

Chapter One

"If I wanted you gone, you'd be sixteen feet under with a hundred pounds of cement drying on top of your sorry, cheating, stubborn, deadbeat of a well-proportioned tail!"

I flipped the agent-mode switch and bent an ear, wondering if the last part was meant as a final cheap shot or a compliment to soften the blow.

"You don't have the guts or the connections!" A big guy jumped off the porch with a beer can in hand. He stumbled sideways but somehow managed to keep his balance. Shooting a wink and a smile, he flexed his muscles before he hollered over his shoulder, "It's not my job to keep you content, woman!"

Nice. I wondered if this self-appointed legend wanted applause now or later.

"What'd I tell you, Fortune? Just another day in our sleepy little town." The added spring in Gertie's step was bothersome. She'd perked right up as soon as the couple's bickering had begun.

Prior to that ear-piercing moment, Gertie and I had been enjoying our stroll down Main Street. A picturesque town, Sinful could've been cut straight from a movie. The street boasted picture-perfect storefronts with cute doodads in the windows. Buildings painted in pastel colors were very similar to those found in storybooks from a bygone era. In a Southern Louisiana town such as this, it was often quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

"Come back here! I'm not through with you!" The petite brunette stomped her foot and jammed her small fists against her hips. "I'm talking to you!"

"For a minute there, I thought she meant me."

"Did you have a dog in this race?" Gertie asked.

"What do you think?" I rolled my eyes and muttered, "I've never been one to chase the beer-drinking, cheating, stubborn, *whatever-she-said* kind of man."

"What's that?" Gertie asked.

"Never mind." Since moving to Sinful, I'd developed an irritating habit of talking to myself. Most of the time, it was an outburst about weapons, guns mostly, but on occasion I rambled about stilettos. They were deadly in the right hands. *Mine as an example.* "I was commenting on the two heathens across the way there."

Gertie laughed. "You're starting to sound like a Louisiana native."

"Thanks," I said, glancing at two said natives. Sounding like the locals worked for me. Acting like them was another beast altogether.

"If I find out that you did somethin' inappropriate, I'll start a bonfire with your junk!" The woman's high-pitched voice carried like chimes. "I'll even toss in your briefs for show!"

"Now that's harsh."

Gertie waved her hand in the air. "Don't pay attention to those two, Fortune. They've been making threats for years."

"Who are they?"

"Peanut and Rich Richards. They've been fighting like that since the day they were married. Took separate cars when they went on their honeymoon if you can believe that."

Peanut picked up a rock and threw it at her beloved. "Leave! Don't come back!"

"Yes, Gertie. I can see it. So Peanut isn't a pet name?"

Gertie scoffed. "The only pet name Rich has for Peanut is 'woman' and it's generally said in a slurred voice when he's demanding a beer."

"Wait! I'm not done here!" Peanut screamed until her voice broke. "Where do you think you're going?" She screamed again, only this time she sounded like Tarzan. In fact, I was waiting to see a chest-pounding.

Anytime now, Peanut.

"I'm going to a safe place."

"You won't find one of those until you get a job!"

Rich kept right on walking.

"Uh-oh," I muttered. "Looks like the man of the house is leaving."

"He won't get very far." Gertie wagged her finger at their yard. "Watch."

Rich marched to a burgundy Buick. He swung the door open and squealed like a stuck pig when the darn thing crashed to the ground.

Gertie slapped her leg and bent over with laughter. "Every single time that happens, I get tickled."

"You took my car apart again!" The man looked just plain crazy when he turned around. "Who do you think you are?"

Gertie patted my arm. "Time to go, Fortune."

"I'm not leaving," I said, slurping the last of my fountain drink. Sinful, Louisiana had once been a calm town but since my arrival there, things had apparently changed. There were murders to solve and crimes to stop. One such crime could unfold at any moment given the look on Rich's face.

"Answer me, *woman!* Did you do this?"

"Why on earth would you think such a thing, sugar?" Peanut wasn't backing down from the bear approaching her.

Subject one: Six-foot four beast of a man with trunk-like arms, jagged scar down the left side of his unshaven face, and tightly clenched fists. Shoulder-length hair could benefit from a good shampoo. Higher-than-average threat level. Subject two: Petite woman with short brown hair. Butterfly tattoo on her neck. Ouch. Painful. Iron skillet in her left hand. Unidentifiable object in her right. Given her size, threat is unlikely. Given her temper, anything goes.

Gertie released an exaggerated sigh. "I know that look, Fortune. I've seen it before. You can memorize everything about this moment but there won't be a crime to solve later. Trust me. Those two have a history of raising hell."

"What's in her hand?" I asked, squinting.

