

Bayou Halloween
Riley Blake

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About *Bayou Halloween*

Bayou Halloween and Bayou Cozy Romantic Thrills are now part of the Miss Fortune World published by J&R Fan Fiction. These short stories feature many of the original characters created by Jana DeLeon (Gertie, Ida Belle, Fortune, Carter, Walter, and more).

These short stories follow the first two 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

“This is the worst night of my life.”

Actually, it was morning, but the sun hadn’t made an appearance. As long as I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face, it was still post meridiem in my book. To make matters worse, it was just after the three o’clock witching hour on All Hallows’ Eve. “Remind me again. Why are we dumping the evidence out here?”

The airboat grazed a log and if it hadn’t been for Gertie, I would’ve tumbled overboard. She grabbed the back of my jacket as the boat continued its glide across the Louisiana swamp. “Takes some time to get your sea legs. You’ll get used to it.”

“I hope not,” I mumbled.

“We’re almost there!” Ida Belle leaned forward in her elevated seat. “Let me know when you see a brown canoe!”

“Are you serious?” Gertie hollered. “In this heavy fog? We wouldn’t see a red ship with Walter standing on the stern wearing flashing boxers.”

“Nice image.” Ida Belle snorted a laugh. “I’ll stay the course. Gertie, keep the comments coming. Fortune, you’re on watch.”

Ida Belle’s idea of “watch” varied from mine. My gaze shifted to the right then back to the left. Ghost-hunting required a certain level of attentiveness. Thanks to an overactive imagination, wherever I looked the shadows stared back.

Five-foot-four. No. Five-foot-nine and hanging from a tree. Faces with no names. Bodies without faces. Ghosts and other creatures rising from the fog. We’d need some luck if we were going to make it out of the swamps alive. Without luck, we were doomed to become... I shivered. I couldn’t go there.

I shouldn’t be *here* at all. It’s Halloween.

My neighbor’s daughter Annie once said that Sinful residents didn’t see the point in watching for ghosts and goblins. They could turn to the bayou for their next scare...or just find me. Since arriving in Sinful, Louisiana, I’d developed a reputation for being in the thick of things. If ricocheting bullets and dead bodies were someone’s idea of a good time, I was their go-to girl.

Leave it to a nine year old to tell what the locals said behind one's back.

"Disposing of evidence carries a significant risk." Ida Belle fiddled with her spotlight and cast a beam across the swamplands. She'd borrowed the boat under the pretense that she might later buy it. "What would life be without a little danger?"

"Barely tolerable," said Gertie.

"Risky was leaving evidence in my attic for almost eight months." I clutched both sides of a borrowed orange lifejacket. My life depended on it. Ida Belle was the captain steering this vessel so it wasn't a moot point. "We should've buried these guns right after Valentine's Day."

"And miss watching you squirm on the creepiest holiday of the year?" Ida Belle scoffed. "Not a chance."

Gertie said, "After Carter started prowling through your kitchen, it was only a matter of time before he snooped elsewhere."

"A man raids the kitchen. Doesn't mean he'll start prowling in the attic." Since the Wasteland Steakhouse shootout, Carter had spent a great deal of time at my place. Being hip-to-hip was more annoying than satisfying. "Besides, if he'd wanted to be a scavenger, he had the opportunity."

"Carter is very sneaky, dear. Don't underestimate the man behind the badge. Once an officer, always on duty."

"Now you tell me."

"This isn't news to you," said Ida Belle.

"We could've buried the guns in *your* backyard." I leveled my gaze on Ida Belle but when she ignored me, I quickly turned to Gertie. "Or yours." She was noncommittal. "Okay then. Mine it is. Let's go back. This place gives me the creeps."

"Your backyard isn't an option," Ida Belle said. "Bones has a nose for ammunition."

"There is that." The annoying hound was part of Sandy-Sue Morrow's inheritance package and since I was standing in for Miss Morrow, Bones was part of my new identity. As a librarian and former beauty queen, I apparently loved animals, books, and books about animals. And I had a penchant for long nails and makeup, something I couldn't pull off as easily as dog ownership.

