

GILT TRIP by Laura Childs

Sneak Peek of Chapter 1

It was your typical New Orleans Garden District party. Wealthy, careless men sloshing down too much bourbon, tucked and lifted socialites flaunting their latest fashions, and twenty-something women looking sleek as alley cats as they prowled for rich husbands. And every dang one of them on their best baddest behavior as they shrieked, shimmied, danced, and drank while the Bayou Breezers cranked out a string of raucous zydeco tunes.

“And then there’s us,” said Carmela Bertrand. She gave a rueful smile as butlers in white tie and tails glided through the crowd serving tiny canapés of duck liver, baked oysters, and Beluga caviar.

“Nothing wrong with sniffing the rarified air and seeing how the other half lives,” said her friend Ava Gruix.

“I’d say it’s all very posh and predictable,” said Carmela. Her tone was flat but her blue eyes danced with mirth as she ruffled a hand through short, choppy blond hair that was, as Ava so delightfully phrased it, chunked and skunked. Blessed with a radiant complexion and relatively calm demeanor (by New Orleans standards, that is) Carmela also possessed a nimble mind and burning curiosity. Which, on more than one occasion, had sent her rushing in where proverbial angels feared to tread.

“Watch this,” said Ava, grabbing a champagne glass and tipping it toward an enormous ice sculpture. “Tell me this isn’t cool.”

A slosh of excellent French champagne gushed down a steep tunnel of ice, foamed slightly as it navigated a quick series of S-turns, and emptied into Ava’s crystal flute with a satisfying fizz.

“Isn’t that too much!” exclaimed Ava.

“Service with a flourish,” said the smiling bartender.

Carmela decided maybe she needed a hit of bubbly, too. “What do you call this ice carving thing?”

“A champagne luge,” said the waiter. “Guaranteed to deliver a super-chilled serving of champagne.”

Ava, who was Carmela’s BFF, shopping cohort, and French Quarter neighbor, gave Carmela a nudge. “C’mon, you do it.” She smiled coyly at the bartender. “Ready, baby?”

Nodding, the bartender hefted a magnum of champagne, poured a judicious serving into the delicately carved ice slot at the top of the sculpture, then stood back and smiled.

“Isn’t that the coolest dang thing you’ve ever laid eyes on?” said Ava as she watched the froth of champagne wend its circuitous route to Carmela’s glass. The ice luge, carved from a solid block of ice, was almost five feet high and featured, besides the zig-zagging slide, a carved Chinese dragon inset with gold coins.

“Only the best for Margo,” said Carmela.

“And Jerry Earl,” said Ava. She pushed a mass of dark curly hair off her check, angled out one curvaceous hip, and struck a red carpet-worthy pose. “This is some super welcome home party for him.”

Margo’s husband, Jerry Earl Leland, had just been released from the Dixon Correctional Institute and Margo was throwing what she called a Get Out Of Jail Free Party.

“Jerry Earl’s a lucky man,” said Carmela. And she meant that in more ways than one. He’d been Margo’s ex-husband, then the two had remarried in a red hot flurry right before Jerry Earl had been carted off to the slammer. And now he’d been released from prison early.

“Champagne, caviar, and a spattering of eligible men,” said Ava, glancing about with predatory eyes. “How’d we manage to get invited to this fancy soiree?”

“We’re here mostly out of politeness,” said Carmela. “I got roped into designing the invitations and Margo went bonkers when she saw what I came up with. Told me I just had to attend. A command performance was how she phrased it.” Carmela’s scrapbooking shop, Memory Mine, carried all the latest papers and albums and was the go to spot for having cards, announcements, and invitations designed. Besides being the French Quarter’s resident scrapbook maven, Carmela was also a skilled graphic artist.

“I gotta say,” said Ava, helping herself to a toast point loaded with glistening caviar. “The lady has style. As well as a pot full of money. I mean, did you get a gander at that gilded fireplace? And all that fancy artwork? And the silk upholstery on her cabriolet sofa? The word opulent does come to mind.”

