



MARIAN P. MERRITT

*Gumbo
Weather*

A BIJOU BAYOU CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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Marian P. Merritt

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Dedication

For Hope, for the young lady you've become and the
daughter I love.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is responsible for
all I have and all I am.

Un

“No, no. Noooo.” Noel Winters smacked the dashboard of her compact car. “You can’t go out on me now.” She tapped the check engine light in hopes that the annoying yellow glow would disappear. No such luck. A quick scan of the area melted her confidence. Nothing but semi-darkness and pine trees. She’d veered off the interstate twenty minutes ago. Only another five miles to Bijou Bayou.

“I hope you’re worth it.” She’d conjured up several scenarios of what it would be like to finally meet her father. With the possibility a soon-to-be reality, her fears ran amok. Would he acknowledge her as his daughter? Would he like her? So many *what ifs*. And now, the list seemed miles longer than it did seventeen hours ago when she’d left Colorado.

“C’mon, phone. Where are you?” She rummaged through the fast food bag and the granola bar wrappers strewn on the passenger seat. The sound of her purse’s contents falling onto the floorboard sent her heart deeper into despair.

Her fingers grazed the slick LED screen. Yes. A quick swipe and her last hope diminished along with the setting sun. *Urgh. Dead.* Why hadn’t she plugged it in earlier?

With only a sliver of light from the darkening sky, she gathered her fallen items, her over-packed suitcase, and the last tidbit of courage, and started down the

narrow road leading to the small town where the Internet said her father lived.

The deafening chirps of crickets and the deep-throated croaking of frogs, once pleasing during her summers spent in South Texas, now reverberated in the night like the warning calls of angry gangs ready to pounce. The muggy, humid air tugged at her hair, makeup, and clothes. She wiped beads of perspiration from her forehead and forged ahead.

As the last strands of daylight disappeared behind the tall pines lining the road, eerie shadows played havoc with her resolve. A crackling noise in the brush sent her heart racing—a perfect hiding place for a mask-clad, crazy man wielding a chainsaw. Yet, with the herd of mosquitoes buzzing her head, she couldn't hear a chainsaw should one be running right in front of her. A chill snaked along the back of her neck.

Only five miles. She could do this.

She trudged forward. Two steps later, she sunk into something soft and mushy. Warm ooze wrapped around the top of her foot. "Really? These are new loafers." A tug only resulted in a bare, slimy foot.

Great. No phone, no light. She breathed in the saturated air filled with the odors of earth, pine, and musk. With one hand on her suitcase for support, she bent to begin her search. Slime—wet and slick covered her fingers. "Eeewww." She dug deeper into the sludge. Found it. A slurping sound gurgled as the glob released her now-ruined flat.

"Gross." The stench of decay filled the night air. Noel slid her muddy foot into the muddier loafer, and then wiped her fingers on the grass next to the side of the road. Probably a good thing she couldn't see what she'd stuck her hand into. While ignorance could be

bliss, in this case, it was nothing short of pure survival.

She propped her suitcase on the pavement once again and headed toward town. The mosquitoes began their shock and awe attack of dive-bombing the tender exposed skin of her face, neck, and forearms. Flailing her arms to bat away the unruly insects only resulted in bruises on her thigh from the uncooperative suitcase, and blisters on her foot from her ruined, gravel-filled, muddy shoe.

Her shadow played on the grass and asphalt of the narrow road as lights beamed from behind. "Could this be any worse?"

As it approached, a vehicle's engine drowned the sounds of the Louisiana night and slowed next to her. Noel's pulse pounded. She'd thought her fear ran amok before. Now it escalated to full-blown panic mode.

With nothing to use as a weapon, unless flinging a muddy flat-heeled shoe like a Ninja Star counted, she straightened her shoulders and marched on. Maybe if she appeared confident, the person in the car would ignore her.

Not likely, though. A girl walking on a dark road with a mud-covered foot and ankle, flinging one hand around her head while fighting a malfunctioning rolling suitcase with the other did not exude confidence. More like craziness. Maybe that would be enough to deter the driver.

How had she gotten into this unsettling position? Had her incessant need to find her father trumped her good judgment? Maybe, if she'd taken her usually reliable car in for a maintenance check before she left Colorado Springs, she wouldn't be in this fix.

The long, white sedan slowed next to her. Should

she stop? Or keep walking while focusing straight ahead? The passenger window lowered. A quick peek revealed an eerie green light casting shadows on the driver's face.

