

Chapter 1

The day dawned brilliantly sunny, reflecting the bright light on the crisp snow that had fallen the day before in Squaw Valley. The ski conditions were perfect, better than they ever had been for Bill, Stephanie, and their two favorite couples, the Freemans and Dawsons, with whom they spent Presidents' Weekend every year. It was a tradition they had observed for ten years, a sacred pact that none of them would break.

Alyson Freeman had come, even days before she had given birth to their last baby, their third child, two years before, refusing to miss the great weekend they always shared. And since Brad was a doctor, she said she felt safe being there. It was only a four-hour drive from home, and although Brad was an orthopedic surgeon and not an obstetrician, she knew he would see to it that she got the best care, if she gave birth in Tahoe over the long weekend. Their Presidents' Weekend was a date they never broke, and this year was no different. It was meant to be an adult weekend, free of children and responsibilities.

It was no longer an issue for Stephanie and Bill, whose children

were dispersed and working in Atlanta and New York, for their first steps on their fledgling careers, and in Rome, where their younger daughter was spending her junior year abroad. Fred and Jean Dawson's daughters were both married and lived in Chicago, having married brothers. But even Brad and Alyson, whose children were much younger than the others', agreed not to bring their kids, and left them with an au pair at home.

Fred and Jean had been married the longest and were slightly older than the others. To those outside the close circle of friends, they appeared to have the perfect marriage. Fred had invented software that had made him a fortune, and had gotten in on the dot-com boom right at the beginning. Their palatial home in Hillsborough was testimony to his success, along with his plane, his Ferrari and Aston Martin, and Jean's stable full of Thoroughbred horses, which were her passion. They had money to burn, and Fred's humble origins were a dimly remembered dream now.

Jean had been a waitress in Modesto when he met her, from a dirt-poor family that had just lost their farm when her father died in an accident, leaving five starving kids and a widow who looked twenty years older than she was. Jean rarely saw her siblings anymore and had nothing in common with them. She had married Fred thirty years before, and was fifty-one years old. She'd had her eyes done, an excellent face-lift by a plastic surgeon in New York, she stayed in shape, took terrific care of herself, and got Botox shots three times a year. She was a beautiful woman, although her face showed almost no expression, which was fine with her. Above all, she never wanted to be poor again, and as long as she and Fred stayed married, she knew she never would be.

She knew that he had cheated on her for most of their marriage, and she no longer cared. She hadn't been in love with him in years.

She could have sued him for a fortune in a divorce, but she liked the lifestyle he provided, the perks, and the status of being Mrs. Fred Dawson. She said jokingly to her friends that she had made a pact with the devil, and the devil in her life was Fred. She had no illusions about him, and no desire to change anything about the way she lived. She had her horses and her friends and went to visit her daughters in Chicago if she wanted to see them, and she and Fred had an unspoken arrangement that worked for both of them. There was an undeniable edge to her, born of the way things had worked out, and she didn't have a high opinion of her husband, or men like him. She believed now that all men cheated, given half a chance to do so, and her husband certainly did, and had for years. He slept with secretaries, assistants, and women he met at cocktail parties, on business, or in elevators, and women he sat next to on planes. The only women he didn't sleep with, she was certain, were her closest friends. At least he had the good taste not to do that. And most of them were too old for him. But he wouldn't have done that to her anyway. He wasn't a bad guy, just a cheater, with a weakness for twenty-five-year-olds.

They had a civil relationship, based on a mutual arrangement that worked for both of them, even if it was devoid of warmth. She had forgotten what it was like to feel loved by a man, and no longer thought about it. She had everything else she wanted, materially, which by now was more important to her. She wouldn't have given that up for anything in the world. They had recently bought a Picasso for their dining room, for which Fred had paid just under ten million dollars. They had one of the most important art collections in the West.

Jean's one soft spot was how much she cared about her friends, Alyson and Stephanie. She loved the weekends they spent together,

and talking to them every day. She had opportunities and luxuries they didn't, but neither of them was jealous of her, and she knew it. They didn't envy the state of her marriage either, or the emptiness of her relationship with Fred, but despite the choices she had made, there was a human side to Jean, and an honesty about herself that they all found endearing. There was no pretense to Jean, she loved being rich and Mrs. Fred Dawson, and it was worth anything to her to stay that way. It was almost like a career choice she had made. Corporate wife of multimillionaire, who was rapidly on his way to becoming a billionaire in the high-tech world. Fred Dawson had a Midas touch, which men admired and envied, and the power he exuded was like an aphrodisiac to women. And Jean bought more Thoroughbreds, fabulous Impressionist paintings, and owned more Hermès and Louis Vuitton and Graff jewelry than almost any woman in the world. And yet she was perfectly capable of enjoying a weekend in Squaw Valley with their four best friends.

