

Bayou Witness
Riley Blake

Chapter One

Since moving to Louisiana to assume the life and times of Sandy-Sue Morrow, I had learned some unforgettable lessons. Sinful was like any other sleepy bayou town with its unusual small-town laws and distinct dialect, but we also had two exceptions to the norm. And I was staring up at them.

“Be thankful that I didn’t have my nine on the nightstand,” I said, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“Oh good. She’s awake,” Gertie announced with too much glee in her voice.

“Of course she’s awake,” Ida Belle grumbled. “After all the noise you’ve made, I’m surprised you didn’t wake the dead.”

Noticing it was still dark, I yanked the covers over my head and grumbled, “I’m changing the locks.”

“Go ahead,” Ida Belle said, waving a dismissive hand. “It won’t do any good.”

“We know every locksmith from here to New Orleans, dear.”

“Of course you do,” I said.

Ida Belle snatched the comforter and dragged it to the floor. “Rise and shine. We have a Hollowman problem.”

“What time is it?” I asked, burying my face in a pillow.

“Early. Meet us downstairs in seventeen hundred.”

“You have five minutes,” Gertie added.

I would’ve pulled the covers over my head once again, but they were now piled at the foot of the bed. As a CIA sniper-in-hiding, I could always determine the day ahead simply by how early Gertie and Ida Belle showed up on my doorstep.

This was a record, even for them.

After my first cup of coffee, I studied my senior friends. “Okay. I’m up now. The roosters down the street haven’t begun to stir, but the gang’s all here. What’s so urgent?”

“We have to call Ally,” Gertie said.

“Why?” Ally was our dear and sweet friend, but she was rarely apprised of the problems, especially when we were called upon for a Wasteland situation.

“If we knew why, you would still be in bed,” Ida Belle pointed out.

“Speaking of which, how did you know Carter wasn’t here?”

Gertie sipped her coffee. “We didn’t, but since you mentioned our young deputy, where is he?”

“No idea. He was supposed to call last night but I didn’t wait up.” I browsed through recent calls. “He called at ten and twelve.”

“Those are booty calls,” Gertie said.

“I don’t do booty calls,” I lied.

“Then you’re missing out,” Gertie said.

“How would you know?” Ida Belle asked.

She shook her head. “Not today.”

Before I could try and find out more, the phone jingled with the happy ringtone assigned to Ally.

“You’re up early,” I said, connecting the call.

“I haven’t been to bed,” she said wearily. “Francine and I had a catering event out in Wasteland.”

“Hence the reason that we know about the Hollowman problem,” Ida Belle pointed out.

That’s when I read a late text from Ally. An unexpected incident led her to phone a friend. Since she couldn’t reach Sinful’s deputies or anyone in Wasteland, she reached out in hopes that Gertie, Ida Belle, and I could handle an unfolding situation.

“Is Carter there by chance?” Ally asked.

“No and she doesn’t know where he is,” Ida Belle said.

“Whatever he can do, we can do better,” I said, catching nods from the other two. Now wasn’t the time to ask, but I wondered why Ally had taken the long way around a solution. Going to Carter for a Wasteland problem was like trying to spread a rumor when one call to Celia Arceneaux would do.

“This must be serious if you thought of Carter first,” Gertie said.

Gertie and Ida Belle were old school. They served in the military and practically governed Sinful, Louisiana. Since they operated in the shadows, they didn’t need or want unnecessary titles, but they could’ve easily held official positions.

“Try to remember that I’m on the outside looking in. This thing with Gomer, it’s probably nothing, but from an amateur’s point of view, it all feels very dangerous to me.”

“What’s happened, dear?” Gertie asked, cradling her coffee mug as if she believed it might shatter with the wrong news.

“Gomer has gone too far this time.” Ally sucked in a breath. “Francine and I were hired to cater out at the old Hollowman farm. We thought it was like any other Labor Day event until he made some unusual requests.”

Gertie looked alarmed. “Do you mean unusual for Gomer or unusual for everyone else?”