Justin tightened the nut on top of the high-performance carburetor. Finished. All he needed was to start this baby up and listen to her purr. He glanced at the wall clock in the garage—five o'clock. Good. One less car to work on Monday. He'd only been home a week, and his schedule was full.

"Hey, buddy." Nonc Al cleaned his grease-stained hands with an equally grease-stained towel while his Cajun accent reminded Justin of his father's. He resisted the familiar tug at his heart.

"It's time to call it a day. There's always Monday. Besides, your Tante Cookie has a catfish courtbouillon waitin' for us."

Yeah, there's always Monday. Easy for his uncle to say. He lived here. The three weeks at Christmas Justin spent with the man and woman who raised him never seemed enough.

Nonc Al approached and leaned against the front fender. He ran his fingers gently over the shiny surface. "Your dad would have loved this car. You know, he had a '70 Camaro when he was in high school. We spent hours workin' on that old clunker. His car was gold with black stripes." Nonc Al shook his head and pursed his lips. "Man, he loved that car. Took your mom on their first date in dat Chevy."

Nineteen years had passed since Justin lost his parents. The memory of their faces was as clear to him

now as the day they boarded that ill-fated plane. He could easily imagine his daddy sliding behind the wheel of the Camaro while his mama sat in the passenger seat. Justin wiped down the top of the fender, rubbing the red paint to a mirror-like shine. "Wouldn't it be cool to find that car and fix it up?"

Nonc Al nodded. "I know where it is."

"You do?" Justin turned to his uncle. "Where?"

"In Mr. Jack's barn. Your dad sold it to Jack's son when your mama got pregnant. He said he couldn't have a family with a two-door muscle car."

"Do you think Mr. Jack would sell it to me?" The thought of restoring a car his dad owned sent Justin's pulse on high throttle.

Nonc Al shrugged his shoulders. "He might. Is that something you'd like?"

"It would be fun to have Dad's old car."

"I'll see if I can make that happen."

Justin shook his head. "No. Don't be getting any ideas. I'll buy it. Not you. You've done too much already."

Nonc Al and Tante Cookie had raised him as theirs and made sure he got to do the thing he loved most—play baseball.

Hopefully, this summer he would get to make them proud. He'd gotten the official call in September. He would be wearing a major league uniform for spring training—a second chance despite his poor performance the last time he'd been called up. But he couldn't let his aunt and uncle know. Not yet. What if he fumbled again?

While the whole town considered him a hero because he'd gotten as far as he had, he wouldn't settle until he pitched in the big leagues. And did it well. If

only to satisfy his father's dream and make proud an uncle who'd never gotten past the ninth grade.

When he raised his head, the hard underside of the hood brought his teeth together and an explosion of pain. "Ugh." He winced. "Go on, Nonc Al. I'll close up and meet you at home in a bit. I need to pick-up my tools. Tell Tante Cookie not to hold dinner on me."

"Don't be too late. You know as well as I do dat your Tante Cookie is not gonna eat until you are at de table wit us."

"I won't be long. Promise." His uncle patted Justin on the shoulder as he headed for the back door. Before leaving, he turned back, his brow arched and index finger pointed. "Don't make her come get you."

Justin chuckled. Yep, he knew better. He'd seen the wrath of Tante Cookie when her food was involved. No one, not a single soul, who entered her house or grounds for that matter, could leave without eating. Feeding everyone who graced her presence was her self-appointed mission.

He'd probably be packing an extra ten pounds if he wasn't careful. Tomorrow, he would start running again. Start working on his shoulder. He needed to be in tiptop shape. Needed to make sure he could do the job and not let himself and everyone else down like last time.

Deux

Noel's obstinate suitcase rolled off the pavement for the fifth time. She jerked it back on track and then stood still. A battalion of mosquitoes continued their ruthless pursuit, and several enterprising bloodsuckers bit at her ears and face. "Ouch." She swatted her head and waved her arm as though wielding an imaginary sword.

"Hey, young lady, you need a ride?" The women's voice drifted through the dense night air. The sound curbed the pitter-patter in Noel's chest, but then a striking thought emerged: women could be serial killers too. Right?

What had she gotten herself into?

"Now, sweetie, I know you must be scared, but this road is not where you want to be walkin' at night. Gators cross here to go to the other side of the bayou."

Noel's breath caught. Gators? As in alligators? Alarms bellowed in her head, but surprisingly, the women's strange accent and sweet voice calmed her. She braved a step closer. A distinguished blonde sat behind the wheel. The dashboard light cast a green tint to her skin and the tiny hair tendrils circling her temples, but her genuine smile glowed like a beacon of hope.

