

# Chapter One

October 10, 2014

Death is colorful in the fall. The trees in Central Park bristle with red and gold leaves, like a beautiful dawn before the dark of winter. On this crisp, sunny October day in New York, I'm all dressed up for a lunch to which I'm definitely not invited. I want to look my very best. I'm wearing a tailored St. Laurent black wool suit, one I bought in Paris years ago when Yves was still designing. Affixed to my right lapel is a fake gold and sapphire pin in the shape of a flower, a decent copy of the real one from Verdura I had to hock years ago because I was broke. I have on a pair of secondhand black patent leather Louboutin shoes with scuffed red soles I recently bought at a thrift shop just for this occasion. I think labels matter much too much in New York. But, alas, they *do* matter, and I'm on my way to a place where they matter most.

I whisk a comb through my bobbed graying hair and apply a little lip gloss to my lightly made-up face. It's not an unattractive face, just an older one, silted with apprehension. I'm satisfied I look like what I'm supposed to be: a middle-aged lady of means with a conservative sense of style. I re-check the contents in my faux Birkin bag to make sure I have everything I need. It's all there: wallet, glasses, compact, lipstick, comb, cell phone, gun.

My name is Maud Warner. I grew up in New York. Many of the girls I went to private school with lived in the grand houses and apartment buildings of the Upper East Side. My parents' duplex apartment at 1040 Fifth was stocked with fine antiques and paintings. I never thought about how rich we were. No one in my young world thought about such things. Money and possessions were simply the view we'd all grown up with, like farmland to a bunch of country girls. We wore uniforms in my all-girls school so there wasn't the egregious sartorial competition there is today. The only thing I knew for sure was that the girl sitting next to me in class was probably just as miserable as I was.

I pass several haunts of my youth: The Knickerbocker Club, where I attended my very first dance when I was twelve years old and sat like a wallflower until the bitter end, despite having learned how to do a mean foxtrot in dancing school... A La Vielle Russie, the elegant jewelry shop on the corner of 59th, where my stepfather bought me a Faberge pin for my twenty-first birthday which had belonged to one of the last Tsar's kids—so much for a good luck charm... F.A.O. Schwartz, where my beloved Nana took me to sit on Santa's knee every Christmas... The now-defunct Plaza Hotel, where Mummy and I had tea in the Palm Court once a month, and where I lost my virginity to a Harvard boy in a white and gold suite on the tenth floor after he plied me with mai tais from Trader Vic's... And lovely Bergdorf's, where I bought my coming out dress and the wedding dress I burned when I got divorced, plus so many of the clothes that enhanced the great and small occasions of my seemingly privileged life... Tiffany's, where I ordered my pale blue monogrammed stationery... And Trump Tower, which used to be Bonwit Teller, the old department store, where I had my first summer job in the gift department, and learned that the road to hell was actually paved with beaded flowers and gilded frames.

I pass Saint Patrick's Cathedral, where I always went to light candles for the dead. I walk in and light a candle for my beloved

brother, Alan, recently deceased. He was the last of my family and one of the main reasons for this outing.

I cross over to Madison Avenue, then Park, where I pause to look up at the elegant Seagram's Building, my final destination. My stepfather knew the architect, Mies van der Rohe. My parents had many famous friends. Their glamorous parties were so packed with celebrities, I used to refer to myself as "the only person there I didn't know."

I turn down 52nd Street toward Lexington and stop at the entrance to The Four Seasons restaurant, that bastion of social climbing in Manhattan. I take a bracing breath and walk purposefully inside. As I climb the marble staircase, I hear the hum of conversation, which is the music of power in this power restaurant in this power city. I gird my loins, as the Bible says, and take the last few stairs up into the airy restaurant where the best tables are reserved for the best bank accounts.

I'm greeted by the famous *maître d'*, who knows who is who and who is *not*. This guy can size up a customer before he or she has reached the top step. That's why I've taken care to dress well. He doesn't recognize me, thank God.

"Good afternoon. Do you have a reservation?" he says, his polite smile conveying a *souçon* of suspicion.

"I'm meeting Mr. Burt Sklar," I say. "I believe he's dining with Mr. Sunderland."

"Ah. Mr. Sunderland, of course!"

