

A romantic winter night scene. A young man and woman are embracing in the snow. The man is wearing a striped knit hat and a blue and white winter jacket. The woman is wearing a white winter jacket and a dark knit hat. In the background, there is a rustic log cabin with a snow-covered roof and a decorated Christmas tree. The sky is dark blue with a full moon and falling snowflakes.

Marian P.
Merritt

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Deep Freeze Christmas

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To my mom, Norma, who taught me how to cook all the Cajun dishes I make. Many times over the phone, her instructions began with, "first make a roux" or "brown your onions."

Praise

On *Southern Fried Christmas*: A Colorado girl who doesn't cook goes south to write about Cajun cooking. Crawfish and spicy food are foreign to her but the candy cane is a joint heritage. Marian P. Merritt weaves culture (even a gator!), past hurts, a precocious daughter for the hero, and a trusting God into a precious Christmas novella. ~LoRee Peery, author of the *Frivolities Series* and *Creighton's Hideaway*.

Marian P. Merritt's *Southern Fried Christmas* is a charming trip through Cajun country at Christmastime. From traditional food to steamy humidity, I was transported to Louisiana for the holidays by way of this author's descriptive and realistic Deep South Christmas. I rooted for Denny and Kelly all the way and look forward to more from Marian P. Merritt. ~Carla Rossi, author of *Unexpected Wedding*.

With just the right turn of a Cajun phrase and the perfect dash of *laissez les bon temps roule*, Marian P. Merritt's writing takes this bayou girl home to Louisiana every time I open one of her books. ~Kathleen Y'Barbo, author of the award-winning historical series, *The Secret Lives of Will Tucker: Flora's Wish, Millie's Treasure*, and her latest, *Sadie's Secret*.

Marian brings Cajun culture and profound characters alive in her novels. ~Nadine Brandes (Brandes Editorial)

Un

Leona Buquet peered out from the backseat of the Sikorsky helicopter and watched in awe as the snow-covered Rocky Mountains zoomed beneath her. As a child, she'd dreamed of one day seeing the snow-capped mountains. Today, at twenty-eight, her dream had come true. Barely able to contain her excitement, she squealed into the headset to her boss and mentor, Chef Julian Mayeux. "This is so cool."

"You a long way from N'awlins, Toto." He flashed her one of his cheeky smiles.

The pilot's voice came through her headphones. "We'll be landing in five minutes."

Once they landed, Leona helped Julian unload their luggage and gear. The squeaky crunch of her footsteps on the snow heightened her senses and filled her heart. She seized every sound, smell, feeling, and sight she could. This was a major check off her bucket list.

She placed the bags on the porch of the lodge and then went back down the steps, gathered a large ball of snow, packed it tightly, and hurled it toward Julian. The snowball smacked him on the head. She couldn't distinguish between the snow or the gray in his hair and goatee.

"Why you little..." He dropped the bag he carried, bent down and gathered his own ammunition. He sailed the snowball toward her. She dodged the assault

and taunted him. "Missed me."

Before she could move, he threw another ball and hit her directly in the forehead. "Not dat time." He laughed and his large belly shook from the effort.

Leona gasped as she wiped the snow from her face and hair. With every breath, the crisp air bit her lungs.

"Ready to cook some good Cajun food for some wealthy people?" Chef Julian's thick Cajun accent sailed through the thin air while he tried to catch his breath.

"I'm always ready to cook good Cajun food." Leona gasped for air as well. They weren't accustomed to the thin air at these high elevations. After all, in New Orleans, they lived below sea level. She hefted her bag onto her shoulder and entered the lodge.

The commanding entryway loomed above with massive log beams and a large chandelier of intertwined elk horns.

"Julian, I see you made it." A silver-haired man greeted them. Julian's friend, she suspected. His blue eyes sparkled in the natural light streaming through the twenty-foot wall of windows.

"CG." Julian extended his hand. "It's good to see you again." He turned toward Leona. "This is my Sous Chef, Leona Buquet."

