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*A Light on
the Veranda*

CIJI WARE



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This novel is dedicated to

MICHAEL LLEWELLYN, novelist, journalist, and friend
beyond price who led me to the Town That Time Forgot in
Mississippi and shared all he'd learned,

MARY LOU ENGLAND, book lover, bookseller, and book
angel, whose knowledge of Natchez, generosity of spirit, and
grace under pressure informed this novel from first page to last,

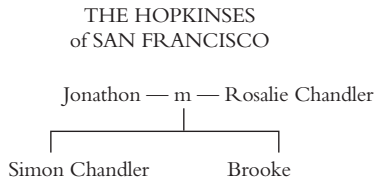
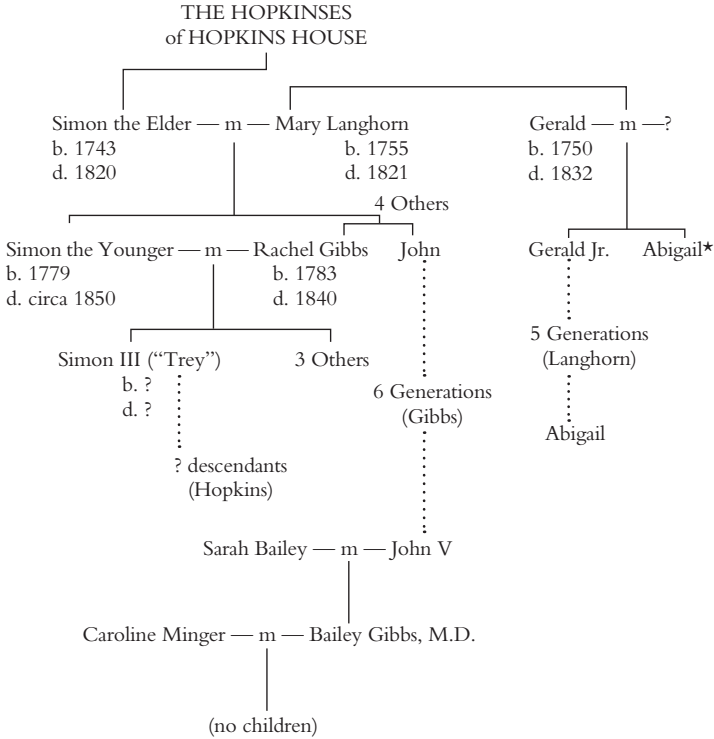
DEBORAH HENSON-CONANT, brilliant jazz harpist
and blithe spirit who could have founded the Aphrodite
Jazz Ensemble if she'd wanted to,

RON and LANI RICHES of Monmouth Plantation, and
the late ROBERT PULLY, of Governor Holmes House,
supporters of the arts and innkeepers *extraordinaires* who
helped make Natchez the wonderful place it is.

Everything is vibrational in nature
We respond to things we cannot hear.

—Jim Oliver, composer
Harmonic Resonance

A MISSISSIPPI



*The Same

CHAPTER 1

MARCH 14

DAPHNE WHITAKER DUVALLOON ALWAYS suspected that jilted fiancés could spell trouble, and—in certain circumstances—might even be downright dangerous.

Of course, nobody thought that on the night the classical harpist ditched Jack Ebert *at the altar* in front of five hundred wedding guests at Saint Louis Cathedral in the heart of New Orleans’s French Quarter. Most folks thought that Jack took the public humiliation remarkably well. However, from that candlelit evening onwards, any unbiased observer would say that Daphne’s life became the female version of Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride.

Even so, how could she have known that an entirely *new* path would emerge from the supernova her life had become, or that the orbit of nature photographer Simon Chandler Hopkins was destined to intersect her own? Looking back, she realized that surely the stars must have shifted in the heavens the instant she retrieved that fateful voice mail message one raw, rain-filled night in New York.

“Hey there, Botticelli angel girl! How y’all doing up there in Yankee land?”

Daphne pictured her older brother clapping an amber bottle of Dixie beer in one hand and his cell phone in the other, perfectly at ease chatting to his sister’s voice mail in faraway Manhattan.

“It’s a lovely spring evening here in New Orleans, and I just wanted you to know that your only sibling’s still *very* much a man in love. So guess what, darlin’? Corlis and I are finally going to do

the deed! Kingsbury Duvallon is—at last—getting married. Next week, in fact.”

Next week?

The mere mention of a wedding—*any* wedding, even her beloved brother’s—made Daphne’s heart pound erratically and her breath come in short gasps. It had been just over two years since she’d fled back to New York after her eleventh-hour bailout of her own Christmastime marriage extravaganza—a hundred-thousand-dollar event replete with nine bridesmaids; three flower girls; twin-boy ring bearers; acres of roses and pine boughs, supplied at cost from Flowers by Duvallon; seven limousines, supplied gratis from the Ebert-Petrella chain of funeral homes; not to mention sixty-six tall, ivory tapers affixed one to a pew at twenty dollars a pop and the stillborn reception at the posh New Orleans Country Club. And of course, who could forget the television crew in the church balcony sent by WVEZ-TV to cover the “wedding of the season”?

Was it any wonder, Daphne thought, that King’s reference to nuptials involving her family in New Orleans made her feel as if she might slip off her kitchen bar stool in a dead faint? She scanned her minuscule, fifth-floor walk-up and wondered if her cordless landline phone would still work if she stuck her head out of the window to get some cool, northeastern air.

“To make up for such short notice,” her brother continued carefully, sounding as if he could imagine her discomfort when she heard word of this impending family gathering, “you’ll probably be mighty pleased to hear that we’re *not* tying the knot in the great state of Louisiana.”

