

KICKS FOR A SINNER

By

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CHAPTER ONE

“If your mama mentions our little frozen babies one more time, I swear I will brain her with her own cast-iron skillet!” Nell removed the bacon tray from the microwave oven and slammed its door.

Joe Dean Billodeaux, star quarterback of the New Orleans Sinners, reformed womanizer and good family man, hunkered down behind his newspaper in a time-honored way learned from his father. Only now the newspaper, thin, crinkly, and rolling up at both ends, did not provide much shelter from a woman’s wrath. Who knew they made any paper cheaper than newsprint? Not exactly the way he’d planned to spend the first day of the off-season. The kids in school, Corazon’s day off. No *huevos rancheros* for breakfast this morning. He simply wanted a hearty meal followed by a return to the bedroom with his feisty little wife tucked under his arm. Did not look like he would get his wish *this* time.

Nell raged, “Our twins are in kindergarten, Tommy in first grade, and Dean in second. We’ve earned our time without dirty diapers and baby puke. Nadine has seventeen grandchildren already. If she wants more, let your sisters have them.”

The toaster popped, and Nell took four pieces of browned whole wheat bread from the slots, buttered them, and severed the stack of slices in half. He waited until she put down the knife.

“You know how Mama loves babies, and the grandchildren haven’t started producing yet. Allie, Eenie, Lizzie, and Izzy are all older than us and say they’re done having kids. Catholic or not, if the Pope wants more children in this world, he should have them himself. That’s what Allie said.”

“I agree with her wholeheartedly.”

Nell pushed the mass of yellow eggs around in the non-stick pan. Not a chance in the world she would add a little bacon grease the way his mama did. His wife believed in healthy eating and that did keep her petite figure slim and perky. No, she would pour that grease into a paper cup and dispose of it. At least, she hadn’t inflicted turkey bacon on him yet.

He’d told Mama he would talk to Nell, a dangerous play to call. “It’s just that she knows we have those three frozen embryos sitting in a container in Phoenix. We did promise Father Ardoin we would use ‘em all.”

“You promised and she promised, but not me.” Nell slid the scrambled eggs onto a large plate, garnished them with a heap of bacon and a pile of toast, and slapped his breakfast in front

of him. The table jiggled causing his glasses of orange juice and milk to slosh over onto the table—which made him very glad he held the cup of hot coffee in his hand.

“You know how I feel about keeping my vows,” he mumbled into the mug.

She hadn’t finished yet. “Do you remember how difficult those days were before we implanted the twins? Do you know how hard it is to carry twins, and now you want to try for triplets?”

“I’ve been reading up, and it won’t be as bad this time. You take the drugs that get you ready, and we can have as much sex as we want beforehand since I don’t have to save up for the fertilization process. We won’t have Emily to cope with this time either. She might be your sister and our egg donor, but that woman doesn’t make anything easier. Besides, having twins didn’t hurt you any. You only got more voluptuous, sugar.”

Her breasts were bigger and her hips a little fuller, but she wouldn’t want to hear that last observation. Joe Dean gave his wife one of his patented sure-to-get-you-laid grins. She put her hands on her wider hips. Those big, brown eyes of hers narrowed and her usually full, tender lips thinned. She still reminded him of a tiny, infuriated, brunette fairy with her hair always worn in a pixie cut. Once, he’d talked her into letting her locks grow out. She’d reminded him eerily of the bitchy, conniving Emily, and he hadn’t minded a bit when she’d cut them off, donating her ponytail to make wigs for cancer victims.

“Don’t think you are going to get around me with sex, Joe Dean Billodeaux.”

“Around you, over you, and under you.” He half rose from the table.

She pushed his broad shoulders down. “Eat your breakfast. We have another problem to discuss.”

“This can’t be good for the digestion, Tink,” he said, using her pet name. But, he sat and dug into the eggs.

“Cassie is coming over again this weekend.”

“So what? She is Tommy’s birth mother. We do have an open adoption with her.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Cassie is past twenty-one now. She’d not a scared, pregnant teenager anymore, but a very attractive young woman with a college degree in child psychology going straight on for her master’s exactly like I did. Joe, I think she believes she is in love with you, and that’s why she hangs around here so much, not simply to visit Tommy.”

“In love wit’ *moi*? *Mais, cher*, I’m all beat up from playing football and ten year older den her. Me, I don’t notice she grown up, no.” He tried to humor her with his cute Cajun routine.

