

TILLY BAGSHAWE

Sidney Sheldon's
After the Darkness

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Greed is right.

Greed works.

*Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures
the essence of the evolutionary spirit.*

*Greed, in all of its forms – greed for life, for money,
for love, for knowledge – has marked the
upward surge of mankind.*

—Gordon Gekko, in *Wall Street*, 1987

Prologue

New York, December 15, 2009

The day of reckoning had arrived.

The Gods had demanded a sacrifice. A human sacrifice. In ancient Roman times, when the city was at war, captured enemy leaders would have been ritually strangled on the battlefield in front of a statue of Mars, the war god. Crowds of soldiers would have cheered, screaming not for justice but for vengeance. For blood.

This was not ancient Rome. It was modern-day New York, the beating heart of civilized America. But New York was also a city at war. It was a city full of suffering, angry people who needed somebody to blame for their pain. Today's human sacrifice would be offered up in the clinical, ordered surroundings of the Manhattan Criminal Courts Building. But it would be none the less bloody for that.

Normally, the TV crews and hordes of ghoulish spectators only showed up for murder trials. Today's defendant, Grace Brookstein, had not murdered anybody. Not directly anyway. Yet there were plenty of New Yorkers who would have rejoiced to see Grace Brookstein sent to the electric chair. Her son-of-a-bitch husband had cheated them. Worse, he had

cheated justice. Lenny Brookstein – *may he rot in hell* – had laughed in the face of the Gods. Well, now the Gods must be appeased.

The man responsible for appeasing them – District Attorney Angelo Michele, representative of the people – looked across the courtroom at his intended victim. The woman sitting at the defendant’s table, hands clasped calmly in front of her, did not look like a criminal. A slight, attractive blonde in her early twenties, Grace Brookstein had the sweet, angelic features of a child. A competitive gymnast in her teens, she still carried herself with a dancer’s poise, back ramrod straight, hand gestures measured and fluid. Grace Brookstein was fragile. Delicate. Beautiful. She was the sort of woman whom men instinctively wanted to protect. Or rather she would have been, had she not stolen \$75 billion in the largest, most catastrophic fraud in U.S. history.

The collapse of Quorum, the hedge fund founded by Lenny Brookstein and co-owned by his young wife, had dealt a fatal blow to the already crippled American economy. Between them, the Brooksteins had ruined families, destroyed entire industries, and brought the once great financial center of New York to its knees. They had stolen more than Madoff, but that wasn’t what hurt the most. Unlike Madoff, the Brooksteins had stolen not from the rich, but from the poor. Their victims were ordinary people: the elderly, small charities, hardworking, blue-collar families already struggling to get by. At least one young father made destitute by Quorum had shot himself, unable to bear the shame of seeing his children turned out on the streets. Not once had Grace Brookstein displayed so much as a shred of remorse.

Of course, there were those who argued that Grace Brookstein was not guilty of the crimes that had brought her to this courtroom. That it was Lenny Brookstein, not his wife, who had masterminded the Quorum fraud. District

Attorney Angelo Michele loathed such people. *Bleeding-heart liberals. Fools! You think the wife didn't know what was going on? She knew. She knew everything. She just didn't care. She spent your pension funds, your life savings, your kids' college money . . . Just look at her now! Is she dressed like a woman who gives a shit that you lost your home?*

Over the course of the trial, the press had made much of Grace Brookstein's courtroom attire. Today, for the verdict, she had chosen a white Chanel shift (\$7,600), matching bouclé jacket (\$5,200), Louis Vuitton pumps (\$1,200) and purse (\$18,600), and an exquisite floor-length mink hand-made for her in Paris, an anniversary present from her husband. The *New York Post* early edition was already on newsstands. Above a full-length shot of Grace Brookstein arriving at Court 14, the front-page headline screamed: LET THEM EAT CAKE!

District Attorney Angelo Michele intended to make sure that Grace Brookstein's cake-eating days were over. *Enjoy those furs, lady. This'll be the last day you get to wear 'em.*

Angelo Michele was a tall, lean man in his midforties. He wore a plain Brooks Brothers suit and his thick black hair slicked back till it gleamed on top of his head like a shiny black helmet. Angelo Michele was an ambitious man and a fearsome boss – all the junior D.A.s were terrified of him – but he was a good son. Angelo's parents ran a pizza parlor in Brooklyn. Or they had run one until Lenny Brookstein 'lost' their life savings and forced them into bankruptcy. Thank God Angelo earned good money. Without his income the Micheles would have been out on the streets in their old age, destitute like so many other hardworking Americans. As far as Angelo Michele was concerned, prison was too good for Grace Brookstein. But it was a start. And he was going to be the man who put her there.