"I'm Vivian Broussard. I live up ahead in Bijou Bayou, and I'd be happy to give you a ride into town."

What choice did Noel have? If she didn't accept

this ride, she'd end up with a huge blister on her heel and welts the size of watermelons or worse, be some lucky alligator's next meal.

She opened the back door and loaded her suitcase amid an enormous mound of shopping bags.

"Jus' move that stuff over," Vivian said.

Once Noel sat in the front seat, the classy southern lady extended her hand. "And your name is?"

"Oh, I'm Noel Winters."

"My, oh my, your mama had a bit of a sense of humor, didn't she?"

Noel smirked. "She did. Figured a girl born on Christmas day needed a special name. Special for that day. Guess she never thought about having to live with it for the other three hundred sixty-four days."

The Cadillac lurched forward. "Way I see it, she did you a favor. Made you unique. Someth'ing to be proud of."

"She certainly did. She was a remarkable woman." Hundreds of memories rushed through Noel's mind. One happy thought after another. Hiking Pike's Peak during those amazing Colorado summers, making homemade ice cream in the middle of winter, cutting each other's hair to save money. She'd enjoyed years of love and laughter with a single mom who possessed a heart of gold. Odd how the heartwarming memories were followed so closely by the heart-rending, familiar pain. *Miss you, Mom.*

Noel's mom always reminded her: *Just because you don't have a father, you're no less special than any of your friends.* While Noel believed her, as a child she wondered where her golden-brown eyes came from.

"Was? She passed away?"

"Yes, in September."

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry. It’s hard to lose your mama.”

Noel nodded. Hard indeed.

Vivian laid a gentle hand on Noel’s arm. Just like mom used to. She resisted the pressure of tears. No. She’d cried enough these past months.

“I’m takin’ you to my cousin Al’s shop. He does the best work, and if anyone can get you back on the road, Al can. Where were you headed anyway?”

“To my father’s house, Delton Detiveaux. Do you know him?”

Vivian turned toward Noel. Her violet eyes shone bright and widened. “I...know...him.” The words slipped through Vivian’s lips low and slow. Her smile faded.

In only three words, Noel’s good mood crashed. Why would mentioning her father’s name cause such a change in Vivian?

Justin slid the last of his wrenches into the large rolling toolbox next to his friend’s car. Bobby would be excited to know his Camaro purred like a cat—a very fast cat. A few minor adjustments and a carburetor overhaul proved the answer. Unfortunately, it had taken longer than Justin planned. He’d have to wait until Monday to start on Mrs. Benoit’s Buick. He’d agreed to drive her to church tomorrow if her car wasn’t ready. Looked like he’d have to make good on his promise.

Judging from the look on Mrs. Benoit’s face and her comment that day, Justin was pretty sure she wouldn’t complain. Her words rang through his brain,

“Not every day an eighty-five-year-old woman gets escorted to church by the most handsome young man in Bijou Bayou. And the most famous too.” He was pretty sure she blushed.

He glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes. Another ten and Nonc Al would be calling him in. If he hurried, he could get cleaned up and be at the dinner table by six.

“Al, you still in here?” The female voice filtered over the running water and through the garage from the back door. He shut the faucet and turned in time to catch a glimpse of Ms. Vivian, a long-standing resident of the Bayou and a family relative—one of many.

“Ms. Vivian, how can I help you?”

“Well, um...is that you, Justin?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is.” He dried his wet hands and gave her a hug. “What brings you out here?”

“Well, I found this young lady walking down Munson’s Road.” Vivian turned toward the door. “Well, she was just behind me. She should be coming in shortly. Her car broke down about five miles from here. Can you or Al help her out?”

“Walking on Munson’s Road at this time of night? That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, she’s from Colorado so she had no idea.”

“Let me tell Nonc Al. We’ll get the tow truck. Where will she be staying tonight?”

“At a hotel in town.” A perky voice grabbed his attention. Standing at the rear of the Camaro stood a pint-sized woman with short, spiky hair, eyes the color of honey, and with more attitude than should be allowed in a less than five-foot frame.

The curly hair framing Ms. Vivian’s face jerked back and forth with the vigorous shaking of her head.

“No, no. You’re stayin’ wit’ me, of course.”

“Mrs. Broussard, I couldn’t. You’ve been too kind already.”

Justin stared. The petite woman’s large, amber eyes enhanced by her delicate skin were ablaze. Something about her brought a tremor to his knees. Nah, he was tired from being on his feet all day.

