

Chapter One

Gertie, Ida Belle, and I were on our way to Francine's when Carter's monster truck screeched to a halt behind my Jeep. Under normal circumstances, I would simply find another way out, especially with breakfast on my mind, but Deputy Charming was the exception.

"This can't be good," Ida Belle said, standing in his way as he hurriedly left the truck.

"Ida Belle." Carter tipped his hat and turned to me. "We need to talk."

"Rude." Gertie shook her finger. "Better make it quick. Francine baked homemade sausage balls this morning and they won't last all day."

"Good morning to you, too, Gertie." Carter's focus remained on me. "It's important."

Realizing Carter wouldn't speak in front of them, Ida Belle turned on her heel. "We'll wait on the porch."

Gertie twitched in frustration, but followed behind Ida Belle. "I'll make sandwiches for the road. I guess our plans have changed."

"What's this about?" His face fell as soon as I asked the question which made me uncomfortable. If this had been a social call, he would've been playful, and not so cryptic.

On a positive note, he didn't arrive pitching accusations or asking questions. On a negative one, those who were about to be arrested, didn't necessarily receive advance notice.

Carter sighed. "I talked to Bob Myers this morning and we have a problem."

Bob was a former or present US Marshal. No one seemed to know. If they did, they didn't tell us. When Bob first arrived in Sinful, Carter verified his credentials, but I didn't trust him.

I frowned. "He's working with a criminal in an effort to launch a new witness protection program. He may always have a new problem."

"He's worried about Gomer."

I jerked. "You pulled me away from Ida Belle and Gertie to discuss Gomer?"

"Because he'll listen to you. Ida Belle can handle him when he's about to make a dangerous move, but only if he's already in the eye of the storm. Gertie goes along with whatever he wants to do, because they sometimes think alike, but you? He wants to impress you."

"Hmm. I hadn't noticed."

“Right, but this is serious.” His gaze changed and he looked down, then back at the main road. “The Daigles are on their way to Louisiana. It’s only a matter of days before they’re creating trouble again, but Brigham was released from prison yesterday.”

“Did he even go? I always assumed it was for show.”

“That makes two of us, but whatever deal the Feds made, the end result is still the same. Jax *and* Brigham always planned to come back.”

I nodded in understanding, but realized how the Daigle presence in Wasteland, or anywhere in the bayou for that matter, was a legitimate cause for concern. When the New York mob took over a small town, racketeering was the least of local law enforcement’s worries.

The Daigle family was a multigenerational outfit and had somehow convinced the Feds to go along with a new witness protection program that included them. It was a bizarre proposal, one which should’ve been dismissed before it gained any real traction.

It never would’ve been greenlighted anywhere else. Wasteland might as well have been an island unto itself.

“How is this happening?” I considered those standing in the gap between Gomer and the Daigles, and we were at a disadvantage. We lived in Sinful. Gomer and a handful of others still called Wasteland home. “This doesn’t make any sense. Families looking for a fresh start will be relocated here only to find themselves living next to those who have mafia ties? What’s next? An international arms dealer rents a spot next to Walter’s?”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” He rested his hand on his service weapon. “How the Daigles managed to align themselves with any witness protection program, is beyond frustrating, but we have a more immediate problem. According to Bob, Gomer believes his daughter Gloria could be in a vulnerable position, especially since she and Elle Daigle spent so much time together.”

“Gomer claimed he and Jax were friends.”

Carter stared at me for a moment. “If Jax considered him a friend, and I believe he did, that’s enough for Brigham to view Gomer as an enemy. There’s no doubt in my mind that the haunted house incident could’ve ended badly.”

“True, but would Brigham hurt Gloria? I don’t think Jax would.”

“Are you willing to bet her life on that?” Carter asked.

“Not at all,” I said. “But Brigham only has one child. Elle doesn’t have many friends. With everything that’s happened over the last few months, it wouldn’t make sense for Brigham to harm the person who might be able to help him mend his relationship with his daughter.”

“*Gloria* can help with that. Gomer?” Carter tilted his head from side to side, weighing the possibilities. “He could be seen as expendable.”

“Maybe.”