Carmela nodded in agreement. Margo’s house was a bold statement in conspicuous consumption. But, truth be told, she wasn’t all that impressed. It hadn’t been too many years since she’d resided in this part of town herself. In a white elephant of a house that was currently on the market for two point three million. Of course, her tenure in the Garden District stretched back to the bad old days when she’d been married to Shamus Allan Meechum, heretofore known as The Rat. Shamus, who possessed silky charm, a dazzling smile, and a wandering eye, hailed from the same rich-as-Croesus, crazy-ass family as the Crescent City Bank Meechums. Thus, he’d always felt above it all and not bound by ordinary convention.

Carmela nudged Ava. “There’s Margo now.”

Margo Leland looked like she'd been hung by her heels and dipped in gold. Her dress was an explosion of gold sequins, her fingernails shimmered, her cantilevered beehive hairdo was spackled with threads of pink and gold, and the chains that clanked around her neck and chubby wrists were real deal twenty-four karat gold. Though pushing sixty, she still dressed like she was trotting off to Studio 54.

"Holy Coupe deVille," Ava whispered. "Margo's a walking Fort Knox."

Margo immediately noticed them noticing. A wide grin split her flushed face, her eyes lit up, and she immediately tottered over on sky-high gold silk heels to greet them.

"Carmela!" Margo cried exuberantly, throwing her arms wide and losing half of her drink in the process. "You came! *Vous etes arrive*!"

"How could we not?" said Carmela. She tried to ratchet up her enthusiasm, feeling a little fake and knowing in her heart that she'd rather be cozied up in her garden apartment, wearing jammies and reading a good mystery. Spending time with her two dogs Boo and Poobah. She sighed. "And you remember Ava."

"Eva!" Margo shrieked. "You gorgeous thing, you!" Then she turned to Carmela and slurred, "Oh, to be thirty again."

"Twenty-nine," said Ava, somewhat crisply.

"And so pretty and model thin," Margo enthused.

"And look at you," Ava drawled back, ever the good sport. "All drippy in gems and jewelry."

Margo wiggled her ample hips, giddy that they'd noticed. Then she fingered a chunky necklace that encircled her neck. "Vintage," she chirped. "Twenty-five carats of Sri Lankan amethyst set in pure gold. Designed and signed by Louis Comfort Tiffany himself."

Carmela, whose jewelry consisted of a gold bangle and small diamond stud earrings, smiled politely. She didn't much care that Margo had decked herself out in the crown jewels. But she was starting to sincerely regret that she and Ava had dropped by this lavish party. It was all a trifle too ostentatious, the gaiety a little too . . . forced.

But the second act was yet to come.

Margo snatched a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'm going to offer a congratulatory toast to Jerry Earl."

"I guess it isn't every day your hubby gets sprung from the joint," said Ava.

Carmela had to stifle a giggle. Ava didn't have much of a filter.

But Margo wasn't one bit bothered. "Thank *heavens* we were able to apply some judicious pressure to the judicial system," she said, giving an elaborate wink-wink. "And it certainly helps to know the right people."

"I'll bet," said Carmela. While her roots were English, Cajun, and a smattering of French, Margo Leland could trace her ancestry all the way back to the Vicomte Francois Pierre-Marie. That distant nobleman had fled France for New Orleans in eighteen-fifteen following the exile of Napoleon, and had spawned an entire lineage of prominent New Orleanians. Which Margo never let anyone forget.

Margo took a quick slug of champagne and said, "Time to kick this party into high gear!" She grabbed Carmela's wrist and pulled her over to the band. Standing on tiptoe, she waved airily to the group's front man, a bearded and mulleted redhead. The musicians immediately ceased playing and a microphone was passed to Margo.

There was a momentary high-pitched squeal as Margo shouted out, “Everyone! Everyone! I want to thank you *so* much for coming tonight to celebrate what is truly the most splendid day of my life. And now, I’d like you all to join me in a toast. A toast to the man who puffs me with pride, the husband who still curls my toes!” She hoisted her champagne glass high in the air and paused dramatically. “To Jerry Earl!”