"It's nice to meet you Miss? Mrs? Buquet."

"Miss."

"Miss Buquet. CG Fleming." He extended his hand for Leona to shake. "Welcome to my mountain home." He pointed down a long corridor. "The kitchen is down here." He guided them down the hallway where watercolor paintings of elk, deer, rainbow trout, and bear covered the walls.

The gourmet kitchen sported the finest stainless

steel appliances and more than adequate counter space. Granite countertops covered a small bar with leather stools circling the opposite side. "Wow, it will be a joy to work in this kitchen," Leona said.

Julian looked around and snickered. "It'll do."

"I see you haven't changed much. Mr. Grinch." CG smiled.

Julian grinned. "Wouldn't want to disappoint." He plopped the bag holding their kitchen gear onto the counter. "Is our food shipment here?"

"Yes, it's been placed in the freezer room and the fresher items will be delivered later today. If you follow me, I'll show you to your rooms."

"Is Carletta here?" Julian asked.

"No she can't come this year." CG's smile faded and a flash of sorrow crossed his eyes. "Her best friend from college is ill, so she's flown to be by her side for Christmas." He turned to Leona. "Carletta is my wife and the person who has kept me on the straight and narrow for almost forty years."

"Yeah, his better half." Julian stared at CG. "Everyt'ing OK between you two?"

CG nodded. "Yes, never better."

"Well, give her my love and tell her I'm sorry I missed her."

CG led them out of the kitchen and to the massive stairs in the living room. They climbed to the second floor. Each step was a large log cut in half. Once upstairs, wide pine planks covered the floor of the expansive hallway that ran along the west side of the house in both the north and south wings. They stopped at the end of the North hallway. He opened the door on the east side. "Miss Buquet, this is your room. Julian you're across the way. I'll let you freshen up. If you

need anything, I'll be downstairs. The housekeeper, Mrs. McCaffrey, can also help you. She'll be here later today."

Leona entered her room and placed her suitcase on the holder next to the log post bed. The multicolored quilt of burgundy, green, blue, and cream-colored squares covering the bed matched the curtains, and a hanging miniature version adorned the wall above the bed.

She peered out the window. The view took her breath. The snow-covered peak towered above the lodge with deep green Douglas fir dotting its base. Several pines grew near her window, their branches reaching out toward the lodge. The pristine snow covered the ground and sparkled in the midday sun. A river, frozen on the sides, flowed along the curves and over large boulders.

She took in the sight and then jotted a few notes in her journal. When she described CG on her pages, there was something about him—something familiar. She'd have to ask Julian how he knew him. Once she'd freshened up and changed, she met Julian down in the kitchen.

"How many are we feeding?" she asked.

Julian reviewed the guest list and counted off the names. "It looks like five guests, CG, his son, Cameron, and the housekeeper, Mrs. McCaffery. So with us two, that's ten mouths to feed every day. Three meals. You up for it?"

"Am I up for it? Really, Chef? This is a dream job chefs live for."

He grinned. "Oh yeah, over a week of isolation, cold weather, cookin' in the Rocky Mountains for a bunch of spoiled rich people. Dat's a dream, all right."

"C'mon, Chef, tell me how you really feel." Leona began unpacking their gear and placing the items where they would find them for dinner tonight. "Why'd you take this job if you don't want to do this?"

"Because I've known CG for over twenty years, and he's been a good friend. I couldn't say no when he asked." His tone softened. Chef Julian opened the glass doors and began rearranging the items in the refrigerator. "Besides he's not a spoiled brat rich dude, and he's paying us a boatload of money. I can get that new ice cream maker we talked about and a few other things for the restaurant. And you, my dear, will be a few thousand closer to getting your own restaurant."

Leona smiled. Yes, she would be closer to rebuilding *Leo's*. The restaurant her grandmother, Leona, had opened and run along the lake near New Orleans. Her father had taken the reins and run it for years. When Leona graduated from the Louisiana Culinary Institute she was in line to take over and allow her father to retire.