Carter moved away from his truck. “Gomer must be thinking along the same lines. Regardless of perceived friendships, he’s a dad first. He doesn’t want criminals for neighbors. Can’t say that I blame him.”

I tried to imagine how a Gomer-opposition might look. He was one for theatrics. I wouldn’t be surprised if he pulled artifacts from the Wasteland Steakhouse and carried around muzzle loaders, swords, but also a white flag of surrender.

Then again, Gomer never said die.

When Sinful residents opposed projects, plans, or people for that matter, it was an outright war thanks to the division between SLS and the GWs. Over in Wasteland, Gomer stood alone.

He might call upon Ida Belle to rally the Sinful Ladies for a protest, or alter his coin policy and charge everyone pennies for dinners. Outside of that, he didn’t have any substantial weapons other than actions that the Daigles would view as petty.

Carter waved his hand in front of my face. “Where’d you go?”

I blinked. “Sorry. I was trying to imagine Gomer telling Bob that this project doesn’t fit into his plans. Gomer won’t look scared. He’ll look like he’s trying to protect the Hollowman family name and their bayou foothold.”

“He went to the wrong one for help. The Wasteland Witness Program will provide Bob with the legacy he wants. He expects us to deal with all Wasteland residents, but what goes on over in Wasteland isn’t my business. It shouldn’t be anyone else’s.” He paused and leveled a hard look at me as if to say I should feel the same way. “Tolliver needs a different distraction so he can deal with Gomer.”

I grinned. “Ah. That’s funny.” Carter was convinced that Bob’s muscleman Lee Tolliver would eventually ask me out. “I only have eyes for a charming deputy.”

“Good.” He smirked. “I’ve got the girl. He can have his fins and medals. I came out the winner if you ask me.”

As if on cue, my skin heated. Carter smiled, undoubtedly aware of why I was blushing. Whenever he called me ‘his’ or made any reference to the same, I melted.

Cutting me a break, he returned to the topic at hand. “Gomer may start a war if he tries to stand against the program. The Feds want this to work as much as Jax does.”

“What mutual interest could the Feds have with the Daigles?” I considered all possibilities and then sucked in a breath. “I know why.” He nodded as if he believed we were thinking along the same lines. “Carter, it’s an international play.”

“Possibly.” Carter frowned. “Bob headed up this program because he has a reputation for putting together dirty deals. They’ll relocate people to Wasteland. If they happen to send a Daigle enemy there?”

“They won’t care. Jax’s enemies will run. And Bob keeps his hands clean.” A couple of months ago, a woman and her family were relocated to the bayou. We tried to help her prepare to face the Daigles, but our plans fell apart. She fled as soon as she saw Jax. Still, we learned a lot from that disaster, and Doris helped us identify some powerful players in the Daigle network.

“They won’t be able to leave fast enough,” Carter said in a barely audible voice. “And Jax and his men will be ready to follow.”

Without thinking, I reached for him and stared down at our hands, watching as he slowly ran his thumb over mine. It was peculiar, this sweet intimacy that existed between us. Carter and I had become so in sync. If someone watched us for any length of time, they would undoubtedly know how much we meant to one another.

Aware then of what that meant, I pulled my arm back.

Carter lifted a brow and his expression changed. He looked hurt and while I hated that, public displays of affection were risky.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Not yet.” He pulled me forward for a sensual kiss. When our lips parted, he whispered, “Be alert out there.”

Since we shared a public kiss in my yard, I should’ve told him that the CIA didn’t want us to have attachments, but he knew. He didn’t need the reminder.

Deputy LeBlanc was a former Marine and deputy. He understood the risks, but he was willing to take them anyway.

“Don’t mind us!” Gertie called out. “We’re living vicariously through you!”

“Bye ladies!” Carter returned to his truck and lowered his window. “Hey. I’m serious. Be extra careful until we find out how much the Daigles know about you. See if you can reassure Gomer and ask him not to make any obnoxious moves against the program. Then, come home.”

“Don’t worry about us,” I said. “Once Gomer realizes how important this project is to those behind the program, he’ll be as quiet as a church mouse.”

