about this Stephanie business. I have hated that name since the day I was born, and Steffie is even worse. Please call me Stevie. All the guys do."

“Okay, Stevie, then,” but Connor’s expression was one of sorrow. He had thought of her as Stephanie all these years.

Joe Dean was stirring with impatience like the hyperactive child he had once been. “Say Con, we ought to let Stevie get some rest, and go and visit old Artie. He’s somewhere in this building, too. I need to see how he’s doing.”

“I suspect your motives, Joe. How about we pass through the children’s ward and spread a little sunshine while we’re here,” the Rev suggested in his deep preacher’s voice, the ghetto accent packed away somewhere.

“Sure.” Connor Riley pushed reluctantly out of the room’s single chair. “I’ll come back to see you, Stephanie, ah, Stevie.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m as tough as these daisies.”

“And just as sweet and pretty, too.”

She laughed, shook her head “no”, and instantly regretted the motion. “Go,” she said.

On their way out the door, the three big men collided with a stocky fireplug of a woman bearing a large, white teddy bear. She gave them a slight nod as they stepped aside and lit up with a big grin as she saw Stevie.

“Stevie, baby doll, what have men done to you now?”

“Jackie! How did you know?” they heard Stephanie answer.

The three players continued down the corridor. Joe Dean placed Stevie’s guest first. “Jackie Haile, Ladies Professional Golf Tour, top money winner this year.”

The Rev could not resist a jab at Joe Dean. “You follow women’s golf, do you? Kills the time while you warm the bench?”

“Rev, I take an interest in women, even the ones not likely to be interested in me,” the second-string quarterback retorted.

Connor Riley looked worried.

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Jackie Haile sat down in the chair, its seat still warm from Connor’s backside. She snuggled the teddy bear under the covers next to Stevie. “Here’s someone to keep you company in bed since you won’t have none of me.”

“Stop it, Jackie. You’re a great friend, but that’s all. Live with it. Now tell me how you got here.”

“I was doing a charity tournament sponsored by one of the casinos down in Biloxi. Not a bad gig, great room, wonderful food, big-name entertainment as they say. I was having a cold one in the bar after my round, watching the Sinners’ game, and saw you get sacked. Knew it was you by the blonde ponytail flying up in the air even before they announced your name in the replays. Figured that must have hurt. So, I called around to a couple of New Orleans hospitals, and when we got rained out, I rented a car, and here I am to cheer you up in your time of need.”

“Thanks for coming, but what I really need is another painkiller for this head. See if you can get a nurse for me. I buzzed awhile ago.”

Jackie strode off into the hall and strong-armed a passing nurse into the room. None too happy about the abduction, the nurse read Stevie’s chart. “Sorry, Miss Dowd, you’ll have to wait another half hour for medication. I’ll be back then.” Stevie remembered not to shrug and instead, gritted her teeth.

“Poor baby doll. Leave it to a pack of oversized boys to mess up the one photographer who ever took a pretty picture of me,” Jackie said sympathetically.

“It wasn’t a pretty picture. It showed your powerful swing. It showed your power as a woman,” Steve declared.

“And the head shot showed my beautiful ears. No one but you ever noticed my ears. I think they are my best feature.” Jackie Haile smoothed back her close-cropped dark hair. Tiny gold hoops pierced each of the small, nicely formed ears lying close to her head. “I tell you, you are wasting yourself on men. Come over to the other side for some real lovin’, Stevie.”

“There hasn’t been a man in my life for more than a year, speaking of which, Connor Riley gave my camera to Dexter Sykes to take care of it for me.”

“Why didn’t he just stamp on it with his big feet?” Jackie answered, knowing Stevie’s history with Dex. “Want me to beat up Sykes for you?”

“That’s the second offer I’ve had today. I can do my own fighting. I just hope any shots he submits end up with my name on them. The last time he sent in my photos, he got the credit line and offered to share the check with me.”

“And you blacked his eye and made him sign the check over to you, but I never did see your name on that cover of Smokey LeBlanc hitting the game-winning homer.”

“Dex claimed it was a labeling accident. They did print a tiny correction in the next issue, but I’m not sure anyone noticed. My past just keeps repeating itself. Guess who Connor Riley is?”

“Lying, cheating Marcello’s American cousin?” Jackie guessed.

“Nope. Kevin the Rat’s brother. I met him once when he was seventeen and didn’t even recall his name. Can you believe he remembered that I liked daisies? That was ten years ago.”

“Brought these, did he?” Jackie flicked the flowers with the short-cut, unpolished nails of her thick fingers. “Sounds like a schoolboy crush to me.”

“I hope not. There is no way I want to be mixed up with Kevin Riley’s family again. Besides, I’ve given up on men. And I’m not ready to take up women,” Stevie added as Jackie grinned at her.

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Connor, Joe Dean, and the Rev had passed through the children’s ward autographing anything that was held out to them, paper napkins, coloring books, stuffed toys, and high-fiving little hands so small and weak their slaps could barely be felt on the calloused palms of the athletes.