Truthfully, he had noticed. His total fidelity to Nell didn’t mean he couldn’t look at other women now and again. Cassie Thomas had morphed into a blue-eyed, red-haired beauty, though she toned down that hair with blonde streaks and covered her freckles with makeup now. She had legs way longer than Nell’s and a nice rack, too. When Cassie rode one of their quarter horses around the barrel-racing course, she reminded him of their old acquaintance Norma Jean Scruggs, not in looks but in spirit and style. Still, Cassie seemed more like a daughter than a woman on the make to him.

The trouble with Nell when she got an idea in her head, no matter how wrong, she let it build like a hurricane in the Gulf until it led to disaster. She needed to be distracted, the sooner the better.

“Put on that cute Cajun routine all you want, Joe. I know what I see when she looks at you. And dammit, you are still a very tall, dark, and handsome man.”

Nell leaned from her place beside him at the table where she'd sat down to have this discussion with a cup of black coffee not nearly as strong as his Mama made in her hands. She smoothed away that black curl on his forehead, gazed into his dark chocolate eyes, and ran her pinkie along his full, delicious lips. That's all it took. He was up and ready. She should have known better than to succumb to touching him when they needed to have a serious discussion.

Joe grasped her around the waist and headed for the kitchen counter. Her barely over five feet tall, about one-hundred pounds body never could resist his six-three, over two-hundred pounds of incredibly toned flesh. He could pretty much do what he wanted with her when he wanted. Still, she protested, pushing against his chest with her hands.

"Joe, put me down! We need to talk about this situation with Cassie. We cannot have counter sex. Someone might walk in."

He gave her that white-toothed grin blazing out of his tanned Cajun complexion, no stopping him now. To love Joe Dean was to have frequent sex with Joe Dean. Not that Nell minded most of the time. They had barely moved into his white-columned mansion when he discovered the kitchen counter had the perfect height to make up for the disparity in theirs. When the children were babies, she hadn't mined at all, but now counter sex had become riskier. You never knew when someone would interrupt.

"Like who? Everyone is gone."

He sat her down between the butter and the remaining bacon draining on a paper towel. Moving fast, he had her snug jeans unsnapped and those long thumbs of his inserted in her panties, pushing both garments down around her ankles. His hands moved up under her stretchy, red top and unsnapped her bra. He dabbed a finger in the soft butter and rubbed it on her nipples, all the while kissing her neck from ear lobe to collarbone and beyond. The top and bra, too much in the way, came off. He sucked a nipple, paused, and said, "I am so, so glad we haven't switched to margarine."

Nell gave him a light punch in the bicep, not that he cared. She was no three-hundred pound lineman beating up on him. Nothing more to do than close her eyes, lean back on her hands, and enjoy the moment. She spread her legs to take him inside her body. Bracing her hips with his hands, he went long and deep. He kept up a steady rhythm until the two-minute warning came with her small scream. He picked up the pace and scored a big one. Nell collapsed with her head on his shoulder. She'd put her hand down in the butter somewhere along the way and overturned the dish. Joe licked it off her palm.

"Stop that! We still need to talk."

"Nell, even if Cassie does have crush on me, I just proved how much I love you. She's never getting none of this."

"Easy for you to say, but..."

The kitchen doorknob turned. A person stood outside trying to peek through the crack in the little fringe of curtains over the pane in the door.

"You in there, Joe Dean? What for you lockin' your doors now? I brung y'all a nice bread pudding wit' the high meringue the way you like it. Okay, you still in bed. For shame, so late in the day. I'm gonna get the key and set this on the table, you hear."

"Jesus God, it's Mama!" Joe hiked Nell off the counter and gave her a tiny swat on the rear. "Run, Tink."

Nell gathered up the jeans around her ankles and snatched her bra and top from the counter. Admiring her sweet, naked behind, Joe watched his wife retreat to the powder room in

the hall. Leisurely, he tucked himself in and buckled his belt. By the time his mother had foraged the hidden key from the shrubbery, he stood at the door ready to take her on.

“Hi, Ma.” Joe pecked her cheek. “Let me take that. Looks delicious.” He deposited the pan of bread pudding topped with lightly browned meringue and drizzled with rum sauce on the kitchen table.

“Did I interrupt anything?”

Nadine eyed the overturned butter dish and a few strips of bacon that had fallen to the floor. She sniffed the air. Joe sure hoped the scent of the bacon trumped the smell of sex.

