

Chapter One

“Don’t forget to water the plants!” Gertie called out, waving like she was flagging down traffic.

Sometimes, I wondered how she ever worked as a spy. For a coffin-dodger, she possessed more energy than most toddlers in their terrible twos.

“Since when do you have plants?” Ida Belle asked.

I wondered the same thing.

Gertie adjusted her yellow and black purse straps securely on her shoulder. With a sweater and pants to match, she looked as if she were paying homage to bumblebees. “Haven’t you ever watched sitcoms where the main characters are leaving town and they need a house-sitter? They don’t have kids or pets, so they hire someone with a green thumb.”

Ida Belle looked baffled. “If you were hiring Gertrude Jekyll, I might understand, but Fortune doesn’t do well with domestic responsibilities.”

Gertie blinked. “Isn’t Gertrude dead?”

“The fact that we know about her at all shows how old we are.”

“Speak for yourself. If I let age get me down, I’d never get up in the morning. And what would Fortune do without us?”

“I guess she’d water the plants,” Ida Belle said.

In an attempt to stop the unfolding banter, I said, “I can’t *promise* your greenery will be alive when you return, but I’ll do my best.”

Gertie patted my hand. “I know you will, dear.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Fortune didn’t want an extra responsibility? She’s supposed to submit a complete inventory of Marge’s house sometime later this month.”

Gertie shrugged. “Oh. I forgot about that. Just tend to them if you get bored.”

Ida Belle narrowed her eyes. She apparently believed as I did. There was a gag gift attached to this house-sitting gig.

Gertie hopped in the SUV and rolled down her window. “Hopefully, our time away will help you in the future.”

“How’s that?” Ida Belle asked.

“She’ll know what it feels like to miss us when we’re gone.” She waited a beat. “You know, when we’re finished here and *not* coming back?”

“Okay, that’s it.” Ida Belle leaned down so she could look at Gertie as she wrestled with her seatbelt. “What’s going on? First, you’re buying plants so Fortune has more responsibility. Now, you’re killing us off and we’re not even out of the driveway.”

Gertie focused on me. “Don’t pay attention to her. I’ll explain everything when we get back.” She shot Ida Belle a sideways glance and then whispered, “Lord willing, we’ll see you soon.”

I stared. Was she serious right now? Was she worried they wouldn’t make it back? I turned to Ida Belle who rolled her eyes and shook her head. She glanced at Gertie once more. “Is there any reason that we shouldn’t go to New Orleans?”

She shrugged and then primly placed her folded hands in her lap.

“Alright then.” Ida Belle slid behind the wheel. Within seconds, she started grumbling about fancy cars and unnecessary gadgets. “Any chance you’ve ever driven one of these?”

“You’re the one who wanted to roll into New Orleans with new wheels,” Gertie said.

“I was talking to Fortune.”

“Rude.”

“Never mind,” Ida Belle muttered. “I wanted to keep the miles off our cars, but could’ve rented a 1966 Thunderbird. Then, we would’ve known how to operate it.”

Gertie’s bottom lip trembled. “I knew it. This trip is a bad idea.”

“Okay. Spit it out. You’ve babbled about not coming back for the last few minutes and now a Thunderbird is a horrible idea, too?”

Gertie twisted her lips as if she were trying to decide how to break the devastating news. “Thelma and Louise were in a 1966 Thunderbird when they drove off a cliff.”

“That’s fiction,” Ida Belle stated flatly.

Gertie frowned. “What color would you have rented?”

“Blue. Why?”

Gertie fell against her seat and whimpered.

Ida Belle laughed. “I’ve seen the movie.”

“Everything will be fine. When you’re not at the hospital with Ally’s mom, maybe you can get out and enjoy the sights,” I said, attempting to ease her anxiety.

Gertie perked up again. “Great idea. I’ve been wanting to tour St. Louis Cemetery Number 1.”

Ida Belle held up her hand so I wouldn’t feed into the theatrics. “Might as well give up now and keep your dignity.” She mouthed, “She took some cold medicine last night. It’s still in her system.”

That explained everything. She had zero tolerance for medication.

Ida Belle dragged her hands around the steering wheel. “This is one sweet ride.”

“Better enjoy it while you can,” Gertie said.

I backed away from the getaway car before Gertie changed her mind about their trip. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

“We won’t. Oh, before I forget... Walter will stop by my place each night and turn on the lights. We want the neighbors to think we’re still home.”

About that time, Ally rushed outside with a large bakery box. “I was afraid I might have missed you! I just saw Aunt Celia over at the café and she mentioned Ida Belle. Apparently, you almost ran over her when you were backing out of your driveway.”

“I missed?” Ida Belle snapped her fingers.

Gertie leaned across Ida Belle so she could see. “What else did she say?”

Ally fidgeted. “She said Ida Belle must’ve been going out of town because she was in a borrowed luxury vehicle.”

Ida Belle looked bewildered. “Why borrowed?”

