

Bunny Brunch
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About *Bunny Brunch*:

This Easter, Celia Arceneaux is holding a Louisiana picnic and everyone is invited. Fearful of what they might miss, Ida Belle, Fortune, and Gertie plan for an enjoyable day. Under the pretense of courteous Sinful neighbors, the women arrive with baked goods in tow, vowing to remain on their best behaviors. Unfortunately, someone else is watching with deadly goals in mind.

Chapter One

I peered around the hedges to survey the lay of the land. Maybe it was the CIA sniper emerging, or maybe I'd simply chosen to err on the side of caution. Like most Sinful residents, Ida Belle, Gertie, and I had received invitations to the biggest bayou event of the season, but something didn't feel right. It was either intuition or outright dread, but either way something was off.

My gut was rarely wrong.

With a dark cloud hovering over Sinful, I'd tried to think of a good excuse and send my regrets, but my senior friends wouldn't hear of it. Earlier that morning, Gertie called to remind me of this little shindig. She'd started with, "Wake up! I'll pick you up for church in an hour!" And ended with, "Don't forget, we're going to the bunny brunch this afternoon!"

I'd started to protest, but Gertie quickly issued a reminder that sounded like, "We can't decline an enemy's invitation, especially on Easter Sunday." In other words, Gertie and Ida Belle refused to miss a party at their archrival's house for fear of being ridiculed if someone suggested they weren't on the guestlist.

"There you are." Celia Arceneaux smiled big and put her arm around my shoulder to guide me away from the bushes. "I was about to ask Carter if he'd talked to you."

"Carter? Why?" The words tumbled from my mouth before I had time to consider how frantic I sounded. Celia arched a brow so I quickly added, "I haven't seen him in a month of Mondays."

"Really?" Celia rested her hands on her waist. "When did you arrive in Sinful again?"

"She's been here long enough to know that she doesn't answer to you," Ida Belle snapped, approaching with a limp. "I thought we were here to eat. If you question your guests as they arrive, we'll still be here for the Fourth of July."

Celia looked as prim as a plum. Her rosy cheeks were smeared with rouge and her paperwhite hair was set to perfection. "Ida Belle, no matter how hard you try today, you can't provoke me. We're going to eat, drink and be merry. And if you can't do that, you can leave. I'll escort you out myself."

"That, I'd like to see," Ally whispered as she walked by with a couple of pies.

I laughed, and was tempted to follow her as an aroma of baked goods filled the warm air. Since Ally and Francine had baked all the desserts, it wouldn't be a stretch to park myself near the largest assortment of towering cakes and delicious pies.

"Come on, dear," Gertie said gently. "We saved you a place at our table."

"You must've missed the memo," said Celia.

"Wouldn't be the first time. I tend to ignore most things from you," Ida Belle muttered, jumping when Gertie elbowed her.

Celia cleared her throat. "Sitting together won't work."

"Why *won't it work*?" Ida Belle asked. "You can't expect Fortune to break bread with you."

"Today, we're not a divided community. We'll go through the line buffet-style. Then, choose our seats randomly. If you know more than two people at any table, you can't sit there." She smiled. "Should be pretty easy for you since you only associate with Sinful Ladies. Thanks to power and position at various points in my life, I have a larger circle of influence."

Ida Belle shuddered. "Mostly criminals, I'm sure."

"There you go with your bad behavior again, but don't worry. I don't have a doghouse so you'll still be able to eat with the adults and children."

Celia's snide remark was enough to set the tone and pace for the rest of the day. My stomach growled as if to remind me that if things went to hell in a handbasket, I still needed to load up a to-go plate on the way out.

After Celia took her parting shot, Gertie jumped in front of Ida Belle. "Glad you mentioned the doghouse. We'll save our scraps for Bones."

"Suit yourselves." Celia shrugged and walked away.

"The nerve of that woman," Ida Belle said.

"I told you this was a bad idea." My attention was on Gertie. "Even on Sundays, Celia and Ida Belle remain enemies."

"She's just sore because one of hers asked *one of ours* how to become a Sinful Ladies member." Ida Belle shrugged. "I wish I could've been there when Celia heard the news."

"There, there." Gertie used an exaggerated tone and patted her shoulder. "We'll have the last laugh today."

Ida Belle huffed. "I don't care if it's a laugh or cry after that remark."