“Nope, only breakfast.”

“It’s okay. You married now.” Nadine helped herself to a triangle of toast and shoved some of Joe’s food onto it. “These eggs is cold. Speaking of which, you talk to Nell about our little frozen babies, yet?”

“Sure. I promised. She says she isn’t ready for more kids yet.”

“What? Been five years since you had any. You got this great big house to fill, son, and we did swear we’d use all them eggs instead of waiting on God to do the job if He’d bless our going with doctors and test tubes and such. I thought a little dessert might sweeten Nell up, but I can see you got your own way of doing that.”

With a big smile plastered on her face, Nell entered the kitchen. “Hi, Nadine, you’re out early this morning. Want some coffee?”

In the past five years, her sturdy mother-in-law had gotten more iron gray in her black hair, but her strong features hadn’t softened a bit. Though Joe Dean had gotten his daddy’s height and build, he resembled this woman more than she liked to admit. She supposed they could both be described as handsome.

“I never turn down coffee, *cher*. You got grease stains on your shirt, here and here.”

“Um, so I do. Must have happened when I made the bacon.” Nell filled a mug for her mother-in-law and hastened to take a bottle of disinfectant from a cabinet and begin vigorously wiping down the counter. The smashed butter went into the trash, the dish into the washer and the fallen bacon into a dustpan.

Nadine all but spit out her coffee. “What, you don’t use dark roast no more? This stuff is weak enough to water plants wit’.”

“It’s decaf.”

“Figures. So, about your little frozen babies.”

Nell clutched the handle of the dustpan like she would raise it as a weapon. Joe pried it from her hand, disposed of the bacon, and put it in its place.

“We have embryos, not babies, only a collection of cells.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you was Cat’lic, dear. You should convert. Less confusing for the children than going to two churches.”

“They can choose what religion they want when they get old enough,” Nell growled. Joe slid his arms around his wife and held her tight.

“Touchy, touchy. I thought you liked Father Ardoin.”

“I do. He’s a fine old man, but our babies, I mean embryos, are none of his business. I might add that none of your daughters has more than four children either.”

“Well, they don’t got to carry on the Billodeaux name. You have two daughters and Dean, but little Tommy ain’t Joe’s blood. Not like I don’t love him as much as the rest. Still, a few more sons wouldn’t hurt.”

“Tommy *is* a Billodeaux. His natural father is Joe’s rotten cousin, Bijou, remember? And I’m the one who will suffer having more babies.”

“Oh, *cher*, it went hard wit’ you las’ time, the babies coming in the accident the way they did. We gonna have another novena to make sure that don’t happen again. We’ll pray for three nice healthy babies and a normal birth.”

“There is nothing normal about in vitro or triplets. Look Nadine, thanks for the bread pudding, but you need to leave now.”

Over Nell’s head, Joe nodded and mouthed, “Leave it to me.”

“I understand. You need a tee-tiny bit more time. I’m going. Hug my grandbabies for me.” Nadine moved her interfering self out the door.

“Easy, easy,” Joe said as if he were gentling one of the horses. He turned Nell in his arms and held her against his broad chest. At least, his mama had taken her mind off Cassie.

“Say, I forgot to tell you I invited a guest for the weekend.”

“Just what I need right now, another houseguest.”

“It’s our rookie kicker, Howdy . . .”

“Are you still calling that poor kid Howdy?”

“Aw, come on. He walks into training camp wearing his cowboy boots and hat and greets all the guys with a big ole howdy like he’s some country hick. Plus, he looks exactly like that dummy from back in the Fifties, the one who ran around with a clown and an Indian princess. Sort of reddish-brown hair flopping in his face over big blue eyes, freckles across his nose, all lanky and loose-jointed, a huge stupid grin on his face. And he’s a kicker. He just begged to be called that.”

“Come on. He’s a sweet, good looking boy, and he got the Sinners into the playoffs with his field goal. You should treat him with more respect. But must we have him over this weekend? I was looking forward to being alone with you and the children—and Cassie, I suppose.”

“Nell, the kid has no family. His grandparents raised him, and they’ve both passed on. I asked what his plans for the off-season were, and he said he’d just go back to Oklahoma and knock around the little ranch his grandpa left him, try to fix it up all alone.”

He watched the hard, angry line of Nell’s mouth soften and her brown eyes fill with sympathy. Nothing like a kid in need to melt her heart. “Fine, let him visit.”

