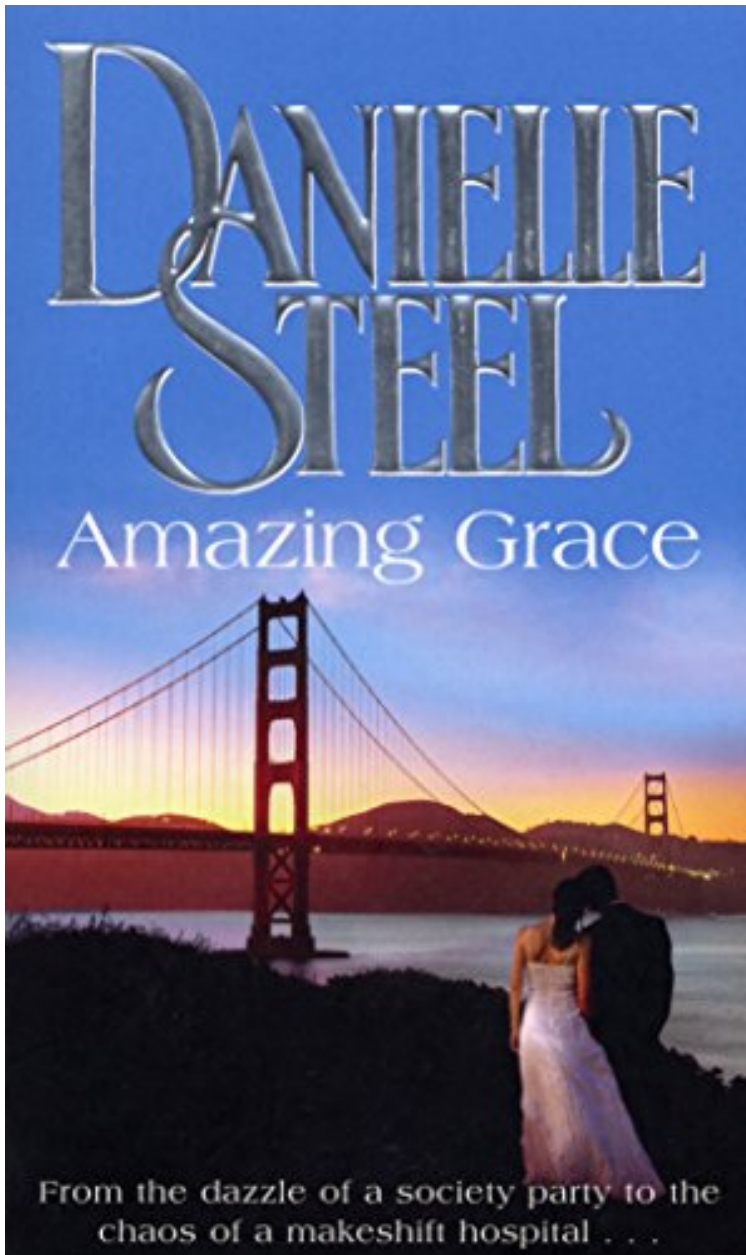


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Amazing Grace



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn a warm May night in San Francisco, a glittering, celebrity-studded crowd gathers for a charity event. Just minutes before midnight, the room begins to sway. Glass shatters, the lights go out, and people start to scream.... In the earthquake's aftermath, the lives of four strangers will converge: Sarah Sloane, the beautiful wife of a financial star, watches her perfect world fall to pieces.Melanie Free, award-winning singer, comes to a turning point in her career. Everett Carson, a former war correspondent whose

personal demons have demoted him to covering society parties, finds new purpose amid the carnage. Sister Maggie Kent, a nun who does her best work in jeans and trainers, searches through the rubble - and knows instantly that there is much work to be done. The city staggers back to life, and a chain reaction will touch each of the survivors as they find the amazing grace of new beginnings.