But Hurricane Katrina changed their plans. The restaurant had been totally destroyed and the insurance money hadn't been enough to rebuild. So all she owned right now was a cement slab with a nice view of Lake Pontchartrain.

Leona opened her laptop and brought up their menu for the coming week. "How do you know CG?"

"He used to live in Louisiana. He helped me open my first restaurant."

"Really?" She lifted the culinary torch from the gear bag. They'd need it for the *crème brûlée* tonight.

"That's another reason I brought you along. If you impress him, he might be interested in investin' in another restaurant. Not that I need you as

competition."

She placed her hands together and bowed to him. In a deep reverent voice she said, "You know, oh great, wise Chef Julian, that I could never compete with you."

"Great, we've been here less than two hours and the sass and disrespect has already started. Ay, yi, yi, it's going to be a long week." His dark eyes twinkled, and his silly grin offset the dark goatee dotted with gray.

She laughed. "You're such a drama queen."

He winked at her. "King, that's king. See if you can find the bags of shrimp for tonight's meal." He pointed toward a door off the back of the kitchen." CG said something about a freezer room in there."

"Great, I'll see what I can find." She opened the door that led down a hallway. The first door led into a pantry the size of her bedroom in her tiny apartment. She was pretty sure she'd died and gone to chef-heaven, a to-die-for kitchen, and now this. Stocked shelves lined the walls with a counter down the middle with drawers underneath. Anything they needed, she was pretty sure they'd find in here.

She backed out and went down the hallway again in search of the "freezer room." Another door jettied off to the right, she opened it and understood why CG had said freezer room instead of walk-in freezer. The room held seven commercial grade freezers with another door leading into a large walk-in freezer.

She found bags of shrimp and a few other items they'd need for tonight's meal. Before she headed back to the kitchen, the door at the end of the hallway beckoned. Where did it lead? When she opened it, a blast of cold air rushed in and took her breath away followed by a blur of white the size of a small horse.

Before she knew what hit her, she was flat on her back getting sloppy dog kisses—all over her face.

"Max. Stop!" CG appeared and captured Max's leash. "Stop, boy! Sit."

Max picked the worst time to obey. He stopped licking and sat—on Leona.

CG pulled the near hundred pound, snow-dripping lab off her. "I'm so sorry. He's still a puppy, and we're working on manners. Seems the snow makes him a little frisky. Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She laughed and rubbed the dog's ear. "Still a puppy? I can't imagine how big he'll be when he's full grown. Hello, Max."

"He should grow into those feet at about one hundred pounds."

Max sat on the floor next to her, leaned over, and licked her face again.

She laughed and rubbed his head. His dark eyes followed her hand and seemed to relax at her touch. "Nice to meet you, Max."

"Here let me help you up." CG offered his hand. After she stood, he gathered the frozen items before Max had a chance to check them out.

Leona took the items into the kitchen while CG led Max out the back door. She plopped the cold items onto the counter. "You've got to check out the pantry and freezer. Aaa-mazing."

"I'm sure it is. I wouldn't expect less from CG. You OK?" Chef Julian pointed to her jacket.

She looked down. Several large muddy paw prints adorned the front of her white jacket. "Yikes. Guess I need to change."

"Oh and Leona, you might want to wash your face, too." Chef gave her one of his famous grins and a nod.

After Max's licking, she could only imagine what her face looked like. It would just take a minute to run upstairs and change. She climbed the back stairs and turned the corner headed to her room.

"Hello, there." The smooth voice belonged to six feet of pure handsome. She felt sure she'd be a puddle before long if he kept staring at her with those crystal blue eyes. This had to be CG's son.

He pointed to her jacket. "I see you've met Max."

"Um...yes, we met." She laughed. "Quite intimately, I might add."

He held out his hand. "I'm Cameron Fleming, CG's son."

"Cameron, I'm Leona Buquet, the Sous Chef. It's nice to meet you." She shook his hand.

"Buquet, are you from Louisiana?"