He followed the conversation between them.

“Not gonna happen. There are no hotels in this small town. Only one bed and breakfast and she’s full. So there will be no more of dat talk. You are stayin’ wit me and dat’s dat.” Vivian placed her fisted hands on her hips. Justin’s finger twitched to signal the girl—to let her know her protests were useless. When Ms. Vivian decided something, it was decided.

He extended his hand. “I’m Justin Gravois.”

Deep creases deepened between her brows while she slowly placed her tiny hand in his. “Noel Winters.”

He gave her his best high-voltage smile. “As in Christmas Winters? Pretty *cool*.”

Had she just rolled her eyes at him? Apparently, she didn’t appreciate the pun. Way to go. She’d probably heard all the corny comebacks about her name. And now he’d just added himself to the list of thoughtless goofballs who thought they were being funny.

She slid her hand out from his. “Thanks.” Her lips turned into a sly smirk while she arched her left eyebrow. “About my car?”

This diminutive damsel in despair could hold her own. “I’ll call you when I know something. May not be until tomorrow afternoon.”

Ms. Vivian stepped forward. “We’ll be at my house if you have any questions. Her car is the dark

blue little thing. Can't miss it. It's parked on the west side of the road. Noel, you've had a tiring day. How does a long soak in a hot bath and a comfortable bed sound?"

"Sounds great." Noel turned toward Justin. "Here are the keys."

He lifted them from her outstretched hand. The scent of sweet almond drifted toward him making him take in a deep breath. The smell took him back to fifth grade when he sat behind Angie Melancon, the first girl to steal his heart.

"Very well then. We're having Cheryl and Beau's bridal shower tomorrow. Al and Cookie are coming." She tapped a long index finger on Justin's chest. "And so are you. We'll see you around one o'clock."

"Whaa...Ms. Viv—"

"Nope. I won't hear otherwise." She strolled toward the door with Noel close behind.

Surely, there had to be a way to decline Ms. Vivian's invitation? A bridal shower? Was she serious? He could think of thousands of things he'd rather do on Sunday afternoon. Like watching football, for one.

Then again, if he did go, he'd see the damsel again. Maybe it would be worth sitting through.

Wait a minute. No. What was he thinking? His career needed his focus. No need for romantic entanglements in his life right now. Especially, with a cute firecracker like Noel.

Trois

Noel returned to Vivian's car and took several deep breaths to ease the churning in her stomach. She only thought getting stranded on a dark and scary road in the Louisiana swamp was the worst that could happen. But meeting Justin Gravois in person took the lead. Of all the rotten luck. She had to get her car fixed, meet her father, and leave here as soon as possible.

As Vivian turned into the driveway to her house, Noel took in the array of Christmas decorations. Lighted snowmen dotted the yard. A life-sized cardboard Santa waved from a narrow canoe-like boat hitched to a team of alligators, and the centerpiece, a large blow-up crawfish danced in the evening breeze. Noel stared. She'd never seen anything quite like this unusual display.

"We're here." Vivian parked the car in the garage beneath the house.

Noel gathered her suitcase and several shopping bags from the backseat.

"C'mon, we'll take the elevator up." Vivian guided her to a small enclosure in the middle of the garage.

Noel stepped onto the second floor into an expansive living room with a cedar-lined ceiling. Christmas decorations covered every possible surface. It must have taken weeks to do this.

"Let me show you to the guest room. I hope you

like purple." Vivian dropped the bags onto the sectional in her living room and motioned for Noel to do the same.

Noel caught up to Vivian at the door of a bedroom—one that seemed plucked from the pages of those southern magazines Noel had browsed in her doctor's waiting room. She stood next to the white iron bed topped with a purple flowered comforter. Matching drapes flanked the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Vivian pointed to an antique dresser adjacent to the bed. "For your folding clothes. There're hangers in the closet if you need them."

"Mrs. Broussard, I insist on paying you for my stay here. This is so kind of you to take me in like this."

Vivian tossed the decorative pillows off the bed into the corner, ending with a pile the height of Noel. "Oh, honey. Not to worry. You can help with the bridal shower tomorrow. Somebody's got to help eat all the food we'll have." She grinned. "Besides, I couldn't bear the thought of you walking out there all alone. You must have been scared."

Noel nodded. "I was shaking in my loafers."

Vivian glanced at Noel's feet. "I hope dat's not the only pair of shoes you brought."