“Amen,” she murmured, closing her eyes and offering up a prayer of thanks to whatever voodoo gods were handling her case. She leaned her elbows against the kitchen counter for support and held onto the phone receiver like a life preserver. Someone in the next apartment slammed a door and yelled a curse in Spanish that was immediately answered with a string of Anglo-Saxon epithets. Five stories below, car brakes screeched and horns honked furiously. “Manhattan cab drivers,” she muttered.

“Corlis and I have decided our little shindig’ll work just fine

in Natchez, instead of New Orleans, so you have *no* excuse not to be there,” King’s voice message continued. “We’ve almost got the church lined up, with the rest of the details—like the reception—to follow. *Y’have* to come, Daph.”

King’s mellifluous Southern drawl was soothing. Daphne would bet a new set of harp strings that her brother and his fiancée were lounging on King’s elegant, fern-strewn gallery overlooking the French Quarter, relaxing after work.

She could imagine her brother’s tall, lean figure slouched in a chair, his handsome dark head framed by a fan of white wicker, his feet propped up on the wrought iron railing. Even over the phone line she could hear the sound of a jingling harness, the faint clip-clop of a mule passing by on Dauphine Street below, and the shout of a tourist-carriage driver speeding toward the city’s livery stable a few blocks away. According to her kitchen clock, it was still early evening in New Orleans. The gas-lit street lamps would be glowing through a riverine mist obscuring the modern skyscrapers that loomed over the Quarter. Those steel-and-glass monstrosities towering above Canal Street had made King’s efforts as an architectural historian to protect the city’s remaining store of venerable old buildings a *cause célèbre* in the Big Easy—and justly earned him the title “The Hero of New Orleans” in the *Times-Picayune*. To his younger sister, however, King had been a hero long before that. He’d been her rock. Her bulwark against—

“Guess I’m taking up all the space on the ol’ voice mail,” her brother said apologetically, jolting her back to reality. “Call us, sugar, ASAP. And don’t let any of this wedding stuff freak you out. It’ll all turn out just fine. Take good care, y’hear?”

Daphne inhaled shakily, pushed “save,” then speed dialed the familiar number in New Orleans. As expected, she got King’s voice mail. Daphne knew he routinely screened his calls to avoid any unexpected verbal confrontations with Magnolia Mama, as their mother, Antoinette Kingsbury Duvallon, was known among her intimates.

Daphne’s brother concluded his taped greeting with his customary wry dispatch. “Y’all have a decent day, y’hear?”

Before Daphne could leave a congratulatory message, call waiting kicked and King's caller ID appeared.

"Hey! Daphne!" King's deep voice broke in when she clicked the line. "Corlis said it'd be you. Whatcha think, angel girl?"

"I will be forever in your debt for *not* getting married in our hometown."

"Cousin Maddy, up in Natchez, is over the moon 'bout us holding the wedding in the Town That Time Forgot," he replied with deliberate irony. Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, sparred in an age-old rivalry as to which riverside city was held in higher esteem by historians, or possessed the most revered architecture. "She's offered us that tumbling down old mansion of hers, overlooking the river, as Wedding Central."

"You're getting married at Cousin Maddy's *house*?" Daphne asked incredulously. A mental picture of her elderly cousin's chaotic abode materialized in her mind: the lopsided veranda supported by six shaky Corinthian-style front porch pillars, five years of magazines stashed under priceless antique furniture throughout four floors, and a good half inch of cat hair dusting every horizontal surface. Cousin Maddy was a sweetheart and a superb music teacher, but a tidy housekeeper she was not.

"Oh, good Lord, no!" King assured his sister. "Our *very* abbreviated bridal party's just sleeping there 'midst the rubble, since everything in town was booked for Spring Pilgrimage."

"You're getting married during the home tours? You *are* brave."

"The ceremony's planned for First Presbyterian on Pearl Street. We'll know for sure later today if we got the church, but I'm pretty sure we lucked out there."

"Mmmm... it's gorgeous... and a lot *smaller*..." Daphne murmured into the receiver.

"I just don't think any of us could have stomached seeing those same ol' people in that same ol' cathedral on Jackson Square this time 'round."

"I'm afraid my stomach might have made me a no-show," Daphne admitted sheepishly.

"Naturally, Mama's fit to be tied not being able to over decorate

Saint Louis Cathedral with Flowers by Duvallon again, but what else is new?"

"Nothing," Daphne declared, pronouncing the *g* distinctly. She'd worked hard on losing her Southern inflection in a conscious effort to sound like other New Yorkers.

"First Pres being only a third the size of the cathedral means most of Mama's friends will be *highly insulted* not to be invited—as she informed me this morning—but it'll all work out, eventually. I keep telling her the bride gets to pick the church, but you know those magnolias... they think they rule the world."

"You got *that* right," Daphne agreed with more pique than she intended. How could things "work out eventually" when her mother and father had refused to speak or communicate with her in the twenty-seven months since she'd bolted from her wedding at the absolute last second?

"Now, don't you start worrying 'bout Jack getting wind of this. He's moved to Dallas. And besides, everyone on this end's sworn to secrecy—even 'bout the date of this thing. Waylon claims he's goin' fishin' next weekend, so there won't be trouble on *that* score, either," he added with an uncharacteristic edge of bitterness. Daphne's throat tightened at her brother's oblique reference to another family problem.

"Oh, King..." she murmured. "Daddy's so impossible sometimes..."

"You gotta trust me 'bout all of this, Daphne," King insisted. "We've tried to think of everything."