Chapter One Sarah Sloane walked into the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco and thought it looked fantastic. The tables were set with cream-colored damask cloths, the silver candlesticks, flatware, and crystal gleamed. They had been rented from an outside source, which had donated their use for the evening, and offered fancier options than those provided by the hotel. The plates were rimmed with gold. Silver-wrapped party favors were on the tables at each place. A calligrapher had written up the menus on heavy ecru stock, and they'd been clipped into little silver stands. The placecards with tiny gold angels on them had already been set down according to Sarah's carefully thought-out seating chart. The gold sponsor tables were at the front of the room, three rows of them in fact, with the silver and bronze tables behind them. There was a beautiful program on every seat, along with an auction catalogue and numbered paddle. Sarah had organized the event with the same meticulous diligence and precision that she did everything, and in the way she had run similar charity events in New York. She had given every detail a personal touch, and it looked more like a wedding than a benefit, as she glanced at the cream-colored roses encircled with gold and silver ribbons on every table. They had been provided by the city's best florist at one-third of the normal cost. Saks was providing a fashion show, Tiffany was sending models to wear their jewelry and wander through the crowd. There was an auction of high-ticket items, which included jewelry, exotic trips, sports packages, celebrity meet-and-greet opportunities, and a black Range Rover parked in front of the hotel with a huge gold bow tied on top. Someone was going to be very happy driving the car home at the end of the evening. And the neonatal unit at the hospital benefiting from the evening was going to be even happier. This was the second Smallest Angels Ball that Sarah had organized and run for them. The first one had netted them more than two million dollars, between seat prices, the auction, and donations. She hoped to make three million tonight. The high caliber of the entertainment they were providing would help them get to their goal. There was a dance band, which would play on and off during the night. One of the other members of the committee was the daughter of a major Hollywood music mogul. Her father had gotten Melanie Free to perform, which allowed them to charge high prices for both individual seats and particularly the sponsor tables. Melanie had won a Grammy three months earlier, and her single performances like this one usually ran a million five. She was donating her performance. All the Smallest Angels had to pick up were her production costs, which were quite high. The cost of travel, lodgings, food, and the set-up of her roadies and band was estimated to cost them three hundred thousand dollars, which was a bargain, considering who she was and the cataclysmic effect of her performance. Everyone was so impressed when they got the invitation and saw who was performing. Melanie Free was the hottest musical artist in the country at the moment and dazzling to look at. She was nineteen years old and had had a meteoric rise in the last two years, due to her consistent hits. Her recent Grammy was the icing on the cake, and Sarah was grateful she was still willing to do their benefit for free. Her greatest fear had been that Melanie would cancel at the last minute. With a donated performance, a lot of stars and singers dropped out hours before they were expected to show up. But Melanie's agent had sworn she would be there. It was promising to be an exciting evening, and the press were covering the event in force. The committee had even managed to corral a few stars to fly up from L.A. and attend, and all the local socialites had bought tickets. For the past two years, it had been the most important and productive benefit in San Francisco and, everyone said, the most fun to attend. Sarah had started the benefit as a result of her own experience with the neonatal unit, which had saved her daughter, Molly, three years ago, when she was born three months premature. She was Sarah's first baby. During the pregnancy everything seemed fine. Sarah looked and felt fabulous, and at thirty-two, she assumed she wouldn't have any problems, until she went into labor one rainy night, and they couldn't stop it. Molly was born the next day and spent two months in an incubator in the neonatal ICU, with Sarah and her husband, Seth, standing by. Sarah had been at the hospital day and night, and they had saved Molly with no ill effects or resulting damage. She was now a happy, bouncy three-year-old, ready to start preschool in the fall. Sarah's second baby, Oliver Ollie had been born the previous summer, without any problems. He was a delicious, chubby, gurgling nine-month-old now. Her children were the joy of Sarah's existence and her husband's. She was a full-time mom, and her only other serious activity was putting on this benefit every year. It took a monumental amount of work and organization, which she was good at. Sarah and Seth had met at Stanford Business School six years before, which had brought them both out from New York. They married as soon as they graduated, and stayed on in

San Francisco. Seth had gotten a job in Silicon Valley, and just after Molly's birth he had started his own hedge fund. Sarah had decided not to join the workforce. She got pregnant with Molly on their wedding night, and wanted to stay home with their babies. She had spent five years working on Wall Street in New York as an analyst, before going to business school at Stanford. She wanted to take a few years off now, to enjoy motherhood full-time. Seth had done so well with his hedge fund that there was no reason for her to go back to work. At thirty-seven, Seth had already made a considerable fortune, and was one of the brightest young stars in the heavens of the financial community, in both San Francisco and New York. They had bought a beautiful large brick house overlooking the bay in Pacific Heights, and filled it with important contemporary art: Calder, Ellsworth Kelly, de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and a handful of promising unknowns. Sarah and Seth were thoroughly enjoying their life in San Francisco. It had been easy for them to move since Seth had lost his parents years before, and Sarah's had moved to Bermuda, so their family ties to New York were no longer strong. It was obvious to everyone on both coasts that Sarah and Seth were there to stay, and they were a wonderful addition to the business and social scenes of the city. A rival hedge fund had even offered Sarah a job, but she had no desire to do anything except spend her time with Oliver and Molly and Seth when he was free. He had just bought a plane, a G5, and flew to L.A., Chicago, Boston, and New York often. They had a golden life that only got better year by year. Although she and Seth had both grown up in comfortable circumstances, neither of them had had the extravagant life they had now. It worried Sarah a little from time to time that maybe they were spending too much money, with a fabulous house in Tahoe in addition to their city house, and their own plane. But Seth insisted they were fine. He said that the kind of money he was making was meant to be enjoyed. And there was no question that he did. Seth drove a Ferrari, and Sarah a Mercedes station wagon that was perfect for her with two kids, although she had an eye on the Range Rover that was going to be auctioned off that night. She had told Seth she thought it was really cute. And most of all, it was for a good cause, one they both really cared about. After all, the neonatal unit had saved Molly's life. In a less high-tech, medically sophisticated hospital, their adorable three-year-old wouldn't be alive today. It meant the world to Sarah to give back by organizing the benefit, which had been her idea. The committee turned an enormous profit over to them after the evening's expenses were paid. Seth had kicked things off for them with a two-hundred-thousand-dollar donation in both their names. Sarah was very proud of him. She always had been and still was. He was the star of her heavens, and even after four years of marriage and two children, they were very much in love. They were even thinking about trying for a third baby. She had been overwhelmed with the benefit for the past three months. They were chartering a yacht in Greece in August, and Sarah thought that would be the perfect time to get pregnant again. Sarah walked slowly around each table in the ballroom, double-checking the names on the placecards against her list. Part of the success of the Smallest Angels Ball was that it was exquisitely run. It was a first-class event. As she made her way toward the silver tables, after checking the gold, she found two mistakes, and switched the placecards with a serious expression. She had just finished checking the last of the tables, and was going to check on the party favor bags that six of the committee members were filling to hand out at the end of the evening, when the benefit's assistant chair made her way toward Sarah across the ballroom, with an excited look. She was a beautiful, tall blonde married to the CEO of a major corporation.