“I got an idea. Since you’re so concerned about how Cassie might feel about me, why don’t we nudge the two together? He’s a real nice guy, Baptist, doesn’t drink hard liquor, smoke, or run around with bad women. Cassie comes from a huge family, and he needs a family. Not everyone is lucky enough to have lots of relatives, brothers and sisters. Having a big family is great.”

“Enough, Joe. Don’t push. We’ll introduce them, and I’d better not hear one more word about frozen babies today.”

“I swear you won’t.”

There, one problem solved, get Cassie fixated on another man. As for more babies, Joe did not remind Nell of the prediction made by the old *traiteur*, Madame Leleux, who had the sight. They would have twelve children and get them this way, that way, all ways. Madame Leleux, now dead and gone, had never gotten the future wrong. More Billodeaux babies were on the way for sure, and Nell couldn’t stop them from coming.

CHAPTER TWO

Cassie Thomas sat beneath one of the massive live oaks dotting Joe's ranch and watched the red-headed boy she'd given birth to as a teenager six years ago circle the riding ring on a pinto pony named Boo. She could stand another typical Billodeaux family weekend with a smile on her face as long as she managed to be close to Joe.

Sure, as a kid recovering from leukemia, she'd had a crush on his former wide receiver, Connor Riley, a really good guy devoted to his wife, Stevie. Who could compete with tall, blonde Stevie Dodd, glamorous sports photographer? That couple didn't want children interfering with their fabulous lives. At least, they had none so far. But Joe married Nell only so he could make a home for his illegitimate son, Dean, and then convinced Nell to adopt her Tommy.

Tommy could not have better parents, she granted. Once Joe Dean Billodeaux settled down, he'd done so with the same kind of concentration and joy he brought to the game of football. His teammates often called him Daddy Joe, but barely over thirty and hardly an old man Cassie still found him so very attractive. His love of children made him even more desirable in her eyes.

Nell, being a child psychologist unable to have children in the normal way, did love her Tommy as well as Dean and the twin girls produced from her sister's eggs and Joe's sperm, but she had to be the organizer and the disciplinarian because Joe preferred to have fun with the kids whenever he spent time at home. And Nell had been beyond kind to her, raising her child, always allowing Cassie to be part of his life, mentoring her through college when she'd chosen the same field of study.

She did feel some qualms about trying to lure Joe away from Nell, but she could offer the quarterback so much more. Coming from a family with eleven offspring and outstanding fertility, she could give him as many children as he wanted. She'd overheard Nell again today tell Joe she thought they had a big enough family and to shut up about those little frozen babies. The dispute had been going on for some time, a first wedge in their marriage. As a Catholic exactly like Joe, Cassie understood how he felt while Nell obviously did not.

When she'd first decided to follow in Nell's footsteps and become a child psychologist, she gave her reasons as a desire to be closer to Tommy and to help other foolish girls lured into sex with older men, then abandoned as Bijou had done to her in Arizona. Okay, Nell had saved her and lost one of her newly implanted babies in the process, but she'd given Nell her son in reparation. That made them even.

As she grew up, Joe became the attraction, a perfect match for her with their mutual love of horses. Nell could barely ride no matter how often her husband took her out on long excursions. Sometimes, Cassie watched the children for them until they returned with Nell always looking disheveled as if she'd fallen from her mount a few times. Joe said Cassie sat a horse tighter than a cocklebur.

Since Bijou and all through college, she'd given herself to no other man, saving herself for Joe, she told herself. Nell, she knew from a few frank conversations between only the two of

them, had been with at least four men before marrying Joe, maybe more. Of course, Joe probably had been with hundreds of bed partners back when he prided himself on womanizing, but that's the way God created young men. He'd settled down now and deserved someone younger and fresher than Nell. Once Joe divorced his wife, she and he could take Tommy and Dean, leaving Nell with the girls so she wouldn't be all alone. They'd all remain friends like Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher and Bruce Willis. She did love reading about situations like that in the tabloids, her secret guilty pleasure.

“Lookit, Mama Nell! Lookit, Mama Cassie!”

Tommy dropped his knotted reins over the horn, stood up in his saddle, and raised his arms toward a chilly, blue January sky. The patient Boo continued on around the ring at a steady pace. Dean shot by Tom riding his chestnut half-Arabian, Drummer Boy, and obscuring his brother's feat in a cloud of dust.

