

The Stiletto Scandal

Riley Blake

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Author Note

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An additional thank you to my wonderful mom for ‘finally’ giving up her carrot cake recipe for Celia to use in this novella. *Celia’s* recipe is the talk of the town when she throws a party. You’ll see why after you try it.

For the readers out there who have supported the authors writing fan fiction, thank you for bringing our books into your homes. Thank you for reading the *Stiletto Scandal*. I appreciate your readership.

Riley Blake

Dedication

For my brother Ben: Any humor I possessed was always derived from you. I miss you.

Chapter One

Dragging tail wasn't an option.

As soon as I spotted the floater, I tossed aside my binoculars, wiggled my toes into a double layer of warm fuzzy socks—compliments of my good friend Ally—and hurriedly grabbed a tacky pair of wading boots, recently purchased from Walter at the local general store.

After a minute's worth of hobbles, boots were in place and I was raring to go. *First stop, my kitchen table.* Scooping up the barely-charged cell phone, I punched Gertie's contact number and waited. Under normal circumstances, Ida Belle would've been the logical first call, but it wasn't quite six yet. She probably hadn't unrolled her hair curlers, much less made it out of bed.

"What and where?" Gertie asked. A simple "hello" wasn't dramatic enough.

Fueling her enthusiasm for mysterious happenings, I said, "My house. Down by the bayou. Emergency meeting. Call it."

Until the others arrived, I needed to figure out how to secure a body. It wouldn't be an easy feat thanks to fast-moving rapids. After recent storms, the bayou swirled with the muddiest swamp waters I'd ever seen, not that I was a professional slough-watcher, but I paid close attention to my backyard.

Thanks to a dead body recently discovered there, my place was somewhat of a landmark. Jeanine from Sinful Sightings even pointed it out on her haunted ghost tours, which was disconcerting when I stopped to think about it. With a body count now standing at two and only a couple of months into my Sinful residency, I was beginning to think that the Louisiana Bayou wasn't exactly the safest place to lay low and hide.

I entered the back shed, steps away from the slight incline leading to the bayou. *Second stop—a supply-gathering mission.*

Thanks to the former homeowner Marge Boudreaux, I'd soon have my hands wrapped around a few body-fishing supplies. Marge and I were kindred spirits, but we hadn't officially met.

Prior to my arrival in Sinful, Marge went on to a better place. Since the Baptist women often said as much, I assumed they meant heaven. Then again, any place beyond Sinful's city lines might have been considered a 'better' place.

I was in Sinful hiding from those who wanted my head on a spike. In order to avoid a painful end, I assumed the identity of Marge's niece, Sandy-Sue Morrow.

As I rummaged through Marge's dilapidated shed, I thought of how she might handle towing a body from the bayou. The outbuilding housed an assortment of items that a former CIA assassin could use on the job. Not that I was in the mood to kill, but it was always helpful to have access to the necessary tools of the trade. Goals and situations could change on a dime out here in the bayou.

As luck would have it, I was about to accept the role of a fisherwoman. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be casting nets in an effort to catch lobster or crab. Tucking rope under my arm and holding fast to garden supplies, I gave Marge two-thumbs up and hurried to the swamp.

From where I stood, the mission was already set in stone, or rather leaning against a cypress. The poor guy had seen better days. Gunk, also known as bog moss, covered his face. A five o'clock shadow and cold, set eyes were barely visible. I couldn't tell much about his external characteristics. Locals might be able to identify him if I could save him before he became gator bait.

Shuddering at the thought, I secured the coiled rope against my shoulder and fastened a good grip around the shovel handle. It was the same shovel that I often used to carry wandering frogs back to the bayou. My stomach lurched at the thought of employing the same frog-toting tool to fetch a man. In these parts, women often used extreme measures to reel in a fellow, or so I'd been told. Maybe the old saying derived from situations such as these.

Pushing aside local folklore, I focused on the deceased. With limited resources and a fear of alligators, I wasn't exactly jumping up and down to save a dead guy. If only Ida Belle were here. I could hand off the rope and see if she had any experience lassoing a corpse.

Walter came to mind. If he stood as proof, Ida Belle possessed ability but lacked practice.

In any case, until my elderly companions showed up to lend a helping hand, digging was the best course of action, assuming this fellow's feet were planted in shallow waters. Fortunately, I had a close relationship with this shovel which basically meant I knew how to use it.