It is Sun Sunderland's name, not Sklar's, which sparks deference in the *maître d'*. He inclines his head in the direction of "the Sunderland table," as it's known. It's the best table in the house—a banquette against the wall. Anyone sitting at it can see and be seen from a decorous distance. Four times a week, at lunch, it's occupied by Mr. Sunderland and at least one of an array of prominent guests who comprise the media, financial, political, and artistic elite of New York, the country, and the world. But on Fridays, Sunderland always dines with his best

friend and business partner, Burt Sklar. It is their ritual. I know this because it is well known and often commented on.

The maître d' leads me through the restaurant. I recognize a few famous faces which stand out in the crowd like the fresh pepper grinds on the chef's famous white truffle risotto. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a table of three lunching ladies I used to know quite well. Once upon a time, I would have detoured to air kiss them all. Not today. Today it's eyes straight ahead, one foot in front of the other in a grim gangplank demeanor. Nothing can distract me from this plunge into the depths.

As we approach the table, I see that Sunderland and Sklar are deep in conversation. Sunderland is a stocky man who looks ponderously prosperous in his dark suit, gray Charvet tie, and starched white shirt with knotted gold cuff links. He has a full head of silvering hair and tired brown eyes. He's a solid man who exudes Mount Rushmore gravitas.

Burt Sklar, by contrast, is gym-fit and spray-tanned. Strands of his black hair are carefully combed over a shiny pate. He's dressed all in black—black suit, black shirt, black tie. Contrary to Sunderland's rocklike presence, Sklar is all motion, using his hands to hammer in a verbal point. He reminds me of a bat. I overhear him repeating his mantra, the words he prefaces every sentence with in order to reassure people of his veracity: "*Candidly...? Honestly...? Truthfully...?*"

I'm careful to stay behind the maître d' so the two men won't see me coming. My heart's beating fast. I glance down at my bag to make sure all is in order. It's open in a fashionably casual way, like a pricey tote. The gun is nestled in the side pocket where it will be easy to grab.

I've rehearsed this moment in my mind and in front of my warped closet mirror too many times to count. I know exactly what I want to do. Whether or not I'll be able to do it right there on the spot is the question. Let's face it, no one ever really knows how they will perform until the curtain goes up for the live show.

I hear the maître d' say, "Mr. Sklar, your guest is here."

Sklar looks up, clearly irritated at having been interrupted mid-spiel.

"What?" he asks, puzzled.

"Your guest is here," the maître d' repeats.

Sunderland turns to Sklar. "You invited someone?"

"Hell, no," Sklar says.

Sklar furrows his brow and leans to one side, trying to get a look at me, the uninvited guest. He can't see my face because I'm using the maître d' as a shield until I'm ready. I draw the gun from my purse. Sunderland sees me before Sklar does. His eyes widen as he gasps: "*Lois! No! We killed you!*"

I'm so startled by Sunderland's outburst, I lose my concentration as I pull the trigger. The noise is deafening. Chaos erupts in the room. People are screaming, scrambling, diving for cover. I drop the gun, turn around, and start walking. If I'm caught, so be it. If not, I've come prepared. Amazingly enough, no one stops me. Out on the street, I hail a cab and head for Penn Station, where I board an Acela train back to Washington, D.C.

So it begins...

## Chapter Two

This crime is so shocking that even the most jaded reporters are impressed by its brazenness, and even more impressed by the unlikely shooter—a fifty-six-year-old socialite named Maud Warner, who somehow escaped and is now on the run. Sun Sunderland, billionaire financier and philanthropist, was shot while lunching at The Four Seasons restaurant.

Fifty-second Street between Park and Lexington avenues is cordoned off. A gaggle of media is camped outside the restaurant hoping to snag beleaguered patrons as they exit the building, one by weary one, after being questioned by the police. People are phoning, texting, Facebooking, tweeting, instagramming, belching, screaming, practically vomiting the news.

Inside the restaurant, the *maître d'* has been sedated, sick with the knowledge that this terrible thing has happened on his watch. The Four Seasons will no longer be known as New York's premiere power eatery. It will now be known to the rubbernecking masses as "the place where that billionaire got shot." Tourists will book a reservation there, not for the restaurant's gourmet food, elegant Bauhaus setting, or to mingle with its elite clientele, but to view the scene of high-class carnage.

The *maître d'* feels responsible because he now realizes exactly who Maud Warner is. How could he have been so stupid not to recognize her right away—he, who never forgets a face or a

name? Had he recognized her, he never would have brought her anywhere near Burt Sklar. He never would have let her into the hallowed Grill Room. He would have ushered her straight out the door, or perhaps to the Pool Room, where the lesser-known rub elbows with the unknown.