"Of course I trust you," she replied in a rush. "I'm really touched you and Corlis are thinking so much about *me* when—"

"Of course I'm gonna look out for you, darlin'. You're my baby sister, aren't you?" he teased gruffly.

The lump in Daphne's throat swelled to the size of a pecan and she found she didn't dare say another word. At the time of her breakup with Jack, everybody, including her brother and her, had learned that Daphne's father, Waylon Duvallon, was not, in fact, King's biological father. She was still recovering from the shock that she was merely King's half sister, and things within the family would never be the same.

Don't go there. Just don't go there.

In the background, her soon-to-be sister-in-law, Corlis McCullough, was saying something. “Oh, yeah... ’course.” King chuckled into the phone. “Here, ask her yourself, California.”

Corlis’s happy voice interrupted her melancholy musings. “So. Are you surprised we’re finally getting hitched, girlfriend?”

“A little,” Daphne admitted. “But I’m really thrilled about it, Corlis. I hereby declare you my *real* sister, and not just a sister-in-law. You and I’ve got to stick together in this clan.” Daphne silently thanked the mysterious fates that the Duvallons were acquiring such a welcome addition to their ragtag ranks.

“Count on it, sweetie pie,” Corlis said, suddenly sounding solemn.

“And brava for finally saying yes to the poor guy!”

“Oh, I said yes to the guy ages ago. I just didn’t have the nerve to say yes to getting *married*. Now, here’s the deal, angel,” Corlis said, becoming serious again. “We would really love you to play your harp at the ceremony. It’d mean a lot to us both.”

“Of *course* I’ll play,” Daphne assured her, though, privately, she wondered if she could actually make it through a Duvallon family gathering.

“Listen, Daph,” Corlis said softly, reading her thoughts, “I know that assembling your clan again for a *wedding* isn’t number one on your list of wishes, but King and I have tried to make this pretty much a no-frills event. And if hauling that big harp of yours all the way down here from New York and plucking out ‘Here Comes the Bride’ sounds too much like work, I’d love you to be one of my bridal attendants. Both Althea LaCroix and Aunt Bethany say they’re game to walk down the aisle ahead of me at this little dog and pony show, if *you* are. Want to be an attendant instead?”

“I’m totally up for this, including transporting the harp to Natchez,” she replied with more conviction than she felt. “What kind of threads are we talking about for this clambake? Evening gowns? Afternoon garden party stuff?”

“The latter. The wedding’s at four... reception starts at five. Everybody’s wearing whatever pretty dress they want,” Corlis announced breezily. “My great aunt Marge’s giving me away in

her Hedda Hopper turban. As luck would have it, Hollywood Harry's shooting a game show pilot next week in LaLa Land, and my daffy mother's chanting in a monastery somewhere in Tibet, so..." Corlis paused to catch her breath following her flippant description of divorced parents who had put their small daughter in the care of an aged relation so they could "follow their bliss," as Corlis had once told Daphne privately. "It's the perfect moment to hold this little hoolie, wouldn't you say? As you can see, this is not your average Miss Manners event on *either* side of the aisle."

"Well, as New York's greatest shrink says, we're all grown-ups now, aren't we?" Daphne offered. "We can do what we damn well please, right?"

"That's the spirit," Corlis agreed emphatically. "So it's totally up to you how you want to handle this. We just want you to *be* there, and maybe even have a little fun. Oh! Another call's coming through. Hope it's the minister at First Pres. More details to follow. Love you madly. See you in Natchez on Saturday. Bye."

Click.

Have fun at a wedding?

Not anytime soon.

Then, a giant thunderbolt erased all thoughts about disastrous nuptials, disgusting ex-fiancés, self-centered parents, and trips back home.

See you *Saturday*?

Daphne inhaled a gulp of air and stared, horrified, at the silent phone receiver.

"*Saturday?*" she wailed to her kitchen's four walls, prompting the cockroaches to run for cover. "Oh *no!* Not *this* Saturday!"



The following morning, the skies over Manhattan continued to dump steady March rain on every pedestrian in the plaza fronting Columbus Circle, including the umbrella-less harpist dashing from the subway exit toward the entrance of the Juilliard School adjacent to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. As Daphne ran, she silently practiced her speech to the conductor, Rafé Oberlin, about

having to be at her brother's hastily organized nuptials in Natchez on Saturday. Despite her well-rehearsed patter, she knew that the thirty-five-year-old musical *wunderkind* was bound to make the next half hour of her life an absolute misery.

But he can't forbid me to go, she tried to assure herself. *This sort of thing falls into the category of "family emergency," right? It's covered in our union contract.*

Maybe so, but March 20 at eight p.m. marked the fledgling Oberlin Chamber Orchestra's debut concert at Lincoln Center, and contract or no contract, Daphne steeled herself for trouble.

"So? You wanted to see me?" Rafe waved her into his office deep in the bowels of the Juilliard School, where he continued to teach conducting while his star rose steadily in the musical firmament. "You have exactly seven minutes to tell me what this is about before I start a master class next door," he announced, gesturing toward a chair. "Next time, I suggest you phone for an appointment."

"This will just take a minute."

The dashing blond impresario wore knife-pleated gray flannels and a turquoise polo shirt that complemented a physique more suited to the winner of the *Tour de France* than a classical music conductor. Rafe leafed through a mammoth score on a desk large enough to accommodate architectural blueprints for a skyscraper. He made no attempt to disguise his annoyance occasioned by Daphne's unexpected arrival.

"By the way," he said, staring down at his score, "you were late coming in on bar thirty-two at rehearsal yesterday. Make sure that doesn't happen on Saturday, will you please?"

