

**Bayou Spring Sample**  
**Riley Blake**

## Chapter One

Gertie, Ida Belle, and I had been chasing Braylee Breaux for the last twenty minutes. Prior to our pursuits, I spotted Braylee leaving one of my neighbor's houses with a slingshot bag full of loot. Like her brothers, Braylee was a handful, but Braylee lived with her paternal grandmother and could do whatever she wanted.

Mrs. Breaux viewed her granddaughter as more saint than sinner.

I, on the other hand, watched for daily disasters. Since Braylee had a penchant for taking things that didn't belong to her, my neighbors and I had begun to expect weekly pandemonium.

"Braylee, wait!" Ida Belle's screams rang out from my backyard.

Gertie rounded the corner and bent over, holding her side. "She should've been on a track and field team."

"Good exercise!" Ida Belle shouted, but the irritation in her voice suggested that our workout was almost over.

I gave Gertie a quick hand signal and darted in my house. If Gertie pursued Braylee from the left and Ida Belle held her position in the backyard, we might be able to trap her in between my house and the neighbor's fence.

At this point, I didn't really care about confronting her, but hoped to recover the stolen goods so she wouldn't have to face a juvenile judge. While she needed to pay for her crimes, I wasn't the youth police. Plus, Ida Belle wanted to scare Braylee straight.

For now, however, this mission was a recovery assignment.

Somewhere in the distance, Ida Belle screamed, "If Mrs. Walford calls the police, you'll spend the night in jail!"

"Leave me alone!" Braylee shouted. "I haven't done anything to you!"

Gertie shrugged. "We can't argue there. This isn't our business."

"We're saving her from herself," Ida Belle bit out, squatting next to the porch. "See if you can chase her back this way."

Gertie frowned. "And you'll what? Tackle her?"

Gertie and I swapped glances, shrugged, and went our separate ways.

"Braylee, dear, please come out. I'll bake some milk and pour you some cookies."

Gertie's shortness of breath was more disconcerting than her jumbled promises.

I crept to the edge of my neighbor Annie's porch and peered over the top of her mother's shrubs, hoping to catch the little thief as she darted across the road in an attempt to make a break for home.

It was a longshot, but if I could stop her before she reached her grandmother's property, I would grab the bag and let her go. Unfortunately, my plan wasn't perfected by any stretch of the imagination. As soon as I spotted Braylee's bag next to an old jalopy on the other side of the street, I hopped across the bushes, darted down the sidewalk, and tripped over a tiny tricycle that shouldn't have been there.

That's when the day's mayhem kicked up a notch.

As I tried to prevent a crashlanding that involved a small child's toy, I stumbled over the curb, avoided faceplanting on my neighbor's car, and barely regained my footing in time to push away from a parked sedan. Since none of that was planned, I shoved away with too much force and pivoted in time to miss a sportscar racing down our street.

The end result was the appearance of a girlygirl dance, the kind that women my age only tried when no one was watching. Thanks to a weird twist, I ended up in front of two curbside trash carts.

I twirled one way and then another before pivoting to the left in an attempt to avoid another trike. What was it with kids and their toys these days? Didn't they believe in returning them to their own yards?

While thinking about that instead of where I was going, my back foot landed on an adult-size scooter. Since it prevented a tumble into the street, I took that to mean it was time to go for a spin. With my lack of grace in the midst of a chase, I didn't get very far. After one wobble and then another, I tossed aside the wheels and skirted a tree.

Braylee was in my sights once more. This time my hot pursuit placed another in my path. Deputy Carter LeBlanc's truck was parked down the street and I could see him leaning over the wheel, watching as the chaos unfolded.

Gertie had apparently noticed the same and dashed behind a Seven Sisters Oak, a tree that may have earned its name from a sisterhood much like the one I'd found in Louisiana. Sisterhood or not, this kid was getting the best of us. Gertie jabbed her finger at Mrs. Breaux's home and I nodded once in understanding.

She was somewhere between here and there.