She was his trophy wife, had been a model in New York, and was twenty-nine years old. She had no children and wasn't planning to have any. She had wanted to be on the committee with Sarah because the benefit was such a big deal and so much fun. She'd had a ball helping Sarah put it together, and the two women got along well. Sarah's hair was as dark as Angela's was blond. Sarah had long, straight, dark brown hair, creamy skin, and huge green eyes. She was a beautiful young woman, even with her hair in a ponytail, no makeup, a sweatshirt, jeans, and flip-flops. It was just after one o'clock, and in six hours both women would be transformed. For now, they were hard at work. "She's here!" Angela whispered with a broad grin.

"Who?" Sarah asked, resting her clipboard on her hip. "You know who! Melanie, of course! They just arrived. I took her to her room." Sarah was relieved to note they had come in on time, on the private plane the committee had chartered to bring her and her entourage from L.A. Her band and roadies had come by commercial jet, and had already been in their hotel rooms for two hours. Melanie, her best friend, her manager, assistant, hairdresser, boyfriend, and mother, had come up in the chartered plane. "Is she okay?"

Sarah asked, looking concerned. They had gotten an advance list of everything she required, including Calistoga bottled water, low-fat yogurt, a dozen kinds of natural foods, and a case of Cristal champagne. The list was twenty-six pages long, referring to all her personal needs, her mother's food preferences, even the beer her boyfriend drank. And then there were another forty pages referring to the band, and all the electrical

and sound equipment they'd need on stage. The eight-foot grand piano she required for her performance had been brought in at midnight the night before. She and the band were scheduled to rehearse that afternoon at two. Everyone else had to be cleared out of the ballroom by then, which was why Sarah was finishing her rounds at one. "She's fine. The boyfriend is a little odd, and her mom scared me to death, but her best friend is cute. And Melanie is really beautiful and very sweet." Sarah had had that impression the one time she spoke to her on the phone. The rest of the time, Sarah had dealt with her manager, but she had made a point of calling and thanking Melanie personally for doing their benefit. And now the big day was here. Melanie hadn't canceled in favor of a performance somewhere else, the plane hadn't crashed, they'd all arrived on time. The weather was warmer than usual. It was a sunny afternoon in mid-May. In fact it was hot and muggy, which was rare in San Francisco, and more like a summer day in New York. Sarah knew that it would break soon, but it always created a festive atmosphere in the city when the nights were warm. The only thing she didn't like about it was that someone had told her that days like this one were considered "earthquake weather" in San Francisco. They'd been teasing her about it, but she didn't like hearing it anyway. Earthquakes were the one thing that had worried her about the city since they'd moved there, but everyone assured her that they rarely happened, and when they did, they were small. In six years of living in the Bay Area, she hadn't felt one yet. So she dismissed what they had said about "earthquake" weather. She had other things to worry about right now, like their star singer and her entourage. "Do you think I should go up to see her?" Sarah asked Angela. She didn't want to intrude, nor be rude by neglecting them. "I was going to meet her here when she comes down for rehearsal at two." "You can just stick your head in and say hello."

