

A FAMILY SCANDAL — A BRUTAL ATTACK
WHEN DANGER RETURNS TO THE BAYOU WILL IT DRAW THEM TOGETHER OR RIP THEM APART?

BAYOU BLUE

Shades of Hope, Book 3

— RAQUEL BYRNES —



Bayou Blue

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Dedication

To my good friend Erin,
who travels this strange road with me.

1

Bayou La Foudre, Louisiana

I used to think of the bayou as a place of peace until that night on the black water; when the air heated so fast and so furious that the wet steamed right off me. The dark night lit up with a bloom of raging red and orange. The night the thunder stole my brother.

I thought about Randy and what he did on that terrible day almost a month ago as I lay in the canoe. It bobbed lazily underneath the low hanging branches of the cypress tree rocking me in my dark thoughts. Moored to the floating dock, I wasn't going anywhere, so I leaned back in the bottom of the craft. I turned my face to the moon hanging low in the purple sky and listened to the cicadas and frogs along the bank. Their night song, low and steady, hummed its way along the misty water of the bayou. A plaintive cry of a loon tore through my raw nerves and sent me into another fit of sniffles and tears. My new faith, barely months old, shuddered within me.

I don't know how to do this, Lord. I don't know if I can.

Footfalls on the wood planks made me catch my breath. I wondered who found me so fast.

"You promised you wouldn't come back here." The unmistakable voice, thick with the drawl of a man born and raised on the bayou, floated to me on the warm night air.

I lifted my head and peered over the lip of the canoe at the man standing on the dock.

Jake Ayers. His dark eyes captured mine, held them for a second, and then looked away. The anguish rolled off of him in dark waves, chilling me despite the summer night.

Bayou La Foudre was his home and my brother, a disturbed young man, had blown up a chemical plant in Jake's parish, killing twelve people and dying in the blast himself.

My breath caught when I saw the sorrow etched under Jake's eyes. So much heartache there.

Trying for humor, I sat up in the canoe and hugged my knees. "Is that any way to greet a friend?"

"*Nous ne sommes pas amis.*" He hooked his thumbs through the gun belt at his waist and shrugged. The dark brown Sheriff's uniform outlined his tall stature against the lights from the dock. He kept his gaze on the dark water. "We're not friends, Riley." He pronounced it rah-ley, like he didn't realize my name had no 'a' in it.

I smiled sadly. This place felt so foreign. Louisiana and I would never be friends.

I turned my head, wanting to see what he was looking at.

Tiny lights flickered and bobbed over the surface of the swamp; lightning bugs.

I turned back to him and tried a strained grin. "What are we, then?"

I honestly need to know.

Jake didn't answer. Instead, he reached down and grabbed a length of the tow rope. He pulled my canoe towards the dock, and I let him, watching his face in the bright light of the harvest moon. Once he tied the

boat in place, he extended his hand and wriggled his fingers. "Come on."

I tilted my head, looking at him from an angle, but didn't stand up. I didn't reach out to him. "I'm not leaving. Not till I get what I came for."

Jake's face didn't change expression. He reached out a little further. "Your hand, Riley."

Reluctant to leave the safe cradle of the water and trees, I sighed and let Jake help me off the boat and onto the dock. The narrow path made us stand much closer than we would have otherwise. Being so near him made me remember what it was like to have his strong arms wrapped around me, and I blinked back more tears. That he didn't even consider us friends stung more than I cared to admit.

"You helped me once, Jake." My voice cracked, and I bit my lip. I wished I could get a grip, but being back here in this place wrenched me wide open. "Can't you do that again?"

"Getting you out of town *is* helping you, Riley. You just don't realize that yet."

Jake gestured for me to walk in front of him.

I glanced back at the water and then up at the trees, but didn't move. "There's more, Jake. There's more than what they're telling us, I know it. The FBI is—"

"There isn't more, Riley." Jake's voice sounded tight, as if he was holding back anger.

"You don't know that." My voice trembled, and I fought to quell the frustration rumbling up my spine. "All those people, Jake. They died and there has to be a reason. They can't just have..." My voice broke, and I struggled to push back the sorrow that threatened to crush me.

“Randy did what he did and that’s all there is to it. We just weren’t...” He drew in a slow breath. “We were too late, that’s all.”

Three weeks ago, when I rushed into Jake’s parish frantic over my missing brother, he’d been there for me.

Jake took me all over town and beyond trying to find Randy.

Back when my brother was only missing and not a monster.

Jake’s parish was barely back on their feet after Katrina and didn’t deserve what my brother did to them. They didn’t deserve to fear dying again.