“The doghouse was a bit much,” Gertie agreed.

“Then again, you two haven’t exactly been the gracious guests,” I pointed out.

“That’s not so.” Gertie crossed her arms. “We brought enough food to feed an army.”

“Everybody did,” I reminded her.

“What’s your point?” Ida Belle asked.

“I haven’t been to enough picnics to know if this is usual protocol, but it might go against Southern etiquette to speak negatively about the hostess while placing a covered dish on her table.”

“Are you saying we were impolite?” Gertie asked, feigning disbelief.

“Maybe. If this were my party, I might spend the better part of the day avoiding those who arrived with sweet potatoes *and* bitter warnings.”

“You must be hearing things,” Ida Belle said.

“Uh-huh.” I leveled my gaze to Ida Belle. “And what about the GWs?”

“Plead the fifth,” Gertie said.

About that time, Deputy Carter LeBlanc joined us. He looked troubled, as if he were there for law and order. Given the crowd, I couldn’t blame him for looking distressed. With Ida Belle and Gertie present, the hostess might need security.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” I said, trying to remember when I’d last seen Carter in uniform. In recent weeks, I’d only seen Carter in social situations.

“If there’s food, Deputy LeBlanc and Sheriff Lee are usually nearby,” Ida Belle said.

“I’m not here for the food.” His dark eyes filled with mischief. “Since I know some of the guests, I’m sticking around for the entertainment.”

“Celia didn’t mention games. What are we playing? Horseshoes? Kickball?” Ally asked innocently.

“Just games.” He narrowed his eyes at Ida Belle. “Why do I have a feeling that’s the only reason you accepted Celia’s invitation?”

Ida Belle said, “I’m not inclined to guess at what you might mean. Like everyone else here, we were invited.”

“Besides, it would be rude—

“Gertie?” Carter put up his hand. “Don’t.”

“Why Carter LeBlanc. You can’t speak to your elders that way.” Gertie frowned. “It goes against your upbringing.”

“Free passes do, too. It may even be a sin to go along with your charades when you blame bad behavior on old age.”

Ally and I swapped glances, but remained silent. We weren’t touching this one with a ten-foot pole.

“Be careful when you sling around the word ‘old’ especially with this bunch.” Ida Belle turned to the crowd. “You’re kind of outnumbered.”

“Maybe, but from now on, I’ll call it as I see it. You’re not old. You have one foot in the grave and another one firmly planted in trouble.”

“Keeps us young,” Gertie said.

“Don’t doubt it. I expect you’ll both outlive me.”

“At least your honest,” Ida Belle said, watching Gertie. “What’s wrong with you?”

Gertie twitched as if she were nervous. It was a tell that I’d seen numerous times since I’d moved to Sinful.

They’re definitely up to something.

“I’m just weak,” Gertie said, fanning her face. “It must be my blood sugar. I need something to eat.”

“I’ll grab some cheese and crackers,” Ally said.

“Don’t.” Ida Belle rolled her eyes. “She uses that stunt so she can go to the front of the line. She hates eating food that’s been picked over.”

Carter looked somewhat serious then. “I know you have something planned. Whatever it is, I strongly suggest that you shelve it for another day.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ida Belle said.

“It’s Easter. Let’s all enjoy the beautiful weather and great meal. Sinful has some of the best cooks in the bayou. There’s no reason to ruin it. For once, let’s put aside any standing disagreements and enjoy the good company.”

“Easy for you to say,” Gertie said. “You’ll be sitting next to Fortune. Nobody will try to divide and conquer where the two of you are concerned. She’s the new resident in town and you’re the town’s favorite deputy.”

“When you put it like that, I can abide by the rules, too. There are ten tables here. We’ll all sit at different ones. I told Celia it will be the perfect time to get to know our neighbors. Less trouble.”

“Wait.” Ida Belle closed the distance between them. “This was *your* idea?”

He nodded. “When you and Gertie are together, anything goes. Apart? I’ll have time to see you coming so I can run interference.”

“You must think they cause trouble everywhere they go,” I said, knowing my statement couldn’t be disputed.

“With Gertie and Ida Belle, history often repeats itself. The past provided experience. Unfortunately, these two are still creative enough to keep things interesting. No one sees them in the middle of chaos until it’s almost over.”