Sitting next to Grace at the defendant's table was the man

whose job it was to stop him. Francis Hammond III, ‘Big Frank’ as he was known among the New York legal community, was the shortest man in the room. At five foot four, he was barely taller than his tiny client. But Frank Hammond’s intellect towered over his opponents like a behemoth. A brilliant defense attorney with the mind of a chess grand master and the morals of a gutter fighter, Frank Hammond was Grace Brookstein’s Great White Hope. His specialty was playing juries, uncovering fears and desires and prejudices that people didn’t even know they had and turning them to his clients’ advantage. In the past year alone, Frank Hammond had been responsible for the acquittals of two murdering Mafia bosses and a child-molesting actor. His cases were always high profile, and his clients always began their trials as underdogs. Grace Brookstein had originally hired another lawyer to represent her, but her friend and confidant John Merrivale had insisted she fire him and go with Big Frank.

‘You’re innocent, Grace. *We* know that. But the rest of the world doesn’t. The m-m-media wants you hanged, drawn and quartered. Frank Hammond’s the only guy who can turn that around. He’s a genius.’

No one could understand why Big Frank had allowed Grace Brookstein to show up to court every day in such inflammatory outfits. Her clothes seemed designed to enrage the press still further, not to mention the jury. Surely a titanic mistake?

But Frank Hammond did not make mistakes. Angelo Michele knew that better than anyone.

There’s a method in his madness. There has to be. I just wish I knew what it was.

Still, it didn’t really matter. Today was the last day of the trial and Angelo Michele was convinced he had built an airtight case. Grace Brookstein was going down. First to jail. And then to hell.

* * *

Grace Brookstein had woken up that morning in the Merrivales' guest bedroom suffused with a deep sense of peace. She'd had a dream about Lenny. They were at their estate in Nantucket, always Grace's favorite of their many multimillion-dollar homes. They were walking in the rose garden. Lenny was holding her hand. Grace could feel the warmth of his skin, the familiar roughness of his palms.

'It will be okay, my darling. Have faith, Gracie. It will all be okay.'

Walking into court this morning, arm in arm with her attorney, Grace Brookstein had felt the crowd's hatred, hundreds of pairs of eyes burning a hole in her back. She had heard the catcalls. *Bitch. Liar. Thief.* But she held on to her inner peace, to Lenny's voice inside her head.

It will all be okay.

Have faith.

John Merrivale had said the same thing on the phone last night. Thank God for John! Without him, Grace would have been completely lost. Everyone else had deserted her in her hour of need, her friends, even her own sisters. *Rats on a sinking ship.* It was John Merrivale who had forced Grace to hire Frank Hammond. And now Frank Hammond was going to save her.

Grace watched him summing up now, this fiery little man, strutting back and forth in front of the jury like a farmyard rooster. She only understood a fragment of what Hammond was saying. The legal arguments were way over her head. But she knew with certainty that her attorney would get her an acquittal. Then, and only then, would her real work begin.

Walking free from court is just the start. I still have to clear my name. And Lenny's. God, I miss him. I miss him so much. Why did God have to take him away from me? Why did any of this have to happen?

Frank Hammond finished speaking. Now it was Angelo Michele's turn.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Over the last five days you have heard a lot of complex legal arguments, some of them from me, and some of them from Mr Hammond. Unfortunately it had to be that way. The scale of the fraud at Quorum: seventy-five *billion* dollars . . .'

Angelo Michele paused to let the impact of the number sink in. Even after so many months of repetition, the sheer size of the Brooksteins' theft never failed to shock.

' . . . means that, by its very nature, this case is complicated. The fact that the bulk of that money is still missing makes it even more complicated. Lenny Brookstein was a wicked man. But he was not a stupid man. Nor is his wife, Grace Brookstein, a stupid woman. The paper trail they left behind them at Quorum is so complicated, so impenetrable, that the truth is, we may *never* recover that money. Or what's left of it.'

Angelo Michele looked at Grace with naked loathing. At least two female jurors did the same.

'But let me tell you what's not complicated about this case. Greed.'

Another pause.

'Arrogance.'

And another.

'Lenny and Grace Brookstein believed they were above the law. Like so many of their kind, the rich bankers on Wall Street who have raped and pillaged this great country of ours, who have taken tax payers' money, *your* money, and squandered it with such shameless abandon, the Brooksteins don't believe that the rules of the *Little People* apply to them. Take a good look at Mrs Brookstein, ladies and gentlemen. Do you see a woman who understands what ordinary people in this country are suffering? Do you see a woman who cares?