“He wanted us to prepare all the food there so his guests would have the overall feel of a homecooked Southern meal.”

“That’s not alarming,” Ida Belle said.

“He also wanted us to tell his guests that we served up three square meals each day with select choices for vegetarians and vegans, too.”

“Probably trying to impress a certain guest. No worries, dear. Once they go back home, they’ll forget about it.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think any of them are going home.”

We all stared at one another. After a few shared glances and nods, we were all on the same page.

“What do you mean they aren’t going home?” Ida Belle asked.

“Let me back up. Gomer ordered a pile of food. He wanted casseroles, sliced ham, sausage pinwheels, fruit and cheese trays, you name it. The windows were opened when we first arrived and I didn’t think too much of it since the ventilation has always left a lot to be desired in older farmhouses. I was unpacking the groceries when I overheard a couple of guys talking on the patio.”

Ida Belle perked up. “Eavesdropping. I like it.”

“We’re good at it,” Gertie added.

“*Anyway*...They were making small talk and speaking in that distinct Brooklyn dialect. After our experience with the Daigles, I picked up on it right away. Since Elle and Gloria were upstairs, I was a little paranoid.”

“Rightfully so after everything Elle has been through with her family,” Ida Belle said.

“My thoughts, too,” Ally hurriedly said. “I tiptoed over to the window and sure enough, there they were. Four mobster types sitting in the rockers.”

“Define mob-types,” said Ida Belle.

“Dark hair, darker features, dressed in pleated pants, tight black T-shirts, and expensive sunglasses.”

“Definitely sounds like Daigle’s guys,” Gertie said. “There for a minute, I was afraid you were going to say that Gomer opened a private school and the bayou was now full of tot-size kids with Elle-sized attitudes.”

“This is much worse,” Ida Belle said.

I hated to say it, but I agreed with Ida Belle. Elle’s family was steeped in mafia legacy, but Gomer adopted the preteen in spite of her past. She and his daughter were best friends and he couldn’t bear to think of her going into the foster system.

Ida Belle hovered over the phone. “Wait. Are these guys there for Elle?”

“No. I don’t think so. Gomer has gone back to the original Wasteland witness protection plan. Only, I think he’s doing it on his own. I overheard Elle speaking to someone on the phone. She said that Wasteland was ‘a place for marked men’ to regain their lives. Gloria was encouraging her to make more calls.”

“It sounds like they’re recruiting for Gomer,” Ida Belle said.

“Exactly,” said Ally.

“Maybe they knew you were eavesdropping,” I said.

Gertie nodded. “They could be playing a prank.”

“These guys are the real deal. This isn’t a joke,” Ally said.

“Gomer couldn’t restart the program without some help. Jax is dead. Bob was a dirty Fed and will be lucky if he ever sees the light of day again. No one would greenlight a witness protection program here after the last one was an epic failure.” Ida Belle spoke with some measure of confidence, but didn’t look so sure.

“He could be trying to do this on his own,” I said.

“He doesn’t have the brains or the experience,” Ida Belle said, beginning her morning ritual of removing her hair curlers.

She was probably weighing the pros and cons of Gomer’s new adventure. Like me, she undoubtedly realized how we could soon face our share of cons, in more ways than one.

As a former CIA assassin, I still had a lot of contacts so I said, “Let me do some digging. I’ll find out if Harrison knows anything.”

"I'll save you some time," Ally said. "This is all on Gomer. He's funding himself. I don't think he's answering to anyone."

Ida Belle frowned. "After everything fell apart with the Daigles, he knows he isn't experienced enough to handle a bunch of convicts."

"I overheard someone asking how he came up with the idea. He mentioned Jax of course, but then said that he originally thought of the idea due to the privately held prisons. And I don't know how to tell you this, but he's advertising the place."

Ida Belle sighed. "Of course he is."

"Billboards?" I asked.