Maud Warner has famously been proclaiming her hatred for Burt Sklar for years, accusing the “accountant to the stars,” as he’s known, of looting her family fortune. She has been nicknamed “Mad Maud” for going around predicting doom for anyone associated with Sklar. People think she’s nuts to question the integrity of a man who has so many celebrated clients and—most of all—whose best friend and business partner is the honorable, estimable, and immensely powerful Sun Sunderland. Like everyone else who knows the history, the maître d’ is convinced that Sklar, not Sunderland, was the intended target, and that Maud Warner is just a lousy shot.

There’s an APB out for Warner, who is in the wind after a miraculous escape. Sunderland has been whisked away to New York Hospital in critical condition. Burt Sklar is being questioned by the cops before being taken to the hospital to be checked out.

Sklar talks even faster than his usual carnival patter because he is so damn relieved to be alive. He’s suffered a sprained wrist from diving under the table. No social tennis for awhile. He tells officers he knows exactly who the shooter is: She’s Maud Warner, this crazy woman who claims he’s responsible for her mother’s misfortunes, her brother’s recent death, and all her family’s woes.

“*Truthfully?* Maud Warner’s been the bane of my existence for years,” he says.

He tells cops he’s sure she was aiming only for him, not his “best friend” Sun Sunderland. But by some “mysterious quirk of fate,” Sunderland somehow got into her line of fire. The “mysterious quirk of fate” of which Sklar speaks was, in fact, his own arm pulling Sunderland across him to shield himself the instant he saw the gun. In Sklar’s mind, his action was nothing more

than a reflexive survival instinct, a natural response he could no more help than, say, fleeing a rabid dog. Unfortunately, pulling your best friend in front of you to take a bullet clearly meant for you, might possibly be construed as a cowardly act by those who were never actually in that dicey situation. Better not to mention it, he concludes.

Sklar is humble and super cooperative with the cops. He's a chameleon, able to gauge the colors of those he's dealing with and blend into their sensibilities. He tells detectives, "That bullet was meant for me. I know it was. *Truthfully*...? I'd give anything to change places with Sun. I love the man."

The cops don't comment. They listen. Sklar continues talking to them earnestly, making eye contact with each man, impressing upon them that he knows they have a job to do and can see they are both excellent officers of the law. Sklar is usually very adept at creating camaraderie with people by seeming to put himself in their shoes, however costly or cheap those shoes may be. But right now, his folksy approach doesn't seem to be working. The cops are looking at him like they suspect there's something he's not telling them. Time to crack a joke to get them in his corner.

"*Candidly*, guys? You know the world's gone completely nuts when you're safer in Syria than at The Four Seasons."

That gets a chuckle out of them. And don't they know it too. The world is nuts, all right, full of people who think they can get away with all kinds of shit.

And do.

## Chapter Three

As the train rumbles toward D.C., I can't believe I actually escaped from that restaurant. Forget *The Invisible Man*. Older women are invisible and we don't even have to disappear. No one gave me credit for being the shooter. That's why I was able to calmly walk out of there. It used to bug me that I was beyond the gaze of men, overlooked and underestimated. But right now, I'm quite happy no one on this train is paying the slightest bit of attention to me. If they're focused on anyone other than themselves, it's the millennial blonde in the front of the compartment.

As the train rolls on, I replay the scene in my mind. I was pretty cool and calm walking up to that table because I'd rehearsed it so much. But I did get rattled when Sunderland blurted out, "*Lois, no! We killed you!*" like he'd seen my mother's ghost. I must look a lot more like my mother than I thought. I wonder if she'd be pleased to know that. Doubtful. Mummy so loved being one of a kind.

I close my eyes and think, am I really that same prep school girl whose life was laid out before her like a magic carpet of privilege? Was I ever that innocent young debutante who curtisied to New York Society at the New York Infirmity Ball, then went on to marry the very suitable young man of my parents' dreams? It's hard to recognize myself now. God knows that naïve

young girl could never have imagined that in her middle age she'd be sitting on a train wondering if she'd killed a man—and worse—not really caring.