Because I don't. I see a woman born into wealth, a woman married into wealth, a woman who considers wealth – obscene wealth – to be her God-given right.'

Up in the gallery, John Merrivale whispered to his wife.

'This isn't a l-legal argument. It's a witch hunt.'

The district attorney went on.

'Grace Brookstein was a partner in Quorum. An equal equity partner. She was not only legally responsible for the fund's actions. She was morally responsible for them. Make no mistake. Grace Brookstein knew what her husband was doing. And she supported and encouraged him every step of the way.

'Don't let the complexity of this case fool you, ladies and gentlemen. Underneath all the jargon and paperwork, all the offshore bank accounts and derivative transactions, what happened here is really very simple. Grace Brookstein stole. She stole because she was greedy. She stole because she thought she could get away with it.'

He looked at Grace one last time.

'She still thinks she can get away with it. It's up to you to prove her wrong.'

Grace Brookstein watched District Attorney Angelo Michele sit down. He'd given a bravura performance, far more eloquent than Frank Hammond's. The jury looked as if they wanted to burst into spontaneous applause.

If he weren't trying to destroy me, I'd feel sorry for him. Poor man, he's tried so hard. And such passion! Perhaps, if we'd met in other circumstances, we'd have been friends?

The general consensus in the media was that the jury would take at least a day to deliberate. The mountain of evidence in the case was so enormous that it was hard to see how they could review it any quicker. In fact, they came back to Court 14 in less than an hour. *Just like Frank Hammond said they would.*

The judge spoke solemnly. 'Have you reached your verdict?'
The foreman, a black man in his fifties, nodded. 'We have,
Your Honor.'
'And how do you find the defendant? Guilty, or not guilty?'
The foreman looked directly at Grace Brookstein.
And smiled.

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

New York, Six Months Earlier

‘What do you think, Gracie? The black or the blue?’

Lenny Brookstein held up two bespoke suits. It was the night before the Quorum Charity Ball, New York’s most glamorous annual fund-raiser, and he and Grace were getting ready for bed.

‘Black,’ said Grace, not looking up. ‘It’s more classic.’

She was sitting at her priceless Louis XVI walnut dressing table, brushing her long blond hair. The champagne silk La Perla negligee Lenny bought her last week clung to her perfect gymnast’s body, accentuating every curve. Lenny Brookstein thought, *I’m a lucky man*. Then he laughed aloud. *Talk about an understatement.*

Lenny Brookstein was the undisputed king of Wall Street. But he hadn’t been born into royalty. Today, everyone in America recognized the heavyset fifty-eight-year-old: the wiry gray hair, the broken nose from a childhood brawl that he’d never gotten fixed (why should he? He won), the sparkling, intelligent amber eyes. All these features made up a face as familiar to ordinary Americans as Uncle Sam or Ronald

McDonald. In many ways, Lenny Brookstein *was* America. Ambitious. Hardworking. Generous. Warmhearted. Nowhere was he more loved than here, in his native New York.

It hadn't always been so.

Born Leonard Alvin Brookstein, the fifth child and second son of Jacob and Rachel Brookstein, Lenny had a horrific childhood. In later life, one of the few things that could rouse Lenny Brookstein's rarely seen temper were books and movies that seemed to romanticize poverty. Misery Memoirs, that's what they called them. *Where did those guys get off?* Lenny Brookstein grew up in poverty – crushing, soul-destroying poverty – and there was nothing romantic or noble about it. It wasn't *romantic* when his father came home drunk and beat his mother unconscious in front of him and his siblings. Or when his beloved elder sister Rosa threw herself under a subway train after three boys from the Brooksteins' filthy housing project gang-raped her on her way home from school one night. It wasn't *noble* when Lenny and his brothers got attacked at school for eating 'stinky' Jewish food. Or when Lenny's mother died of cervical cancer at the age of thirty-four because she couldn't take the time off work to see a doctor for her stomach cramps. Poverty did not bring Lenny Brookstein's family closer together. It pulled them apart. Then, one by one, it pulled them to pieces. All except Lenny.

Lenny dropped out of high school at sixteen and left home the same year. He never looked back. He went to work for a pawnbroker in Queens, a job that provided him with more proof, if any were needed, that the poor did not 'pull together' in times of trouble. They ripped one another's throats out. It was tough watching old women handing over objects of huge sentimental value – a dead husband's watch, a daughter's cherished silver christening spoon – in return for a grudging handful of dirty bills. Mr Grady, the pawnbroker, had had heart bypass surgery the year before Lenny went to work for

him. Evidently the surgeon had removed his compassion at the same time.

Mr Grady used to tell Lenny: ‘Value is not what something is *worth*, kid. That’s a fairy tale. Value is what someone is willing to pay. Or *be paid*.’

