

WISH FOR A SINNER

by

LYNN SHURR

CHAPTER 1

His mama always said, “If you have ice cream for breakfast, chocolate cake for lunch and a big ole sack of candy for dinner, y’all will soon be craving the good green beans your pawpaw grew just for you.”

Joe Dean Billodeaux, star quarterback of the New Orleans Sinners, ruffled the pages of his little black book. The football season ended a month ago and he had done as promised. Beginning with “A”, he started contacting each and every female who had written a name and number in his book during his six months of celibacy.

When he thought back on it, that vow to remain celibate for the entire season seemed hasty, but he did have to admit St. Jude delivered. Connor Riley, his favorite receiver, had recovered from a broken neck and played again, almost as good as raising the dead or at least a dead career. Keeping his own mind off women had increased his concentration on the game and the results had been spectacular.

Joe Dean paused in flipping the pages to admire his Super Bowl ring, heavy gold, a circle of diamonds and a black enameled “S” with a sinuous row of small rubies running down the center, red and black, the Sinners’ colors. “S” was for Super Bowl. “S” was for Sinners. “S” was for stud. Women loved to try on his ring.

By doing two, sometimes three a day, he had reached number sixty-nine on his list, and he was only up to the “E”’s. A few had cancelled on him. One was now engaged, another pregnant and a third giggled so much he quickly figured out she was underage. He had drawn thick, dark lines through their names. Joe Dean Billodeaux did have his standards —only he had broken one tonight.

His nooner had gone well. Carly Eglund, a pert, blonde secretary, asked her boss for a long lunch hour. They enjoyed a light repast on Joe’s terrace overlooking the Mississippi from his top floor condo, then passed a pleasurable time together. It was understood he would not be getting back to any of the women any time soon. He gave Carly two stars in his book, an average rating.

He had gone out of order a few times. At the end of the “B”’s, he decided impulsively to call the three names at the end of the book, Zelinsky, Yablonsky, and Xavier. Zelinsky and Yablonsky were good time girls, but Latasha Xavier turned out to be a hot UNO senior with many talents. He put four stars by her name. Still, the very first one and the last had left him feeling like someone put pins in his Halloween candy.

He’d been true to his word by letting Margaret Stutes, a publicist for the Sinners, be the first woman he bedded directly after the Super Bowl. That was taking one for the team in the name of

friendship. When Connor Riley's fiancée, Stevie Dowd, asked him to put Margaret at the top of his list in order to get herself a job as an official Sinners photographer, he agreed reluctantly. Having Stevie nearby helped Connor overcome the spates of temper that nearly cost him his career as a wide receiver when not even the neck injury had kept him out of the game. He had done his best to help his friends.

Well, to be honest, that night was not his best. He had put away two bottles of victory champagne and was starting on a third when Margaret dragged him from the locker room and hailed a cab to take them back to her hotel. He seemed to remember polishing off that third bottle on the trip to her room with the help of a doorman who was holding him up. Margaret tipped the fellow with a bill large enough to gain his help in getting Joe to the bed and partially undressed. After that, the evening was pretty much a blank.

He did recall waking in the early morning hours to Margaret's nasal voice complaining that Joe Dean Billodeaux was just a flash in the pan and she was going to let everyone know unless she got a redo. Her thin to the point of bony body with its small, flat breasts and freckled skin, her purple-red hair, her overbite and her whining had necessitated a quick trip into the bathroom.

Afterwards, he was able to carry on and defend his reputation. Talk about playing hurt. As he picked up his rhythm over Margaret, his brains seemed to be sloshing against the top of his skull. Keeping his eyes closed mitigated some of the piercing pain he felt when he opened them. In this situation, stamina and training paid off. Margaret, shrieking and clawing, was finally satiated. On the way back to his own room to pack and meet the team for a return to New Orleans, Joe Dean pulled out his black book, found Margaret's name in the "S"s and crossed it out as he had once before, this time so hard the page ripped.

That was one bad experience and tonight brought another. Nicole Everard, a lady lawyer as he found out when he called her office number, remembered putting her name in his book one evening when she'd been having drinks with a few of her friends. She wondered when he was going to get around to her. Tonight after work would be fine. Her office sat only a short way from his condo.

Nicole required no drink, no food, no foreplay. Telling Joe Dean, wearing nothing but his boxers, to relax against the pillows, she undressed for him at the foot of the bed. Watching her strip down from her navy blue lawyer's suit to nothing but a garter belt and black stockings easily aroused him. Nicole, long and lean and lightly muscled, looked like a woman who worked out regularly. Though small-breasted, what she had was firm and up-tilted, always a feature he admired. Her skin was lightly tanned and her teeth perfect.