The twins on the older ponies Joe had rescued from Phoenix cried out, “Mom, make Deanie stop that!” Despite being very young, all the Billodeaux children rode better than their mother.

“Dean, you come over here at once,” Nell commanded from her seat on a fence rail.

Cassie uncurled her long legs. Foolishly, she'd worn heels high enough to make Nell seem like a dwarf beside her and skinny jeans so tight the word “comfort” could not have squeezed into them. Now, she hobbled across the rough lawn to the ring where Dean's chewing out progressed.

“You saw Tommy showing us his trick. How unkind and dangerous to try to upstage him. What if he had fallen and gotten hurt? Then how would you feel? I think you owe your brother an apology,” Nell chastised.

Dean hung his head a little and glanced sideways at Tommy who had come to a stop beside him. “Sorry, bro. It's just Drummer Boy is so much faster and bigger than Boo. He likes to run.”

“S'okay, Dean. I'm glad I don't have to ride a girlie horse anymore since you let me have Boo. Besides, I didn't fall off. Daddy says I'm like a tick on a long-eared dog when it comes to riding.” Tommy's happy grin squinched all his freckles together and crinkled the corners of his dark brown Billodeaux eyes. Cassie preferred to think his ability to stay on a horse came from her, not Bijou, the former bull rider.

“Poor Buttercup, you learned your lessons on her,” Nell said with some disapproval.

“Cowboys don't ride horses with names like Buttercup, Mama Nell. Do they, Mama Cassie?”

Cassie's heart filled with warmth as she answered her natural-born son. “No, they don't.”

“Come on, Deanie. Let's race.” Tommy took an illegal head start on his short-legged pony. Dish-faced Drummer Boy caught up in one stride.

Nell shouted to the little girls to pull to the side. “Watch out for your brothers!”

Cassie stayed back from the rails and the dust. She smoothed the pastel blue cashmere sweater over her chest and took a quick peek toward the barbecue pavilion where Joe manned the grill to see if he noticed how great she looked in her latest purchase guaranteed to draw the male eye. It fit snugly over a seamless Victoria's Secret bra that made her breasts look like perfect globes and shoved all she had into a deep cleavage in the v-neck of the garment. A small gold crucifix dangling exactly the right amount above this display pointed the way.

As a grad student and teaching assistant her income really did not stretch to include such luxuries. Their cost swelled her credit card bills, swamping her with growing interest payments. Oh well, Joe would take care of that someday—if he ever noticed she'd grown up. His eyes stayed on the burgers, hotdogs, and steaks he supervised on the grill. But that guy standing next to Joe, that Howdy they were trying to push on her, did see and went all wide-eyed, a wonder he didn't have to blot the drool from his lips with a napkin. How could Nell possibly think she would ever go for another cowboy type after Bijou?

Cassie twisted a strawberry blonde curl around her finger. Toning down her bright red hair at a fancy salon had cost her, but the results did please men. Many had told her so, but they didn't count. She'd let her hair grow long and trained it into smooth curls. She might have been a mixed-up kid when she first met Joe, but she did remember that before Nell he'd preferred busty blondes and redheads who flipped their hair over their shoulders to show off their breasts. The tabloids once featured plenty of pictures of the quarterback with exactly that kind of woman. She kept an album of them. Even without the miracle bra, her boobs were way bigger than Nell's round little tits. Cassie flipped her hair over her shoulders and inhaled to expand her chest. Joe flipped the hamburgers. Howdy smiled so broadly he could have caught the flies trying to get into the screened pavilion with his grin.

Her freckles gone, hidden under carefully applied makeup, her blue eyes enhanced with long, darkened lashes and dramatic liner, her lips all pouty and glossy, but did Joe Dean Billodeaux notice? Apparently not. He stuck a finger into his special steak sauce, tasted, and added a few more drops of hot sauce. Being too spicy for the children, Nell always made him serve it on the side. Cassie planned to show her appreciation of his culinary skills by slathering the concoction on her meat as soon as they sat down to eat. Joe said something to the new guy who loped from the pavilion and headed her way. He pulled up in front of her nervous as a shying horse.

“Joe says dinner is about ready, ma'am.”

She scowled at him. “Ma'am? We're exactly the same age.”

He lowered his blue eyes, but his glance skimmed across her tight sweater on the way. “My grandparents raised me, and they were kind of old-timey. They taught me to address all grown women as ma'am until told otherwise.”