Lenny Brookstein had no respect for Mr Grady, as a person or a businessman. But the truth of those words stuck with him. Later, much later, they became the foundation for Lenny Brookstein’s fortune and Quorum’s sensational success. Lenny Brookstein understood what ordinary, poor people were willing to accept. That one person’s concept of ‘value’ was different from another’s, and that the market’s could be different again.

I owe the old bastard for that.

The story of Lenny Brookstein’s rise from pawnbroker’s lackey to world-respected billionaire had become an American legend, part of the country’s folklore. George Washington could not tell a lie. Lenny Brookstein could not make a bad investment. After a successful run of bets on the horses in his late teens (Jacob Brookstein, Lenny’s father, had been an inveterate gambler), Lenny decided to try his luck on the stock market. At Saratoga and Monticello, Lenny had learned the importance of developing a system and sticking to it. On Wall Street, they called a system a ‘model’ but it was the same thing. Unlike his father, Lenny also had the discipline to cut his losses and walk away when he needed to. In the movie *Wall Street*, Michael Douglas’s Gordon Gekko had famously declared: ‘Greed is good.’ Lenny Brookstein profoundly disagreed with that statement. Greed wasn’t good. On the contrary, it was the downfall of almost all unsuccessful investors. *Discipline* was good. Finding the right model and sticking to it, through hell or high water. That was the key.

Lenny Brookstein was already a millionaire many times over by the time he met John Merrivale. The two men could

not have had less in common. Lenny was self-made, confident, a walking ball of energy and joie de vivre. He never spoke about his past because he never thought about it. His brilliant amber eyes were always fixed on the future, the next trade, the next opportunity. John Merrivale was upper class, shy, cerebral and prone to depression. A skinny, redheaded young man, he was nicknamed ‘Matchstick’ at Harvard Business School, where he graduated top in his class, as his father and grandfather had both done before him. Everybody, including John Merrivale himself, expected he would go into one of the top-tier Wall Street firms, Goldman or Morgan, and begin his slow but predictable rise to the top. But then Lenny Brookstein burst into John Merrivale’s life like a meteor and everything changed.

‘I’m starting a hedge fund,’ Lenny told John the night they met, at a mutual acquaintance’s party. ‘I’ll make the investment decisions. But I need a partner, someone with a blue-chip background to help bring in outside capital. Someone like you.’

John Merrivale was flattered. No one had ever believed in him before. ‘Thank you. But I’m not a marketing guy. T-t-t-trust me. I’m a thinker, not a s-s-salesman.’ He blushed. *Goddamn stammer. Why the hell can’t I get over it already?*

Lenny Brookstein thought: *And a stammer, too. You couldn’t make this guy up. He’s perfect.*

Lenny told John, ‘Listen. Salesmen are a dime a dozen. What I need is someone low-key and credible. Someone who can get an eighty-five-year-old Swiss banker to trust him with his mother’s life savings. I can’t do that. I’m too . . .’ He cast around for the right word. ‘Flamboyant. I need someone that makes a risk-averse pension fund manager think: “You know what? This guy’s honest. And he knows his shit. I like him better than that sharp, cocky kid from Morgan Stanley.” I’m telling you, John. It’s *you*.’

That conversation had been fifteen years ago. Since then, Quorum had grown to become the largest, most profitable hedge fund of all time, its tentacles reaching into every aspect of American life: real estate, mortgages, manufacturing, services, technology. One in six New Yorkers – *one in six* – was employed by a company whose balance sheet depended on Quorum’s performance. And Quorum’s performance *was* dependable. Even now, in the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, with giants like Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns hitting the wall, and the government bailing out once untouchable firms like AIG to the tune of billions, Quorum continued turning a modest, consistent profit. The world was on fire, Wall Street was on its knees. But Lenny Brookstein stuck to his system, the same way he always had. And the good times kept rolling.

For years Lenny Brookstein believed he had everything he wanted. He had bought himself homes all over the globe, but rarely left America, dividing his time between his mansion in Palm Beach, his Fifth Avenue apartment and his idyllic beachfront estate on Nantucket Island. He threw parties that everybody came to. He donated millions of dollars to his favorite causes and felt a warm glow inside. He bought a three-hundred-foot yacht, interior-designed by Terence Disdale, and a private Airbus A340 quad jet that he flew in only twice. Occasionally he slept with one of the models who made it their business to be around him, should he suddenly find himself in the mood for sex. But he never had ‘girl-friends.’ He was surrounded by people, many of whom he liked, but he did not have ‘friends’ in the traditional sense of that word. Lenny Brookstein was beloved by all who knew him. But he didn’t ‘do’ intimacy. Everybody knew that.