Daphne found it bitterly ironic that she remained under the baton of the man whose abject betrayal had thrown her directly into harm's way in the first place. If she hadn't been so dazzled by the maestro's magnetic personality, she might have seen a lot sooner what an absolute rat he was underneath all his celebrated charisma and might also have avoided a classic rebound romance with Jack back home.

Good Lord, Daphne thought, cringing at the memory. She'd

certainly been naive when she arrived at Juilliard. Rafe had swiftly wooed and won the virginal heart of the younger, more impressionable Ms. Duvallon, late of New Orleans, failing to mention in the white heat of their mad affair what everyone else in New York already knew: that he was married to a British ballerina who was away on a year's tour of Commonwealth countries.

"But you weren't wearing a ring," she'd wailed when she'd confronted him in a storm of grief and chagrin that swept over her like straight-line winds down the Mississippi Delta—and immediately felt like an even greater fool.

Her hasty exit from Rafe's magnificent Westside apartment was even more mortifying because it had left her feeling like an idiot *and* a trollop. Far from taking time to lick her wounds and consider the genesis of her folly, she'd crawled home at Christmastime to the social whirl of New Orleans. Shell-shocked from Rafe's betrayal, she allowed herself to be flattered, wined, and dined by the son of her parents' business partners, Alice and René Ebert, co-owners of a chain of funeral homes in Louisiana that—along with the proprietors of Flowers by Duvallon—had a virtual lock on the lucrative business of being laid to rest in the Big Easy.

Daphne briefly lowered her eyes to stare at the musical score on the conductor's desk, angry all over again at herself and everything that had happened since her double-barreled debacle with Jack and the almighty maestro Oberlin. She attempted to gather her thoughts and continue with the matter at hand.

"Rafe, I know how important Saturday's concert is, and I realize—"

She hesitated, as unhappy images skittered through her head, erasing the carefully prepared words she'd hoped would soften the news of her untimely departure.

Rafe waited an instant, then said with rising irritation, "Well, what is it? I'm five days away from the most important night of my life, Daphne. I don't have time for chitchat."

Daphne inhaled swiftly and spoke before her voice froze. "I'm very sorry, Rafe, but I can't play the concert on Saturday. My brother is getting married in Natchez on the same day and I have to be there."

Rafe shot her a look of disbelief, and snapped, “It’s a joke, right? People plan weddings *months* in advance.”

“No. They just decided yesterday and called me last night.”

“They’re eloping,” he said flatly. “Nobody wants a lot of family around when they elope. They’re just being polite.”

“They’re not just being polite and they’re not eloping,” she replied doggedly. “It’s a full-on church ceremony in Natchez, Mississippi, and it’s my *brother’s* wedding, Rafe. Remember him?” she added, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “The man who contributed ten thousand bucks to your orchestra?”

“You signed a contract with *me* to play the harp Saturday night, remember?” Rafe replied coolly. “If you don’t show up, you’re in violation. You know the rules. You’re going to have to tell him to get somebody else to play at his wedding.”

“Our contract allows for family emergencies,” Daphne began.

“This doesn’t qualify as one,” Rafe shot back.

“That’s not how I read the contract, but I’m certainly willing to pay for my replacement,” she promptly volunteered, hoping she didn’t sound as desperate as she felt.

“That’s hardly the point,” Rafe retorted caustically. “I can’t believe you’d be so idiotic as to miss your chance to solo at the most significant concert date you’ve ever played in your life.” Rafe’s lips had compressed into a straight line and his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Now, listen, Daphne, if you were a true professional—”

Ignoring these warning signs, she jumped from her chair, her heart pounding and repressed humiliation simmering just below her ladylike smile. “No! It’s your turn to listen to me,” she interrupted. “I showed up at every single rehearsal and performance even after I found out you were two-timing me *and*—as it turned out—your *wife* with another woman. And I never missed any planning meetings, either, when you were barely paying your musicians minimum wage, before we unionized!”

Rafe’s eyes were practically slits now. He wagged a cautionary finger in her direction. “There are hundreds of harpists just as well trained and just as talented as you are. You’re lucky to be working for any wage, and *I’m* the one who made that possible. I strongly

advise you to show up Saturday night or, believe me, Daphne, you will regret it.”

Daphne took a step forward and put both hands on his desk so she could stare directly into his turquoise eyes. “I’m flying home this week,” she said softly. “I’m going to play in my brother’s wedding on Saturday. Evelyn Farnsworth can easily move up to principal harpist for this one performance. She’s played at my side every rehearsal and knows the solo as well as I do.”

“Good!” he snapped. “She can move right into your slot—permanently.”

How could she ever have thought this man was a grown-up?

“Look, Rafe.” She switched to a conciliatory tone she hoped would bring them both back from the brink. “I’m rooting for all of us to succeed like gangbusters Saturday night. Our Lincoln Center debut marks a watershed for our group.” She softened her next remark with a crooked smile. “And I truly believe you’d regret firing me because I’m the best damn harpist in New York who ever played for union scale.”

“Then show me how good you think you are on Saturday, or you’re out.”

Daphne tried not to let a sense of panic take hold. “C’mon, Maestro,” she cajoled. “You know I have the highest professional regard for this organization you’ve created, and I very much want to continue as principal harpist. Why don’t we call a time-out for now and we’ll talk it over when I get back from Natchez?”

“I know what my decision is right *now*,” Rafe retorted, glowering like a small boy who’d just lost a game of marbles. “You’re history, Ms. Duvalon. Excuse me, won’t you? I have a class to teach.”