Jerry Earl Leland, who Carmela thought had the rather unfortunate countenance of a Galapagos turtle, was ensconced in a Louis XVI chair and deep in conversation with local businessman Buddy Pelletier. He barely looked up during Margo’s heartfelt tribute. And when he finally did, aimed a perfunctory, knowing nod in the direction of the revelers. Then Jerry Earl turned back to resume his conversation.

Fueled by too much champagne, bourbon, and rich food, the tony crowd didn’t seem to mind his dismissiveness. “To Jerry Earl!” they roared. Glasses clinked and laughter echoed as one hundred of New Orleans’s most prominent socialites poured even more liquor down their gullets.

“You’d think Jerry Earl would be a bit more humbled,” observed Ava. “On account of his being incarcerated and all.”

“Doubtful,” said Carmela. She didn’t believe that Jerry Earl was one bit concerned, embarrassed, or mollified. She had no doubt that he’d be back doing whatever he’d been sent to prison for in less than forty-eight hours.

As if reading her mind, Ava asked, “What was he in prison for?”

“That would be your white collar crime,” said Carmela.

Ava cocked her head. “Which means . . .?”

“Basically something fraudulent,” said Carmela. She wasn’t sure if Jerry Earl has engineered a phony land deal or cooked the books on a mythical corporation. And she didn’t really want to know since it was a moot point.

Jerry Earl was a free man now and back in business, even though his dealings were probably nefarious.

“And Jerry Earl only did eighteen months?” Surprise colored Ava’s voice.

“On a five year sentence,” said Carmela.

“Wow. I guess he got serious time off for good behavior.”

“Most likely it was time off because someone was paid off.”

“Ohhhh,” said Ava, her eyes going wide. “Now I understand. We’re talking good old-fashioned Louisiana law, politics, and cronyism.”

“Which are all pretty much one and the same,” said Carmela. She paused for a few moments and decided the air had gone out of the evening for her. “You know what? It’s probably time to go.”

“Go?” said Ava. “I thought we were just getting warmed up.” She swiped a hand across her tummy. “Besides, I’m starving. And I happen to know there’s an enormous dessert buffet set up in the solarium. Wouldn’t you like a hit of sugar to get your heart a-pumping? Maybe a slice of bread pudding soaked in brandy and dripping with ooey gooey caramel sauce?”

“Ten more minutes,” said Carmela. “Then we call it a night, okay?”

“Got it,” said Ava. “Besides, there are some good looking guys here that I’d like to say how-do to. Beats scouting for a date on craigslist.”

“Ten minutes,” said Carmela, as they pushed through the crowd.

Like everything else in Margo’s home, the dessert bar was over the top. Silver chafing dishes overflowed with bananas Foster, bread pudding, and cherries jubilee. There were plates of killer brownies, carrot cake, and pecan pie. Pastel-colored French macarons were stacked like poker chips.

Carmela and Ava piled up their plates, hooked up with a couple of people they knew, then strolled out to the back patio and sat down. It was a balmy

April evening with a light wind that made the humidity more than tolerable. Intoxicating jasmine blossoms and bougainvillea perfumed the air and a giant green-winged luna moth fluttered leisurely through the dusk.

Just as Ava held a spoonful of cherries jubilee to her mouth, it dribbled down onto her silk blouse. “Oh no!” she cried, making a motion to jump up.

Carmela held out a hand. “No, stay put. If you stand up it’ll only blob down and make things worse. I’ll run get a towel or something.” She hurried back inside and tiptoed down a back hallway, figuring it would lead to a butler’s pantry or the kitchen. When she saw a waiter bustling toward her, she made a small helpless gesture and said, “We’ve had a spill. Is there soda water? A towel?” But the waiter merely hooked a finger over his shoulder and continued on his way.

“Huh,” said Carmela, slightly miffed. “I guess I’ll have to find it myself.”