When she let down her long, brunette hair from its twist, never taking her dark, intent eyes off of his body, Joe gave a growl of appreciation. She started out on top, but after a small tussle for domination, she submitted to the bottom position. They were both satisfied at the end. Then, Nicole rose from the covers first.

Usually, Joe left the bed first. Normally, he headed for the shower and gave the woman a chance to relax, dress or join him in the water, whatever they wanted. Nicole pulled a perfumed, lace-edged handkerchief from the pocket of her suit, dabbed at her thighs, and proceeded to dress rapidly after checking the slim gold watch she'd left on the night table.

"Must run, Joe. Harry always works late at the firm and I told him I was going home to spend some time with the kids. I'll have to give my nanny a bonus to keep her mouth shut."

"Harry? Kids?" he'd asked blankly.

"My husband and the two boys. I've crossed one more thing off my life list thanks to you," she said while shrugging into her blue jacket.

"Life list?" He was clueless again.

“Yes. Sex with a major athlete. Done. But, there’s still sky-diving, a trip to Nepal to seek my spirituality and sex with a famous musician among other things. If musicians are as easy as you, that last one should be no trouble at all. Thanks a million, Joe.”

She went out the door before he could shuck off his condom. He liked to send his women off with a kiss and a smile and no hard feelings. He never knowingly slept with married women, the under-aged, virgins or the girlfriends of his teammates. He did not coerce or play rough unless his partner started it. This was supposed to be fun and games for both of them, but tonight he felt used. If he associated Margaret with the taste of regurgitated champagne, then Nicole left behind the lingering flavor of sour grapes.

No wonder Joe Dean Billodeaux had an appetite for someone fresh and wholesome. He thumbed through his book again. Where, where, St. Jude, where? A business card tucked into the binding fluttered to the floor. It read, *Nellwyn Abbott, Volunteer, Louisiana Wish Kidz*. The card listed three telephone numbers—office, home, and cell. This woman wanted to be contacted.

Joe recalled her now, a small sylph of a woman with large, dark eyes and a pixie haircut. He had hit on her in front of a room full of sick children, their families, three friends and Margaret Stutes in one of life’s most embarrassing moments. She was the Wish Lady, there to introduce the sick children to their heroes. Nell looked not much older than the children she accompanied, but the authority in her voice when she put him in his place let him know she was a woman grown.

Covering his humiliation by giving her his autograph, and then unable to resist teasing her, his phone number encircled by a devil’s tail heart, he moved on to spend a few hours with little Patrick, a childhood leukemia victim. He left the kid with one of his jerseys, an autographed football and a promise he would win the Super Bowl for him. Joe Dean Billodeaux always kept his word. For the first time since the big game, Joe wondered how Patrick was doing. The Wish Lady would know.

Let’s see, he thought, home or cell phone on a Friday night? If she was out on a date, the cell phone was a bad choice. She worked with sick kids and should to have an answering machine. Call the home number, then. Joe punched out the digits that would connect him to Nellwyn Abbott.

CHAPTER 2

Nell, wrapped in a flowered cotton afghan, lay on her sofa and watched for the hundredth time her favorite comfort film, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. The main characters danced in the ballroom, light and colors flashing by. She closed her eyes and imagined twirling with them. Her telephone rang, destroying the magical moment. Putting the old VCR tape on pause, she picked up the phone and made a wish that this would not be more bad news.

"Hey, Nell," a deep, masculine voice said.

"Hello?" she answered not having the vaguest idea who it was.

"This is Joe."

"Joe?"

She sorted through all of the Joes she knew—first, her supervisor at the hospital, but for a man, he had a rather high voice very unlike this one. Joe, the maintenance worker at her apartment complex, spoke with a heavy foreign accent, and besides, his name wasn't really Joe, but a substitute for something unpronounceable by Americans. Joe, the pharmaceutical salesman, or representative as he liked to be known, would have identified himself formally with his full name immediately before asking for an appointment or a date if he was contemplating cheating on his wife again. None of them fit the warm, deep voice on the phone.

"Joe Dean Billodeaux, quarterback for the Sinners." He sounded a little peeved at having to identify himself. That was just too bad.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Billodeaux."

"Joe," he said again.

"Joe. Do you need my help with something?" Nell could have kicked herself. She was so used to offering help any time, day or night. A guy like this would positively take her offer the wrong way.

"Um, yes. I was sitting here alone wondering"

Nell had absolutely no time for this stuff. "Look, Joe, this is a bad time for me."

"Oh, you have somebody with you?"

"No, I attended a funeral this afternoon. I'm feeling a little low and am not in the mood, okay?"

"Okay. I was wondering about Patrick, the little kid at the Super Bowl. How's he doing? I bought a small ranch out by Chapelle with my bonus. It's not cleaned up yet, but I plan to keep some horses. Maybe you could bring him and his family out to ride sometime this summer." He got this out in a burst as if he figured she was about to hang up.