Melanie and her group had two large suites, and five other rooms on the club floor, all provided on a complimentary basis by the hotel. They were thrilled to host the event, and gave the benefit committee a total of five free suites for their stars and fifteen rooms and junior suites for their VIPs. The band and roadies were on a lower floor, in lesser rooms that the committee had to pay for out of the benefit budget, which came from their profits for the night. Sarah nodded, put her clipboard in her handbag, and checked on the women stuffing the party favor bags with expensive goodies from a variety of stores. And a moment later she was in the elevator on the way to the club floor. She and Seth had a room there too, so she used her key for the elevator. Otherwise there was no way to get to that floor. She and Seth had decided it would be easier to dress at the hotel than go home and rush back. Their babysitter had agreed to stay overnight with the kids, which made it a nice night off for Sarah and Seth. She could hardly wait till the next day, when they could lie in bed, order room service, and talk about the event the night before. But for now, she just hoped everything would go okay. As soon as she got off the elevator, Sarah saw the huge lounge on the club floor. Pastries, sandwiches, and fruit were set out, bottles of wine, and a small bar. There were comfortable chairs, tables, telephones, a vast array of newspapers, a gigantic wide-screen TV, and two women sitting at a desk, to help guests in any way they could, with dinner reservations, questions about the city, directions, manicures, massages, whatever whim a guest could have. Sarah asked them for the directions to Melanies room, and then continued down the hall. To avoid security hassles, and fans, Melanie was registered under the name Hastings, her mother's maiden name. They did that at every hotel, as did some of the other stars, who rarely registered in their own names. Sarah gently knocked on the door of the suite number she'd been given by the woman in the lounge. She could hear music inside, and a moment later the door was opened by a short, heavy-set woman in a halter top and jeans. She was carrying a yellow pad, with a pen stuck in her hair, and carrying an evening gown. Sarah guessed correctly that she was Melanies assistant, whom she had also spoken to on the phone. Pam? Sarah asked, as the other woman smiled and nodded. Im Sarah Sloane. I just came to say hello. Come on in, she said cheerfully, as Sarah followed her into the living room of the suite, and saw chaos all around her. Half a dozen suitcases were open on the floor, with their contents spilling everywhere. One was full of slinky gowns. Out of the others poured boots, jeans, handbags, tops, blouses, a cashmere blanket, and a teddy bear. It looked as though an entire chorus line of women had dumped their belongings on the floor. And sitting on the floor beside them was a small elfin-looking blond girl. She glanced up at Sarah, and then went back to pawing through one of the bags, obviously searching for something specific. It didn't seem like an easy task to find anything in the heaps of clothes. Sarah glanced around the room then, feeling out of her element, and then she saw her, Melanie Free, sprawled out on the couch in exercise clothes, her head leaning on her boyfriends shoulder. He was working hard with the remote, with a glass of champagne in his other hand. He was a handsome boy, and Sarah knew he was an actor who had recently left a successful TV show, due to a drug problem. She vaguely remembered that he was recently out of rehab, and he appeared sober as he smiled at Sarah, despite the champagne bottle sitting

next to him on the floor. His name was Jake. Melanie stood up to come and say hello to Sarah. She seemed even younger than she was, with no makeup on. She looked about sixteen with long, straight golden-colored hair. The boyfriends was jet black and spiked, and before Melanie could say a word to either of them, Melanies mother appeared from nowhere and shook Sarahs hand, until it nearly ached. Hi, Im Janet. Im Melanies mom. We love it here. Thanks for getting everything on our list. My baby loves her familiar treats, you know how that is, she said with a wide, friendly grin. She was a pretty woman in her mid-forties who might have been beautiful once, but had seen better days. Despite the handsome face, she had gotten wide in the hips. Her baby still hadnt said a word. She hadnt had a chance to in the face of her mothers chatter. Janet Hastings had bright-red dyed hair. The color was aggressive, particularly next to Melanies pale blond hair and almost childlike looks. Hi, Melanie said quietly. She didnt seem like a star, just a pretty teenage girl. Sarah shook hands with both of them as Melanies mother went on talking, two other women walked through the room, and the boyfriend stood up and announced he was going to the gym. I dont want to intrude. Ill let you settle in, Sarah said to Melanie and her mother, and then she gazed directly at Melanie. Are you still rehearsing at two? Melanie nodded and then glanced at her assistant, as her manager spoke up from the doorway. The band says theyll be ready to set up at two-fifteen. Melanie can go on at three. We only need an hour, so she can check out the sound in the room. Thats fine, Sarah reassured them, when a hotel maid arrived to take Melanies costume away to be pressed. It was mostly sequins and net. Ill be waiting for you in the ballroom, just to make sure you have everything you need. She had to be at the hairdresser herself at four, to get her hair and nails done, and then back at the hotel at six, in order to dress and show up in the ballroom at seven, to assess things one last time, make sure everyone was on deck, and greet the guests. The piano came last night. And they tuned it this morning. Melanie smiled and nodded again, and then flopped down in a chair, while her best friend on the floor next to the suitcases gave a victorious shriek. Sarah had heard someone call her Ashley, and she had the same childlike appearance as Melanie. Found it! Can I wear it tonight? The item she held up for Melanie to see was a slinky leopard-print dress. Melanie nodded, and Ashley giggled again when she found the matching platform shoes with what looked like eight-inch heels. She scampered off to try the outfit on, and Melanie smiled shyly at Sarah again. Ashley and I went to school together from the time I was five, Melanie explained. Shes my best friend. She goes with me everywhere. She had obviously become part of the entourage, and Sarah couldnt help thinking that it was a strange way to live. There was an almost circuslike feeling to their lifestyle, in hotel rooms and backstage. In a matter of minutes, they had given the elegant suite at the Ritz the feeling of a college dorm. And once Jake had gone to the gym, there were nothing but women in the room. The hairdresser matched a thick fall to Melanies blond hair. It was perfection. Thank you for doing this, Sarah said, looking into Melanies eyes with a smile. I saw you on the Grammys and you were terrific. Are you going to sing Dont Leave Me tonight? Yes, she is, her mother answered for her, handing her daughter a bottle of the preordered Calistoga water, while standing between Melanie and Sarah, speaking for her as though the beautiful blond superstar didnt exist. Without further conversation, Melanie sat down on the couch, picked up the remote, took a long drink of the water, and turned on MTV. We love that song, Janet said with a broad smile. So do I, Sarah agreed, a little startled by Janets forcefulness. She appeared to run her daughters life, and seemed to think she was as much a part of her stardom as Melanie was herself. Melanie didnt appear to object, she was obviously used to it, and a few minutes later, her friend came back into the room, teetering on the leopard heels, in the borrowed dress. It looked a little big on her. She immediately sat down on the couch to join her childhood friend in staring at the TV. It was impossible to figure out who Melanie was. She seemed to have no personality of her own, and no voice, except to sing. I was a showgirl in Las Vegas, you know, Janet informed Sarah, who attempted to look impressed. It was easy to believe, she looked the type, in spite of lavishly filled jeans, and huge breasts, which Sarah correctly suspected werent real. Melanies were impressive too, but she was young enough to pull it off on her slim, sexy, well-toned frame. Janet looked a little over the hill. In fact, she looked like the hill. She was a robust-looking woman, with a loud voice and a personality to match. Sarah was feeling overwhelmed as she struggled for excuses to leave the room, while Melanie and her school chum were mesmerized by the TV. Ill meet you downstairs to make sure everything is set for your rehearsal, Sarah said to Janet, since she appeared to be the full-time proxy for her daughter in real life. Sarah calculated quickly that if she stayed with them for twenty minutes, she d still have time to get to the hairdresser. Everything else would be done by then, and in fact already was. See you there. Janet beamed at her, as Sarah slipped out of the suite and headed down the hall to her own room. She sat down for a few minutes, and checked the messages on her cell phone. It had vibrated twice while she was in Melanies suite, and she hadnt