Unable to disguise her shock, she cocked her head to one side, and asked slowly, “You’re actually letting me go?”

“I actually am,” he replied smugly, lifting his baton off the desk. “For cause. Play or pay. Just the reason I was looking for. I’ve been thinking for quite a while that you really don’t have what it takes to be first rank.”

“That’s crap and you know it!” she cried in an uncharacteristic show of vulgarity.

“It’s my well-considered opinion,” he said as if he were enjoying this exchange.

“I’ll file a grievance,” she countered, while disjointed images of monthly bills, stomach-churning auditions, and the shame of actually being canned by a man with whom she’d been intimate collided in her brain.

“If you do, other colleagues in our business will hear my side of the story. Face it, Daphne, it was consensual sex.”

“I don’t mean that,” she said sharply. “I’m talking about *this*.” She pointed at him and then at herself. “You’re trying to intimidate me right now to prevent my exercising my rights under our union contract.”

“You’ll be known around town as capital-*T* trouble, and you know what that means.”

She certainly did. There were too many talented musicians chasing too few top-echelon jobs in New York. The last thing a harpist wanted to be dubbed was “trouble.”

“I’m willing to give you one more chance,” Rafe said with a calculating air, “but you have to tell me right now you’ll play the Lincoln Center concert—or you’re through.”

Daphne pictured her brother, King, swiftly stepping out of the line of tail-coated ushers and whisking her away from her philandering groom, down the aisle of Saint Louis Cathedral, and out the arched doors to freedom.

“I love my brother very much,” she said quietly. “I can’t let him down and miss his wedding. He saved me from mine.”

“Yeah, yeah... well, we all have problems. Mine is to fill your chair before our final rehearsal tomorrow.” He punched his intercom. “Helen? Get Evelyn Farnsworth on the phone.”

For a split second, Daphne nearly fell on her knees and begged him to reconsider. A boss who wished her well could easily have interpreted the family emergency clause in her favor. But by now she should know that Rafe Oberlin cared about the advancement of Rafe Oberlin, period. She regarded the handsome young conductor for a long moment as silence filled the room.

I will not cry, she scolded herself.

She breathed deeply and nodded in acquiescence. Then she summoned her sweetest magnolia smile and bid farewell in a deliberately exaggerated drawl. “You take good care, now, Rafe. And, all the best on Saturday, y’hear? Ah mean it sincerely...”



Hundreds of travelers, anxious to begin their revels on Bourbon Street, surged toward the Delta Airlines baggage carousels. Daphne, however, hardly noticed them. She pointed to her claim check and then gazed, incensed, at the lost-and-found clerk standing behind the Formica counter.

“I watched them load the harp on board the plane in New York *myself*,” she said with growing desperation. “It’s six feet tall and weighs at least a hundred and fifty pounds. Not an easy item to misplace.”

“Perhaps it’s comin’ on another flight, miss,” the woman offered hopefully.

“Oh, please,” Daphne said, her exhaustion and stress level zooming into the stratosphere. “It’s got to be here somewhere!”

First I lose my job. Now I lose my harp. What else can happen?

“I’ll contact New York and call you when we locate it,” the clerk said, with a shrug. “That’s all I can do.”

“You need to know that this little problem will cost forty thousand dollars to solve, so I suggest you—”

“Daphne!” King hissed. “Look over there. Quick!”

Startled, Daphne turned to stare in the direction her brother indicated. A slender, sandy-haired man standing twenty-five feet away was in the act of handing a fistful of bills to a grinning skycap.

“*Jack?*” Daphne whispered, dumbfounded to see the very person she never wanted to lay eyes on again.

Jack Ebert.

Her almost husband.

A man she had known since they shared a playpen set up in the Ebert or Duvallon back parlors by their mamas—two women engaged in endless competition, yet who claimed to be *best* best friends. There stood the person with whom she’d gone to grade

school, high school, and college for sixteen years—but had ignored as best she could for most of that time, until later when, unbelievably, he became her short-term fiancé.

Daphne's unhappy musings were cut short by the sight of Jack's dark blond head bobbing toward the pneumatic doors that led to the bus and taxi stands. In that same instant, she knew that it was no coincidence that her jilted fiancé should have suddenly materialized at the Delta baggage claim just as she was attempting to find an industrial-size harp that had somehow gone astray. She took off at a dead run.

"Hey, Daphne! Wait!" King called. "Let *me* deal with it!"

She ignored her brother's urgent command. Instead, she bolted toward the skycap, who was smiling to himself as he stowed the wad of cash in his back pocket. She arrived at his side out of breath.

"Don't you *move*," she shouted, assuming her most abrasive New York persona. "You can keep the cash," she announced, pointing to the skycap's pants pocket. "But I'll give you exactly *two minutes* to go wherever the hell you stashed my forty-thousand-dollar concert harp and deliver it to me *here*. Otherwise," she said, pulling out her cell phone, "I'm calling the N.O.P.D. right now and having you and my former fiancé—who I saw give you money to hide my harp—*arrested* as an accessory to grand theft!"

By this time, King was at her side. The baggage handler stared at Daphne for a moment and then, with a shrug, sidled off toward a door marked "Employees Only." Within minutes, he reappeared pushing a handcart through the crowds. The instrument loomed even larger than its six feet, shrouded in a form-fitting, ink-black fiberglass case that weighed more than the harp itself.

"Think that's it?" King asked, deadpan.

Before Daphne could deliver a retort, the skycap asked nonchalantly, "Is this what y'all are lookin' for? It was in the locked room. For safekeepin'," he added baldly.