Then he met Grace Knowles.

* * *

More than thirty years Lenny Brookstein's junior, Grace Knowles was the youngest of the famous Knowles sisters, New York socialite daughters of the late Cooper Knowles. Cooper Knowles had been a real estate guy, worth a couple of hundred million in his heyday. Never as big as 'the Donald,' Cooper was always far better liked. Even business rivals invariably described him as 'charming,' 'a gentleman,' 'old-school.' Like her elder sisters, Constance and Honor, Grace adored her father. She was eleven years old when Cooper died, and his death left a void in her life that nothing could fill.

Grace's mother remarried – three times in total – and moved permanently to East Hampton, where the girls' lives continued much as they had before. School, shopping, parties, vacations, more shopping. Connie and Honor were both pretty and much sought after by New York's eligible young bachelors. It was generally accepted, however, that Grace was the most beautiful of the Knowles sisters. When she took up gymnastics competitively at thirteen in an attempt to distract herself from her ongoing grief for her father, her elder sisters were secretly relieved. Gymnastics meant training, and traveling out of state, *a lot*. Once *they* were safely married off, it would be fine to have Grace come to parties with them again. But until then, Connie and Honor heartily encouraged their baby sister's love affair with the parallel bars.

By the time she was eighteen, Grace's days as a competition-level gymnast were over. But that was okay. By then Connie had married a movie-star-handsome investment banker named Michael Gray, a real up-and-comer at Lehman Brothers. And Honor had hit the marital jackpot by landing Jack Warner, the Republican congressman for New York's 20th Congressional District. Jack was already being hotly touted as a candidate for the Senate, and perhaps even one day for the presidency. The Warners' wedding was all over Page 6, and photographs of the honeymoon appeared in a

number of national tabloids. As the new Caroline Kennedy, Honor could afford to be gracious to her little sister. It was Honor who invited Grace to the garden party where she first met Lenny Brookstein.

In later years, both Lenny and Grace would describe that first meeting as the proverbial thunderbolt. Grace was eighteen, a child, with no experience of the world outside her cosseted, pampered East Hampton existence. Even her friends from gymnastics were wealthy. And yet there was something wonderfully unspoiled about her. Lenny Brookstein had grown used to what his mother would have called ‘fast’ women. Every girl he’d ever slept with wanted something from him. Jewels, money . . . something. Grace Knowles was the opposite. She had a quality that Lenny himself had never had and wanted badly. Something so precious and elusive, he had almost given up believing it existed: *innocence*. Lenny Brookstein wanted to capture Grace Knowles. To hold that innocence in his hands. To *own* it.

For Grace, the attraction was even simpler. She needed a father. Someone who would protect her and love her for herself, the way that Cooper Knowles had loved her when she was a little girl. The truth was, Grace Knowles wanted to *go back* to being a little girl. To go back to a time when she was totally, blissfully happy. Lenny Brookstein offered her that chance. Grace grabbed it with both hands.

They married on Nantucket six weeks later, in front of six hundred of Lenny Brookstein’s closest friends. John Merrivale was best man. His wife, Caroline, and Grace’s sisters were the matrons of honor. On their honeymoon in Mustique, Lenny turned to Grace nervously one night and asked: ‘What about children? We never discussed it. I suppose you’ll want to be a mother at some stage?’

Grace gazed pensively out across the ocean. Soft, gray moonlight danced upon the waves. At last, she said: ‘Not

really. Of course, if *you* want children, I'll gladly give them to you. But I'm so happy as we are. There's nothing missing, Lenny. Do you know what I mean?'

Lenny Brookstein knew what she meant.

It was one of the happiest moments of his life.

'Do you know what you're wearing yet?' Lenny pulled some papers out of his briefcase and put on his reading glasses before climbing into bed.

'I do,' said Grace. 'But it's a secret. I want to surprise you.'

Earlier that afternoon Grace had spent three happy hours in Valentino with her elder sister Honor. Honor had always had an amazing sense of style and the sisters loved to shop together. The manager had closed the store especially so that they could peruse the gowns in peace.

'I feel quite the rebel.' Grace giggled. 'Leaving it to the last minute like this.'

'I know! We're kicking over the traces, Gracie.'

The Quorum Ball was *the* society event of the season. Always held in early June, it marked the start of summer for Manhattan's privileged elite, who decamped en masse to East Hampton the following week. Most of the women attending tomorrow night at The Plaza would have begun planning their outfits like generals before a military campaign months ago, ordering in silks from Paris and diamonds from Israel, starving themselves for weeks in order to look their flat-stomached best.