Ally shifted her weight from one foot to the other, a surefire sign that she didn’t want to quote Celia verbatim. “She said we don’t have a rental car company here that would rent out a luxury vehicle to an old buzzard.”

Ida Belle’s face turned red. “Why that—”

“Don’t say it,” I said, holding up my hand.

“Ida Belle knows better than to call Celia names on Monday.”

How could I forget? Mondays were sacred ground. If someone attended church on Sunday, they couldn’t talk about their enemies the next day. If they did, it meant they weren’t paying attention to the previous day’s sermon. I wondered then if parishioners were exempt if they missed church.

Ida Belle looked at her sidekick. “You didn’t happen to mention our trip to Beatrice. Did you?”

On paper, Beatrice Paulson appeared to have an alignment with God’s Wives, Celia’s ladies group. Ida Belle turned her so she was now a spy for the Sinful Ladies Society.

“I haven’t talked to Beatrice, but she wouldn’t betray confidences.” Gertie furrowed her brow. “If Celia knows we’re going out of town, it’s probably because her spies watch your every move. You didn’t exactly hide the fact that we were packing for a trip. Your luggage was on your porch for several hours.”

Ally stayed on point by saying, “Aunt Celia doesn’t know where you’re going. If she did, she would be headed to New Orleans, too. She’s family and would think it’s expected, but Momma issued strict instructions not to tell Aunt Celia about her surgery.”

Gertie smiled big. “After we’ve been gone for a few days, please tell Celia that your mother asked *us* to help. We’re better company.” She laughed so hard that she couldn’t speak. Finally, she held up a finger and added, “Oh, and be sure to get that on video.”

“You’re a mess.” Ally handed off the bakery box and white bag to Ida Belle. “Two roast beef sandwiches, four bags of chips, and some chess bars.”

“Thank you.” She put the items on the dash. “Where’s Gertie’s?”

“You’re the one who wanted to drive.” Gertie grabbed their goodies. “Enjoy life in the fast lane. I’d rather eat.”

“You’d better go,” Ally said. “There’s a storm rolling in, and Momma will freak out if she comes out of surgery and she’s all alone.”

“We have plenty of time,” Ida Belle assured her.

“When are you coming back?” Ally asked.

Gertie’s glum expression returned. “If creeks don’t rise and floods don’t wash us all away, we should be back as soon as they tell your mother she can go back to the nursing home.”

“Ignore her,” Ida Belle mouthed. At this point, anything we might say would only prolong their trip. “You two stay out of trouble.”

“Always,” Ally said.

“Never,” I said at the same time.

As they backed out of the driveway, Gertie yelled, “Don’t forget the plants!”

After they were out of sight, Ally followed me inside where I retrieved Gertie's housekeys. "Are you working the rest of the day?"

"Unfortunately. The café was packed so I left the new cook in charge long enough to run over here."

"Care to drop me off at Gertie's?"

"I can save you a trip, but don't tell Gertie that I spoiled the surprise."

"You have my word."

"She asked Walter to order some indoor flowers. He didn't think you'd want to deal with it, so he ordered artificials."

"Does Gertie know?"

"Of course. That's why she's so excited. She wanted you to take care of them all week so she could pull one over on you."

"Like I couldn't tell the difference."

Ally giggled. "I'll side with you and say that you would've known for sure. Now, I've got to run. Stay out of trouble!"

"What's with everyone? Do I look like someone who needs that warning?"

"Ever since you moved here, Louisiana hasn't been the same. Some blame you for the excitement."

"I'll carry that blame around like a trophy."

"I knew you would," she said, waving goodbye.

After Ally left, I thought about what she said. While I couldn't comment on the state of Louisiana, Sinful had been a busy little town in recent weeks. In fact, the whole parish was hopping. Cartier had its first crime in over a hundred years. Another town caught a criminal who was wanted in seven states after a string of burglaries.

When I first arrived here several months ago, I could've sworn that I'd been dumped on a movie set straight out of the 70s. The place looked like a bus stop postcard, a town everyone wanted to visit.

That first day, I also met Deputy Carter LeBlanc. One look at him and the charming scenery gained another gold star, but I wouldn't have admitted it then.

Right after I was introduced to Gertie and Ida Belle, crimes followed in rapid succession. Now, everyone in Sinful apparently believed their parish only went topsy turvy because of the newcomer, a Yankee of all things.

On a positive note, I was wrong about Sinful. It wasn't a gloomy place with dull people. On a negative one, those who kept it so interesting would be gone for a few days.

Carter was due back tomorrow from a fishing trip. Marie was in Baton Rouge for a women's conference. Francine worked half-days due to a knee problem which meant Ally wouldn't have a day off anytime soon. Scooter...well, no one really depended on Scooter.

That left Walter.

Now, I understood why everyone was so concerned. We were bound to land in some sort of mischief. At the thought, I practically skipped upstairs to jump in the shower.

If trouble would soon knock at our door, I couldn't wait to answer it.