wanted to pick up. One was from the florist, telling her that the four huge urns outside the ballroom would be filled by four o'clock. The other was from the dance band, confirming their start time at eight o'clock. She called home to check on the children then, and the sitter told her they were fine. Parmani was a lovely Nepalese woman who had been with them since Molly was born. Sarah didn't want a live-in, she loved taking care of her babies herself, but Parmani was there in the daytime to help her, and she stayed in the evening when Seth and Sarah went out. She was spending the night, which she seldom did, but she was more than happy to help on a special occasion like this. She knew how important the benefit was to Sarah, and how hard she'd worked on it for months. She wished her good luck before they hung up. Sarah had wanted to say hi to Molly, but she was still having a nap. By the time Sarah finished, checked some notes on her clipboard, and brushed her hair, which looked a mess, it was time to go back to the ballroom to meet Melanie and her crew for rehearsal. She had already been told that Melanie didn't want anyone in the room when she rehearsed. Thinking about it now, Sarah couldn't help wondering if it was her mother's edict, and not the stars. Melanie didn't look as though she'd care who was around. She seemed oblivious to what went on around her, who came in and out, or what they did. Maybe it was different when she performed, Sarah told herself. But Melanie seemed to have the indifference and passive manner of a docile child and an absolutely incredible voice. Like everyone who had bought tickets, Sarah couldn't wait to hear her perform that night. The band was already in the ballroom when Sarah walked in. They were standing around, talking and laughing, while the roadies finished unpacking equipment and setting it up. They were almost through, and the entire group looked like a motley crew. There were eight men in Melanie's band, and Sarah had to remind herself that the pretty blond girl she'd seen watching MTV in the suite upstairs was currently one of the biggest singing stars in the world. There was nothing pretentious or arrogant about her. The only thing that gave it away was the size of her entourage. But she had none of the bad habits or behaviors of most stars. The singer they'd had at the Smallest Angels Ball the year before had had a major tantrum over a problem with the sound system right before she went on, threw a bottle of water at her manager, and threatened to walk out. The problem had been fixed, but Sarah had nearly panicked at the prospect of her canceling at the last minute. Melanie's easy ways were a relief, whatever her mother's demands on her behalf. Sarah waited ten more minutes while they finished setting up, wondering if Melanie would come down late, but she didn't dare ask. She had discreetly inquired if the band had everything they needed, and when they said they did, she sat down quietly at a table, out of their way, and waited for Melanie to appear. It was ten to four when she walked in, and Sarah knew she would be late for the hairdresser. She was going to have to rush like a maniac afterward to get ready on time. But she had to attend to her duties first, and this was one of them—running interference for their star, being available, and paying court to her, if need be. Melanie walked in wearing flip-flops, a skimpy T-shirt, and cut-off jeans. Her hair was lumped up on her head in a banana clip, and her best friend was at her side. Her mother marched in first, her assistant and manager brought up the rear, and there were two ominous-looking bodyguards close at hand. The boyfriend, Jake, was nowhere to be seen. He was probably still at the gym. Melanie was the least noticeable member of the group, and nearly disappeared in their midst. Her drummer handed her a Coke, she popped it open, took a swig, hopped up on stage, and squinted as she looked into the room. Compared to the venues where she was used to performing in concert, this was tiny. The ballroom had a warm, intimate feel to it, particularly the way Sarah had it set up, and once the lights were dimmed and the candles lit that night, it would look beautiful. The room was brightly lit now, and after Melanie looked around for a minute, she shouted to one of her roadies, Kill the lights! She was coming alive. Sarah could see it happen as she watched, and cautiously approached the stage to talk to her. Melanie looked down at her with a smile. Does everything look okay? Sarah asked, once again feeling as though she were talking to a kid, and then reminded herself that Melanie was a teenager after all, even if she was a star. It looks great. You did a really nice job, Melanie said sweetly, and Sarah was touched. Thank you. Does the band have everything they need? Melanie turned and looked over her shoulder with a confident glance. She was happiest when on stage. This was what she did best. It was a familiar world to her, even though this was a lot nicer than where she usually played. She loved the suite, and so did Jake. You got everything you need, guys? she asked the band. They all nodded, said they did, and started getting their instruments in the right key, as Melanie forgot Sarah and turned to them. She told them what she wanted to play first. They had already agreed on the order of the songs she was going to sing, including her current smash hit. Sarah realized she was no longer needed then, and started to leave. It was five after four, and she was going to be half an hour late for her hair appointment. She'd be lucky if she could get her nails done. Maybe not. She made it to just outside the ballroom door when one of