"I am." She finally let go of his hand.

"I used—"

"Cameron, there you are." A sultry voice drifted from behind Cameron and when its owner materialized, Leona recognized the gorgeous actress, Marissa Madison, known for her high-maintenance expectations and temper tantrums when she didn't get her way.

Following celebrity gossip was a vice Leona still worked against.

Marissa scanned Leona's jacket and then her face and hair. She raised an eyebrow and then scrunched her nose. "Did something explode in the kitchen?"

"No, the dog—"

"Well, we'll let you get washed up. Wouldn't want you preparing our food like that." She scrunched her nose and nodded toward Leona's jacket before linking her arm through Cameron's and guiding him around

Leona.

He stopped and smiled at her. "Miss, it is Miss, isn't it?"

What was it about these Fleming men with the Miss or Mrs.? "It's Miss."

"Well, it's nice to meet you. I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other over the next week."

"I'm sure w—"

"C'mon Cameron. Your dad is waiting for us." She glanced back toward Leona. "He's taking us *out* for lunch."

"Nice...meeting you." Leona's words drifted into the empty hallway.

In her bedroom, Leona stared into the mirror and the aftereffects of Max's generous kisses. Her bangs stuck up where his saliva had dried. Her makeup, what was left of it, streaked her face. One eyelid still sported the light brown eye shadow while the other's had disappeared completely and her left eyelash stuck to her eyebrow making her look eerily similar to Quasimodo. Great. She'd met the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on, and this is how she looked. He and *Miss* Madison must be having a big laugh right about now.

She couldn't forget the way he looked at her. Those icy aquamarine eyes held her captive. She'd felt at home there like she'd known him all her life.

Deux

Leona worked the buttery sauce for the first course: a champagne beurre blanc sauce with marinated shrimp. She'd made this dish so many times she could almost make it in her sleep.

After a light lunch, she and Chef had spent the afternoon scouring the pantry and freezer to ensure everything they needed for their scheduled meals was available. They'd also whipped up a batch of pastries to have on hand for snacks or breakfast.

"Here try dis." Chef held a spoonful of something in front of her.

"What is it?" She pushed his hand away so she could see what lay on his spoon.

"Jus' try it, and don't ax questions."

She grabbed the spoon from him, blew on it, and with caution, tasted the potatoes and sausage mixture. "What did you do differently? That's good."

"Used a different kind of Andouille sausage."

She nodded. "Much better."

Cameron entered the kitchen as Leona returned to stirring her sauce. "Hello, Julian."

"Well, hello dere, my boy." He hugged Cameron and slapped his shoulder. "Where you been?"

"You know, Dad. He had to take everyone on a tour of the property and through Steamboat Springs. Took all afternoon. What's cooking?"

"What kind of question is dat? I'm not telling you."

You'll find out when everyone else does, at da dinner table."

Cameron looked toward Leona. "Hello again. Any chance you can get him to change his mind?"

She shook her head. "Are you kidding? Even waterboarding wouldn't work on him. Trust me. I've tried." She smiled.

Julian raised his eyebrows and pointed toward the side of his face near his mouth. "Uh-um, here ya go." He handed her a napkin. "You have a little gumbo right here." He pointed to her cheek.

Not again. That's twice she'd seen Cameron, and both times, she had something on her face. So much for first *and* second impressions. Both were blown. She wiped her mouth.

"Better," Julian said.

"You've tried waterboarding on him?" Cameron sat on the stool across from where she worked.

"Nah, I haven't, but I don't think it would work. He's a tough nut to crack."

"I think you got the nut part right." Cameron laughed when Julian glared at him. "Can I, at least, help?"

Julian stopped stirring his gumbo, replaced the lid on the large stainless steel pot. "No way. Your Dad would blow a gasket if he caught you workin' in dis kitchen. Don't you remember the no-kid-of-mine speech we got dat summer?"