They had driven up from Hillsborough in Fred's new Ferrari. And she always referred to the three couples as the Big Six. Fred had already been successful when they met, though not on the scale he was now. Even Jean admitted that the amount of money he had made in recent years was ridiculous, but it suited her just fine. She felt like a queen, and in her world she was. But her bright mind, quick wit, and honesty about herself and others kept her from being obnoxious. She could be harsh at times, born of disappointment about her marriage. But her friends loved her as she was, even if her husband didn't. He was only attracted to young women, and no matter how great she looked, Jean had been too old to appeal to him for years. At fifty-five, Fred preferred women under thirty, and considered them a status symbol to feed his ego, which Jean knew well. No matter how much plastic surgery she had or how many Botox

shots, or how diligently she worked out with her trainer, Fred hadn't been attracted to her in years. And Jean had no illusions about it. It took a strong ego for Jean to no longer be affected by it, and she availed herself his credit cards at every opportunity to keep her morale high. It worked for her.

Brad and Alyson Freeman were the opposite of Jean and Fred. After twelve years of marriage, they were still madly in love, and Alyson thought her husband walked on water. She had been a rep for a pharmaceutical company, and at thirty-five she had begun to think she would be single forever, until her Cinderella story happened. Brad had noticed her when she was dropping drug samples off at his office. Still a bachelor at forty-one, and enjoying every minute of it, he was the object of all his nurses' fantasies, and Alyson's as well. He was the successful orthopedic surgeon they all dreamed of, and he fell for Alyson like the proverbial ton of bricks. Eight months after they started dating, they were married, and Alyson's life changed forever. She worked for a few more months until she got pregnant, and had been busy with their three children ever since. Twelve years later, she still talked about her husband like a modern-day saint, grateful for everything he did for her, thrilled with the life they shared. He was a devoted, loving husband and a great father to their kids, and whenever Jean made one of her acerbic comments that all men were cheaters given the chance, Alyson defended Brad hotly and told her he had never so much as looked at another woman since they were married, which caused Jean to give her one of her wry smiles.

"I know Brad is perfect, and the most faithful man on the planet, but he's still a guy," she commented. And Alyson's body still looked great, although she rarely had time to dress up anymore. She was too busy with their kids. But she worked out at the gym several

times a week, and played tennis, and she loved their ski weekends with their friends. And even Stephanie teased her occasionally about how she idolized Brad and how in love with him she was. But it was sweet to see. They were obviously happy, Brad had done well, their kids were adorable and were eleven, six, and two, and they had a beautiful home in Ross, one of the most luxurious and affluent suburbs in Marin. And they really seemed to have an idyllic life. Brad was constantly loving and solicitous and was as in love with Alyson as she was with him. And he really was the perfect dad. He was their older son's Cub Scout leader, took their daughter to her soccer games and ballet on the weekend, and had a "date" with Alyson at the best restaurants in San Francisco every Saturday night. And he was one of the most respected surgeons in his field. And at fifty-three, he was still a very handsome man, and looked years younger than he was.

Each of the two couples represented an extreme on the scale of marital bliss. Alyson and Brad were madly in love, and Fred and Jean had settled for an arrangement that worked for both of them but, even to those who knew them well, appeared to be devoid of love.

Stephanie and Bill were somewhere in the middle, having had their ups and downs and a few hard knocks in their twenty-six years of marriage. The first eight or nine years had been wonderful and everything Stephanie had hoped they would be, having babies, buying their first home in the city, Bill becoming a partner in the law firm he worked for, and doing well. They had met in college at Berkeley, while she was an undergraduate and Bill was finishing law school, and had married shortly after she graduated. She had gotten a terrific job at a very successful ad agency, which used her

writing and marketing skills, and which she was excited about, until she had problems in her first pregnancy and was put on bed rest for five months. Michael, their first child, was born prematurely, and after that, with Bill's encouragement, she never went back to work. She was a stay-at-home mom and enjoyed her life, until things started to get hectic as the kids got older, and there were times when she regretted not having kept her hand in the workforce, to have a sense of accomplishment of her own. She talked to Bill about it once their younger daughter Charlotte started school, but Bill was insistent that he preferred her being at home for their kids, so for several years now she had given up the dream of ever working again.