I nodded silently, and the two of us headed back up the dock to the soft grass of the bank where his squad car idled.

He walked over to the passenger side and opened the door. Standing there in the better light, his gaze flitted to the still healing burns on my arms. His brows furrowed with concern. “You’re doing all right?”

I shrugged as I slid into the seat, not answering because I didn’t want him to hear the truth in my voice.

He nodded and shut the door. “I thought so.”

Walking around the nose of the squad car, he slid into the seat and gave me an exasperated look. “How’d you get the canoe out of the locked boathouse?”

I shrugged. “I did research about home invasions for an article once.”

“What did you do, interview a cat burglar?”

“They don’t like that term.” I said, and tried to smile.

My job as a reporter put me in contact with people from all walks of life. That some of their “talents”

rubbed off on me wasn't surprising.

This wasn't the first time Jake commented on my strange skill set.

As he pulled onto the road, I swayed with the rocking of the car on the uneven dirt road. "How did you find me?"

"Your older brother, Raymond, called the station. He thought you might be on your way."

My family didn't want me within twenty miles of this place. They probably hoped I'd get run out of town.

"No, how did you know I'd be *here*. In all of Bayou La Foudre, why'd you look here?"

"You liked this place when we came here together. You said you thought it would be a good place to hide and think." He said it without looking away from the road; without looking at me, and I wondered if he remembered that he'd also kissed me that day.

"You really want me to leave?" My heart fell at the thought of Jake not wanting me around. I wished he would smile. I wished I could still see something warm in his gaze.

Jake faced me then, the pain of so much sorrow in so short a time etched across his features. "It's not about what I want, Riley, it's about this parish healing. It's about moving on."

"Moving on," I repeated slowly.

Jake took one hand off the steering wheel and reached across the darkness to me. He took my chin in his hand, tilting my face towards him, the car coming to a slow stop on the dark road. "This isn't fair. I know it, Riley, but the FBI just left and most of the reporters. Things are starting to get back on track. Having you here..." His gaze flitted from my eyes to my mouth

and back again. He let go and gripped the steering wheel till it creaked under his palm. "You can't stay."

He was right, but despite that fact, I *was* staying. I thought about my plans, what I had to do...for Randy's sake, for my parents' sake; and a quiver of fear shook through me. I wondered how long before my actions pushed Jake away for good.

2

The dream came again that night, like it had in the days after the tragedy. I remained locked in the memory of those brutal minutes, reliving it without the conscious knowledge that it was already over.

I saw Randy running towards me on the plant's production floor, his eyes wide with terror, and clutching something to his chest. He screamed, waving his free hand for me to run, but somehow in the memory of my dream, I knew it was too late.

An explosion blew me backwards and knocked the scream from my throat with invisible force. Pain and fear burned through me, and I scrambled to my feet, shouting and disoriented, looking for my brother.

All around me the superheated cloud of vapor swirled and roared overhead. It hissed down the red-hot pipes that ran along the wall and ceiling. The shrill scream of the smoke alarm sent a shudder up my spine as I struggled to breathe, to see.

Terror mingled with overwhelming grief. Too late. I was too late. Trembling with fear and loss, my brother's last words clanged in my head.

Don't believe what they tell you.

I awoke mid-morning, panting and disoriented before realizing where I was. Rummaging in my

suitcase for a white, cotton button-up blouse and some dark jeans, I dressed quickly. The humidity made dealing with my long hair nearly impossible. I combed fingers through dark red locks, fussing with the knots. I tried to make myself look less tired, too. I lined my eyes; honey-colored according to my mother, with earth-toned liner, and then threw on some mascara. I checked my phone's clock and headed out.

After breakfast, I made the long drive back into Bayou La Foudre from the airport hotel in Thibodaux. I took the 182 towards Houma, where large parishes with shopping malls and big box stores gave way to smaller groups of homes along the interstate. To my right, a huge expanse of woods and green fields gave me the feeling that no matter how fast I drove, I was standing still.

I passed Houma, the last big town. Eventually the interstate ended and neat gridded roads lined with homes became two way streets with sparsely populated parishes. The structures fell away, crowded out by looming oaks and vistas of sparkling green bayou waterways. Shrimp boats and shacks butted up against the banks.

An hour later, I crossed a pontoon bridge with jade water moving swiftly under the rusty structure. Over the metal and into La Foudre once again, I passed the boat propeller nailed to the roadside tree welcoming me to the parish, population 5,000.