True, when Nell introduced them with such a hopeful look on her pixie face, Cassie had barely given him a once over, let alone told him to call her by her first name. Instead, she'd flounced off to sit under the oaks even though in January, fair-skinned or not, she hardly needed to sit in the shade to watch the children ride. This guy, Howdy, introduced by his real and not much better name of Howard McCoy, took the hint and tamely followed Joe to the grill. So not an alpha male, the Sinners' rookie kicker lacked any aggressive attitude at all, it seemed. Cassie wondered how he survived on the football field, but then, all he did there was boot field goals and try to stay out of the way of the real players.

“Fine! Call me Cassie,” she snapped.

“Yes, ma'am, I mean Cassie. Dinner is served.” In a boyish gesture, he swiped away the hair hanging in his eyes and reset the baseball cap on his head.

Having done his butler duty by her, he ambled over to the others to deliver his message again. She would say one thing for Howdy, he did fill out his dark blue jeans very nicely under that ugly shirt—but not any better than Joe. Nell directed the children to tie up their ponies and wash their hands.

In the pavilion, the twins asked for someone to boost them up to sink level. Howdy tucked one under each arm and raised them to faucet. The curly-headed little girls took advantage to engage in a splashing game that left him with wet splotches on the front of his red Sinners t-shirt worn under an open green plaid flannel shirt. He looked like a Christmas tree, a wet and dripping Christmas tree. Joe always wore the black version of the Sinners' shirt and covered it today with a gray hoodie that stretched across his broad shoulders.

Still, she could tell the other guy exercised more than his legs as the damp T-shirt clung to a smoothly muscled chest. Cassie shook her own curls and turned to grab the seat at the picnic table closest to Joe who sat at its head in a folding chair. Dean beat her to the spot. Nell took a seat on Joe's left and slid down the bench to allow Howdy to deposit their daughters between them in case either girl needed help with their food.

"You two are like hauling a sack full of giggles," the cowboy said. Jude and Annie giggled some more.

"You're very good with children, Howard," Nell said as she distributed plastic plates cheerful with a sunflower pattern on the table covered with a dark green cloth weighted down with pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. Purposefully, she placed the extra plate on Cassie's side of the table leaving the kicker no choice but to sit next to her as Tommy had already slipped into the end place. As he slung his long legs over the bench, Cassie lifted Dean and plopped him down between them.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to your daddy all day, Dean. Why don't you sit next to nice Mr. Howdy."

"Okay." Dean reached for a burger already enrobed in a whole wheat bun and put a splotch of ketchup from a squeeze bottle under its lid before digging into his meal.

Nell, slightly pursing her lips, appeared displeased by the change in sitting arrangements, but that was just too bad. Ever plucky, she continued to pimp for Howard, pointing out again what a way he had with children.

"Did you come from a large family? Cassie belongs to an enormous family of eleven children." Nell squeezed a line of mustard onto Jude's hotdog and tucked some relish into the side of the bun.

"Don't you remember, I told you Howdy doesn't have any family," Joe remarked. He drew a frustrated sigh from his wife and shrugged his shoulders, puzzled. Impaling a thick, grilled t-bone from a platter, he asked, "Who wants one of these babies?"

Cassie immediately held out her plate. Howdy sent his up to be filled by red meat, and Nell asked her husband cut off half a portion for her. "Some of my special steak sauce?" Joe asked, passing around a yellow ceramic bowl brimming with the stuff.

Cassie ladled it over her steak until the t-bone swam in sauce. "Dean, do you want some on your burger?"

"No, Dad makes it too hot. Pass the chips, please."

Howard McCoy accepted the bowl from Cassie's hands and cautiously spooned some on the side. "How about you, Tommy?"

"Little bit." The kicker applied a dab to the boy's burger and handed the bowl across to Nell who sent it straight back to Joe without taking any.

Nell offered a plate of foil-wrapped baked potatoes and her own homemade yogurt topping flecked with fresh chopped chives as well as little dishes of bacon bits and grated cheese, a concession to her husband's tastes. Since the children ignored the vegetable platter, she piled grape tomatoes, baby carrots, and celery sticks on their plates along with some of the yogurt and

nodded to Joe to do the same. He took a big handful of veggies and bathed his potato in all the toppings.

Nell tried to jump-start the conversation again. “Now that everyone is settled, tell me how you know so much about children if you have no brothers and sisters, Howard.”