Both of them kept busy. She had been president of the PTA for several years. She was a hands-on full-time mother, involved in all their activities. And Bill was too busy at the law firm to participate in their children's lives as much as he should. Over the years, they had both discovered that being a hands-on parent was not his strong suit. He was much better at making a living that provided a nice home for them in the city, and at keeping their kids in private schools. He was an excellent provider, and a good person, but he had no desire to spend his weekends ferrying the children from one soccer match to another, or even showing up at the girls' ballet recitals or school plays once a year. Stephanie had become artful at making excuses for him to make up for all the things he didn't do. He loved his children but never seemed to have time to spend with them. He rarely had time to come home for dinner, and often came home at night when they were asleep. And somehow Stephanie always managed to cover for him, and make him look good to their kids. Even when he played golf with clients on the weekend, she always had a

rational explanation for why he really had to be somewhere else. And by the time they were in their teens, the kids were so busy that they never seemed to notice or comment on his absence, even when they didn't see him for several days. As far as they were concerned, according to what their mom said, that was what dads did. Stephanie always picked up the slack for him. She never missed a sporting event, a school conference, or a doctor's appointment. She carpooled when they were younger, listened to their problems, made their Halloween costumes, and kissed away all their hurts. Bill's frequent no-shows put additional pressure on her. She never complained about it, but she noticed, and so did Michael before he left for college.

Michael had played lacrosse for four years by that time, and one night at the dinner table he pointed out that his father had never come to a single game. Stephanie found that hard to believe, but when she thought about it later, she realized it was true. Michael left for UCLA a few months later, preparing for a program in sports management he wanted to take in graduate school after college, and moved to Atlanta to work for the Braves when he got his B.A. He had been there now for three years, and still planned to go to graduate school eventually, but not just yet. She missed him, but he loved his job, it was a great team, and she was happy for him.

The girls had never commented about Bill's performance as a father, even if Michael had. She tried to be both mother and father to all of them and never said anything to Bill about it. She knew how hard he worked, and how well he provided for them.

They lacked for nothing, and he had established a solid base for her and the children. All three of their children had gone to excellent colleges, and good schools before that. They went on wonderful vacations in the summer, and Stephanie had never had to work. For all intents and purposes, he was the perfect husband and father,

even if he didn't remember their birthdays or hers, or show up for school plays.

The subject of her going back to work came up again when Charlotte started high school, Louise was a senior, and Michael was in college, but by then Stephanie couldn't imagine who would employ her, and at what. It had been twenty years since she had worked. And before she could figure out what to do about it, a bomb she had never expected had hit their life. She discovered by accident that Bill was having an affair. Until then, she had thought that they had a good marriage, in spite of occasional bumps. By a series of unlucky coincidences, she found out that Bill was having an affair with a junior lawyer at the firm. They had been working on a case together, and once Bill confessed, he swore nothing like it had ever happened before. It came at a time when Stephanie had been particularly busy getting Charlotte into high school, and helping Louise apply to college, and she and Bill had been spending almost no time together. And the antitrust case he was working on kept him at the office until midnight every night. He and the young lawyer had spent a week in L.A. taking depositions, and he admitted later that it had started then. She was also married, and the discovery—Stephanie had seen them at a restaurant together when he claimed to be in meetings at the office—rocked her world. He had been deeply apologetic and admitted that he was in love with the young lawyer, but also said he didn't want to lose their marriage. With enormous sadness, Stephanie asked him to move out, until he made some clear-cut decisions. It was a painful time for Stephanie and they had separated for two months. He had wanted to marry Marella, who then decided to stay with her husband. He was honest with Stephanie, and said he wanted to resume their marriage and try to forget his affair. It would be better for their kids, but he didn't

pretend to be in love with her anymore. Stephanie didn't want him back by default, but she had also had time to realize that she didn't want a divorce.

