

CHAPTER 1



When the doorbell rang at River Oaks Manor, Gene gave his wife an exasperated look. “Anabelle’s appointment does not start for another thirty minutes.” He pushed back his dining room chair and prepared to send the young brunette on her way. “I swear, your customers would come all hours of the night and day if I didn’t step in.”

“Be nice,” Lenore Zeringue cautioned her husband. She was not as graceful getting out of her chair as her lean mate. Being six months pregnant, her already ample breasts were expanding as fast as her middle. “Anabelle is a paying customer, Gene. As my business manager, you of all people should remember the old adage about the customer always being right.”

“Not when said customer’s reading is not scheduled for another thirty minutes. When that time comes, and after she pays for the services, the customer can think she is always right. Not during our dinner time. That’s sacred family time. Once the baby arrives, we agreed parts of the day would be dedicated to being business free. I agreed not to work on any of my manuscripts, and you promised to ignore the spirits wandering around this old place and giving out psychic readings.”

“The baby doesn’t arrive for another three months, honey.” Lenore waddled after her husband. The ghost of a man in a Confederate suit tried to get her attention, but she waved him off. Her Granny Royal was not as easily dismissed. Even though she had only recently passed away, the former psychic of the River Parishes made her presence known. The gray haired, big bosomed ghost had appointed herself as an ambassador for the spirits of River Oaks, all of whom were vying for Lenore’s attention.

The smell of sulfur clung to Granny Royal as her spirit floated several inches in front of Lenore. “You better listen to your husband, dear. He wields a mean paddle.”

Tired of being nagged by her grandmother, who often sided with Gene instead of her own flesh and blood, the pregnant psychic lost her patience. “Go away!” Lenore admonished.

Gene heard his petite wife and nodded in approval, assuming his lovely wife was finally coming around to seeing things his way. “Perfect greeting. Just give me a second to open the door, and you can say it again, a bit louder though.”

The front room of River Oaks Manor was dark and small compared to the rest of the house. A wooden table dominated the gloomy space. Most of Lenore’s customers never made it past this room. While Gene Zeringue was a recent convert to accepting the existence of the paranormal, he still wanted to live a normal life as much as possible. It was bad enough spirits roamed aimlessly around their home. The last thing they needed was living intruders disturbing the peace of their day to day life. Neither Lenore nor Gene noticed the glow of the blue stone centered on the table, a sure sign a new spirit was preparing to take up residence at the manor or looking to communicate with someone coming to Lenore for a reading.

Gene swung open the front door so forcefully it flung into the connecting wall, sending a loud echo through their home. Instead of finding the tiny, pretty, twenty-something, brunette he expected, a tall, dark haired gentleman of about thirty stood at the threshold. The stranger did not look like a client. In fact, Gene recognized a skeptic

when he saw one. The former news reporter would wager a tidy sum that this was not a potential customer coming to ask for a reading.

His wife did not have the same skill for reading people. Lenore peeked around her husband's broad shoulders to get a better look at the stranger. "Can we help you?"

The man regarded the couple for a moment before responding. "Is this River Oaks? There's no sign out front, but the billboard on the highway gave this address?"

"My billboard, ah?" Smiling and nodding, Lenore gave her husband a smug wink. "I told you investing in a billboard along the highway would draw in more customers."

Gene turned to glare at his woman. "I never doubted it would send more people our way, if you remember correctly. I told you it wasn't wise to advertise for more customers when you are already almost over booked until your due date."

Beau St. Pierre watched the people argue back and forth. They appeared to be a normal, married couple. The two looked like an average, everyday pair of lovers, not con artists out to balk innocent victims. At first, he thought he might have come to the wrong address. While the couple seemed genuine, the manor definitely played into the setting of a psychic's business. Hell, someone seemed to be pumping in a horrible metal smell and cold air in an effort to make the atmosphere seem more genuine. "You wouldn't be Madame Lenore, psychic to the River Parishes, would you?"

"You aren't here for a reading." Gene's radar was up. It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact. Turning back to his wife, he ordered her to wait for him in another room while he dealt with this intruder. Lenore was such a loving person, always wanting to see the best in people. As head of their home, it was his job to protect her tender heart.

Ignoring Gene's orders was challenging, the image of her husband taking a wooden spoon to her backside for defiance popping in her head, but Lenore spoke to the visitor. "Yes, I am the psychic. Are you trying to communicate with someone who has passed on?"

The spirit of Granny Royal hissed in Lenore's ear. "You are going

to get your butt busted for sure. I told you to listen to your husband. He knows what's best for you."

"Go away," Lenore hissed in response, and Gene again seemed to assume his wife was finally learning to heed his warning, albeit a bit late.

