

Christmas in the Bayou
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About *Christmas in the Bayou*

Christmas in the Bayou is now part of the Miss Fortune World published by J&R Fan Fiction. The stories feature many of the original characters created by Jana DeLeon (Gertie, Ida Belle, Fortune, Carter, Walter, and more).

This Christmas story is a single title holiday installment and follows the first three books in Jana DeLeon's Miss Fortune series. A sincere thank you goes out to Jana DeLeon for allowing authors to continue writing in her hilarious Miss Fortune world.

Chapter One

“You want me to what?” At times like these, I could’ve sworn that I had an anxiety disorder. It only flared up when I was asked to do something relatively normal, at least by Sinful, Louisiana standards.

“Have you ever noticed how rapidly Fortune ages when we ask her to do something she doesn’t want to do? Suddenly, she’s in dire need of a hearing aid.” With her lopsided hair curlers, Ida Belle looked like she had one foot in the grave this morning, but I didn’t mention the fact.

“She lacks intel,” Gertie said. “Give her a minute and she’ll be all about it.”

“In my world, volunteering means jumping at the chance to go on a dangerous mission that no one else wants.” I watched Gertie and Ida Belle through narrowed eyes. “That’s it! You don’t want to do it so you pushed me to the front of the line.”

“Guilty as charged,” Ida Belle said, slowly taking a seat while balancing a plastic container and a steamy cup of coffee.

“There’s more to this than meets the eye,” I said.

Ida Belle shrugged, noncommittal as usual. Founder of the Sinful Ladies Society, she rarely followed anyone’s lead. “You’ll do a fine job, Fortune.” Unless it helped her pass the buck, which was a given in this case.

“Think of it as your good deed for the year,” Gertie said.

“It is the holiday season,” Ida Belle pointed out.

“When did I mention that I wanted to spread Christmas cheer?” Thinking on my feet, I quickly added, “I’m supposed to lay low—that means stay out of sight.”

Since arriving in Sinful, Louisiana, I’d inherited more than a respectable cover. When I went dark, it was a haunting feat. I stepped into Miss Perfect’s shoes.

Assuming any new identity was a difficult task, but Sandy-Sue was my direct opposite. The former librarian’s deceased aunt had recently passed away and left Sandy-Sue all of her belongings, which included the home where I now lived. With a price on my head, I needed a good cover, but someone forgot to mention what I would gain by agreeing to settle down in small town Louisiana.

I’d been left with the former homeowner’s best friends—Ida Belle and Gertie, ex-covert operatives. They’d pegged me as a fraud from the moment that I stepped into my role in their cut-from-perfect Louisiana town.

“I’m really not what you’d call a good deed-doer,” I said, breaking the silence. “Never had much time to contribute to the community.”

“That’s because you lived in DC,” Ida Belle said.

“It’s easy to hide when they pass around the sign-up sheet in Washington,” Gertie added.

“Politicians do it all the time.”

Sometimes I couldn't help but wonder about these two. Had Director Morrow set me up from the start? Were Ida Belle and Gertie undercover CIA handlers? It wouldn't surprise me. They seemingly scheduled my activities and inserted themselves into every aspect of my new life. "You want a trained assassin to volunteer at the local school?"

I couldn't picture it. It was too much.

"You're a natural," Ida Belle said, yanking her curlers from her hair. She tossed one in the nearby container. "Look at it this way. You need the experience. Sandy-Sue is a librarian. Might as well gain the intelligence needed to pull off a more believable act."

"I *borrowed* Sandy-Sue Morrow's life. *But*—and pay close attention ladies—I plan to return said life to sender." *As soon as possible*. "Until then, there's no way that I can pretend to be a librarian. Not at Sinful Elementary or anywhere else. I don't have the skills, patience, *or* the desire to handle a bunch of kids for a week."

"Who said anything about a week?" Ida Belle asked, watching me with an arched brow.

"One day, dear," Gertie said, holding up her index finger. "That's it."

"Don't make it sound like it's a cakewalk," Ida Belle said. "Remember who we're dealing with. Fortune is the girl who gets icing all over her face before the cake is even baked."

Seeing a challenge and tempted to take it, I asked, "One day?" I considered it. "No way." But then that ship sailed. "Whose idea was this anyway?"

"Celia's," Gertie replied.

"Since when do you pay attention to Celia's orders?" I searched their faces. "Well?" They didn't respond. "You don't even like *Mayor* Celia Arceneaux."