“Seeing little kids with IV’s in their arms and maybe dying depresses the hell out of me,” Joe Dean Billodeaux sighed as they rode the elevator up to Art Golden’s suite.

“It’s a blessing for your soul, brother. Makes you appreciate what the Lord gave you when you was a child - good health and good parents. From what I hear about your escapades, Joe Dean, you better be scoring a few points in heaven,” the Rev answered.

“I wish you’d just retire and take over your daddy’s church like you always say you’re going to do,” Joe Dean sulked. “Don’t you think it’s time he hung up his pads and followed his calling, Con? A lot of good would come from it. A much weaker Falcons defensive team for one thing. Right?”

Connor Riley was not following their banter. “You don’t really think Stephanie is a lesbian, do you?”

“Hell, no. She mentioned relationships with three men in the half hour we were in her room. Of course, she could swing both ways. Her and Jackie Haile, all sweaty, doing it in a sand trap. That has its possibilities. I might have to check out our Stevie after she mends.”

Connor gave Joe Dean an ungentle elbow in the ribs. “She’s not your Stevie.”

“Hey, I’m still bruised there from the game. Doesn’t sound like Stevie Dowd has been saving her virginity for you the last ten years, Con. She must be pushing thirty, too. The age thing makes them desperate. As far as I’m concerned, Stevie is a loose ball that anyone can jump on top of.”

“Stevie is twenty-nine. Her birthday is in November and mine is in February so that makes her just two and a quarter years older than me, and she will never be desperate enough to sleep with you!”

Connor slammed the quarterback against the elevator’s control panel. The lights for several floors lit up, and the elevator slid to a stop three floors short of their goal. The door opened, and a pretty student nurse with red curls bobbing stepped inside.

Joe Dean slipped out of Connor’s grasp and gave her his best smile. “Sugar, you sure are going to be the most beautiful nurse on this floor one of these days,” he came on to her.

The Rev stepped between Joe Dean and the blushing student nurse. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Joe. We need to talk about celibacy.”

“Not having any, thanks. Or rather, I’m getting plenty and would like some more.” Joe peered around the Rev at the student nurse, who scurried out when the elevator door opened again. “Guess I scared her.”

“I expect you to be a gentleman about this, Joe. Connor here has an interest in Miss Stevie. You let him court her. If she turns him down, then you get a chance, understood?”

“Court her? Count me out.” Billodeaux waited, tapping his foot for the doors to open on their floor. Connor Riley relaxed.

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In Art Golden’s hospital suite, an identical black vase of red roses sent by the Sinners’ management adorned his coffee table. The quarterback’s right leg was strung up in traction, and at the other end from the wires and pulleys, Art Golden’s weathered face looked up at the ceiling from its nest of pillows. He was in his own blue silk pajamas, shorties to accommodate his cast. The bump from a previous break of his collarbone showed at the V-neckline of his top, and the scars from elbow surgery were visible just below his right sleeve. He was none too happy to see Joe Dean come into view.

“Guess you guys heard the news already,” he said, looking miserable.

“We’ve been in the hospital most of the afternoon visiting the photographer I sacked and the children’s ward,” Connor told him.

“Looks like my football days are over. The doctors tell me if I ever smash this leg up again, I could lose it or walk with a permanent limp for the rest of my life. Brenda is happy at last. She’s been mad ever since the Cowboys released me, and I signed with the Sinners for three years. Wouldn’t move here to the Big Easy. She stays on the ranch with the kids. Says it’s a healthier environment, and when I am ready to admit that

thirty-eight is too old to play pro ball, she'll put out the welcome mat. I guess my wife just got her wish."

"There will be life after football, Art," the Rev said as if he were visiting a hospice.

"Yeah, I should spend more time with my two boys. Daniel's got a good arm, and Austin has speed. Guess you got your wish, too, Billodeaux. You'll be the one taking the team to the playoffs. Hope you make it past the first game," said Art without enthusiasm.

"Connor and me have that all worked out. I pass. He catches. Easy," Joe Dean joked.

"Look, I saw the replays on the news. You were gambling Riley would be there when the ball came down 'cause he wasn't anywhere in the area when you threw it. That's a dangerous thing to do in the playoffs."

"But it worked this time, and we had nothing to lose but the game if I didn't try it."

"I'm just saying you better work on your short passes, and try running a few yourself, or you'll end up getting Connor hurt if you go to him too often. Just take the advice from the old war horse and say thank you."

"*Merci beaucoup*, then," Joe Dean answered resentfully.

"So, what now?" Connor asked trying to take conversation in another direction.

"Oh, some ranching. I raise quarter horses for a hobby. Might open up a barbecue place like I've always wanted. Free meals for any of my old teammates. You know, the usual thing washed-up football players do."

"You are done playing, not washed-up," counseled the Rev.

"Never made it to the Super Bowl. Got no ring to show for it," Art Golden said with real regret.

"You're still on the team, Artie, and me and Riley are going to get you that ring for sure," Joe Dean swore.

Art gave his visitors a melancholy smile. "I guess it will be easier than doing it myself."