"Frying pan in one." Gertie stood on her tiptoes as if that would help. "Unsure about the other."

"You care more about that darn car than you care about me!" Peanut continued. "I've been your wife for over six years now and how do you thank me? You bring my first cousin on my mother's side into our bedroom and bandage her knee!"

"Could've been worse," Gertie said out of the corner of her mouth. "Could've been her second cousin on her father's side. Now that would've started a battle worth watching. Rumor has it when she's in their *matrimonial room*, there's a bit more than first aid applied."

"How do you know all this?" I was forever amazed at how information circulated in this small town. Then again, Sinful was a tight knit community. There were only two major divisions—the Catholics and the Baptists on the religious front. God's Wives and the Sinful Ladies Society on the social front. "Give up your sources. Where do you gain your intelligence?"

"Born with it," Gertie quipped, still stretching her neck and watching the unfolding show. "And Ida Belle and I used to come out here with our lawn chairs and popcorn."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Hand to God." Gertie was dead serious. "We spent most Friday evenings here. Rich used to host a poker game and the locals would come out and place side bets. We'd wager on everything from what time the game would begin to which player would win or lose the most. Those were the good old days."

"You listen to me, you lying..." Peanut was off and running again. We slowly turned our heads together, taking in the argument across the street. "I don't work all day long so you can have the run of the house to mess around."

"She doesn't work *all day*," Gertie said. "Four hours. Three days a week. One town over at the Drive By."

"Sounds like a scary place."

"It is," Gertie assured me. "Gangs frequent that dive, thus the name. On the flipside, they have good burgers."

"What'd ya expect me to do? Let her bleed all over the place!" Rich finally tossed aside the door he'd carried from the driveway to the porch.

"She had an itsy-bitsy paper cut!"

"She's anemic, Peanut!"

"And a paper cut caused a gusher, did it?" She wound that right arm like a baseball pitcher might. "No more than she weighs, you could've picked her up and set her on the counter! You didn't have to take her to our holy place!"

I was taken aback. Since others were now joining us on the sidewalk, I resisted the urge to laugh aloud. Trouble often began when outsiders laughed at what insiders knew better than to acknowledge.

"She recently found religion," Gertie quietly explained, leaning sideways in a conspiratorial fashion. "Ella Ruth, the writer who always hangs out at Francine's, said she quotes scripture, carries around her Bible, and even attended back-to-back revivals in neighboring towns a month or so ago."

"Stop putting on a show for our neighbors!" Rich yelled, spinning around with his arms spread like wings. "Our bedroom hasn't been holy since you turned down the sheets for Freddy Baylor!"

Before I could ask, Gertie whispered, "Freddy is a traveling salesman. Several of God's Wives had high hopes that he'd end up with one of their daughters. Until..." She jabbed her finger at the bickering Sinful couple.

"That's a rumor, Rich. Nothin' more and nothin' less!" Peanut screamed, lifting her leg like she planned to kick Rich in the seat of his pants. She swung instead and a loud thud landed against Rich's back.

"All these people are standing as witnesses!" Rich yelled, ducking and dodging another swat.

Peering over my shoulder, since I'd caught the 'all' in Rich's last statement, I couldn't help but notice Deputy Carter LeBlanc pushing his way through the throng of onlookers. "Let's go, Gertie."

Carter made me blush like a schoolgirl. Since it was broad daylight and I couldn't easily conceal my red cheeks, I opted for the high road. A good CIA agent understood when it was imperative to lay low and hide. I'd look for a future opportunity to check out the Peanut and Rich situation.

"I think she's holding a gun." Gertie elbowed me. "Let's wait here and see what happens."

A giant man stepped in front of us. He acted as if we weren't even there.

"Excuse me," Gertie said, trying to move him aside.

Jolly Giant didn't budge. Instead, he said, "No harm done."

Gertie shook her finger at his back. "Can you believe this guy?"

Considering a five-foot-two woman was clobbering her husband with a large iron skillet while an entire town cheered and took pictures, I could believe just about anything.

Gertie pecked on Mr. Giant's shoulder once more. "Excuse me?"

"What is it?" He slowly turned around and looked mean enough to scare a gator straight from the bayou.

Gertie gulped. "Nothing. Pardon me. My mistake."

"Really?" I made a fist and contemplated knocking on the fellow's shoulder since Gertie's peck hadn't worked.

Gertie grabbed my hand. "Pick your battles."

Six-foot five. Bald. Three hundred pounds of rude topped off with a terrible disposition.

Gertie was probably right. I couldn't win here.

"Peanut could be dangerous if she has a palm pistol," Gertie said.