## Chapter Four

Greta Lauber is with her chef, going over the menu of tonight's dinner party in honor of her dear friend Sun Sunderland when the phone rings. She lets her assistant get it. She has no time to chat. She's much too busy with last-minute details. Greta plans dinner parties the way generals plan battles. Like a social Napoleon, she understands that guests march on their stomachs.

Greta is a famous hostess in New York, known as a grand acquirer of paintings, porcelain, and people. She has an eye for quality, in life and in art. No "Paperless Post" for her. Invitations to her "small dinners," as she calls them, are handwritten on ecru cards, and much sought-after because, along with the elegant apartment, gourmet food, vintage wines, and glittering table settings, there is always interesting company. Greta coined the phrase, "You are who you eat *with*." She has a knack for finding new people, young people, people of the moment, who add spice to the stew of old regulars. But the thing that has cemented her reputation as a hostess with the mostest are the dinners she gives for really powerful people—politicians, movie stars, media moguls, billionaires—like the one she is giving tonight in honor of Sun Sunderland, who has just donated one hundred million dollars to New York Hospital for a new cardiac research wing.

Greta has recently noticed that many of her wealthiest friends have become as obsessed with science as they once were with art.

The big collectors who used to bring gallerists and fashionable artists to her soirees now bring doctors and research scientists. She attributes this to the fear many of her aging friends have of being themselves collected by the Great Connoisseur in the sky.

Through her long career in the financial capital of the world, she has observed one thing: Money exaggerates who people are. If they are good, they will be better. If they are bad, they will jump right down on the devil's trampoline. If they are fearful of death, they will fund research into the disease they believe they are most likely to die of. Hence, The Sun Sunderland Cardiac Research Center at New York Hospital. She has no idea her august guest of honor is fighting for his life in the very hospital he has just endowed with a fortune. He is not dying of heart disease, as expected, but of a gunshot wound. What are the odds?

Ms. Ellis, Greta's crackerjack assistant, comes into the dining room wearing a long face.

"Mrs. Lauber, Mrs. Hartz is on the telephone. I told her you were busy, but she says it's extremely urgent. She sounds distraught."

"She always sounds distraught," Greta mutters heading for the library to take the call.

"Magma, sweetie, I really can't talk now. What's up?"

"You haven't heard." Magma the Magpie, as she is affectionately known, falls uncharacteristically silent. It is the calculated silence of someone who enjoys the glide before impact.

"*What?*" Greta says impatiently.

Wait for it...

"Sun's been *shot*."

"What do you mean *shot*?"

"I mean *shot*. With a *gun*. That Mad Maud Warner walked into The Four Seasons at lunch and shot Sun point-blank. And she got away! I was *there*! I saw the whole thing! The police questioned me!"

"*Dear God...!*" Greta says, plopping down on the couch.

As Magma Hartz is recounting the drama in detail, Greta grabs the remote and switches on the TV. The five o'clock news is just coming on. The screen blooms with the chaotic scene outside The Four Seasons earlier that day. The shooting is the lead story. A perky blond reporter is on camera giving a breathy account of the incident. Greta turns off the sound. She has no need of media commentary when she's hearing all about it from an eyewitness.

The crime is so bizarre on so many levels that Greta cannot quite comprehend it. First of all, what are the odds that one of your guests would have witnessed the shooting of your guest of honor—even if it is a small world, like people always say? Second of all, she can't believe that Maud Warner, a woman she's known for years, could possibly be capable of such a depraved and brazen act.

Greta feels terrible for Sun, now in intensive care, as well as for his wife, Jean, who is one of Greta's very best friends.

"I should probably cancel the dinner," Greta muses.

"Absolutely *not*," Magma cries. "People want to be together in time of tragedy. Trust me, discussing it will be helpful for everyone."

Greta understands better than anyone that what separates a good hostess from a great one is her record of providing memorable parties. This dinner will be memorable, all right, especially with Magma, an eyewitness, right there to be questioned. On that account alone, she feels she must go through with it.

Greta hangs up and rushes to the dining room. She surveys her round table which is set for sixteen, the most it can accommodate. She instructs Martyn, her butler, to remove two places, which is not as easy as it sounds. Greta's famous round table is known for its elaborate place settings. She likes to create a feast for the eye as well as the palate. Martyn removes two places, then rearranges the wineglasses, the water goblets, the champagne flutes, the crystal vodka shot glasses, the sterling silver placemats

and cutlery, the individual Georgian salt cellars, the candlesticks, and Greta's collection of little precious jewel flowerpots which sparkle against the dark mahogany. It's time-consuming, like striking a stage set.