Alyson had been heartbroken for her when Stephanie told her about it, and Jean had said she wasn't surprised, it was no worse than the dozens of indiscretions Fred had committed over the years. All it did was confirm Jean's belief that all men were cheaters given the opportunity, and Bill was no better than anyone else. "You can make him pay for it if you stay," she teased Stephanie, but she was sad for Stephanie that it had happened. It had shattered Stephanie's illusions about Bill and their marriage, and made it hard if not impossible to feel the same about him again. They had gone to marriage counseling, Stephanie finally agreed to continue their marriage, and the children were aware that something terrible had happened between their parents, but Stephanie had never told them what it was. She didn't want them hating their father because he had cheated on her. She didn't think that would be fair to him. Jean was outraged when Stephanie told her and thought that they should know, but Stephanie had spent twenty years creating the illusion for them that their father was devoted, concerned, honorable, and above reproach. She didn't want to expose him to their children as the cheater he was, nor damage their relationship with him, although her relationship with him seemed to be destroyed beyond repair when he moved home again.

After the two-month separation, things had never been the same again. They were more like roommates under one roof. She believed that they loved each other, out of a sense of history, if nothing else, and they had children together, but there were no longer any obvious demonstrations of affection, and she no longer complained about how little they saw of him. Before, he had been busy, but now

there was a chasm between them that neither of them had been able to bridge. And she never fully trusted him after he returned. They still had sex, but it was infrequent and lackluster. She felt it was an obligation since they had decided to stay married, and he made love to her because he knew he should. Their relationship had never been passionate, but it had been friendly and warm in the early years, and adequate after that, but all desire had gone out of it for both of them by the time they got back together.

Stephanie knew the young lawyer had left the law firm six months after the affair, but she no longer cared. Bill was still her husband, but he would never again be her best friend, or someone she was even close to. They had nothing to say to each other anymore, except about the kids. She kept him informed of their progress in school and college, and when Michael and Louise got their first jobs. Louise had recently moved to New York to work for Sotheby's in the art department. They talked about practical matters, but never about their feelings for each other, or his affair, which stood like a wall between them. She had been sad about it for a long time, but now she simply accepted it as the way marriages were after this many years. And his infidelity with the young lawyer had left irreparable scars. But Stephanie had never wavered from her decision to stay with him, for the kids, and Bill had been adamant about wanting to stay married to her. He didn't want a divorce. They were a family, and he wanted to stay that way, however impaired their marriage was.

It had been particularly lonely for Stephanie when Charlotte left for college at NYU, and even more so now that she was doing her junior year abroad, in Rome. Stephanie and Bill had gone over to see her in January, and she was having a ball. She was going to be there until June, come home for the summer, then go back to NYU. Steph-

anie could hardly wait till she got home. She was toying with the idea again of finding a job herself. With all three kids gone, she desperately needed something to do. She had worked on several benefit committees, but she had been bored planning charity events and raising money, and wanted more to do. But her brief fledgling career after college was a dim memory now. She had opted for family instead of career, and now the kids were all away. It made for some painfully quiet nights when Bill was working late, and awkward ones when he was home. They had so little to say, other than the news she shared about the kids. He never called them himself, but they all called her to check in. And the only evenings Bill and Stephanie really enjoyed together now were the ones they spent with their friends, the Dawsons and the Freemans, and the trips they had taken together for years. Then she could chat with the women, and Bill could hang out with the “boys.”

All six of them were good skiers, although the three women took it easy, and the men were always competitive with each other, particularly Brad and Fred. Bill was less so and a more relaxed skier. They took the black diamond trails, while the girls took the gentler runs, and they met for lunch at the base, and went to good restaurants at night.

Stephanie was looking forward to a day of skiing with Alyson and Jean as she zipped up her parka, and walked into the living room of their suite to find Bill. He looked trim in a black parka and ski pants, with hiking boots. He had left his ski boots in his locker at the lift, with his skis and poles, where she had left hers as well. Stephanie was wearing a white ski parka, with her long blond hair in a braid, and a pale blue knit cap. She was carrying her goggles and gloves as she glanced at Bill.

“Ready?” He nodded and followed her out of the room. At break-

fast, they talked about the weather and he read the newspaper. They walked out into the winter sunshine and covered the short distance to the shuttle to take them to the lift. The other two couples were staying at a hotel at the base, which was new. Bill had wanted to stay at the same hotel where they always did, and didn't mind the shuttle to get to the lift. The others were already waiting for them with their skis on, and Bill and Stephanie hurried to put on theirs. They put them on side by side, and Stephanie started to say something to him as he began to move toward the men. He turned and glanced at her with a serious look. They rarely smiled at each other anymore. It didn't occur to either of them, they weren't even aware of it.

