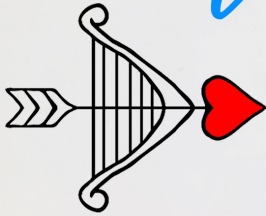


Ellen the



HARPIST

A Novel

Diane Michaels

one
here she comes

IT WAS ME AND MY HARP versus a pair of doors. Framed by a pale grey stone archway, the twin glass and metal barriers stood like bouncers at the entrance of the church. Long silver handles invited us to try to enter. I let go of my harp cart and grasped a handle. Only by throwing my full weight into the effort could I pull one door all the way open. Tentatively, I released my fingers from the handle, hoping the door would remain where I left it. I hopped out of the way as it slammed shut.

I peered through the doors and beyond the mosaic of stained glass-filtered light on the floor. I saw no one inside who could rescue me. And there was nothing around to use as a doorstep. My black shoulder bag lacked the heft to do the job. It held only my dress shoes, a folding music stand, the harp part to Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote* plus some lightweight bits of harp paraphernalia. I wished today's gig had been a wedding. Weighted down with overstuffed books of music, my bag would have been able to foil the door's evil plot to deny me access to the church. Out of options, I volunteered my right foot to be my doorperson.

Twisting myself into the Inverted Harp Mover pose, I grabbed my harp cart and wheeled the harp backwards through the open door.

The door had other plans. My foot could not prevent it from closing, and the door pushed against my harp as I shimmied through the ever-narrowing space. You would think I would be worried about harming my instrument, which is worth more than my minivan. Instead, I envisioned a scenario in which my harp vanquished our mortal enemy, reducing it to a pile of shattered glass. I'm sure my heroic slaying of the door would limit my chance of being hired for future gigs at Our Lady of the Perpetually Closing Door in Livingston, NJ.

I hoped my battle hadn't attracted an audience. Too many times, as I struggled to move my six-foot tall, eighty-one pound harp by myself, a comedian would offer not assistance but a joke. "Don't you wish you played the flute?" they always ask.

No one responded to my klutzy entrance with a punch line, but I wasn't alone. On the right side of the sanctuary two people engaged in a skirmish of their own. The man held a violin case and the woman held her jaw clenched.

As I plunked down the harp in a harp-sized space amongst the neat rows of folding chairs in front of the altar, I drew the attention of the tenser half of the bickering couple. Like me, she wore a black dress — concert attire. Unlike me, she had the good sense to play the flute. I assumed she was Monica, the person who hired me for this gig. I straightened my back like a soldier awaiting inspection by her superior.

Her expression pegged her as the controlling sort. I imagined all of the ways she might find fault with me before we even said a word to each other. Sacred

settings have a way of making me feel profane. I half expect I'm going to knock over a statue or start spewing obscenities. I'm sure one or two words not typically found in the mass liturgy flew out of my mouth while I wrestled with the door. Maybe she overheard me. Or maybe she felt slighted when I didn't ask for her help in finding a spot for my harp. Her copper-colored hair flowed halfway down her back in precisely choreographed waves; its dullness hinted at an addiction to hairspray. I readied myself for a spray of commands and criticisms.

Our short conversation was friendly and free of censure. With her green eyes darting around the church, Monica assessed her corps of musicians. Arrival of harpist — check. With more items to complete on her mental to-do list, she left me to my job of getting ready for the rehearsal.

The rest of the musicians arrived. They began tuning and playing bits of the repertoire from our program. Individual lines of beautiful music blended into a familiar cacophony. Whether I'm on stage or in the audience, this sound always feeds my anticipation for the performance to begin.

The man who argued with Monica claimed the seat to my left. For a moment, I forgot people were warming up around me. I thought the music I heard when I gazed at this violinist must follow him around like the soundtrack to a movie. I could play my part to *Don Quixote* in the curls on top of his head and not miss a note. And those stylishly geeky glasses set off his sparkling brown eyes like a proscenium framing a pair of captivating actors. He leaned toward me, hand extended.

“I'm Josh — looks like we're practically stand partners.”

Most orchestras have tons of string players but only one harpist. Row after row of first violinists, second violinists, violists and cellists fill the front half of the stage. They sit two to a music stand, sharing the music. If a section has an odd number of musicians, the last person sits alone, like a harpist. Like Josh would be doing today.

Quickly shoving a rogue clump of bangs out of my eyes, I shook his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Ellen the harpist. Oh, I guess you didn’t need my help to figure out I’m not here to play the tambourine.” Touching my harp as if it were a talisman, I felt a surge of confidence grow within me, and I continued, “If you want, I can turn pages for you, but there may be one or two notes in my part where I could use your help. Perhaps you can reach over and play a string for me if I don’t get to it in time.” A giggle worthy of a young woman eager to flirt burst from my mouth. I didn’t recognize the young woman in question.

He laughed with me and introduced his violin bow to my low C string. It whispered and scraped, emitting the barest hint of a note as it bounced against the thick metal string. “Hmm, not enough rosin on my bow yet. Besides, playing the lowest string on a harp isn’t in my contract. I didn’t think sitting last chair in the second violin section was, either. Sorry. I got a bit whiny there for a moment. I’ll shut up now.”

I am no expert in such matters, but when I heard him laugh, I had the impression he was a young man eager to flirt. “Whine all you want. It’s my specialty.” It had been years since I practiced the art of seductive banter. Upon hearing myself prattle on about whining, I knew I needed more time in the practice room.