Wait for it. Wait for it. Boom!

Ida Belle snarled. Gertie groaned.

Mission accomplished.

They couldn't stand Celia's new title. They detested the woman who now occupied Sinful's most coveted office. Why help with one of the mayor's projects?

"This has nothing to do with how we feel about Celia," Ida Belle said in a matter-of-fact tone. "She actually came up with a good idea."

"That must've hurt," Gertie said.

"You have no idea," Ida Belle grumbled.

"She wants me to substitute?"

"No, that was *my* idea," Gertie admitted.

"Good to know. You can take your happy little self down to the elementary school and play pretend for the day." I looked at Ida Belle. "She even looks like a librarian."

"Too jittery," Ida Belle said.

Gertie fiddled with her red and white polka dot collared shirt. "Can't help you this time, Fortune. I'm on the luncheon committee."

"You're working in the cafeteria?" I laughed. "This I've gotta see."

"Don't be silly. I'm not working at the school. I'm helping with the honorary luncheon at Francine's."

“And Francine agreed?” My friend Ally worked for Francine but she was one of the few that earned Francine’s stamp of approval, mainly because she wanted to become a pastry chef.

Renowned for their Sunday pudding wars, Francine’s Café was owned and operated by a fifty-something year old entrepreneur. Francine didn’t strike me as someone who would swing open the café-style doors and welcome outsiders to the back-of-the-house. “Does Francine know that Gertie is on kitchen detail?”

“No,” Ida Belle replied. “If she did, Gertie would be reassigned to cafeteria duty with me.”

“You’re serving up a slab of meat and fake potatoes to a bunch of kids?” I really couldn’t picture it. “Are you planning to wear your robe and curlers too?”

“Nope. Just the camo.”

“Hmm...I suspected you’d wear the robe too. By the way, Celia wants all cafeteria volunteers to report at six o’clock so the manager can explain how to use the new commercial stove.”

Ida Belle scoffed. “I’ve already discussed this with the school principal. We’re serving pizza on my watch and I’ll pick it up and bring it in with me—at eleven o’clock.”

“I could handle pizza detail. Ida Belle, you have a better voice than I do. You can read to the kids. It couldn’t be that difficult.”

“It is for someone who isn’t kid friendly,” Gertie said. “Ida Belle and children in the same space? That combination is an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard of one.”

“You can tell wars stories. It shouldn’t be that complicated.” I was grasping.

“Those kids would go home and have nightmares. The only life she’s ever known was as an operative. She can’t spin those experiences into a fairytale.”

“You could tell them how SLS came to pass.”

“Now there’s an idea,” Gertie said, sitting straighter. “We could start a recruitment program. I should’ve thought of that.”

“You’re serious.” It wasn’t a question.

Gertie looked like a bouncy-ball as she excitedly awaited Ida Belle’s reaction. *Might as well go with it.*

I quickly fed the fire by saying, “I like it. You can hand out literature, maybe a tri-fold brochure with a star above the SLS logo and a huge X through Celia’s image and her cohorts.”

God’s Wives, the other ladies’ organization in town, was headed up by Celia. Thanks to numerous differences, SLS members and God’s Wives didn’t break bread together unless it was absolutely necessary.

“On that note, it sounds like a plan to put into motion.” Gertie was all for it.

“Kids love to have that sense of belonging. Think of it as a new lease on life. You’re doing something good for the community. Educators won’t have to worry about sex-ed programs.” The Sinful Ladies Society’s membership base consisted of strong, independent, and very single women. “You’ll grab the girls when they’re young and teach them your ways.” I stopped on that note since my last remark painted a scary image.

Ida Belle grimaced. "Instead, they'll be worried about young women ranting about their rights to bear arms."

"Democrats will love that." I frowned. "Or is it the Republicans?"

"For a woman who lived in D.C., you don't know much about politics, do you, dear?"

"Most of her assignments probably had a political undertone so it was best if she didn't have an opinion, considering her line of work."

That was a conversation for another day. "Okay, so it's settled. I'll take cafeteria duty. Ida Belle, you'll stand in at the library, since it's for a good cause—one that will lead to better SLS recruitment practices in the near future."

"No deal," Ida Belle said. "I'm not interested in becoming a role model."

"Why not?"