The man at the doorway seemed caught off guard, too. "I take it this is not a good time?"

"No, it's not," the psychic's husband turned his attention back on the visitor. "We have supper every night at six sharp. My wife is not Madame Lenore from six to seven p.m." Reaching to the plastic container attached to the wall beside the front door, he grabbed a folded sheet of colorful paper. It was a newly printed brochure which detailed a brief history of River Oaks Manor, Lenore's verified predictions and testimonials from satisfied customers. "Our business number is on the back along with a list of prices for different services. Just so you understand, I vet all of Lenore's clients before she meets with them. Skeptics go through me. While I respect a person's right to judge whether the paranormal is real or not, I don't tolerate people harassing my wife. Try to upset her, and you will answer to me."

"The last thing I want to do is harm Madame Lenore in anyway, I assure you. I believe she is the only avenue available to me right now to get in contact with someone I love very much. It pains me to admit it, but your wife is my last hope."

"So, you do want to communicate with a love one who as passed?" Lenore inched her way to stand beside her husband. It was not in her nature to turn away someone seeking her help.

"Well, no." Beau admitted with honesty.

Gene nudged his wife behind him again. "I suspected as much. Who knows? Maybe I'm a bit psychic, too."

Beau rushed to continue, sensing a door was about to slam in his face. "I am trying to find my fiancée Belle. She is very much alive, and I want to keep her that way. Please, Madame Lenore, I need your help. Invite me in for a few minutes. I won't stay long. If there is a chance you can help me find my Belle, I am willing to pay double your normal rates."

Lenore knew Gene was about to close the door, and whispered in his ear. "Did you hear him? Double the going rate, Gene. You can sit in on the reading if you are concerned about my safety."

"I have no objections to your husband joining us." Beau interjected, sensing his only chance to get inside was to use the woman's willingness to help him.

"As if you would have a choice in the matter," Gene growled.

"The money could go straight into the fund you set up for us to build our own home away from River Oaks. Think about it, Gene. One day, thanks to clients like this man..."

"Beauregard St. Pierre," the man interrupted, pulling out his wallet.

"Thanks to people like Mr. St. Pierre, one day we will have a place to go home to at night, sans the spirits of River Oaks." Lenore waited patiently for her husband to process her words. She could see the inner conflict play across his handsome eyes as he wavered between slamming the door or allowing the session. Having a haven to escape to away from the business side of River Oaks was a dream of his since before he put his ring on Lenore's finger. Would he be willing to give up sacred family time to work toward that goal?

Looking at his watch, Gene announced in a curt tone, "You have exactly fifteen minutes until the next client arrives. I hope you know we'll be charging you for the entire hour. Well, double that amount, thanks to your generous offer." Gene held on to the hope that the man would balk at the terms. The stranger glanced at the back of the brochure. Gene noticed Mr. Beauregard St. Pierre paused when he saw how much this little session was going to cost him. Skeptics rarely wanted to fork up the cost for a psychic reading. Smiling, Gene started to close the door.

Beau opened his wallet and pulled out a few hundred dollars. "Getting my woman back is worth it," he said, mainly to himself. When he got his hands on her, Beau promised himself he'd give her one smack on the ass for every dollar he wasted on this stupid chase.

Lenore led Mr. St. Pierre toward the table where she did her psychic readings. A book display was set up strategically near the table, where customers could not help but see it when they sat down.

Instead of taking a seat, Beauregard strode toward the book-stand. Picking up a copy of *The Spirits of River Oaks* by Gene Zeringue, he started leafing through the pages. The psychic positively beamed with pride. "It's a best seller in the state, and doing very well nationally." She smiled over at her husband, who seemed less than thrilled with the stranger's interest in his book. "Considering how much you paid for the session," Lenore continued, "you could have a copy, if you like."

"You can have a copy for the retail price," Gene said firmly. "Think of it as more money for our new home fund," he added at his wife's frown.

"Actually, I had a copy at home. My fiancée recently became obsessed with all things paranormal. We own an extensive collection of books ranging in topic from ghost haunting to highly acclaimed psychics in the state."

"Had a copy?" Gene asked, and he was already starting to regret allowing this session to take place.

"Belle took a few of the books when she disappeared. *The Spirits of River Oaks* was one of them." Beauregard placed the book back and took a seat before he could be asked to leave.

"So, you're not here for a psychic reading." Gene confirmed his instincts and came to stand behind his wife as Lenore took a seat at the front of the table. Her huge belly made it impossible for his wife to grab her blue stone from the center. Lenore often used the necklace she inherited from her grandmother Royal to help focus her readings.