"Yeah. Sure," Daphne scoffed. The skycap lingered, his hand resting on the retrieved harp.

"Forget it," King snapped. "You already got your tip." The

man shrugged again and slunk off in the direction of a flustered elderly woman surrounded by suitcases.

“You told me that Jack had moved to Dallas,” Daphne said, her breath ragged. Her heart was still pounding, and she could actually feel adrenaline thundering through her limbic system like the crescendo of the “William Tell Overture.”

“He lives there, all right,” King said grimly. “Works as a public relations flak for some oil company. Someone obviously tipped him off as to exactly when you were expected to arrive in New Orleans, en route to the wedding.”

“Gee... who could *that be*?”

Brother and sister exchanged knowing looks.

“Had to be our sainted mama,” King said, with a resigned shake of his head. “She left me a voice mail late this morning saying she wouldn’t be coming to the wedding without a down-on-your-knees apology from both of us for the way we humiliated the entire family at Saint Louis Cathedral—and for everything since.”

“What a surprise,” Daphne replied, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “You support me when I refuse to marry a total jerk and Mama hates us for life.”

“*And I invited Lafayette Marchand to be my best man on Saturday.*”

Daphne gazed at her brother in wide-eyed wonder. “Your father? Oh, boy.” She rested her head against the harp case and heaved a sigh. “Jack must be jumping for joy about all of this.” She affected a shrug. “So Mama’s not coming to Natchez. Okay. Maybe it’s for the best.” She patted her harp. “At least we rescued this baby so I’ll still be able to play at your wedding.”

“Too bad you didn’t take up the piccolo, or something sugar,” King noted dryly. “Even on a *good* day, traveling with a harp must be as easy as transporting a howitzer.” Daphne, long the recipient of such attempts at wit, didn’t respond to his quip. “I’m going to take you and your harp in the Ford Explorer we rented in your honor, okay?” he proposed. “We’ll meet up with Corlis and her aunt and they’ll follow us in the Jag. I figured the drive to Natchez’ll probably give you and me our only chance to catch up before wedding madness takes over.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she agreed, nodding. She’d already decided not to mention she’d been kicked out of the orchestra because of her decision to come to the wedding. She didn’t want to put a pall over the proceedings or burden King and Corlis in any way. Instead, they could talk about how pleased she was to have checkmated Jack—and the son-of-a-gun didn’t even know it. She pointed to the harp. “Just let me attach these two little wheels to the bottom of the harp case, here, and away we go.”



As any refugee from a hurricane watch knows, the escape route out of New Orleans is due west and then north on an interstate highway that eventually leaves the bayous behind and joins a two-lane road that meanders along the Mississippi through plantation country. Within the hour, the two vehicles were whizzing by grand, pillared mansions glimpsed through verdant arched canopies formed by two-hundred-year-old trees.

“Oh, King... look... there’s Oak Alley.” Daphne glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure Corlis, in the Jaguar behind them, was pointing out the landmark to her elderly relative. “Doesn’t it always knock your socks off?” she murmured, gazing at the double row of ancient oaks that lined the approach to a splendid Greek Revival house with its celebrated twenty-eight columns, fan-lighted doorways, and wide, welcoming verandas.

“Always,” replied King reverentially.

Farther down the road, another stand of massive oaks displayed branches laden with cascades of gossamer gray-green moss. “We couldn’t be anywhere but Louisiana, could we?” Daphne sighed contentedly and settled into the passenger seat. She lowered her window a few inches and inhaled the velvety March air laden with the scents of dogwood and pink jasmine. A mere hint of humidity foretold a stiflingly hot summer a few months away.

By one o’clock, the Jaguar and the Explorer had nosed into the parking lot of a restaurant called South of the Border, located just before the Mississippi state line and renowned for its ten-alarm Bloody Marys, fried green tomatoes smothered with crawfish

rémoulade sauce, and drop-dead coconut cake. Arm in arm, Daphne, King, Corlis, and a turban-clad Margery McCullough strolled toward the entrance in the warm noonday sun.

“Daphne, dear,” Corlis’s great aunt said, giving the younger woman’s elbow a gentle squeeze. “I’m so looking forward to hearing you play your harp at the wedding. Corlis tells me you are superb.” The celebrated retired journalist, who looked like a stand-in for the forties gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper, beamed in the direction of her great-niece, and declared, “You know, Corlis? Except for you and me, the family you’re marrying into is a damned sight more talented and accomplished than ours, don’t you agree?”

“You’ve got *that* right, Aunt Marge,” Corlis replied, feigning a long face. Tanned and smiling, WJAZ’s star television reporter wore only light makeup and had pulled her shoulder-length brown hair into a ponytail that made her appear a decade younger than her thirty-five years. “Not a game show host in their entire family tree, lucky them!”

Everybody laughed, and Daphne realized that the stomach knot she lived with full-time in New York had begun to untie.

Two hours later, the foursome emerged from the roadhouse after a feast of “fried everything,” as Marge McCullough described their crunchy, corn-battered oysters, crispy fried catfish, and green tomatoes topped with Vidalia onion rings—all lightly dusted in flour, cooked to a spectacular golden brown, and washed down with frosted pitchers of sweetened tea. Groaning in mock misery, Corlis pretended to stagger across the parking lot, beckoning Daphne toward the Explorer.

“Now, it’s my turn to get you to myself,” Corlis said affectionately, patting the passenger seat. “Climb in, girlfriend.” King and Marge McCullough drove ahead in his midnight-blue Jaguar—a reward from his savvy investments in information technology stocks in the mid-nineties.