Minutes later, I spotted Braylee about ten feet beyond Gertie's current crouched position. I crept up a treelined yard and prepared for the win.

As if he couldn't stand to miss a moment of this chaos, Carter eased his truck up the street. We were already in big trouble, by Sinful standards anyway, and I could almost imagine the good deputy's knuckles cracking while he gripped his steering wheel.

Carter parked behind a jalopy and Gertie must've decided the truck provided better coverage and stooped behind the tailgate. As if the unfolding disaster couldn't get much worse, I spotted a red and white sneaker under Carter's truck and yelled, "What is that" before I realized that the shoe wasn't our concern. The bigger danger of *not thinking* first left Gertie in a vulnerable space.

"I'll check!" Gertie called out, trying to peer under the truck.

"Don't!" Ida Belle yelled, but it was too late.

When Gertie couldn't get a good look on her first try, she decided a squat and go might help her gain a better vantage point. She braced herself against Carter's tailgate right as he threw the truck in drive and she had no other choice but to shove away with all her might.

As luck would have it, when *good* luck wasn't in the equation, Gertie underestimated her strength and went flying through the air. Fearing my senior friend might break a limb, I rolled a trash cart in her direction and pivoted left. Unfortunately, the rotation turned into a ballerina's dance and I spun much longer than intended.

Carter honked his horn and motioned for me, but I ignored him. If he didn't haul us in for this, I would owe him a dinner. Realizing theatrics worked best when there were few other options, I struck a pose, waved, and ended with a curtsy, or at least, it should've ended there.

Instead, I lost my balance and fell into the same trash bin that Gertie was scrambling to leave. On a positive note, the bin was filled with boxes, bubble wrap, and newspapers. On a negative one? Well, the undesirable landing was damning enough.

Carter slammed his door and marched my way so I left behind the garbage and ran down the street. At that moment, I spotted Ida Belle. She popped out of the shrubs and sashayed inside like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Go!" Gertie squealed as I went one way and she went the other.

Braylee climbed out of another neighbor's truck and burst out laughing before she shot across my porch. I had to give this kid credit. She'd pulled out all the stops and was willing to hide anywhere.

Much to my relief, Carter spotted her then and began his chase, but I didn't have a doubt that Braylee would win in any footrace, even against my boyfriend. Still, if Carter wanted to handle this, he could have at it. Gertie and I were finished.

Besides, I could almost hear the butt-chewing that we would inevitably get after he couldn't catch the juvenile delinquent himself. He rarely liked our approach, but in this case? He was smart enough to recognize there was a cause behind this maddening chase.

Ida Belle held the door and waved us inside. "This way! Hurry!"

Returning to my yard with the speed that was generally reserved for a banana pudding run, I sprinted to my porch and immediately noticed Braylee's bag. Looking around as if I shouldn't grab what was left on my doorstep, I scooped it up and headed inside.

Before I slammed the door behind me, I gracefully lifted my free arm above my head, and took a bow, just in case someone was watching the dance that never happened.

Seconds later, I entered the kitchen and tossed the bag to Ida Belle. She opened a cabinet and threw it inside as Gertie kicked out a chair. "Hurry! Act like you've been here all morning."

Breathless and exhausted, we all stared at one another as if we couldn't believe one petite teenager had defeated us, but I couldn't help but laugh. "You realize Carter saw us, right?"

She nodded. "But he didn't detain us while we were in the act."

"Wonder why she left the bag?" I asked.

Ida Belle hushed me and pointed at the door. "Later. Here comes Carter."

Gertie set some water bottles on the table and held one to her face. "I'm too old for hot flashes."

She'd just gotten the words out when Carter slammed the front door and stomped inside. He didn't knock, but to be fair, he rarely did now that we were a couple. Besides, he'd just witnessed Gertie flying through the air, my version of a ballerina's grand jete, and Ida Belle's crossover dance of a cha-cha rumba.

His dumbfounded expression said it all. "I don't know where to start."