"I'm here looking for information," Beauregard's piercing green eyes locked with Gene's. "Information I paid for up front."

"What kind of information?" Lenore picked up on the growing tension between the two men. Gene was very protective of her, even more so now that they were expecting their first child. "Do you already know why your girlfriend disappeared? I sense you know a lot more than you are letting on." Lenore stopped trying to get her stone.

"Being a psychic and all, I would have assumed you could sense what information I already knew?" The comment was out before Beauregard could think better of it. He had not come here to exchange blows with the angry man guarding Madame Lenore. But if

giving and taking a few punches to the face or stomach would help get Belle back, he would be tempted. Beau had a lot of frustration building up, and he longed to relieve some of it. But it would not help him find his love, so he fought the urge. "I apologize, Madame Lenore. That was rude. Trying to track down my Belle has me on edge lately. I'm in real estate, so generally I am more personable. It's frustrating, to say the least. This is the second time she has run from me."

"You're in the habit of misplacing your lover?" Gene was not as forgiving as his wife, even if Lenore still seemed agreeable to helping the man.

"Apparently my lover is making a habit of playing hide and seek from me," Beau admitted gruffly.

"What if he means the girl harm?" Gene asked his wife and waited for her to respond. She eyed the blue stone expectantly, and he reluctantly reached over to grab it.

The psychic gently began stroking the warm stone a few times. A cool breeze fluttered around the table and the stench of sulfur filled the air. "Oh, my." Coughing a few times, she whispered for her husband's ears only, but Beau caught every word. "He's planning on upending her when he finds her. Seeing as you are already planning on doing the same to me just because I didn't leave the room when you told me to, I don't see how you can object."

Beau's eyes widened at the woman's words. He did indeed plan to upend Belle when he finally found her. His fiancée, no doubt, realized it, too. But that was not why his lover was running from him. If only it would have been that easy. "So, you practice Domestic Discipline in this part of the state, too? I figured it was just a kinky niche from the city."

Gene tensed, taking the man's words as an insult. "Funny, I figured it was more of a small parish idea, much too backwards for enlightened people from New Orleans."

"Touché," Beau smiled. He extended his hand to the other man in an effort to declare a truce. A few awkward seconds ticked away before Gene accepted it. Then the other man took a seat across from the stranger, on the other side of his wife.

The stone continued to warm in Lenore's hand, and she closed her eyes to block out the others' energy. When her eyes opened again, she gave Beau a disappointed look. "You aren't here for a reading, after all. You know I will help you find your lover because you suspect she will likely seek me out for a reading."

"Bingo." Beau did not bother to hide his true motives. "She read your husband's book from cover to cover at least two times. It seems reasonable to assume she will probably come to River Oaks sooner or later. All I ask is a heads up when she does. Belle has some crazy notion about our future which is totally ridiculous. She's a brilliant lady with a naive nature. The paranormal has become an obsession with her. Someone convinced her to leave me..."

"Before you hurt her?" Gene interrupted, still not sure what to make of this man.

"Before she can hurt him," Lenore corrected.

A timid knock on the door signaled Beau's time was up. "Do you have a picture of your lover?" Gene asked, escorting the reluctant man to the door. "I'm not promising we'll contact you, but if Lenore senses you are not a threat to the young woman, I see no reason you shouldn't have a chance to reason with her. I understand your frustration about dealing with the paranormal. I've had the same issues since I fell in love with my beautiful wife. It's damn frustrating trying to deal with something you can't see or touch."

Finally, Beau thought, a kindred spirit who understood his frustration. He started to take out his wallet to pull out Belle's photo when the person at the door knocked a bit louder this time. Gene looked at the clock on the wall before speaking. "She is early again. Her appointment is for seven sharp, right?"

"Don't bother with the photo, Mr. St. Pierre. You better open the door, Gene. If I am not mistaken, his fiancée Belle is knocking right now."

"Not your seven o'clock appointment?" Gene was shocked. Was yet another stranger daring to come knocking without calling ahead to make an appointment? The damn billboard was coming down first thing in the morning.

"It's complicated," Lenore said with resignation and reached for the knob. "Welcome Anabelle."

No sooner had the door sprung wide open, Beauregard St. Pierre expelled a loud sigh of relief and grabbed the arm of the fragile woman knocking. "Belle! Where the hell have you been? When I get you home, I promise you won't be able to sit down for a week. I can't believe you took off again after I dragged you home from Baton Rouge the last time."

The beautiful brunette gave Madame Lenore a wounded glance. She appeared to think she had been betrayed by someone she had obviously come to trust. "Lenore, you promised me Beau would be safe!"