"I'm afraid so." Once she'd found the love letter to her mother from Delton Detiveaux, all her common sense flew south along with her grandiose hopes of finally meeting the man she thought was, or rather she knew was, her father.

"I'll make a few phone calls. We'll get you something to wear. What size are you?"

"Five and a-half or six? Depends on the style."

"My word, girl. I believe I was born with bigger feet than dat." Vivian smiled and pulled back the

covers. "There's a bathroom there." She pointed to a closed door on the opposite side of the room. "There's towels, extra toothbrush, a whole slew of stuff, but let me know if there's anyt'ing you need."

Vivian walked to the door and then turned, "Noel I understand your need to know your father. It's a longing so deep inside you wonder how you'll ever quench dat thirst." Her gaze sought Noel's. "It's just...that...sometimes...well, we'll talk later. For now, you take a good long bath and sleep well."

She stepped out into the hallway but then poked her head around the doorframe. "Oh, we go to church at nine. You are welcome to join us. The whole family comes. We sit in the pew behind Al, Cookie, and Justin when he's in town." She winked at Noel and closed the bedroom door.

Noel's head spun. Her car, this woman, her father so close, and now, Justin. She gathered her toiletries bag, ran the water into the claw-foot tub, poured in the gardenia scented bubble bath, and then peeled off her dirt-crust-ed shoes.

When she slid into the warm, foaming bath, she closed her eyes and let the flowered fragrance envelop.

Again, her thoughts whirled. Had it only been a week? She'd been cleaning out her mother's closet when she'd found the journal and a box filled with letters from Delton Detiveaux professing his undying love to her mother. Her mother's journal confirmed Delton as her father. Why had they never married? Spiraling thoughts reached deep into her soul.

One question bashed a dent in her confidence. Why had her mother never told Delton about her?

Had her mother not wanted her to know her father? If that was true, was her being here something

her mother wouldn't approve? Maybe she should abandon this crazy search.

And what was she going to do about Justin? Of all the places to end up one week before Christmas—a no-name town with an upcoming baseball superstar working on her defunct car. What was that about?

She surely hadn't expected him to be so handsome in person. Or so nice. Which made her scathing article last year about how he'd choked at his first chance to pitch in the majors even more biting.

Did he have to be so blasted good-looking? She'd never been so captivated by such intense green eyes. And that smile, it could have lit up half of Louisiana. Maybe she'd get her car back soon, and he'd never have to know that she was Micki Barrett, the sports reporter who wrote the unflattering article about his failed debut in the majors.

"Front pew. Right, Mrs. Benoit?" Justin opened the church door and escorted the grinning Mrs. Benoit to her seat. Before he could slip away to join his family, she grabbed his face with both hands and planted her cherry-red lips on his cheek.

"Uh, oh. You've got lipstick on your cheek. Here, let me." She held onto his face with one hand and with the other, smeared her thumb across the spot she'd kissed.

Justin, in full view of the congregation, resisted the pressing urge to cringe. "It's OK, Mrs. Benoit. I'll get it." If she licked her thumb and tried again, he would lose it. He flashed a smile and gently removed her hand. "I'll come for you after the service."

“But you still have lipstick on your face.” She licked her thumb and reached toward him.

Oh, no. No way. He backed away. “It’s OK. I’ll take care of it.”

She exhaled and lowered onto the pew. “If you insist. I’ll be right here waiting after the service.”

Of course, the men’s room was in the back of the church. As he passed Nonc Al and Tante Cookie, she handed him a tissue. As he reached for his aunt’s offering, he met Noel’s gaze. She quickly turned away, but he was sure she’d been watching him. In that moment, he saw the twinkle he’d seen last night. He lifted his hand to his face and walked faster.

What was it about that girl that turned him into a blubbering fool?

A quick check in the mirror confirmed his suspicion. A deep red smudge marred his cheek in the shape of the letter C.

What had Noel thought? And why did he care? It’s not like he planned to see her. Well, maybe to discuss her car, but that would be strictly business.

Clean cheeked, he walked back into the church and found his seat next to Nonc Al. The familiar piano music filtered from the front and a favorite hymn began.

From the pew behind him, a sweet voice sang the tune in perfect pitch. He itched to turn around, because he suspected the songstress was Noel.

Later, when Pastor Jerry spoke on allowing your life to be guided by God’s plan, Justin paused. Was his desire to pitch in the majors his plan only? Did God not want the same for him? One thing was certain; Justin had lapsed in praying about his future. Why? He couldn’t say except that a part of him feared the