But the first door she opened led to an office. Carmela poked her head in and glanced around. A cypress paneled wall held dozens of oil paintings and awards in ornate frames. Another wall was covered in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and crammed with shimmering geodes, fossils, gold coins set in black velvet, what looked like an Egyptian gold necklace, and glass tubes filled with gold nuggets. An enormous desk sat smack dab in the center of a black and persimmon-colored silk Aubusson carpet.

Jerry Earl’s office, Carmela decided. She’d stumbled upon it from the back entrance, the servant’s entrance.

Curiosity suddenly amped, Carmela took a step in and decided it was quite an amazing place. What had to be a mastodon tusk was mounted on a base of white marble. A large gold mask on a black metal stand, a gold skull of some primitive cat-like creature, and sparkling gold coins were displayed

on Jerry Earl's desk, making it look all the world like the office of some museum curator.

Amazing, Carmela thought to herself. An incredible collection of fossils and gold antiquities. Just as she was about to turn and leave, a slight breeze fluttered the curtains.

Carmela hesitated. *Someone there?*

A noise sounded just beyond the green velvet curtains. A kind of scrape, like boot heels on cement. Then a dull clunk, like something metallic.

Was someone outside? Peeking in at her? Or doing . . . what? Had someone been attracted by all this loot?

"Hello?" she called out. "Jerry Earl? Is that you?"

There was nothing save a warm breeze stirring the curtains.

Realizing she shouldn't be in here, feeling guilty and a little discombobulated, Carmela ducked back out and pulled the door closed behind her. She paused for a moment, then took another few steps down the hallway. Placing her hand on a second doorknob, she was about to pull it open when she heard a muffled thump on the other side of the door.

Oh no, what now?

A woman's voice, low and urgent, murmured, "Just one more, please? Just one eensy little line?"

A man's voice, husky and slightly taunting, said, "You sure about that, baby?"

Oh great. Carmela moved away quickly. She had a pretty good idea what the woman was asking for. She also had a fairly good idea what her boyfriend Edgar Babcock would say about that. And just to be clear, he was *Detective* Edgar Babcock of the New Orleans Police Department. Her own personal Dudley Do-Right snuggle bunny.

“He’d tell me to hustle my sweet patootie out of here,” Carmela muttered to herself. “Before I got involved in some kind of drug incident.”

And just as she was about to do exactly that, she heard another thump. Only this was the tell-tale thump thump thump of a clothes dryer tossing its contents to and fro.

Breathing a sigh of relief, for her errand had somehow turned into a mission, Carmela hurried to the end of the hallway and pushed open a louvered door.

A sizzle of bright fluorescents revealed a tidy, compact laundry room. It was warm, steamy, and noisy, as laundry rooms generally are when there’s a load in the washer and one in the dryer.

Probably a bunch of bar towels, Carmela surmised. Or the caterer had thrown in a load of dish towels. But that wasn’t quite right, was it? Because the top-loading washing machine was standing open and silent. Casting a quick glance at the loudly thumping dryer, Carmela casually wondered what they’d tossed in that was making such an awful racket.

Her eyes had almost pulled away, ready to grab a clean white towel, when she saw what looked like a leather shoe momentarily flash past the dryer’s window.

What. On. Earth? Who would toss shoes in a dryer?

Feeling slightly apprehensive, Carmela took two robotic steps forward. And then, like a warning shot fired across the bow of a ship, something deep in the limbic portion of her brain spit out a cautionary note.

Something’s wrong here. Something’s really wrong.

Don’t be silly, she told herself. There’s nothing to be nervous about.

Except . . . there was that shoe.

Carmela's nose tickled. Her temples throbbed. She was suddenly aware that the air around her was redolent with a strange scent. A sweet, sickening, unnerving scent that was definitely not Downy or Fabreeze.

Mesmerized, moving as if she were in a trance, Carmela stepped forward, curled her fingers around the handle of the dryer, and yanked open the door.

As the dryer groaned to a sudden halt, Carmela jumped back just in time to see a limp hand flop out. And then watched in horror as the bloody, battered body of Jerry Earl Leland spilled out onto the white tiled floor.