Of course, this year there would be some belt tightening. Everyone was talking about the economy and how dire it was. People in Detroit were rioting, apparently. In California, thousands of homeless people had pitched tents along the banks of the American River. The headlines were dreadful. For Grace Brookstein and her friends, nothing compared to the shock they'd felt the day they heard that Lehman Brothers had gone bankrupt. Lehman's collapse was a tragedy far

closer to home. Grace's own brother-in-law Michael Gray had seen his net worth decimated overnight. Poor Connie. It really was too awful.

Lenny told Grace, 'We have to strike a different tone this year, Gracie. The Quorum Ball must go ahead. People need the money that charities like ours provide now more than ever.'

'Of course they do, darling.'

'But it's important we aren't too ostentatious. Compassion. Compassion and restraint. Those must be our watchwords.'

With Honor's help, Grace had picked out a *very* restrained black silk shift from Valentino, with almost no beading whatsoever. As for her Louboutin pumps? *Simplicity itself*. She couldn't wait for Lenny to see her in them.

Slipping into bed beside him, Grace turned off her bedside lamp.

'Just a second, sweetie.' Lenny reached over and turned it on again. 'I need you to sign something for me. Where is it now?' He fumbled through the sheets of paper littering his side of the bed. 'Ah. Here we are.'

He handed Grace the document. She took Lenny's pen and was about to sign it.

'Whoa there!' Lenny laughed. 'Aren't you going to read it first?'

'No. Why would I?'

'Because you don't know what you're signing, Gracie. That's why. Didn't your father ever tell you not to sign anything you haven't read?'

Grace leaned over and kissed him. 'Yes, my darling. But *you've* read it, haven't you? I trust you with my life, Lenny, you know that.'

Lenny Brookstein smiled. Grace was right. He did know it. And he thanked God for it every day.

* * *

On the corner of Fifth Avenue and Central Park South, a battalion of media had gathered in front of The Plaza's iconic Beaux Arts façade. Lenny Brookstein was having a party – *the party* – and as always, the stars were out in force. Billionaires and princes, supermodels and politicians, actors, rock stars, philanthropists; everyone attending tonight's Quorum Ball had one crucial thing in common, and it wasn't a burning desire to help the needy. They were all *winners*.

Senator Jack Warner and his wife, Honor, were among the first to arrive.

'Go around the block,' Senator Warner barked at his driver. 'Why the hell did you get us here so early?'

The driver thought, *Ten minutes ago you were on my case for driving too slow. Make your goddamn mind up, asshole.*

'Yes, Senator Warner. Sorry, Senator Warner.'

Honor Warner studied her husband's angry features as they turned onto West Fifty-seventh Street. *He's been like this all day, ever since he got back from his meeting with Lenny. I hope he isn't going to ruin this evening for us.*

Honor Warner tried to be an understanding wife. She knew that politics was a stressful profession. It had been bad enough when Jack was a congressman, but since his elevation to the Senate (at the remarkably young age of thirty-six), it had gotten worse. The world knew Jack Warner as the Republican's messiah – a conservative Jack Kennedy for the new millennium. Tall, blond and chiseled, with a strong jaw and a steady, blue-eyed gaze, Senator Warner was adored by voters, especially women. He stood for decency, for old-fashioned family values, for a strong, proud America that many people feared was crumbling daily beneath their feet. Just watching Senator Warner on the news, hand in hand with his beautiful wife, their two towheaded daughters skipping along beside them, was enough to restore people's faith in the American Dream.

Honor Warner thought, *If only they knew.*

But how could they? Nobody knew.

Tentatively, she turned to her husband. 'Do you like my dress, Jack?'

Senator Jack Warner looked at his wife and tried to remember the last time he had found her sexually attractive. *It's not that there's anything wrong with her. She's pretty enough, I guess. She's not fat.*

Honor Warner, in fact, was much more than pretty. With her wide-set green eyes, blond curls and high cheekbones, she was widely considered a striking beauty. Not as striking as her sister Grace, perhaps, but gorgeous nonetheless. Tonight Honor was poured into a skintight, strapless Valentino gown the same sea green as her eyes. It was a pull-all-the-stops-out dress. To any impartial observer, Honor Warner looked sexy as hell.

Jack said brusquely. 'It's fine. How much did it cost?'

Honor bit her lower lip hard. *I mustn't cry. My mascara'll run.*

'It's on loan. Like the emeralds. Grace pulled some strings.'

Senator Jack Warner laughed bitterly. 'How generous of her.'

'Please, Jack.'

Honor touched his leg in a conciliatory gesture, but he shrugged away her hand. Knocking on the glass partition, he said to the driver: 'You can turn the car around now. Let's get this evening over with.'