"I'm so sorry, Joe. I misunderstood."

Still, she had to be cautious. As a quarterback, he was probably much, much brighter than people gave him credit for—dumb jock being the designation that usually came to their minds because of his off-field antics. However, when watching games with her dad, she knew Billodeaux could switch plays just like that and the other team hardly knew what hit them.

Her voice grew very soft. "Joe, I attended Patrick's funeral today."

"I should have called sooner about Patrick." Real regret tinged his voice.

“Wouldn’t have made any difference. He was too ill to do much but sit in his chair and watch life go by. He wore your jersey every day. They put it in his coffin along with the football. You made that little boy very happy for one day in his life.”

“How’s the black kid doing? The one the Rev met with.”

“Passed away about a week after the Bowl. Rev Bullock came to his funeral.”

“Yeah, the Rev should have been a Saint,” Joe Dean said referring to the Sinners great cornerback and would-be preacher. “I really did mean it about kids coming to the ranch. I’ll stand by that. When Joe Dean Billodeaux makes a vow, he keeps it.”

“That’s great. Let me know when you are ready for guests. I’ll pass the word along to the Wish Kidz Association and some of my patients.”

How nice of him to offer and to call on a Friday night when he probably had better things or sexier women to do, Nell thought. Maybe the guy wasn’t as bad as the tabloids claimed. She relaxed her guard.

“You’re a doctor? The Rev is marrying a doctor next week,” he said in that rich, seductive voice.

“Yes, I know. I met her at the funeral. She’s a lovely person, inside and out. They invited me to the wedding, me and, I guess, a few hundred other people.”

“Great. I’ll have someone I know to dance with if you come.”

“Aren’t you in the wedding party? Won’t most of the team and their families be there?” Nell shook her head against the phone. He was moving in for a pass. She saw through that play.

“Well, Doc, I meant I won’t be taking a date and the seventeen-year-old I’m escorting is off-limits along with most of the other women who are likely to be relatives of the Rev’s or with the other players.”

“First of all, I am not a doctor. I’m a child psychologist at Ochsner. I deal with patients who have life-threatening illnesses and their families. Secondly, I am not fair game because no one on your list is attending.” Always best to be clear and direct with persistent people. She put the about-ready-to-hang-up tone in her voice.

“Concerning my list...”

She cut him off in a voice turned frosty. “In last week’s tabloids, number forty-seven among your list ladies, who wished to remain anonymous—I can’t imagine why—said you were a real stud muffin and lived up to your reputation with the ladies. You also believe in wining and dining and took some time for foreplay.”

“You shouldn’t believe the tabloids.”

“Which part—the wine, the foreplay?”

“Uh, no. I hate the term stud muffin. I’m nobody’s muffin. I prefer just being called a stud.”

She had to laugh. “Don’t you ever give up, Joe Dean Billodeaux?”

“*Mais, cher*, no. Dat’s why I gonna win anoder Super Bowl, me.”

“Oh, the cute Cajun routine. Number twenty-two reported the week before last that she found it adorable.” There, that should show she knew all his tricks and deflate his enormous ego. She heard the sound of turning pages. He was reading during their conversation? Then, the sound of paper tearing.

“That was Tami Blair, flight attendant, three stars. I won’t be calling her anymore. Look, I’d like to see you again. I’d like to do something for your patients. Sincerely. Why don’t you come over to my place? We’ll talk.”

“I don’t think so, Joe. I have no interest in being number fifty-five or whatever.”

“Number seventy, but you’re not on my list. You aren’t just a number. I could come over to your place—to talk. Where do you live?”

Nell took a look at herself in the mirror by her front door. She wore her tattered Tinker Bell nightshirt, the one she'd gotten at Disney World when she was a Louisiana Wish Kid a dozen years ago. Tink was fading away. Chocolate ice cream stains dribbled down one side of the garment. The armpits had holes. The thing was practically a rag, yet she held on to it, wore it each time one of the children died. It reminded her that some survived.

"I live in Metairie, but you can't come over. I'm not dressed."

"You don't have to get dressed for me, sugar."

She could imagine his sexy leer having experienced it at the Super Bowl meeting. Nell shook her head. The mirror reflected the light from the tiny diamond earrings she had forgotten to take off. They were the only things sparkling in her apartment tonight. Her dad had given them to her when she went into remission. Enough nonsense from this over-sexed jerk.

"I'll see you at the wedding, Joe." She disconnected.

Joe Dean Billodeaux stretched out his six-foot-three frame on the leather sofa long enough to accommodate his entire length with a few feet to spare. He tried to recall the last time a woman had hung up on him. The answer was "never."

He still had plenty of time to call number seventy if he wanted, but his desire just wasn't there. That was the trouble when you craved something healthy and all you were surrounded by was bags and bags of candy and one or two sour grapes.