The bride-to-be looked relaxed and happy, not the ball of nerves Daphne had been on the eve of her ill-fated wedding. Daphne flipped down the visor and peered into the mirror, taking in her

shoulder-length, curly blond hair and dark brown eyes with dark smudges beneath the lower lids. Publicity photos showing her with full makeup and good lighting produced a much more dazzling effect. However, at the moment, she looked a far cry from that, she thought, gazing at her New York pallor. Swiftly, she retrieved the lipstick from her purse and applied it generously, rubbing a small amount into her cheekbones in an effort to revive them.

“Let’s spend the next sixty miles debating the merits of ‘Amazing Grace’ versus ‘Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,’” Daphne joked, snapping the visor in place. They had settled on the order of music for the ceremony by the time Corlis turned off the main highway and headed toward the wide expanse of river seen in the distance.

“What do you say we take the scenic route through town?” Corlis asked. “I’d love to see a bit of Natchez before it gets dark.”

“Then go straight ahead and turn right on Canal Street,” Daphne directed, and soon they caught sight of the silver-painted bridge that connected Natchez, Mississippi, to the communities of Vidalia and Ferriday on the Louisiana side.

It was nearly four thirty. The sun slanted off the water, turning the Mississippi molten gold. *Lady Luck*, a paddle-wheeled gambling boat, rested in her permanent berth at the foot of a cliff on whose lofty palisades early settlers found relief from swarming mosquitoes and the heavy, sultry temperatures along the water’s edge. The vessel’s pilothouse glittered with white tracer lights that beckoned gullible tourists, down-on-their-luck Natchezians, and citizens out for a night on the town to try their fortune. A hundred seventy-five years earlier, Natchez-Under-the-Hill, as the streets flanking the waterfront were called, had been a red-light district, full of raucous bars and boarding houses for gamblers, thieves, and ladies of easy virtue. On the bluff above, block after block of pillared, antebellum mansions and splendid churches bore witness to a city “built so the eighteenth and nineteenth-century cotton planters from around these parts could come to town and show off their wealth and piety,” Daphne told Corlis. “In a city of about twenty thousand people, there are still at least sixty antebellum mansions offering house tours around here. Before the War Between the

States, there were more millionaires in Natchez than there were in New York City.”

“No wonder King wanted to get married in this place. What a Shangri-La for an architectural historian.”

They turned right off Canal Street onto Franklin. Daphne pointed through the windshield as they passed the intersection at Wall Street. “Right over there stood the old Mansion House Hotel where—supposedly—the duc d’Orléans’s son, Louis-Philippe, danced at a ball in 1798.”

“No kidding? French aristocrats?”

“Yup,” Daphne said with a grin. “That was after he’d hot-footed it out of Europe during the French Revolution following his father’s encounter with *Madame Guillotine*. Eventually, Robespierre and his cronies were kicked out of power and young Louis-Philippe was invited back to Paris and became the Citizen King in 1830.”

“Man oh man,” Corlis murmured with admiration. “You’re just like your brother. You really know all this stuff.”

Daphne shrugged. “Local lore, drummed into me by my Natchez cousins. Other folks around here insist the young duke wasn’t entertained at the hotel, but at Concord, a big house on the other side of town that burned down. We know, for sure, though, that Louis-Philippe and his entourage reviewed the local garrison while they were here, over near what was once Fort Rosalie.”

“Really? So he and his courtiers hung out in the South till things cooled down in France?”

“Something like that.”

“What happened to the hotel? Urban renewal?”

“No, the Tornado of 1840. It blew away half the town, but, luckily, it only flattened a few of the big plantation houses in the outlying areas.”

“If I weren’t getting married tomorrow,” Corlis said wistfully as they passed Stanton Hall, another magnificent pillared home on their left, “I’d love to tour every one of these places. They’re gorgeous.”

“Wait till you see where your reception’s being held,” Daphne replied smugly.

“As a matter of fact, we’d better head over to Monmouth Plantation right now. I need to check out a few things.”

“King told me, driving up today, that you booked it at the last minute. Do you know what a miracle that is? Around here, Monmouth’s reserved for weddings when a girl child is *born*.”

“Some poor guy just died—ten days before he could celebrate his ninety-fifth birthday. We took over his spot.”

“This wedding is meant to be.” Daphne laughed happily, her spirits rising each mile they got closer to Monmouth.

A few minutes later, they steered the Explorer into a sweeping drive that led to a magnificent white mansion with imposing square pillars. The plantation house, now a hotel, perched on a lawn-cloaked hill dotted with magnolia trees and giant, moss-hung oaks. A gargantuan tour bus was just pulling away from the front door. Their timing was perfect, Daphne thought.

“Oh... my stars...” Corlis said softly. “What a wonderful place for a wedding reception.”

“Out back is a huge courtyard and a gorgeous garden beyond, plus a pond and vine-covered trellises, azalea and camellia bushes, not to mention a gazebo—which are very big items around here, by the way,” she confided with a grin. “And statues all over the place. The acres of old orchards and cotton fields have been sold off over the years and turned into Greater Natchez.”

Corlis drove the car to an area marked by a discreet sign indicating visitors’ parking. Stepping onto the gravel, she pronounced happily, “It’s perfect! Trust King to get the architecture right.”

Within minutes, they were greeted by the lady of the manor, Lani Riches, a warm, welcoming woman dressed in trim lime linen slacks and a silk blouse. Ushering them into the front hall, she explained that she and her husband Ron, a California developer, had fallen in love with the derelict mansion twenty years earlier on their first trip to Natchez.