By nine P.M., The Plaza's cream-and-gold Grand Ballroom was packed to bursting. On either side of the room, beneath the splendidly restored arches, tables gleamed with brilliantly polished silverware. Light from the candelabras glinted off the women's diamonds as they mingled in the center of the room, admiring one another's priceless couture dresses and

swapping horror stories about their husbands' latest financial woes.

'There's no way we can afford Saint-Tropez this year. Ain't happening.'

'Harry's going to sell the yacht. Can you believe it? He *loved* that thing. He'd sell the children first if he thought anyone would buy them.'

'Did you hear about the Jonases? They just listed their town house. Lucy wants twenty-three million for it, but in this market? Carl thinks they'll be lucky to get half that.'

At nine-thirty exactly, dinner was served. All eyes were on the top table. Surrounded by their inner circle of Quorum courtiers, Lenny and Grace Brookstein sat in regal splendor, with eyes only for each other. Other, lesser hosts might have chosen to seat the most glamorous, famous guests at their table. Prince Albert of Monaco was there. So were Brad and Angelina, and Bono and his wife, Ali. But the Brooksteins pointedly kept close to their family and close friends: John and Caroline Merrivale, the vice president and second lady of Quorum; Andrew Preston, another senior Quorum exec, and his voluptuous wife, Maria; Senator Warner and his wife, Grace Brookstein's sister Honor; and the eldest of the Knowles sisters, Constance, with her husband, Michael.

Lenny Brookstein proposed a toast.

'To Quorum! And all who sail in her!'

'To Quorum!'

Andrew Preston, a handsome, well-built man in his mid-forties with kind eyes and a gentle, self-deprecating smile, watched his wife stand up, champagne glass in hand, and thought: *Another new dress. How am I supposed to pay for that?*

Not that she didn't look wonderful in it. Maria always looked wonderful. A former actress and opera star, Maria Preston was a force of nature. Her mane of chestnut hair

and gravity-defying, creamy white breasts made her beautiful. But it was her manner, the sparkle in her eye, the deep, throaty vibration of her laugh, the flirtatious swing of her hips, that made men fall at her feet. No one could understand what had possessed a live wire like Maria Carmine to marry an ordinary, standard-issue businessman like Andrew Preston. Andrew himself understood it least of all.

She could have had anyone. A movie star. Or a billionaire like Lenny. Perhaps it would have been better if she had.

Andrew Preston loved his wife unreservedly. It was because of his love, and his deep sense of unworthiness, that he forgave her so much. The affairs. The lies. The uncontrollable spending. Andrew earned good money at Quorum. A small fortune by most people's standards. But the more he earned, the more Maria spent. It was a disease with her, an addiction. Month after month, she charged hundreds of thousands of dollars to their Amex card. Clothes, cars, flowers, diamonds, eight-thousand-dollar-a night hotel suites where she spent the night with God knows who . . . it didn't matter. Maria spent for the thrill of spending.

'You want me to look like a pauper, Andy? You want me to sit next to that smug little bitch Grace Brookstein in some off-the-rack monstrosity?'

Maria was jealous of Grace. Then again, she was jealous of every woman. It was part of her fiery Italian nature, part of what Andrew Preston loved about her. He tried to reassure her.

'Darling, you're twice the woman Grace is. You could wear a sack and you would still outshine her.'

'You want me to wear a sack now?'

'No, no, of course not. But, Maria, our mortgage payments . . . Perhaps one of your other dresses, darling? Just this year. You have so many . . .'

It was the wrong thing to say, of course. Now Maria had

punished him by not only buying a new dress, but buying the most expensive dress she could find, a jewel-encrusted riot of feathers and lace. Looking at it, Andrew felt his heart tighten. Their debts were getting serious.

I'll have to talk to Lenny again. But the old man has already been so generous. How much further can I push him before he snaps?

Andrew Preston reached into the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket. When no one was looking, he slipped three Xanax into his mouth, washing them down with a slug of champagne.

You always knew Maria would be hard to hold on to. Find a way, Andrew. Find a way.

'Are you all right, Andrew?' Caroline Merrivale, John Merrivale's wife, noticed Andrew Preston's ashen face. 'You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders.'

'Ha ha! Not at all.' Andrew forced a smile. 'You look ravishing tonight, Caro, as always.'

'Thank you. John and I both made an effort to be low-key. You know, given the current economic circumstances.'