“Mine too. I minored in it in college. So, the deal is, even though the violin is my day job, I also play the

viola. I wanted to be the principal violist today to get a crack at playing the solos in the Strauss, just to say I've played them." He stopped talking for a moment. Resting his chin in his hand, he looked at the ceiling. His brow danced as he contemplated the light fixtures above us. With a wordless syllable to himself expressing newfound clarity, he turned toward me. "I know a joke that kind of explains my situation. Do you want to hear a viola joke?"

He's hot and he tells viola jokes, too? I wondered if he was single. My friends and I love telling jokes about all sorts of musicians. Violists happen to be a favorite target. Which reminds me of another viola joke: *What's the definition of perfect pitch? When you toss a viola in the garbage and it hits the accordion.* I know nearly as many jokes about trombonists as I do about violists. I once even heard a bassoon described as a farting bedpost.

Registering my interest in hearing his joke, Josh asked, "How come violists are always the butt of the joke? Yeah, I heard what I just said — don't go there. OK, so there's this violist, he sits in the middle of the viola section of a local orchestra. During the dinner break before a concert, he takes a stroll on the beach."

"Nice gig — dinner break on the beach. Where is this, the Caribbean?"

"No, Asbury Park."

"I wish our gig were in the Caribbean. I'll pass on Asbury Park, though."

"What — no longings for the Shore? You must not be a Jersey girl."

"Born and raised."

"Me, too. But meanwhile, back on the beach in Asbury Park, our violist stumbles upon what appears to be blue beach glass partially buried in the sand."

“Ooh — blue glass is so pretty. But rare. Sorry — I interrupted again.”

“I don’t mind.” He smiled at me and I heard the phantom music again. Oh, wait. Still at rehearsal.

“Anyway, he digs it out of the sand and uncovers an ornate bottle. As he’s brushing off the sand to inspect it more closely, a billow of purple smoke escapes out of the top. And within the cloud of smoke a genie appears.”

Images of the tale of Aladdin inspired me to pluck a few strings on my harp. I punctuated a chord from Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* with a self-satisfied smile. Josh nodded as he picked up both my musical reference and his violin. His sinewy response wafted between us like purple smoke. I fell under his spell.

He paused as if he, too, had been mesmerized by our musical interlude. Shaking off the sensation, he continued his story. “So, the genie pops out, thanks the violist for releasing him from captivity, and grants him three wishes. Our hero decides to cash in one wish now and save the other two for later. ‘I wish I could be principal violist of my orchestra,’ he says to the genie. This would be a good place for some wish-granting music,” Josh suggested to me.

Sweeping my fingers up and down all of the strings of the harp, I played a wave of glissandos. The effect was like the music you hear on a game show as the curtains part to reveal the prize.

“Nice. So anyway, our friend the violist enjoyed his new gig for a few years. But one day he felt his life was incomplete. He brought out the bottle and summoned the genie.”

“Summoned the genie? That sounds like a line from a movie. What am I thinking of?”

“It could be from a kiddie movie. Or maybe a porno. Great. Now you’ve gone and besmirched my tale.”

“Sorry!” I played the second chord of the violin and harp duet from *Scheherazade*. He didn’t answer with the violin line.

“You’re forgiven. This time. The violist makes his second wish. ‘I’d like to be principal violist of the New York Philharmonic,’ he tells the genie.”

Josh pointed to me. I played another wispy gliss.

“And there he was, livin’ the dream. Years passed.”

I beat Josh to the cue and played a third chord.

“You jumped the gun there. Good thing this is only a rehearsal. So yes, he — I’m not going to say, ‘summoned the genie’ again — rubbed the bottle.” He squinted his left eye as he examined his words and let out a snort before continuing. “Fast forward. Mr. Violist makes his third and final wish, asking to become an even better musician.”

Whoosh! I played a showy glissando, bringing musical resolution to the tale.

“Beautiful — you’re hired! And then the violist found himself in a place more musically fulfilling than sitting principal viola of the New York Phil. He was occupying the last chair in the second violin section of the same regional orchestra from the beginning of this story.”

“Ba doom pah! So, what’s your story? Did you get screwed over by a genie, too?”

“Nah. Monica and I broke up a couple of weeks ago. Last night, without an explanation, she took away the viola solo and put me on violin for this concert. I argued with her about it when I got here. She responded by sticking me at the back of the second violins to prove her point.”

“Bummer on the breakup.” Not really. It means he’s single, right? “And on not getting to play the viola solos in the Strauss. Would you like to play my solo as a consolation prize?”

“I’ll stick with my part, thanks. I’m glad we broke up, I think. And besides, sitting at the back of the seconds no longer feels like a punishment.” Josh wore a smile on his face that made my heart do a joyful pirouette. And then my stomach tried to join the dance, but it lacks both grace and a sense of rhythm. While my nerves stumbled and tripped up our flirtatious ballet, I remained mute.

After an awkward pause, I blurted out, “Maybe we could take the harp and viola routine on the road.”

“Because we know the world will be beating down the doors of every theater hoping to hear another viola joke.”

I may not have spelled it out with precision, but I thought I dropped a clear enough hint about going out some time. Maybe he wasn’t flirting with me after all. In that case, I hoped he didn’t think I was too into him. “Perhaps the market for musician humor is underdeveloped. Not to be rude, but I have to warm up before rehearsal. We’ll work on a marketing plan for our viola act later.”

“I’ll let you get back to it, then. Poke me if I start playing the violin solo from *Scheherazade* instead of my part to *Don Quixote*. Thanks to you, the wrong piece is stuck in my ear.” His smile eased my doubts I had misread his intentions.

He wasn’t the only one distracted from the task at hand. I reminded myself I was there to make music, not googly eyes at some violinist, especially one just out of a relationship. But it had been a while since I last got my flirt on. I had to confess, I had missed it a bit.