Curving my fingers around the wide handle, I cast the triangular end into the water and scooped up the fellow's heel. Unable to budge it, I opted to go deep and aim for the fellow's arch. Maybe I could lift his foot then hook a knee and drag the body to shore. After fruitless attempts, I stepped back and studied the subject.

A crane might do the trick.

If Gertie and company didn't arrive shortly, I could always phone a friend with connections. Since I didn't have a lot of those, I'd probably buzz Walter. He knew people and could probably locate a hoist, but he was also Deputy Carter LeBlanc's uncle. An alerted Walter meant Carter would know about the incident before I had a chance to drag the man ashore and search for some identification.

Glancing back at the house that had become my Louisiana home, I debated on whether or not my Jeep—Marge's jalopy—would prove useful in this situation. It was four-wheel drive. Muddy wheels slipping and sliding wouldn't present a problem.

Then again, I was a DC girl. What did I know about mudding in the Bayou? The cowgirl's rope came to mind once more. What were my options? What was I supposed to do first? Tie off at the dead guy's neck? If the wrong person saw what I was doing, they might jump to conclusions.

The last thing I needed was to look like an accessory after the fact, if a crime had been committed. Based on an early assessment and my record for stumbling upon bodies, foul play was a given.

Catching movement in my periphery, I slung the shovel over my shoulder and prepared to assault any alligator that dared an approach. On a positive note, the victim didn't seem too concerned about undesirable critters. On a negative one, I didn't want to deal with said critters. I rather liked the idea of keeping all limbs attached.

Returning focus to the man in the mud, I made an assessment: *Five foot eleven. Maybe a tad taller—or shorter—hard to tell in potty-like waters. Five o'clock shadow—or was that...* "Ugh." I couldn't think about it. *Ice-blue eyes, much like a killer's.* I'd met a few in my time. *Well over two hundred pounds. Threat level zero, unless his ghost loitered nearby and then we might have a problem.*

He wore a noticeable frown which was to be expected. Dead guys generally didn't have anything to smile about.

Given his present circumstances, I'd frown too if I had someone like yours truly trying to save my corpse for the coroner. I hadn't exactly taken care of this poor fellow's body. My goal was to fish it out of the swamp before a gator came along and left behind bits of flesh and slivers of muscle.

So far, things weren't going as well as planned.

"Fortune! Where are you?" Gertie's voice rang out like a trumpet.

As weird as it seemed, given my professional training, I heaved a sigh of relief. The cavalry had arrived.

"Down here!" I scanned the lower riverbanks for signs of a stirring creature, one with big eyes and ugly scales. I sure didn't want to wake the locals.

"What on earth are you doing all the way down here?" Gertie jogged across the lawn. She came to an abrupt halt and pretended to check out my new lantern-style lights and cobblestone walkway. "Well...look at you...becoming all domestic...aren't...you?"

"Gertie, you're not here to look at the lights or the lawn."

"I figured as much," she said, gasping for a breath.

About that time, Ida Belle shot right past Gertie like she was running a marathon. She was dressed in an oversized white terrycloth bathrobe, the kind that looked big enough to house an army, or the aforementioned cavalry.

"Show off!" Gertie hollered, still winded. After taking a second, she called out, "Ally can't...make it. She's...working. Francine's."

"Take a minute," I told her.

"Marie didn't pick up," Ida Belle said, glancing over her shoulder. "Nice lights. I thought Walter might have been joking when he said this place looked like the starting gate for Sinful's Boat Races."

"You have boat races here?"

"It's for the rednecks," Ida Belle explained.

"They use buoys...not gates," Gertie said, still huffing and puffing. "And we're not out...here...to discuss rednecks."

"Guess that depends on who's in the water," Ida Belle grumbled, giving the man in the mud a good once-over before turning to Gertie. "For Pete's sake, take a minute and catch your breath."

"Who's Pete?"

"You don't know him," Gertie said in a matter of fact voice.

Ida Belle frowned. "I'm not in the mood for your sense of humor."

"Me either," Gertie said. "But you're the one who mentioned Pete."

Ida Belle hiked up her robe and took careful steps as she weaved a path to the water's edge. Gertie stretched her neck and seemingly considered the safest route to the bayou as well.

I watched the two senior citizens, also known for their affiliation with the Sinful Ladies Society. They were my version of back-up. The locals referred to them as the Geritol Mafia and for good reason. They'd earned their reputations. Sadly, thanks to bodies showing up in my backyard, I had rapidly earned town status of a different sort.