It was a deliberate dig at Maria. Andrew let it pass, but thought again how much he loathed Caroline Merrivale. Poor John, being pussy-whipped through life by that harridan. No wonder he always looked so downtrodden.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes in their head that the Merrivale marriage was an unhappy one. Anyone, that is, other than Lenny and Grace Brookstein. Those two were so nauseatingly in love, they seemed to assume that everybody else had what they had. *Easy to keep the love alive when you have billions of dollars to throw at it.* But perhaps Andrew was being unfair? The young Mrs Brookstein was no gold digger. She was naive, that was all, and clearly believed that Caroline Merrivale was her friend. Grace never

saw the envy that blazed in the older woman's eyes whenever her back was turned. But Andrew Preston saw it. Caroline Merrivale was a bitch.

Caroline had always bitterly resented Grace's position as first lady of Quorum. She, Caroline Merrivale, would have been so much better suited to the role. Handsome rather than beautiful, with strong, intelligent features and a sharply cut bob of black hair, Caroline had once had a flourishing career as a trial lawyer. Of course, that was years ago now. Thanks to Lenny Brookstein, her husband, John, had become an immensely wealthy and successful man. Caroline's working days were over. But her ambition was far from extinguished.

John Merrivale, by contrast, had never been ambitious. He worked hard at Quorum, accepted whatever Lenny chose to give him, and was grateful. Caroline would taunt him: 'You're like a puppy, John. Curled up at your master's feet, loyally wagging your tail. No wonder Lenny doesn't respect you.'

'Lenny d-d-does respect me. It's you who d-d-doesn't.'

'No, and why would I? I want a man, John, not a lapdog. You should demand more equity. Stand up and be counted.'

Andrew Preston glanced across the table at John Merrivale now. Lenny was in the middle of an anecdote, with John hanging on his every word. Andrew thought: *He's brilliant. But he's weak.* There was only room for one king at Quorum. Caroline Merrivale might wish it weren't so, but she could keep on wishing. They were all hanging off of Lenny Brookstein's coattails. And they were the lucky ones. Poor old Michael Gray was sitting on Maria's right, also listening to Lenny's story. The Grays were like a walking cautionary tale. One minute they were partying up a storm all over Manhattan, living it up in their Greenwich Village brownstone, summering in the South of France and wintering at their newly remodeled chalet in Aspen. The next minute – *poof* – it was all gone.

Word was that every cent Mike Gray owned had been leveraged against Lehman stock. Their kids, Cade and Cooper, were only still in their private schools because Grace Brookstein, Connie Gray's sister, had insisted on covering the tuition.

Maria whispered in Andrew's ear: 'The auction starts in a few minutes, Andy. I've got my eye on the vintage Cartier watch. Will you bid for it, or shall I?'

Grace Brookstein smiled and clapped throughout the bidding, but she was secretly relieved when the auction ended and it was time for dancing.

'I hate these things,' she whispered in Lenny's ear as he whisked her around the floor. 'All those fragile male egos trying to outspend each other. It's chest beating.'

'I know.' Lenny's hand caressed her lower back. 'But those chest beaters just raised fifteen million for our foundation. In this economy, that's pretty good going.'

'Do you mind if I cut in? I've barely spoken to my favorite brother-in-law all night.'

Connie, Grace's eldest sister, slipped her arm around Lenny's waist. Lenny and Grace both smiled.

'Favorite brother-in-law, eh?' Grace teased. 'Don't let Jack hear you say that.'

'Oh, *Jack*.' Connie waved her hand dismissively. 'He's been in such a funk all evening. I thought being a senator was supposed to be fun. Anyone would think he was the one who'd just lost his house. And job. And life savings. Come on, Lenny! Cheer a girl up, would you?'

Grace watched as her husband dance with her sister, holding Connie close so he could offer words of comfort. *I love them both so much*, she thought. *And I admire them both so much. The way Connie can make jokes and laugh at herself when she and Mike are going through hell. And Lenny's incredible, inexhaustible compassion.* People were

always talking about how ‘lucky’ Grace was to be married to Lenny. Grace agreed. But it wasn’t Lenny’s money that made her blessed. It was his kindness.

Of course, there was a downside to being married to the nicest man in the world. So many people loved Lenny, and relied on him, that Grace almost never got him all to herself. Next week they were flying to Nantucket, Grace’s favorite place in the world, for a two-week vacation. But of course, being the gracious host that he was, Lenny had invited everyone at the table tonight to join them.

‘Promise me we’ll get at least *one* night alone,’ Grace begged, when they finally crawled into bed that night. The ball had been fun, but exhausting. The thought of even more socializing filled Grace with dread.

‘Don’t worry. They won’t all come. And even if they do, we’ll get more than one night alone, I promise. The house is big enough for us to sneak away.’

Grace thought, *That’s true. The house is enormous. Almost as big as your heart, my darling.*