"Is there any other way?" Ally giggled. "The one right outside the parish reads, 'We protect witnesses in high profile cases. If you need target practice, we have criminals running from their pasts and they'll be happy to show you around' and he also has a short one at the steakhouse. It reads, 'We house criminals so you don't have to' and there's a picture of him throwing handcuffs over his shoulder. Elle said there are four more out on the new highway."

"What the hell is he thinking?" Ida Belle asked.

Gertie drummed her fingers against the table. "He probably meant to say they have a shooting range. He gets carried away sometimes. It's not like he's inviting folks for target practice."

Ida Belle's eyes widened. "He's making these guys marked men!"

"Actually, they're hunting one another," Ally said.

"With real guns?" Gertie's voice cracked.

"Paintball," Ally said, clarifying.

The sighs around the table suggested shared relief. With Gomer, it was hard to guess what he might have in mind.

"The heavy hitters are calling him the mob's new secret weapon."

"As if that doesn't scream a catastrophe waiting to happen," Ida Belle mumbled.

"I'm with Ida Belle on this one," Gertie said, acting as if that declaration would come as a surprise. Sometimes, I was convinced that Gertie and Ida Belle shared a brain.

"Gomer posing as anyone's secret weapon is a scary thought," I said. "What about harboring a fugitive? Has he thought of that?"

Ally said, “You know Gomer. If he has an idea, he acts on it and worries about the consequences later.”

“Yes, but reactivating a witness protection program without help from the Feds could be dangerous for Fortune, *and* for Elle and Gloria.”

“Does he have any takers?” Ida Belle asked.

“I only saw seven residents. Four men and a single mom with two boys. He’s housing them in these cute little cabins down by the bayou.”

“Cabins or tents?” Ida Belle asked.

“You’ll need to see it to believe it,” Ally said.

“When did he open for business?” I asked.

“That’s a question for him.”

“I have more than one,” Ida Belle stated flatly. “Thanks for letting us know, Ally. We’ll go talk to him and see if we can convince him to change his mind.”

“Good luck with that. He’s put a lot of work in the place. I don’t think he’s going to change his mind.”

“What’s new?” I asked.

“For starters, there are rustic cabins for singles and families. He’s named each area, too. The names alone could get him killed. He has Loser’s Lair, Domestic Den—that’s where the families stay—Counterfeit Cave, and the list goes on.”

Ida Belle said, “On a positive note, if a Fed comes looking for someone, it won’t take them long to find them.”

“And a negative?” I asked.

“How much time do you have?” Ida Belle snapped. “Ally, we’ll take care of this. Thanks for letting us know.”

“Sure. I’ll see y’all later.”

We disconnected the call and Ida Belle stared. “I should’ve known. That boy can’t be still. If he isn’t stirring mud, he’s not happy.”

“I remember a time when he was the laziest man in Louisiana,” I said.

“Those were the good ole days,” Gertie said dreamily.

Ida Belle finished her beauty ritual by spraying a ton of hairspray. “Alright girls, let’s get moving.”

“Fortune can’t go out there. What if one of Ahmad’s men came to the bayou under the guise of needing asylum? Gomer could be providing room and board for someone who has his sights set on Sinful.”

“We’ll stay out of sight and collect intel then,” Ida Belle said.

“I’ll grab the binoculars,” I said.

“We’ll need a few more toys, too,” Ida Belle said. “Preparation is key in all things.”

“That stupid man,” Gertie mumbled.

I used to think the same thing, but then Gomer aligned himself with one of the wealthiest mobsters in the world, gained his trust, adopted his granddaughter, rose to celebrity status with his coin-only payment policies for things like meals and rent, and inevitably became one of the richest men in Louisiana.

Gomer wasn’t stupid. He was far from it. Still, there were times when he wore his senseless behaviors like an armor. Unfortunately, that armor had a visible crack in it. He was now a father to a high-profile gangster’s granddaughter. Since he wasn’t as dumb as everyone imagined, I couldn’t help but wonder if this new business stemmed from boredom or self-preservation.

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