

# Bluff

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Published by Poisoned Pen Press, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.  
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60563-4410  
(630) 961-3900  
sourcebooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging 2018949096

Printed and bound in the United States of America.  
SB 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Jim Hoagland, the love of my life,  
and for  
Jim Fennell  
and  
Jane Ellis*



## The Flop

“Poker is the game closest to the western conception of life, where life and thought are recognized as intimately combined, where free will prevails over philosophies of fate or of chance, where men are considered moral agents and where—at least in the short run—the important thing is not what happens but what people think happens.”

—*John Lukacs*



# 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 Saint 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 soupçon 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 thing 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.