

Chapter One Excerpt

In my line of work, it helped to be proactive, but when I awoke with a start and hurried downstairs, I wasn't thinking about my response time. I never stopped to consider the possibility of an enemy seated on my front porch.

I didn't think about bedhead or my lack of sweatpants. I just swung the door open and blinked. "What's the matter? It's three in the morning!"

Carter LeBlanc, also known as Deputy Charming, looked amused. "I may regret this but need to ask. Are you allergic to fabric or opposed to seeing me with your clothes on? Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining."

I stood there in temporary shock, blinded by the flashlight in my eyes and very much wishing that I could start again.

"Be right back. Hold that thought." I slammed the door in Carter's face.

As luck would have it when I didn't have any luck at all, Carter had never looked better and I'd never looked worse.

He wasn't there on a social call so there wasn't time to evaluate what he may or may not have been thinking. At three in the morning, it couldn't be good. In some ways, my boy shorts and tank top bought some much needed time.

Given Carter's distressed look, I needed reinforcements and knew where to find them. It was one of the things that I loved about Sinful. My friends were on speed dial and could be there in a matter of minutes.

I jumped into a pair of light-denim jeans and nearly fell on my face when my foot slipped into one of the knee holes. Regaining my balance, I shrugged on a pale green sweatshirt and called Gertie. "Come to the house as soon as you can."

I didn't wait for a response. Instead, I called Ida Belle and delivered the same instructions.

Hopping around, I attempted to put on one large white furry rabbit slipper while locating another. I then peered outside and scanned the yard below.

No visible dead bodies. Always a plus.

In my Louisiana backyard, one couldn't be too sure.

Racing back to the foyer, I painted on a sweet smile, opened the door, and said, “Ah, Carter, what a great surprise. Bet you’d love a cup of coffee. Want to come in?”

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “I wanted to have a private conversation with you. I’m guessing one or two seniors will soon join us.”

“Don’t be silly.” I chuckled. “This is an anti-Celia zone. What you say here will stay here.”

“Uh-huh.” He followed me inside. “Maybe until I leave.”

I practically popped a hip out of joint when I leaned over the counter to flip on the kitchen light. I pulled out a chair and directed Carter to sit.

He towered over me. “Please tell me you didn’t call Gertie and Ida Belle.”

I’d forgotten how handsome he was.

A couple of weeks made the heart grow fonder and the mind churn with all sorts of forbidden ideas. I gasped. Not that I was having forbidden ideas.

“Fortune? Are Gertie and Ida Belle on their way?”

I bit my lip and quickly played out several scenarios ranging from fibbing to telling Carter the truth and only the latter worked. “While I was dressing, I had time to kill and *may* have dialed Gertie’s number.”

“Did you actually speak to her?” His lips held in a firm line.

I cleared my throat. “I believe so. Yes.”

“And I guess Ida Belle was also on your emergency contact list?”

“Why?” I crossed my arms. “Is this an emergency?”

Carter dragged his hand down the length of his face as he claimed a spot at my table. Sandy-Sue Morrow’s aunt had been one of those people who always kept the door open and the coffee on.

It was part of the appeal in my revolving doors. Everyone felt comfortable here. From charming senior citizens to handsome deputies. No one was excluded. Gertie and Ida Belle had even insisted that manners were necessary when an enemy called upon us at our homes.

It was a Southern rule.

I needed to ask Gertie if there were exceptions, like being awakened in the middle of the night by uninvited guests. Not that I was complaining.

Yet.

“Why are you here, Carter?”

“When was the last time you visited Wasteland?”

Interrogation was in the air.

My lips quivered. A shiver ran up my spine.

Carter knew the answer to that because it was one of the last times that I’d seen him, not that we’d had a fizzling romance or anything, but right after a civilian hired someone to kill me, Director Morrow had insisted that I take some time away from Sinful. He wanted to send other operatives to Louisiana so they could determine if my cover would hold.

It was the first time that I’d ever been homesick.

“You look like a stunned groundhog that just saw its shadow,” Carter said, dragging me away from my thoughts.

“And you look like a handsome man in need of an excuse to see me.”

“I don’t need an excuse,” he said, giving me the kind of heated look that made me remember why I thought about the good deputy far more than I should. “I didn’t even know you were back in town until yesterday.”

“You should’ve checked your voicemail.”

“It wouldn’t have done me much good.” He propped his elbow on the chair and turned to look at me. “Unless we’re starting over again.”

“Why would we do that?” I asked.

Carter was far more interesting when he was waking up in my bed and I was tempted to tell him as much. Before the conversation could take a more intimate turn, I heard the quickened footsteps on my front porch.

“Carter? Fortune? Where are you?” Gertie rushed through the door as if she believed there was a shortage of coffee and the first one to the pot would win the last cup.

“What on earth?” Ida Belle glared at Carter before shifting her gaze to me. “Do you know what time it is?” Her hair curlers twitched with every head movement. “I had Johnny Carson reruns on and was just about asleep. This better be good, Carter.”

“Who’s Johnny Carson?” I asked.

“Never mind,” Gertie and Ida Belle chimed together.

Gertie sighed. “Let’s get on with it.” Gertie brewed the coffee while Ida Belle sat across from Carter.

“I’ve been formally read in,” Carter announced, watching my face.

I’d been in similar situations when other CIA agents said they’d been read in so I wasn’t sure if Carter was kidding or trying to drag information out of me or...I gasped...he was serious.

Ida Belle started to speak but I quickly shook my head. We needed to hear this. Director Morrow and Harrison, who had served as my primary contact and handler, hadn’t mentioned giving Carter classified information. While I was in hiding, most of the information relayed to me was on a need-to-know. Had Carter assumed the same and gone around me?

“Before you say anything, Director Morrow said you wouldn’t mind. I would’ve asked but...”

“You did,” I said, furious because he’d gone behind my back. “Many times.”

“What part of, ‘we’ve got this under control’ didn’t you understand?” Ida Belle asked, fuming. Given her red cheeks and forehead, I wouldn’t have been surprised if her curlers went up in flames.

Carter cut his gaze to me. “Why is this even a big deal?”

“I didn’t go to *your* boss,” I snapped.

Gertie sipped her coffee thoughtfully. “To be fair, going to Sheriff Lee probably wouldn’t amount to much more than a photo op with his new burro.”

“Right,” Ida Belle agreed. “Carter, what part of ‘mind your own business’ didn’t you understand?”

“This town and everything that goes on it is my business. I refuse to be kept in the dark in my jurisdiction.” Carter slapped his hand against the table.

Gertie and I jumped. Ida Belle didn’t.

Every man, woman, and child viewed her as a hero. I was no different. She possessed nerves of steel.