Greta thinks about the new generation of baby billionaires who wouldn't be caught dead setting up a dinner like this, even if they had all the accoutrements. While most dinners today are happily casual, with food and dress to match, Greta clings to her formal entertainments like a passenger aboard a sinking yacht.

Greta doesn't really expect to hear from Jean Sunderland to say she's not coming. But she thinks someone from Sunderland's office should have had the grace to let her know. She reflects sadly that basic etiquette has gone the way of bustles and buggy whips, despite the fact that good manners are the only things people have entirely within their own control.

As she soaks in the tub, Greta wonders if she should wear the stunning new Michael Kors black crepe dress she bought just for this occasion. Black crepe is always fashionable—except when death is hovering so close.

"I don't want to look like a prediction," she thinks.

No, she'll wear the cheery green taffeta Oscar from last year. She hopes no one will remember she's worn it several times before—not that people care about such things anymore. The world has changed, she thinks. Definitely not for the better.

## Chapter Five

I check my iPhone. The news is all over the web. Sunderland's in the hospital in intensive care. He's had heart attack as a result of the shooting. They now know I'm the shooter. But so far they've only managed to dig up an old photo of me from my deb days. No chance of me being recognized now. I call Billy Jakes.

"*Maudie!* What the *hell!*! Are you *nuts?* You know the whole world's looking for you, right?"

"At last. They've ignored me for the past ten years."

"Where *are* you?"

"Never mind. Can you meet me at the Shoe?"

"*Jesus...*" He hesitates. "Okay. But I can't get there 'til late. The game."

"See you there."

I put on my sunglasses and get off in Baltimore. I ditch the phone after removing the sim card. I take a taxi to the Horseshoe Casino, which just opened in August. No one there knows me yet. I figure a casino is the perfect place to hide. There are no clocks. No windows. No one's checking the news. People don't care who you are. They just want your money. I can play poker until Billy shows up.

The minute I enter, I hear the cards singing to me like the Sirens over the jingle-jangle of the slot machines, beckoning me upstairs to the poker room.

“Love the cards and the cards will love you,” my grandmother used to say as she taught me poker games like five card stud, seven card high low, and draw.

And I *do* love the cards. The cards are my dangerous friends.

I take the escalator upstairs to the poker room and buy into a two-dollar/five-dollar No Limit Hold'em game. I'm at a table full of men, as usual. When I was young guys used to look at me and think, How do I get her into bed? Now they look at me and think, How do I get into her chips? I'm an older lady who's supposed to play Old Lady Poker. Little do they know.

This particular table is filled with mopes with beer breath and sour attitudes who seem to know each other. As I'm arranging my chip stack on the felt, I see one of them wink at his buddy and whisper, “*Cha-ching!*” like I'm a payday. So I'm thinking, you guys can't even imagine I could outplay you any more than you can imagine you're sitting here with the most wanted woman in the whole freakin' country.

I win the first pot I play.

*Cha-ching!*

## Chapter Six

Jean Sunderland paces the waiting room of New York Hospital. She has been in that sterile hell waiting for updates on her husband's condition ever since a distraught staffer burst into her board meeting at the Museum of Modern Art and blurted out the news he'd been shot. It's hard to believe. Things like this simply don't happen to people like them—not to the wealthy, socially prominent, well respected Sunderlands. If a man like Sun Sunderland ever did get shot, it should be the result of a terrible accident at a pheasant shoot on some grand estate, not at lunch at The Four Seasons.

Jean is a fashionably thin, crisply turned out woman in her mid-fifties. Her attractiveness comes from a combination of meticulous grooming and a lively intelligence. She exudes an aura of competence. She's a person who can be trusted to get things done, and done well. Having been successful in business, she's weathered many a crisis in her life, but nothing near the likes of this current situation.

Burt Sklar was already there when Jean arrived at the hospital. He stayed awhile to keep her company and bond with her in their mutual hour of grief. She finally Garboed him—"I want to be alone"—politely telling him to get lost. Jean has always been wary of Burt Sklar. She has never been able to figure out why her husband liked him so much. She doesn't trust him. In the early

days of their marriage, she asked her husband to drop Sklar. Sun defended his old friend, saying, “Jeanie, you just don’t get Burt. He’s stuck by me through thick and thin. I never forget loyalty.”