the committee members stopped her with a catering manager in tow. There was a problem with the hors d'oeuvres. The Olympia oysters weren't in, what they had on hand wasn't fresh enough, and she had to pick something else. A minor decision for once. Sarah was used to bigger ones. She told the committee member to make the choice, just so it wasn't caviar or something that would destroy their budget, and with that she ran into the elevator, rushed across the lobby, and claimed her car from the valet. He had left it parked nearby. The big tip she'd given him early that morning had served her well. She pulled sharply onto California Street, turned left, and headed up Nob Hill. Fifteen minutes later, she was at her hairdresser, and out of breath when she walked in, apologizing for how late she was. It was four-thirty-five, and she had to leave no later than six. She had hoped to be out by five-forty-five at the latest, which was no longer possible.

They knew she was chairing her big benefit that night, and whisked her into the chair. They brought her some sparkling mineral water, followed by a cup of tea. The manicurist went to work on her as soon as her hair was washed, and they blew it out carefully. So what's Melanie Free really like? her hairdresser asked her, hoping for some dirt. Is Jake with her? He is, Sarah said discreetly, and she seems like a really sweet kid. I'm sure she'll be great tonight. Sarah closed her eyes, trying desperately to relax. It was going to be a long and hopefully successful night. She could hardly wait for it to begin. Sarah was getting her hair swept into an elegant French twist, with little rhinestone stars pinned into it, as Everett Carson checked into the hotel. He was six foot four, originally from Montana, and still looked like the cowboy he had been in his youth. He was tall and lanky, his slightly-too-long hair looked uncombed, and he was wearing jeans, a white T-shirt, and what he referred to as his lucky cowboy boots. They were old, battered, comfortable, and made of black lizard. They were his prize possession, and he had every intention of wearing them with the rented tux that the magazine had paid for him to wear that night. He showed his press pass at the desk, and they smiled and said they were expecting him. The Ritz-Carlton was a lot fancier than the places where Everett usually stayed. He was new to this job and this magazine. He was there to cover the benefit for Scoop, a Hollywood gossip magazine. He had spent years covering war zones for the Associated Press, and after leaving them and taking a year off, he had needed a job, so he took this one. On the night of the benefit, he had worked for the magazine for all of three weeks. So far he had covered three rock concerts, a Hollywood wedding, and this was his second benefit. It was definitely not his cup of tea. He was beginning to feel like a waiter, in all the tuxes he'd been wearing. He actually missed the miserable conditions he'd gotten used to and felt comfortable in, during his twenty-nine years with the AP. He had just turned forty-eight, and he tried to be grateful for the small, well-appointed room they escorted him into, where he dropped his battered bag that had been all over the world with him. Maybe if he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was back in Saigon,