Lenore felt horrible for disappointing a client. "He is safe, Anabelle. Look at him. He's perfectly fine, a bit irate at the moment but healthy."

"I'd like to keep him that way," the younger woman announced, trying to pull free from her lover's firm hold. It was a futile effort. At just over five feet, her lover was a foot taller and outweighed her by at least sixty pounds. His broad shoulders and muscular arms were impossible to escape.

The man was so damn sexy. Anabelle was torn. Part of her wanted to throw herself in Beau's warm embrace and feel his loving arms around her again. No doubt he would scold her for running away, even convince her to go home with him. Another part of her knew being this close to him put the man she loved at grave risk, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Beau was too logical for his own good. Why couldn't her lover listen to reason? She had explained why it was necessary to leave him again and again. It was for his own good, after all. Before she could stop him, Beau had her in his arms and was kissing the fight out of her.

"It looks like we will get our family time after all, honey. I'm afraid my seven o'clock appointment is about to be canceled." Lenore smiled. "Anabelle Simar appears to have another appointment to keep."

"Cancellations require twenty-four hours' notice," Gene interrupted. "You both better come inside. I can't let him take you home

until I am reasonably sure he doesn't mean you harm. Well, not long-lasting harm, at any rate. If what he says about you running off is true, you deserve to have your bottom reddened. Speaking of rates, Anabelle hasn't paid for her session yet. As her fiancé, I assume you'll be handling the matter for her." He gave Beau a pointed look.

The last thing Beau wanted to do was pay even more money. He wanted to get Belle back home safe and sound so he could spank some good sense into her backside. Unless he wanted to haul her over his shoulder and carry her kicking and screaming, he needed to gain her cooperation first. Talking things over at the manor might not be such a bad idea. He asked Gene to keep Belle in place while he yanked out his wallet. Then he handed over another hundred to Gene.

Gene pulled a chair from the table and set it in front of the entrance. "I'll guard the door while you two lovers work things out. Lenore can mediate."

Beau grew tired of trying to reason with Belle half an hour later. Sometimes a man just had to put his foot down, he decided. "Anabelle Simar, do you love me?"

Tossing her golden brown hair over her shoulder, she found it hard to look away from his stern glare. "Of course, I love you, Beau. I have never given you reason to doubt my feelings for you."

"You ran away from me not once, but twice."

"To protect you... Madame Claudette saw my presence in your life would be fatal. I've already explained this to you over and over again."

"Madame Claudette is a fraud, dammit. People can't predict the future," he barked. Lenore reminded the man sitting at her table of her presence. He looked over at her and offered an apology. "What I meant to say is, very few people have the ability to see into the future."

"Madame Claudette is one of them." Belle insisted, two dimples appearing as her lips pursed tightly. "She's never wrong."

"Tell me about this Madame Claudette," Lenore prompted. She understood better than most how con artists sometimes pretended they had the talents associated with the paranormal to separate trusting people from their money. Before Lenore learned to trust and control her own talents, she used whatever tricks available to her to

gain people's trust. From Lenore's experience, most people with the sight did not try to make a living off the talent. They preferred to hide their gift for fear of ridicule. The River Parishes' Psychic, as Lenore had become known, only recently felt comfortable with her own gifts, and then only after Gene showed up in her life and helped fine tune her talents and provide an anchor.

Beau crossed his arms. "Since I paid for this little session, I would prefer to spend the time convincing Belle to come home, not talking about some fake psychic bent on breaking up our relationship. I will ask you again, Belle. Do you love me?" When she nodded, he grabbed her hand and locked eyes with his lover. "Then trust me to protect you."

"I am trying to protect you. Madame Claudette has never been wrong. She said my being with you was dangerous."

"Then trust me to protect both of us, dammit. If you aren't ready to go home, we can finish this discussion someplace else. Mr. Zeringue is watching the damn clock, and frankly, I can't afford these rates."

"We could go to my apartment, I suppose." Belle could not stop herself from enjoying a bit more time with Beau. Though she forced herself to walk away from him, she still longed for his touch and love. When they were together, the world felt right.

"Do you mind if we leave my car here?" Beau asked Gene before they left. "Or should I ask how much it would cost me to leave it here?"

"You could just follow behind me," Belle offered.

"I am not letting you out of my sight again until I can trust you to stay put, Anabelle. We are going to work this issue out once and for all so we can go back home and life can go back to normal."

Gene smiled and offered Beau a bargain discount of ten dollars a day to park in front of River Oaks Manor. Grumbling he paid, sure he would be able to handle this misunderstanding quickly with Belle and pick up his car before it got too expensive. It would be several days later before he came by to pay more fees.