Sunderland and Sklar have been close friends for years—way back when they were each married to their first wives. Sunderland was married to Pam. Sklar was married to Sylvia. They had many happy times, dining and vacationing together, just the four of them. A tight-knit group. Halcyon days. That is, until Pam ditched Sunderland for her exercise teacher—a woman.

Sunderland was devastated by his wife’s betrayal. He didn’t know which was worse: the abandonment, or her choice of a female partner. Wherever Sunderland went, he imagined hearing the snickers of his enemies and friends alike. That a powerful man like Sunderland had been left by his wife for a *woman* was simply too delicious a morsel for the gossips not to chew on. You couldn’t cut the *schadenfreude* with a chainsaw.

It was Sklar who stepped in to help Sunderland navigate that terrible period in Sunderland’s life when his battered manhood was nailed up like a ragged pelt for all the world to sneer at. Grateful for his friend’s loyalty, Sunderland confided in Sklar over many a drunken dinner. He told Sklar about certain sexual appetites he had. He described kinky, stamina-requiring episodes which proved he was a strong and virile man, not some wimp whose wife left him for “Daisy Dyke,” as he referred to his wife’s paramour. Sklar, who knew things about Sunderland that no one else knew or could have imagined, didn’t judge; he listened. Sklar was a discreet, supportive, and sympathetic ear. You don’t forget a friend like that. You can’t. He knows too much.

Eventually, Sunderland met and married Jean Streeter, the creative director of Streeter/Greene, the enormously successful advertising agency she helped build. Jean was a force in New York’s ultra competitive world. She was considered a great catch. Their marriage helped erase Sunderland’s past humiliation. Over Jean’s objections, Sunderland picked Sklar to be his best man in their cozy wedding at Greta Lauber’s house.

Later on, Jean was one of the few people who actually paid attention to Maud when she accused Sklar of embezzlement, and worse. Jean warned her husband, "Where there's smoke, there's fraud." Sunderland defended his old friend, assuring his wife that Maud's accusations against Sklar were nothing more than the deranged rants of a bitter divorcee with money problems.

"You know why she hates Burt? Because Lois Warner trusted Burt more than she trusted her own daughter. Simple as that. All our friends love Burt. Hell, he represents half of them!" Sunderland crowed to Jean.

Still, something told Jean that her husband's continued association with Sklar would bring him trouble one day. And now this!

She leaves the waiting room to call Greta.

"Jeanie, darling! You're an absolute angel to call. How is Sun?"

"He's going to pull through, Greta. I'm sure of it," Jean replies, not because she knows anything from the doctors, but because positive thinking has always been her forte.

"Thank God! Do you want me to come to the hospital?"

"No, sweetie. I'm okay. Besides, you still have your dinner party, right?" Jean says, unsure.

"Yes. And all our thoughts and prayers will be with you, my dear, brave friend. We'll drink a toast to Sun's full recovery," Greta says, figuring it's best not to mention that their mutual friend Magma the Magpie will be there to spice up the evening with her eyewitness account of the crime.

Jean hangs up, touched by Greta's offer to come to the hospital. Still, she can't help wondering if there are places on earth where dinner parties are canceled when the guest of honor gets shot.

## Chapter Seven

Greta Lauber's guests arrive at her apartment in varying states of shock and dismay. Greta greets them all with her usual upbeat charm: "I just spoke to Jean at the hospital. She says Sun's going to pull through!"

Greta feels like an archangel bringing tidings of comfort, if not joy. People are clearly disturbed that one of their own has been shot by one of their own. Everyone needs a drink, and not just those decorous flutes of pink Cristal champagne which are a Lauber party staple. Tonight, everyone who isn't in recovery wants the hard stuff. Greta breaks out the coveted seventeen-year-old double wood Balvenie scotch which was the preferred drink of her late husband, Jake Lauber, the distinguished publisher.

As the guests mingle in the living room, all anyone can talk about is the shooting and how Maud managed to get away. Many of them knew Maud when she lived in New York. They remember her bookshop with fondness. She was quite social and well liked before she went around town like some Park Avenue Cassandra, warning people that Burt Sklar was a crook. Maud's been nuts for years. But *this* nuts? Who knew?

Several people at this very dinner party are clients of Sklar. Sklar looks after them by taking care of all their finances—doing their taxes, paying their bills, overseeing their investments and real estate interests, setting up trusts for their kids, etc. He's a

nanny accountant, a mensch money manager, constantly reassuring his brood that they are in great financial shape.