Pakistan, or New Delhi . . . Afghanistan . . . Lebanon . . . Bosnia, during the war there. He kept asking himself how a guy like him had wound up going to benefits and celebrity weddings. This was cruel and unusual punishment for him. Thanks, he said to the clerk who had shown him to his room. There was a brochure about the neonatal unit on the desk, and a press kit for the Smallest Angels Ball, about which he didn't give a damn. But he would do his job. He was there to take pictures of celebrities and cover Melanie's performance. His editor had said it was a big deal to them, so here he was. He pulled a bottle of lemonade out of the refrigerator in the minibar, opened it, and took a swig. The room had a view of the building across the street and everything in it was so immaculate and incredibly elegant. He longed for the sounds and smells of the rat-holes where he'd slept for thirty years, the stench of the poverty in the back streets of New Delhi, and all the exotic places his career had taken him to for three decades. Take it easy, Ev, he said to himself out loud, switched on CNN, sat down at the foot of the bed, and took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. He had printed it off the Internet before he left the office in L.A. It must have been his lucky day, he told himself. There was a meeting a block away, in a church on California Street called Old St. Mary's. It was at six, would last an hour, and he could be back at the hotel at seven, when the benefit started. It meant that he'd have to go to the meeting in his tux, so he wouldn't start late. He didn't want anyone complaining about him to his editors. It was too soon for him to start cutting corners. He always had, and had gotten away with it. But he was drinking then. This was a new start, and he didn't want to push the limits of the envelope just yet. He was being a good boy, conscientious, and honest. It felt like going to nursery school again for him. After taking photographs of dying soldiers in trenches, and having shellfire all around him, covering a benefit in San Francisco was pretty goddamn tame, although others would have loved it. He wasn't one of them, unfortunately. This was a hardship post for him. He sighed as he finished the lemonade, threw the bottle in the wastebasket, peeled off his clothes, and got into the shower. The water felt good pelting down on him. It had been a hot day in L.A., and it was warm and muggy here. The room had air-conditioning, and

he felt better when he got out of the shower, and told himself to stop bitching about his life, as he got dressed again. He decided to make the best of it and helped himself to the chocolates at his bedside and ate a cookie from the minibar. He looked at himself in the mirror as he clipped on his bow tie, and put on the jacket of his rented tux. My God, you look like a musician . . . or a gentleman, he said grinning. Nahh . . . a waiter . . . lets not get crazy here. He was a damn good photographer who had once won a Pulitzer. Several of his shots had made the cover of Time magazine. He had a name in the business, and for a time had screwed it all up by drinking, but at least that had changed. He had spent six months in rehab, and another five in an ashram figuring out his life. By now he thought he had. Booze was out of his life forever. There was just no other way. By the time he hit bottom, he had damn near died in a fleabag hotel in Bangkok. The hooker he had hired had saved him, and kept him alive till the paramedics came. One of his fellow journalists had shipped him back to the States. The AP had fired him for having been missing in action for nearly three weeks, and blowing all his deadlines, for about the hundredth time that year. He couldnt keep it together anymore, and he had put himself in rehab against his better judgment, and had only agreed to thirty days. It was only after he got there that he realized how bad things were. It was either dry out or die. So he had stayed six months and chose to dry out instead of dying the next time he went on a binge. Since then, he had gained weight, looked healthy, and went to AA meetings every day, sometimes as many as three. It wasnt as tough for him now as it had been at first, but he figured if the meetings didnt always help him, his being there would help someone else. He had a sponsor, was one, and had been sober now for just over a year. He had his one-year chip in his pocket, his lucky boots on, and had forgotten to comb his hair. He picked up the room key, and headed out at three minutes after six, with his camera bag slung over his shoulder, and a smile on his face. He was feeling better than he had half an hour before. Life wasnt easy for him every day, but it was a hell of a lot better than it had been a year ago. As someone had once said to him in AA, I still have bad days, but I used to have bad years. Life seemed pretty sweet to him, as he walked out of the hotel, turned right on California Street, and walked a block down the hill to Old St. Marys Church. He was looking forward to the meeting. He was in the mood for it tonight. He touched his one-year sobriety chip in his pocket, as he often did, to remind himself how far hed come in the past year. Right on . . . , he whispered to himself, as he walked into the rectory to look for the group. It was exactly eight minutes after six. And as he always did, he knew he would share at the meeting. As Everett walked into Old St. Marys, Sarah jumped out of her car, and rushed into the hotel. She had forty-five minutes to dress, and five to get downstairs from her room. Her nails were freshly done, although she had messed up two of them reaching into her bag too soon for the tip. But they looked fine, and she liked the way theyd done her hair. Her flip-flops made a flopping sound as she ran across the lobby. The concierge smiled at her as she sped by, and called out, Good luck tonight! Thanks. She waved, used her key in the elevator to get to the club floor, and three minutes later, she was in her room, ran the tub, and took her dress out of the plastic zipper bag it came in. It was sparkling white and silver, and would show off her figure to perfection. She had bought silver high-heel Manolo Blahnik sandals that were going to be murder to walk in, but they looked fabulous with the dress. She was in and out of the tub in five minutes, sat down to do her makeup, and was clipping on diamond earrings, when Seth walked in at twenty to seven. It was a Thursday night, and he had begged her to do the fund-raiser on the weekend, so he didnt have to get up at the crack of dawn the next morning, but this was the only date that both the hotel and Melanie had given them, so they went with it. Seth looked as stressed as he always did coming home from the office. He worked hard, and kept a lot of balls in the air. A success like his didnt happen by being relaxed and casual about it. But she noticed that he looked particularly harassed that night. He sat down on the edge of the tub, ran a hand through his hair, and leaned over to kiss his wife. You look beat, she said sympathetically. They were a great team. They had gotten along brilliantly since the day they met in business school. They had a happy marriage, loved their life, and were crazy about their kids. He had provided her with an incredible life in the past few years. She loved everything about their life together, and most all, she loved everything about him. I am beat, he confessed. Hows everything lining up for tonight? he asked her. He loved hearing about the things she did. He was her staunchest supporter and biggest fan. Sometimes he thought her staying home was the waste of a great business mind and her MBA degree, but he was grateful that she was so devoted to their babies, and to him. Fantastic! Sarah grinned as she answered his question about the benefit, and slipped on a nearly invisible wisp of white lace thong underwear that wouldnt show underneath her dress. She had the figure for it, and just watching her do it turned him on. He couldnt resist reaching out and fondling her upper leg. Dont start, sweetheart, she warned him, laughing, or Ill be late. You can take your time coming downstairs if you want. If you get there in time for dinner, thatll be