"Might be a good time to move along." We were unarmed and if Peanut waved a weapon as aggressively as she fanned that skillet, I didn't want to be within a mile of this domestic dispute.

"I'm not going anywhere, Fortune," Gertie said, narrowing her eyes on Carter. "Besides, I know why you're in such a rush all of a sudden." She clucked. "Say hello. He's looking our way."

Gertie handled the gestures for me. Waving, winking, and grinning from ear to ear, she made sure Carter saw us.

"You look like Granny from the *Beverly Hillbillies*," I told her, grabbing her arm and holding it at her side.

"Be polite," she said, still grinning at the local deputy.

Thinning my lips, I tilted my head at Carter. He did the same.

"Your *tells* gave you away the second he walked up. Take a deep breath and relax. This is where it gets good."

"Now look what you've done!" Peanut yelled. "You've brought the law to our door!"

"The law?"

"Southern speak for anyone in law enforcement," Gertie quickly explained, swaying left to right so she didn't miss a second of the action.

"Of course it is," I said.

"*The law* wouldn't have been called if you hadn't decided to take our arguments to the streets." Rich turned around and faced the crowd. "And you people need to *get on home*! Next time this happens, I'm charging admission!"

A wave of laughter rippled through the crowd. Someone yelled, "Same time tomorrow, Rich?" More chuckles followed.

"Folks around here are tight but they'd pay the price." Gertie cupped her hands and yelled, "That's a good idea, Rich. I'll sell tickets for you!"

Rich waved at Gertie. She waved back.

"He has two children from a previous marriage. I don't know how they put food on the table. Why Peanut is the only one earning an income as far as I know."

"He doesn't work at all?"

"Bad allergies," Gertie said in a matter of fact voice. "Breaks out in hives whenever someone mentions a job."

"Gertie, you're a mess."

"It's true. Ask anyone who knows him." She pointed at Carter. "Here we go."

Carter approached the house with his hand on his weapon. Even though I didn't have a lot of experience with family matters, I knew that domestic calls were often among the most dangerous. "What's the problem, Rich?"

"The woman is batshit crazy, Carter. *That's* the problem."

"Uh-huh," Carter drawled. "And you married her anyway."

"Did Carter just take a side?"

At my back, the neighbors whispered. Apparently they were surprised, too.

"Peanut's reputation precedes her. In case you haven't noticed, you're in Louisiana. Here, the fellas stick together. In situations like these, the good ole boys club will always stand firm."

"But I'm in *Sinful*, Louisiana," I reminded her. "Here, the town is run by the Sinful Ladies Society. Good ole girls stick together, too."

"Are you suggesting that I go over there and take up for Peanut?"

"No way." I slurped and the rattling sound from the empty cup filled the air.

Gertie snatched my straw. "For heaven's sake, Fortune. No one can hear what's going on."

Pow! Pow! Pow!

Ping! Ping! Ping!

Screams filled the air. Gertie ducked behind the man who'd stepped in front of us. He didn't have the good sense to get down. I squatted next to Gertie, peering around the giant who seemed uninterested in dodging bullets.

People scattered. Sinful's citizens were running for their lives.

"Shots were fired from two different directions," Gertie said. "There's a faulty silencer on one of the weapons."

"What have you done?" Peanut's voice resounded. "Carter LeBlanc! Why?"

"Stay down!" Carter tried to assist but Peanut pushed him away. "Listen to me, Peanut! Keep your head low!"

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "Help! Somebody! Deputy LeBlanc shot my husband!"

Men stormed the yard as if they thought they'd need to take Carter by force. I took a step in that direction, feeling obligated to defend him.

Gertie stopped me. "Stay out of it, Fortune. Those phones are collecting information. Videos and pictures will be all over the internet within an hour. Why Carter couldn't squish a spider without remorse. He didn't shoot anyone. He'll get out of this but he'll need to do it on his own."

Considering the hefty price on my head, Gertie was right. I'd sit this one out.

"He shouldn't have put his hands up in the air," I said, pained by what I saw when two of Carter's fellow officers tackled him. Sheriff Robert E. Lee would show up behind them, eventually. He was often delayed thanks to his transportation—an over-the-hill plug horse with a slow stride. In any event, the sheriff would take Carter's side once he arrived, assuming he'd make it to the crime scene sometime today.

"Help!" Peanut screamed, dropping to her porch and cradling her husband's head in her hands. "Deputy Carter Leblanc shot my husband and he's dead!"

"Well the cops seem to think she's right." Gertie paled. "Guess I was wrong about him."

"What were you saying about squished spiders?" Watching the rookies place Carter in handcuffs infuriated me. "Gertie, Carter didn't shoot anyone."

"Then who did?"

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