"How could I forget? Dashed my dreams of being a chef. But I have been preparing some cool dishes lately. Using all the techniques you taught me." He turned to Leona and blanketed her with his warm gaze. "Maybe you can share some of your cooking tricks with me. Maybe some great recipes?"

"Sure." She had to force herself to pay attention to her sauce. With Cameron so close, it would be easy to let the dish curdle.

He stood. "Better get back to the guests."

"Yeah, ya better or what's her name will come hunt you down. Besides, ya distractin' my help."

Cameron shook his head and walked out the kitchen, but not before looking at Leona, pointing toward Chef, and mouthing, "Waterboarding, let's do it."

She laughed and nodded. What was it about that guy? She instantly liked him.

Cameron hadn't gotten as far as the living room when Marissa found him. "I've been looking for you." She linked her arm through his.

"I was in the kitchen." He led her to the dining room where the guests were gathering.

"The kitchen?" She flashed him a look of total amazement. "Why in the world would you be in there?"

"Oh, visiting with an old friend." He pulled out the chair next to where her name appeared on the place setting.

"Not that dreadful girl from earlier, I hope." A condescending laugh escaped her perfectly colored lips.

He ignored the comment. He'd only met Marissa last week when a friend had introduced them. His father had been there and invited her to the lodge for his annual Christmas "working" get together where he invited a few key people in the industry he hoped to

get together on a project in the coming year.

His dad thought Marissa might be a good choice for the lead actress in the new project he had in mind. So naturally, because they were close to the same age, Cameron got elected to escort her.

Marissa had mistaken his politeness for affection, and now she thought they were an item.

When it came to negotiating multi-million dollar deals, he didn't have a soft bone in his body, but where women were concerned, he was a giant marshmallow.

Once she was seated, he slid Marissa's chair toward the table and found his spot across from her.

When all the guests were settled, Cameron's dad stood at the head of the table and introduced them, not that introductions were needed. Everyone knew everyone else. The Chambers, Henry and Charlene, had worked on many projects with Dad in the past. They'd served as executive producers on his last film. The current heartthrob actor, Bryan Golby, who'd recently been voted by a popular magazine as the Sexiest Man Alive, sat next to Charlene. Of course, Dad always threw in someone from the press to shake things up. This year he'd invited a major network news anchor, Coco Andrus. She'd become the newly crowned queen of the media when she'd been promoted to the position. Coco and his mother had gone to high school together and remained friends. His mother had regretted missing her on this trip.

Mrs. McCaffrey entered the dining room just in time for Dad to introduce her. "Dinner is served, sir."

Julian, wearing his chef's hat and pants with the red peppers pattern under a white jacket, strolled in carrying a tray of appetizers. Leona followed behind him with another full tray wearing the traditional

white jacket over black pants. One fashion chef was enough tonight.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Marinated Shrimp with Champagne Buerre Blanc."

CG remained standing. "And this, friends, is my good friend and world renowned Chef, Julian Mayeux of Mayeux's of New Orleans and his Sous Chef, Leona Buquet."

Julian placed the appetizers on the table in front of the guests. Leona followed behind.

Cameron couldn't take his eyes off her. What was it about the woman? Aside from her gorgeous brown hair, large amber eyes, and arresting smile, there was something comfortingly familiar about her.

When she stood next to him, he inhaled the cooking aromas from her clothing. He wished he could trade places with either of them. He'd much rather be in the kitchen cooking than hobnobbing with the movie industry elite.

As Leona handed Julian the last plate, a deep bark echoed through the large living room followed by a bouncing Max through the dining room. He bumped into Leona, who fell forward, launching the contents of the plate across the table smack-dab into Marissa's lap.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry." Leona quickly stood upright. "I'll get something to wash that out."

Marissa's painted-on smile and deadpan gaze fell flat on Leona. "It's OK. This dress is so old. I've had it forever." She stood and wiped at her dress. She glanced at Cameron and smiled.

Mrs. McCaffrey guided her away from the table and then returned to wipe up the remaining sauce and shrimp. Thankfully, the dish was not served steaming, or the situation could have been much worse.