fine. Seven-thirty, if you can. He glanced at his watch and nodded. It was ten to seven. She had five minutes to get dressed. Ill be down in half an hour. Ive got a couple of calls to make first. He always did, and tonight was no different. Sarah understood. Running his hedge fund kept him busy night and day. It reminded her of her Wall Street days, when they were doing an IPO. His life was constantly like that now, which was why he was happy and successful, and they had the lifestyle that they did. They lived like fabulously wealthy people twice their age. Sarah was grateful for it, and didnt take it for granted. She turned so he could zip up her dress. It looked terrific on her, and he beamed. Wow! Youre a knockout, babe! Thank you. She smiled at him, and they kissed. She put a few things in a tiny silver handbag, slipped on the sexy shoes that went with it, and waved as she left the room. He was already on his cell phone talking to his best friend in New York, making some arrangements for the next day. She didnt bother to listen. She left a small bottle of scotch and a glass of ice beside him, and he was pouring it gratefully into a glass as the door to the suite closed behind her. She got into the elevator and rode down to the ballroom, three floors below the lobby, and everything was perfection. The urns were filled with creamy white roses. Pretty young women in jewel-colored evening gowns were seated at long tables, waiting to hand people escort cards and check them in. Models were wandering around in long black dresses, wearing fabulous jewelry from Tiffany, and only a handful of people had arrived before she did. Sarah checked that everything was in order, just as a tall man with disheveled sandy gray hair walked in with a camera bag over his arm. He smiled at her as he admired her figure, and told her he was from Scoop magazine. She was pleased. The more press coverage they got, the better the turnout next year, and the more appealing theyd be to performers who might donate their performances, and the more money they stood to make. Press was a big deal to them. Im Everett Carson, he introduced himself, and clipped a press badge onto the pocket of his tuxedo. He looked relaxed and entirely at ease. Im Sarah Sloane, the chair of the benefit. Would you like a drink? she offered, and he shook his head with a grin. It always struck him now how that was the first thing people said when welcoming someone, right after introducing themselves. Would you like a drink? It came right after Hello sometimes. No, thanks, Im fine. Anyone special you want me to keep my eye on tonight? Local celebrities, the hot social types in the city? She told him the Gettys would be there, Sean and Robin Wright Penn and Robin Williams, along with a handful of local names he didnt recognize, but she promised to point them out to him as they came in. She went back to stand near the long tables then, to say hello to people as they got off the elevators, near the check-in tables. And Everett Carson started taking photographs of the models. Two of them were sensational-looking, with high, round artificial breasts and interesting cleavage they had draped diamond necklaces on. The others were too skinny for him. He came back and took a photograph of Sarah, before she got too busy. She was a beautiful young woman, with her dark hair swept up, the little stars sparkling in it, and her huge green eyes that seemed to smile at him. Thank you, she said politely, and he gave her a warm smile in return. She wondered why he hadnt combed his hair, if hed just forgotten, or maybe that was his look. She noticed the worn black lizard cowboy boots. He looked like a character, and she was sure there was an interesting story to him, though shed never have a chance to know it. He was just a journalist from Scoop magazine who had come up from L.A. for the evening. Good luck with your benefit, he said, and then sauntered away again, just as the elevators disgorged about thirty people all at once. For Sarah, the night of the Smallest Angels Ball had begun. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly With Bungalow 2 still on bestseller lists, Steel checks in with a Bay Area earthquake that shakes up the lives of three beautiful, talented yet somehow unfulfilled women. Sarah Sloane, 30-something wife of Seth, a wildly successful hedge fund entrepreneur, and mother of two, has planned to perfection a high-ticket charity auction. The only thing she hasn't counted on is the biggest seismic event to hit San Francisco since 1906 and the aftershocks it will cause in her marriage. Meanwhile, hot Grammy-winning 19-year-old singer Melanie Free, flown in to perform at the benefit, likewise finds her life overturned: following an on-stage triumph, Melanie throws away her platform shoes to assist disaster victims, admitting much to the annoyance of her pushy stage mother and her TV actor boyfriend that she always wanted to be a nurse. Sarah and Melanie face change with support from the 40-ish Sister Maggie Kent, a California nun whose good deeds draw the interest of recovering alcoholic and former AP photojournalist Everett Carson, who captures her in pictures. As marriage, faith and vows of chastity are tested, there's nothing complicated to spoil the romance. Steel delivers a sparkly story with an uplifting spiritual twist. (Oct.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.