I smiled. La Foudre's main road took me from one end of the parish to the other in less than ten minutes. Passing old wood structures long since burnt out and graffitied, sharecropper's homes, they now served the local teenagers; a place to hide out from adults.

Jake once quipped that La Foudre had everything

you might need, but just one. One gas station, one school, one church...the only thing they had plenty of was swamp and gators. The town's one major industry outside of fishing was the chemical plant on the edge of the parish. My brother took care of that in one bone-crushing blast.

I thought about my dream at a stop sign until the car behind me honked, tearing me out of my daze. I waved my apology and tore through the intersection. I thought about what the dream meant. In reality, I never saw Randy the night of the explosion. I'd been too late to stop him. I never got further than the front door of the plant. Shaking the images from my mind, I took in a ragged breath. I couldn't dwell on that right now. I had work to do.

I spied the street I wanted and took the turn. Skating around the curve, I rolled across the pebbled driveway of the *Roustabout Hotel*, and skidded into a parking space.

The worn building, one long brown rectangle with evenly spaced doors, sat huddled under a pair of large cypress trees. Spanish moss draped the branches and hung down to the roof, just scraping it with faded green tendrils. Low in the sky, shards of sunlight angled through the softly swaying leaves. I shut off the engine and stared at the building, trying to find the courage to go inside.

I felt alone and wondered how Jake found the strength to keep this parish together after that day. They looked to him, not as just their sheriff, but as something more.

I couldn't put my finger on what or why, but I saw it in their eyes and the way they spoke to him.

I remember Jake praying with some of the victims

after the fire and it struck me as incredibly strong to do that. To share in someone's grief in such an intimate a way like that.

My family wasn't religious, the opposite in fact. I grew up thinking that actions were what mattered, what got things solved.

The fact that I became a believer a few months ago only seemed to add to the tension within my family. I didn't know what to do. I was alone in my faith and that scared me. Was I strong enough to walk down such a different path than what I'd always known?

I know I'm new at this, Lord. I know I still struggle with my old ways...I thought about picking the boathouse's lock last night and cringed.

I want to do what's right. What You put on my heart to do, but I don't know if I can. I don't know if I have it in me.

I sat there, waiting, wishing that it didn't feel like my prayers floated up to the roof of the car only to fall back down on my head. I thought about my friend, Reyna, about her encouragement to me the night I chose to follow the Lord, and sighed. She told me faith was a work in progress; that I was, too. A frown pulled at my mouth. Construction sites were messy, a shambles. Nothing worked like it should yet. They weren't useful yet. Is that how the Lord saw me?

The talk radio station warned the residents of an approaching storm.

I shut it off. My phone buzzed on the seat, the screen showed the number belonging to my boss.

Joseph Bradley ran San Diego's North County Chronicle with promises and temper tantrums. The fact that one of his reporters didn't show up for work this fine Monday morning must be driving him nuts. I checked my messages from him and saw there were

twelve.

Twelve? Something must be going down.

I flicked the phone screen on and read the text messages.

Where are you? What's going on? You're two seconds from losing your job...

The usual threats. Spying a text from my agent, the muscles in my stomach clenched.

Call me immediately.

Huh.

I wondered if he meant to drop me in the aftermath of Randy's deeds. The publicity of a reporter's family as the focus of an FBI investigation isn't the kind an agent wanted.

Dialing his number, I stopped and licked my lips, then ended the call before the first ring. I looked back out the window and wondered if there were any more antacids in my bag. Grinding my jaw, I turned the phone off and shoved it into my jeans pocket.

I dug for my press credential, found it, and tossed it into the glove compartment of the rented sedan.

I won't need that out here. The fewer people know I am back in Louisiana, the better.

I hoped that Jake hadn't said anything after he dropped me off at the airport hotel last night. Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I bit my inner cheek. If I turned around now, caught a flight back to California, and just called the head office...

No. Randy deserved to have his stuff packed up by someone who knew him before his name meant death and destruction. Someone who loved him despite what he'd become. I thought about my younger brother and the breath whooshed out of me with the weight of his memory.

Hand going to my arm, to the burns, I wondered how life pulled us in such different directions that he could turn so far into darkness without me knowing. Without me having one clue.

I folded and refolded the letter I received in the mail three days before the tragedy. Stained with tears and mottled with the oil of my hands, I knew the contents by heart. Randy's all-capital handwriting scratched across the page.

He'd asked for my help. He'd said he was scared. He said he'd explain when I got here. That was it. That was all Randy left me. That, and scars, both inside and out.

I shoved the envelope back in my pocket. Rummaging in my purse, I pulled out a tissue and dabbed at the mascara with one hand and pulled the key out of the ignition with the other. The mascara just wouldn't stay on down here. What with all the humidity and crying I did lately.

