

Bayou Christmas Elves
Riley Blake

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About *Bayou Christmas Elves*

When Gloria Hollowman and Elle Daigle are kidnapped, Deputy Carter LeBlanc fears there's more to the abduction than meets the eye, but he doesn't realize what he stands to lose until Fortune is taken from her home. With Swamp Team 3 one member down, Ida Belle and Gertie turn to their friends in low places. And Big and Little Hebert surprise everyone with a Christmas to remember.

Chapter One

Ida Belle stood at the bottom of my stairs and called out, "Fortune! Ally's here! You can stay in bed when you don't have company."

"And when will that be?" I teased as soon as I joined my friends in the kitchen. It was rare when I didn't have guests.

"She brought blueberry muffins," Gertie said, setting plates on the counter.

I yawned. "Do any of you have anything against brunch?"

"Oh hush." Gertie waved a dismissive hand. "We could've met at my house, but then you would've missed hearing about Pastor Don's sermon."

I frowned. "I attended Sunday service yesterday morning. I can't recall anything out of the ordinary."

Ida Belle turned the newspaper around so I could see Pastor Don's picture on the front page. Before I had a chance to read the headline, she said, "The Sinful Revival started last night. Pastor Don was the guest speaker."

"I'm sorry I missed it."

"Don't lie," Gertie said.

"I'm not. You were here at eight o'clock yesterday morning. I would've skipped the early service and opted for the late if I'd known there were options."

"Everyone is talking about the revival." Ally leaned forward in a conspiratorial fashion and lowered her voice as she said, "Pastor Don brought out the handkerchief."

"He does that every other Sunday anyway," I said, pouring my first cup of coffee.

"This was different," Ally said. "He threw the good book at them."

I frowned. "Is that even legal?"

Gertie nodded. "It's a Southern saying, dear."

Ida Belle tapped the newspaper. “It’s all right here. Pastor Don passed the offering plate and called on criminals to tithe to a ‘church of their choice’ and his picture is trending on social media now.”

“He has a meme,” Gertie explained.

Ally flipped her phone around and passed it off to me. A cartoon was standing next to a chalkboard with a bowl of banana pudding in one hand and silverware in the other. With a teaspoon, he pointed to the blackboard caption: *Sinners are always welcome in church. They tithe more because they sin more. So, don't be shy. Bring your drug dealers to church next Sunday.*

I blinked “Is that true?”

“About sinners tithing more? You’d have to ask a sinner,” Ida Belle said, barely glancing up as she read the morning paper.

“We wouldn’t know from personal experience,” Gertie added.

“I thought we were all sinners,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Ida Belle grumbled. “You could always ask Big and Little Hebert for their opinions.”

Gertie sighed. “Now that I think about it, that may be why Pastor Don preached a fire and brimstone sermon. I bet Little was there. He has a new girlfriend.”

Ida Belle cradled her coffee mug. “Even if he has a religious lady friend, does Little Hebert scream future church member to you?”

“Now that you mention it, no, but we should invite him to join us.” Gertie’s eyes twinkled. “I bet he could outrun Celia in the race to Francine’s.”

“Sure he could,” Ida Belle said. “He’s had plenty of practice running from trouble.”

Extending an invitation to Little Hebert was a great idea as far as I was concerned. If last Christmas taught me anything at all, it was that mobsters wanted to be included and invited as much as anyone else.

“I see those wheels turning,” Ida Belle said, snapping the newspaper pages. “It’s fine to receive a Christmas ham from a criminal, but a different story when you invite them to church.”

“Are you worried what other people might say or think?” Ally asked.

Ida Belle slowly lowered the newspaper. “About as much as I worry that Fortune will adopt a baby gator and name him Precious.”

“Uh-oh.” Ally pointed outside before setting a box of blueberry muffins in the center of my breakfast table. “Carter just pulled up.”

Ida Belle released a heavy sigh and helped herself to one of Ally’s baked goods. Gertie shot her a quick glance. “What’d you do?”

“Me? Why does everyone always assume if anything bad happens, I did it.” Before anyone could answer, Carter burst through the door. Ida Belle took one look at his disheveled hair and whispered, “This can’t be good.”

I had witnessed Carter in various professional states and couldn’t recall another time when he had looked so concerned. He also looked defeated.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Gertie went to him. “Is it your mother? Sheriff Lee?”

He ran his hand through his brown hair. “No.”

“What’s happened to Walter?” Ida Belle slowly rose as she inquired about Carter’s uncle and the only man she’d ever been tempted to marry.

“Walter’s fine as far as I know.” He started to speak but then shook his head. Whatever had happened, it was devastating enough that he couldn’t quite put his thoughts into words.

“Here.” Ally pulled out a chair and pointed. “Sit down for a minute. Can I get you anything?”

He shook his head, but Gertie set a coffee mug in front of him. We all exchanged quick and worried glances.

“It’s Aunt Celia. Isn’t it?” Ally covered her mouth. “She and her neighbor were going to New Orleans. Did she have an accident?”

“The only accident that woman has ever had started in the womb. Everything else is precalculated,” Ida Belle assured her.

“She’s fine,” Carter said.

“Drats,” Gertie whispered.

Celia Arceneaux was Ida Belle’s and Gertie’s sworn enemy. My house wouldn’t have been Carter’s first stop if Celia were in danger.

“We’re fresh out of guesses.” Ida Belle studied Carter’s distressed look and her face softened. “Whatever it is, Carter, you know we’ll help you.”

Was that it?

Had Carter done something that required Ida Belle’s expertise? As the fearless leader of the Sinful Ladies Society, Ida Belle was often called upon when experience and discretion were needed.

Carter blew out a hard breath and then looked up at me. “It’s Gloria. She’s gone.”

Gomer Hollowman’s young daughter was very close to our tightknit group. We all spent a lot of time with her. Before anyone could ask any questions, Carter quickly added, “And Elle Daigle and Braylee Breaux are missing, too.”