“Ron’s the history buff, and I love the decorative arts. We became obsessed with the idea of restoring this pre-Civil War white elephant to its original splendor.” She led them beyond the magnificent delft-blue foyer into a high-ceilinged double parlor

festooned with pale blue silk draperies and matching upholstery. “We’ve been so grateful to King for all the good advice he’s given us over the years,” she said. Daphne’s gaze was immediately drawn to the rear of the large room, which boasted two fireplaces separated by an arch with a fanlight window overhead. Among a scattering of magnificent period mahogany furniture, a small harp of the sort that well-brought-up young ladies played for gentlemen callers stood beside a grand piano.

“This entire place just bowls me over,” Corlis breathed.

“Let me show you the plans we’ve made for your wedding reception,” Lani replied, all business now. “And don’t worry. People on the Pilgrimage tour will be long gone from here tomorrow evening.” Then she addressed Daphne. “Your brother told me you’ll be playing your harp at the church, but you might want to see if you’d like to play ours at the reception. That way, you won’t have to transport yours from First Presbyterian. This one is an antique, but we keep it tuned.”

Corlis said quickly, “You’re a guest, Daphne. Only play at the reception if you feel like it.”

Daphne smiled gratefully at Corlis, then said to their hostess, “Do you mind if I have a closer look?”

“No, of course not. Please do.”

“My cousin Madeline Whitaker, at Bluff House, also has a very old one—which is probably why I never considered taking up the tuba,” Daphne volunteered with a wry smile.

“As I’m sure you know,” Lani said, laughing, “Natchez is a town where there’s a harp in practically every parlor. Feel free to try it out.”

Corlis and Lani headed for the back courtyard to confer on canapés and the merits of various champagnes. Meanwhile, Daphne sat down on a round, pale blue, velvet-covered stool next to the antique instrument. She hiked up her black gored traveling skirt and drew the harp between her legs, briefly considering the sensuousness of such a motion while she nestled the sound box gently against the top of her breast and her right shoulder. Compared to her massive concert harp, this one felt almost cozy. She strummed

the opening chords of the teatime favorite “Greensleeves,” then halted abruptly. Resting the palms of her hands to quiet the vibrating strings, she heaved a sigh. The harp was, indeed, in tune. That wasn’t the problem. The trouble was, she honestly didn’t think she could stand to play that boring old chestnut one more time.

A Bach cantata?

The mere thought of a classical piece of music reminded her of the concert taking place without her at Lincoln Center and the memory of Rafe Oberlin angrily gesturing for her to leave his office. Suddenly, she experienced an avalanche of anxiety she had previously managed to keep in check. She forced herself to take a cleansing breath to fight a deepening sense of depression. Then she sat bolt upright on the stool and tilted her chin skyward. She lifted her fingers from the strings and brought them down again, stroking the notes of a blues favorite, “Georgia on My Mind,” to calm her nerves. The music resonated from the harp and filled her chest in mellow waves as she began to sing in her husky lower register.

“Geor-gia... Geor-gia... the who-ole da-ay long...”

Man, she thought, did it improve her outlook to sing like this and pull funky jazz chords from an antique harp. It was during moments like these that she realized how thoroughly bored she’d become with most popular classical music. She was also tired of her “angelic harp persona” and the halo of shoulder-length curly blond hair that served to reinforce it. Occasionally, she imagined herself playing her gilded instrument while wearing a leather mini-skirt and a chain bustier like Madonna in her bad-girl days—just for the shock value. When she’d once told King about her musical daydream, he’d laughed and challenged her, saying “Why don’t you try it sometime?”

She never would, of course. It was just a fantasy she conjured on days when she wearied of playing too many crowd-pleasers. Even so, her brother’s words echoed in her head as she launched into the second chorus of the sultry tune.

She heard a door open, and footsteps. Then a tall figure loomed in the wide entrance dividing the hotel’s foyer from the double parlors. The thirtysomething man wore a forest-green polo shirt

under a khaki vest studded with half a dozen bulging pockets, along with khaki slacks, leather hiking boots, and two professional-looking cameras slung around his neck. He was holding a collapsed tripod in one hand and had just deposited a duffel bag at his feet, as if he had appeared straight out of an L.L. Bean catalogue. His features wore a look of expectancy. He smiled slightly and nodded encouragement for her to keep playing as he settled himself comfortably against the doorjamb.

She felt like smiling at the stranger and did, thereby gaining a closer look at his handsome, strongly defined nose, chiseled cheekbones, and a chin that suggested one of those brooding models with a five o'clock shadow in the Calvin Klein ads—except that the friendly intruder appeared to be in a very good mood. For some reason, she wasn't embarrassed to be discovered singing a provocative blues number at the top of her lungs. She returned her gaze to the harp's strings and her full attention to the tune's mesmerizing cadences and slow, languid rhythms.

Like Lot's wife, she couldn't resist another surreptitious peek at the visitor. However, at that instant, her vision unaccountably began to gray around the edges. The handsome photographer in khaki slacks and vest leaning against the entrance to the parlor at Monmouth Plantation had subtly been transformed into a young man from some other century who appeared to have recently dismounted a horse. Now, he was wearing a dark green, swallow-tailed riding jacket with a fountain of lace-edged linen at his throat. His knee-high riding boots and the thighs of his buff-colored breeches were caked with Mississippi mud. His dark hair glistened with sweat and he clutched a riding crop, which he beat repeatedly against the palm of his other hand, as if he were trying to make some sort of momentous decision.

What in the world?

Daphne was thoroughly rattled by the photographer's inexplicable metamorphosis and wondered suddenly if Rafe's dismissal and seeing Jack Ebert again, so unexpectedly, had sent her way, way over the edge.