"Me either," Gertie said, now dabbing her forehead with a napkin. "It sure is hot today. Isn't it?"

“The heat has nothing to do with why you’re out of breath.” Carter rested his hands at his waist. “Would someone like to tell me what’s going on? Because I just watched you chase Braylee Breaux back and forth across yards and streets. And the only way that makes sense is if there’s a film crew from *Candid Camera* hiding behind the trees.”

“Speaking of trees, I’d love to know the history behind the Seven Sisters Oak,” I said, leading the distraction.

“We’re discussing busy streets,” Carter reminded me. “Not trees.”

Ida Belle groaned. “These streets haven’t been busy since Pansy Arceneaux moved to California and stopped offering Sinful’s men free demonstrations on how to become a better lover.”

“She did that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Ida Belle and Gertie said in unison.

“Poor Celia,” I said with far too much empathy, a fact that didn’t go unnoticed due to Gertie and Ida Belle’s scornful looks.

“Pansy learned it somewhere, but that’s why there were so many men paying their respects after she died.” Gertie giggled. “They were hoping to bump into Pansy’s third cousin on her mother’s side. She once offered similar services.”

Carter ignored her and focused on me. “Why were you chasing Braylee?”

Gertie waved a dismissive hand. “Fortune wasn’t chasing anyone.”

“Uh-huh. Then, why was she tripping all over herself in the middle of the street?”

“Rude,” Gertie said. “She’s showing off her new dance moves.”

“You could start by appreciating the work that goes into learning such skills,” Ida Belle said.

Carter dragged his hand down his face. We stared, expecting an outburst. Instead, he calmly said, “Try again.”

“When you give the truth right away, there’s nothing left to say,” Ida Belle pointed out.

Gertie shot me a smile. “I’m so proud of Fortune. She’s worked harder than Madge Sayers ever did. Once she perfects the ballet jumps, she’ll invite you over for a private recital.”

“Madge was a figure skater, not a ballerina,” Ida Belle said evenly.

Gertie shrugged. “Close enough.”

I stared. These two wouldn’t give it up. “Maybe I’ll try skating after I perfect dancing.”

“Practice makes perfect, dear,” Gertie said, patting my hand.

“And you can never have too many hobbies,” Ida Belle added.

Carter crossed his arms. “Unless you were practicing the Scottish Country Dance without a partner, I’m pretty sure you the only exercise you were getting was in a Braylee Breaux chase. And I told you to leave that kid to me.”

“And we have.” Ida Belle turned to Gertie. “Now you see why Celia asked her to run in the Sunday pudding race.”

“Can she do that?” I asked.

“She isn’t Catholic. I’ll call her mother and put a stop to that before it happens,” Gertie said.

“The Breaux family members go to the Methodist Church over in Cartier,” Ida Belle explained.

“Enough!” Carter leaned over the table. “No one in their right mind would believe you were practicing ballet and I don’t have time for the crazy conversations that you start in hopes that I’ll forget why I’m here.”

“You took a bad lick on the head a while back.” Gertie smiled. “Come to think of it, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Are you feeling alright today?”

“Too late for a story change,” he grated out. “But let’s say I believe you about Fortune’s ballet practice. What were the two of you doing?”

“Offering moral support, of course,” Gertie said. “Why else would we be outside in this heat?”

As the conversation continued, Carter peered around Ida Belle, apparently seeing what I had also spotted. Thanks to a faulty latch, the cabinet door didn’t hold and Braylee’s bag fell in the floor.

“In the future, try to practice all strenuous exercise in your backyard.” He sidestepped and grabbed the bag before Ida Belle could stop him. Holding it high in the air, he added, “Performances and lies aside, what’s in this?”

“It isn’t ours,” Gertie deadpanned.

“And we don’t have a right to open it,” I added.

About that time, a screeching sound filled the house and then a thud. All gazes locked on the stairs. Before I could explain that Merlin had begun to prowl more than any curious cat should, Carter held up his hand. “Don’t get up. It’s probably the dance instructor.”