Movement inside the manager's office caught my eye. A pulled back curtain fluttered back into place and the click of the door lock signaled they knew. Even though I took care to shove my long auburn curls under a baseball cap, they recognized me.

Trying to be here without causing them more pain or memories, I didn't blame them for not wanting me around. I knew I'd be recognized eventually, but not five minutes after I drove into town.

Looking down at my shaking hands, I railed at myself for being so cowardly. I did this for a living. I investigated things people wanted to stay hidden. Why was it then, so hard for me to do this? I could barely breathe through the fear squeezing my throat.

"I'm sorry, Lord," I whispered. "I don't think I'm

the right person to do this.”

I wrapped my fingers around the ignition key. This was a mistake.

“I thought you said you were leaving town, Riley.” Jake’s low drawl next to my opened window startled me.

Gasping, I turned to face him as he leaned a hip on my fender. Dark hair, dark eyes, shadow of scruff along his angular jaw, Jake Ayers struck a formidable figure. He did not look pleased to see me. That thought made me sadder, more ill-at-ease here in this hostile situation.

I thought I could count on at least one friendly face. I was wrong.

I blamed myself for feeling hurt over his words last night, for caring that he didn’t think any more of me than everyone else out here. As a reporter I should have a thicker skin. So why did his disapproving look put me so on edge? I put on a brave face, the one I used to stare down threatening subjects of my reports. The face I hoped didn’t betray my pain.

“No, *you* said I was leaving last night. I never agreed.” I tried to open my car door, but he blocked it with his hand and leaned into the window.

He raised a single brow. “You might’ve mentioned that when I was waving goodbye.”

“And have you march me onto a plane back to California? No thanks.”

He looked at me for a beat, opened my car door, and extended his hand to help me out.

I put my hand in his and flashed on the image of him that night; his hand reaching down. The rescue helicopter’s whirling blades above him as he scooped me up and ran with me away from the flames. The

terror I'd felt flooded back and I jerked involuntarily.

Jake frowned. "Sure you're OK?"

I forced a smile and nodded. Smoothing the front of my shirt with sweaty hands, I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm good."

He returned the nod, but his look matched the one from the night he plucked me out of the debris. I heard somewhere he used to be with a rescue team of some sort; that he'd volunteered to help that night.

"You're up to something, aren't you?"

Ignoring his question, I peeled my hat off, tossed it in the back, and tried to smooth my humidity-ravaged hair. "How do they know so fast, anyway? I just flew in last night. Did you announce it, or something?"

"No, Riley. I tried to get you out of town quietly, if you remember."

"Well, how then?" I made a face. "I didn't want to upset anyone."

"Do you really believe you can blend in somewhere?"

Gathering my hair atop my head with one hand, I fanned my neck with the other. "What do you mean? I'm not even in my own car."

Looking like he meant to say more, Jake's gaze wandered over my face. Then, he tipped his jaw down and peered back at the office from under the brim of his sheriff's hat.

"You stopped for gas over at the *Snack Shack* on your way back into the parish. Penny called her mother, who called her sister...you know how it goes." He squinted down the road and then looked back at me. "The FBI just released the scene this afternoon, though. The reporters already left, but everybody knows...your brother stayed here."

No one uses Randy's name.

"I know. That's why I flew down."

"That's some source you have. I only got the call a few hours ago from the FBI."

"Yeah, well sources are my bread and butter." I stared past Jake to the hotel manager's office. "Can I go inside, then?"

"This is going to cause problems," He said quietly.

"I understand that they're in pain; that their loss is..." I struggled for words. "Their sorrow must be unfathomable." My throat ached and my last words came out in a whisper. "I tried to stop him."

Jake took a step in front of me, blocking the view of me from the office window.

"They know about his *history*, that you guys covered it up."

I took a step back, frustrated. "Randy was *fifteen* when that happened. That has nothing to do with..."

Jake put his hand up, stopping my protest. "I know, but it is what it is, Riley. People in this kind of grief don't use logic. They read things in the papers and then its truth in their eyes."

"Why didn't anyone ask me? Why didn't you tell them about—?"

"About what? Your family had you lawyered up so fast I'm surprised the guy didn't elbow his way into the emergency room to stop you from answering the surgeon. No one could talk to you, Riley. No one could even come and see you."

I watched the frustration roll across his features and wondered if he meant himself. Did he try to see me? Catching my thoughts before they got going, I stopped before they got to that place; before I wondered if he cared.