“Don’t worry, you can afford it,” is a Sklar catchphrase.

He likes telling rich people they’re richer. They like hearing it.

As the group rehashes the crime, Greta glances at her watch for the tenth time. It’s eight-thirty. Everyone is there except Magma. Magma knows that Greta runs her dinners like clockwork: Invited for seven forty-five. Sit down at eight-thirty. That way everybody’s out by ten or ten-thirty. No one wants a late weeknight. It also helps her chef, whose delicious concoctions depend on perfect timing.

Greta invites her old friend Magma to every single one of her dinners, even though it’s always a major pain in the ass to find an extra man for a single, older woman. Tonight, Greta’s dredged up an eligible for Magma—no easy feat in a town where unmarried heterosexual men are rarer than legal parking spaces. He’s a writer named Brent Hobbs. Greta sat next to Hobbs at a recent charity event. The forty-ish Hobbs made a small splash some years ago with a book on the mortgage crisis called *Complicity*. He has since descended into the blogosphere with a site called *HobbsNobbing*, where he spices up financial news with gossip.

Greta went out on a limb calling Hobbs out of the blue. But Sunderland once mentioned Hobbs’ book on the country’s near economic collapse was one that, “got it right,” and she always likes to surprise her guest of honor in some interesting way. Thus she invited him. Plus, Greta knows that great hostesses have to be vampires, ever in search of new blood to keep their parties lively.

Greta figured Magma, too, would relish the prospect of meeting a smart, heterosexual, younger man—Magma being a widow with lusty appetites. Yet how has her friend repaid her? By being late. At eight-thirty-five Greta instructs Martyn to tell the chef they will sit down.

He gives her a solemn nod. Words are not necessary. He understands his employer perfectly. They will start without Mrs.

Hartz. Martyn has been her butler for over twenty years. Friends and parties come and go. He stays.

As guests are being served the first course in the candlelit dining room, Magma makes a breathy entrance.

“*Hello, everybody!* So sorry to be late. But I was at The Four Seasons today. I saw the whole thing! I’m an absolute *wreck!*” Magma says, raking a hand through her thick, dyed-blond hair.

Greta doesn’t think her friend looks a wreck. In fact, Magma’s glowing with excitement. Her round face is flushed, her kohl-rimmed blue eyes are sparkling, and she’s wearing a dress that leaves little of her ample cleavage to the imagination. Tonight she looks more like her sexy, youthful self than ever.

Greta and Magma have known each other for ages. They met back in the day while working at *Glamour*. Magma wrote features for the magazine and Greta was the assistant beauty editor. They hit it off immediately and stayed in touch through the years, speaking the shorthand of true friends. They’ve gone through good times and bad, confiding in one another about their lives and families. They are godmothers of each other’s children. Both women are widows now. But Greta is a rich widow, while Magma must scrape by on her late husband’s service benefits, plus what she gets for the articles she writes for women’s magazines. But there’s very little money in that. Who wants beauty and fashion tips from an older widow?

Magma is seated next to Brent Hobbs, who seems even more taken with her ample bosom than with the caviar blinis. Their flirtatious conversation is quickly interrupted by guests demanding to hear Magma’s account of the shooting. Sensing she is the star of the evening, Magma holds forth, describing Maud’s journey to Sunderland’s table step by long-winded step until—*gasp!*—*bang!*

“My old and dear friend! *Shot!* I saw him being carried out on a stretcher!” She bursts into tears.

The first time Magma bursts into tears the guests are moved by her dramatic ordeal. The second time she breaks down, during

the entrée, they are less sympathetic. Her third outburst, during the salad course, is met with stony stares. By the time the Grand Marnier soufflé arrives, people wish to hell Magma had gone to some other fucking restaurant. They resent their hostess for allowing a conversational terrorist to hijack the evening and take it down with her in flames. Magma keeps saying, “It all happened so fast.” Yet her retelling has taken a decade.

The weary, despondent guests leave right after dinner—all except Magma and Brent Hobbs, who is now drunkenly diving into Magma’s cleavage with the same gusto he dived into the *boeuf-a-la-mode*. Greta’s polite hostess façade crumbles.

“If you two want a bed, the guest room’s upstairs—second door on the left. I’m done!” she announces, knowing Sun isn’t the only casualty of this ghastly day.