“Men meddle more than they admit. It’s why I never got married. A woman who holds a man’s attention opens herself up to revealing too much. Comes with the territory,” Ida Belle said, weaving the boat through the waters. “It’s why Walter and I never tied the knot.”

“Speaking of knots...my stomach will thank you if you slow down.”

“You’re not seasick!” Ida Belle called out, shifting the steering stick forward. “You miss Carter.”

“About like the flu.”

“Can I quote you on that?”

“As long as I can sit down with Walter and do the same.”

“Walter won’t believe a word of it. He says it’s only a matter of time before we hear church bells!” Ida Belle shouted over the humming motor.

Amused, Gertie slapped her knee. “After all these years, it’s about time!”

Ida Belle scoffed. “We’re talking about Fortune and Carter.”

“You first,” I said, returning my focus to the swamp. The crickets faded into the night which seemingly served as a lingering reminder. We were in gator country. We couldn’t see ten feet in front of us but those big-eyed vultures could undoubtedly see us. We were intruders, trespassing in their environment. There were ten...or maybe *hundreds* of them and they were circling us. They swished their deadly tails as they swam closer and closer.

“They know we’re here.”

“Who?” Gertie asked, popping the top on her soda can.

Ida Belle leaned forward again. “Did you say something?”

“Fortune says someone knows we’re here!”

“Who?” Suddenly on guard, Ida Belle leaned forward again and searched the waters. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Don’t do that!” If I lived in the Louisiana Bayou for the rest of my life, I’d never feel at ease in these murky waters.

“What is it, dear?”

“Don’t stop the boat.” *What if it wouldn’t start back?*

“We’re floating. We’re fine,” Ida Belle said, acting as if we had all day to reach the bayou’s heart.

The sweeping moss and low-riding branches provided reasonable doubt that we'd ever see land again. A full moon allowed brief moments of good visibility but then the fog dropped over us like a veil again. My eyes couldn't adjust and the weathered blindness left us at a disadvantage.

Given our choice of captains, we had our share of limitations before we ever boarded the boat.

"If only we'd dumped this stuff after the Wasteland Massacre."

Ida Belle snorted. "You call it a massacre. I call it justice."

"No, you called it a good time," Gertie said.

"We sent a message. That's what matters." Ida Belle used an authoritative voice, one which teetered between the deliberately blurred lines of former covert operative and the rightful Sinful Ladies Society leader. A local group, the SLS was founded by Ida Belle and Gertie. Sinful residents looked at the women as a managing faction or shadow government behind local politics.

"Harrison said the mob story didn't stick."

"Sure it did," said Gertie. "With all the fake news out there today, folks count on fellow Louisianans to keep the record straight."

"You might remind your partner-turned-handler that the reporters told the truth about what happened. They guessed at who was behind it." Ida Belle maneuvered around a web of garbage and branches. "If Harrison had done his job, we would've been notified long before Valentine's Day."

"I'm a trained sniper," I stated proudly. "Killing is what I do. I should've been expecting visitors."

"Nonsense. Here, you're slinging books not grenades. You're entitled to step into Sandy-Sue's shoes and believe the world is a safe and beautiful place."

"Right," I grumbled. "If only..."

Ida Belle straightened her spine. "Spirited Shaffer from over at Wasteland Chronicles said no one will mess with the Sinful Ladies Society now."

"That's because you fed him some line of bull when you said, 'Bodies are never found here. Our gators feast on criminals. It's why they leave the locals alone.' And I couldn't have said it better myself." Gertie grinned. "Course the newcomers all think you're crazy now."

“I just hope I’m considered a local.” Gator-feeding considerations hung in the balance and I trembled at the thought of becoming a swampland snack. I spotted a dim light in the fog and assumed we were approaching a dock.

Gertie held her flashlight under her chin. “Stick with us.”

“Don’t do that again.” I snatched her flashlight and aimed the beams to the right. “Are we docking?”

“Docking?” Ida Belle scoffed. “No. Why?”

“Because someone is over there.” I pointed to the left. “See?”

Two shadowy figures came into focus. One jolted forward. Had one fellow pushed the other?

“Sorry about your luck!” A man’s deep voice filled the air. And it was quickly followed by a scream, multiple gunfire blasts, and a plop. Then everything went dark.