“Well, ma’am, I used to babysit for pocket money when I went to middle school. But after I got involved in football, I didn’t have the time. I do like kids.” He carved off a portion of tender pink steak, dipped it cautiously in the sauce and chewed.

“Please call me Nell. Ma’am makes me feel so old.”

“See,” Cassie hissed.

“Sure, Nell. Joe, this is a fine steak sauce.” He cut and dipped another piece.

Cassie sawed a chunk from her t-bone and shoved it into her mouth. Her eyes began to water, making her liner run a bit. She blotted the tears carefully with her napkin and chewed gamely until she could swallow. A coughing fit followed the swallow. Howdy reached over Dean and walloped her on the back a few times making her breasts wobble like a gelatin mold.

“Need the Heimlich?” he asked.

“No, no, I’m fine,” she gasped. It should have been Joe who patted her back. After all, she gagged on his sauce.

“Try the yogurt. It will kill the burn,” the cowboy suggested with a cheesy ear-to-ear grin. “Joe, I am enjoying your recipe. Next time I pass through Albuquerque I’ll bring you some fresh red and green chili powder to try. My grandpa cooked a lot of Mexican dishes.”

“I’d like that. Sorry we couldn’t take a Super Bowl while he was still alive,” Joe said.

“He got to see the field goal that got us into the playoffs. I’m glad he wasn’t around to watch me miss the one that lost the division title.” He set down his utensils as if his appetite suddenly failed.

“I saw that one. You blew it,” Cassie said, knowing how heartless and unfair she sounded.

Joe’s black brows snapped together. He chastised her like one of his children. “He missed an impossible sixty-three yard field goal by a whisper in Green Bay with the snow coming down during the last five seconds of the game because I asked him to give it a try. If I had played a better game that field goal wouldn’t have been necessary. Next year, we’ll get ‘em next year, Howdy.”

“Yes, sir.” Howard picked up his fork and delved into the baked potato. Silence thick as a sour cream topping enveloped the table.

“Maybe after lunch, you could show the boys how to kick a football,” Nell said with all the brightness she could bring to the suggestion.

“Not me,” Dean replied. “I’m gonna be a quarterback like Dad.”

Even knowing her face still burned from Joe’s reprimand and how badly in the wrong she was, Cassie blurted out, “That’s right, Dean. Kickers are just glorified soccer players.”

“We used to call her Sassy Cassie as a child not so very long ago,” Joe answered, scowling her way. “Her mouth isn’t as cute now.”

“That’s okay. Lots of folks feel that way, like kickers aren’t real football players. I did start out as a soccer player in high school. The football coach saw one of my kicks and before I knew it, I’d made the team and had a special trainer. Oh, and I think your mouth is cute, very cute, ma’am.” He continued eating his steak while Cassie’s cheeks burned even brighter.

“This kid is cool as ice on the field, and we did have some in Green Bay,” Joe told Nell while disregarding Cassie. “You wouldn’t know it to look at him. He has that boy-next-door kind of face, you see.”

“Takes a lot to rile me, Grandpa always said.” Howdy glanced at Tommy who tugged on the sleeve of his flannel shirt. “What can I do for you little man? Need more lemonade?”

“Nope. I play soccer ‘cause Mama Nell says we’re too young for football. Daddy says I might grow up tall and skinny like Mama Cassie and not be able to play pro, but I could be a kicker, couldn’t I?”

Before Howdy answered, Cassie spewed again as if Joe’s steak sauce had set her on fire. Oh, why couldn’t she stop herself? “I am not skinny! I was thin and sickly as a child, but now I’m very well built.”

The cowboy’s big, blue eyes, all wide and innocent looking, swept across her bosom. “Yes, I’d say you are—ma’am.”

She gritted her teeth. “I told you to call me Cassie.”

“Well, ma’am, you call friends by their first name, but I reckon you don’t want to be friends. But it doesn’t matter if your mama likes me, buddy. I want to teach you how to kick.”

Tommy’s small forehead wrinkled under a shock of red hair. “Maybe not if Mama Cassie doesn’t want me to learn.”

“Oh, Tommy, no. I didn’t mean that at all. You go play with Mr. Howdy after dinner.” Cassie blotted her eyes again.

Nell sat up straight very suddenly as if someone’s long leg had prodded her thigh. Joe leaned over the twins and whispered to his wife loud enough for Cassie to hear every single word. “Ice, baby, ice”