"Do I look like the poster child for skinny jeans?" Ida Belle picked up a donut from a nearby plate, took a hearty bite, and around a mouthful of glaze added, "Besides, I'm older than you are, Fortune. My patience sailed with the Mayflower."

"You're good with people," I said, sounding convinced. "You'll deal with first graders like you deal with everyone else."

Gertie groaned. "How? By playing board games and awarding the winners with a prize-size bottle of cough syrup?"

"If it works, I say go for it."

"Moonshine is not a suitable concoction for children, dear."

"When I was a kid, my dad used to rub Paregoric on my gums so I would go to sleep."

Gertie turned to Ida Belle. "Moonshine. Paregoric. Is there that much of a difference?"

"One used to be heavily prescribed and the other should be." Ida Belle yanked out another large hair curler. "Fortune will take the library. I'll stay in the kitchen."

"I spend most of my time right here in your kitchen or over at mine. Some might say that I have experience."

"You still can't nuke a cup of water," Ida Belle said. "You're the only person I know who boils liquid until it evaporates."

Gertie laughed. "And she still looks perplexed when she goes to the stove and finds an empty pot."

This was a losing battle. Giving it one final shot, I said, "You've got a point. I don't know the first thing about domestic chores, much less how to handle a child."

"We're talking children here, Fortune. As in plural," Ida Belle said.

"All the more reason for me to stay away. I don't relate to them." My job with the CIA entailed going after arms dealers and drug lords. I rarely saw the tiny people in my line of work. A past incident came to mind and I groaned.

"You thought of something." Gertie leaned closer. "Tell us about it."

"There was this kid." I still cringed when I remembered this particular mission. "He was playing in the street where a cocaine dealer was known to open fire when someone in the community owed a drug debt."

“And you saved him?” Gertie scooted to the edge of her chair, gripping her coffee mug with both hands. She loved a good story.

“Well, you might say that.”

“What happened?” Ida Belle asked.

“The kid was kicking his ball in the middle of the road. Someone yelled that Don Juan—that was the dealer’s name—had entered the square. There wasn’t time to coax the kid away from the street so I grabbed him and threw him in the closest thing I could find.”

“See there? We have a true American heroine living right here in Sinful,” Ida Belle said. “Where’d you put him?”

“A dumpster.”

“What?” Gertie screeched.

“I didn’t think about it at the time. I just grabbed him, tossed him over, told him to stay down, and left him there.”

“But he survived, right?” Ida Belle asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t think another thing about that kid until my partner mentioned him later that same night. When I’m responsible for someone, I’m responsible for killing them, not keeping them alive. I completely forgot about the boy.”

“This is different, dear. You aren’t in a warzone.”

“That’s debatable.”

Ida Belle pushed away from the table and looked at Gertie. “Somebody’s theatrics finally rubbed off.”

“Don’t look at me. Fortune is her own person.”

“False,” Ida Belle said. “She’s Sandy-Sue’s person. And right now, it only makes sense that *Sandy-Sue* would volunteer and report for library duty.”

Well, I couldn’t argue there.

Gertie said, “Look on the bright side. It’s one of the easier jobs. Celia said the school works on an hour-long class rotation. When the hour is up, one group of kids will leave and another bunch will arrive. You don’t have to do anything except read to them.”

“They check out their library books, too,” Ida Belle said.

“There you go,” I said, certain of an out. “I’m sure there’s a computer system, a complicated one that could take days—maybe even weeks—to learn.”

“You scan a book, Fortune,” Gertie said, waving her hand dismissively. “But don’t worry, we’ll have one of ours meet you tomorrow. She can show you how it’s done.”

“One of yours?” I should’ve known. The SLS women had their hands in everything.

“Charlene from the Sinful Ladies Society volunteers there. She works in the library twice a month.”

“Then let her do it.”

“She can’t tomorrow. She has an appointment in New Orleans. Her ex-husband is getting new teeth.”

“Do I want to ask?”

“Probably not,” Ida Belle said.

“Charlene has a terrible temper. She caught him with one of God’s Wives and clocked him.”

“The joys of small town living,” I said.

Gertie sighed. “One more reason to love Sinful. Free entertainment. When someone has a domestic dispute here, the neighbors put the word out and we all bring our lawn chairs and popcorn.”

The sad thing? I could see domestic disputes pulling in record numbers in live audiences. I wondered how Deputy Charming handled the crowds when he was working a case. Maybe I’d ask him sometime.