"Have a nice run," she said softly. She had meant to talk to him about renewing Charlotte's traveler's insurance, which was about to expire, but had forgotten to mention it over breakfast. She could always talk to him about it that night. All of their conversations were about practical matters, like roof repairs, a problem with a tree in their garden, or something for one of the kids. She never shared her private thoughts with him anymore, and hadn't for seven years, since the affair. What was the point? They were no longer close.

"Thanks," he said, smiling this time, "you too." There was no touch of the hand, no kiss, no hug, no tender words. They weren't part of each other's emotional landscape now. She had learned to live without it, and she always wondered if he was having another affair, or when he would. Their relationship had been inadequate and sterile now for seven years. And with that, Stephanie shoved off on her skis to join her two women friends.

"Cute hat," Jean said, admiring Stephanie's pale blue knit cap, which was exactly the same color as her eyes. Jean was wearing a big fox hat, and a trim beige ski suit she had bought in Courchevel.

She was always beautifully dressed. She had the time and could afford to be, and she went shopping constantly. She was the best dressed of the three friends, and her nails were exquisitely manicured with bright red polish when she took off her gloves. Alyson never wore any and had given up manicures, since her children were small, and Stephanie had gotten out of the habit years before. She dressed simply and practically and didn't try to look sexy or cute to Bill. Those days were over, and had been for seven years. Stephanie was wearing the pale blue ski pants she had worn for ages, only the white parka was new, and she had actually borrowed it from Louise, who had left it when she went to New York. Alyson was all in red with a red knit cap and her dark hair tucked into it.

The three women rode the chair lift together, and they could see their three men already far ahead. They hadn't lost time getting on the lift, anxious to hit the trails. The girls had taken time to adjust their goggles and hats, pull on their gloves, and get on the lift holding their poles and dangling their skis. The women could have followed the same tough trails as their men, but didn't want to. They preferred a more leisurely run. The boys were already gone when they got off the lift, chatting about their kids. Stephanie was telling Alyson all about their trip to Rome, and the weekend they'd spent in London on the way back. Bill had clients there, and Stephanie had had time to shop. Jean commented that they were going to Europe in a month.

All three women skied down the mountain gracefully, and stopped here and there to admire the view and talk, and then skied on again.

"God, the weather is gorgeous," Stephanie said, admiring the scenery on one of their stops. Squaw was crowded and busy that weekend, but there seemed to be enough space for everyone. There

was at least a foot of fresh powder since the day before. It was harder to ski in, but they had fun on the way down, and enough time for another run. It was almost noon when they reached the base for the second time, and decided to wait for the boys for lunch. They always stopped at noon, and went to the better restaurant, before skiing all afternoon.

“For an old broad, that wasn’t bad,” Jean congratulated herself after their last run. She was a fabulous skier, and in terrific shape. And Stephanie was in good shape too. Only Alyson was slightly out of breath and complained that she was getting to the gym less often because of the kids, and she had gained a few pounds over Christmas.

They stood chatting for half an hour, waiting for their husbands, and Jean looked annoyed as she glanced at her watch. It was a rose gold Rolex Daytona that Fred had given her the year before. “What the hell are they doing?” And then she rolled her eyes with a familiar expression she often used when talking about Fred. “Probably picking up girls on the trail.”

Alyson looked upset the moment she said it, as she always did. “Brad doesn’t do that,” she defended him.

“And they ski too hard to pick up women,” Stephanie said with a grin. “They’re more interested in showing each other up than chasing women,” she said practically, and all three laughed. But they’d been waiting for more than half an hour when Jean suggested they go to the restaurant without them, and wait for them there. She wanted a Bloody Mary and was tired of waiting. She almost had the other two women convinced when out of the corner of her eye, Stephanie saw Brad and Fred following a ski patrol sled, with three members of the ski patrol around them. Both of their men looked serious, and the only one missing was Bill. She saw a form under the

blanket on the sled, and without stopping to say anything to her two friends, she skied toward them. Jean and Alyson exchanged a glance and followed her. And as soon as Stephanie reached them, the ski patrol stopped and Stephanie bent quickly to say something to Bill on the sled. His face was hidden by the blanket, and before she could remove it, Brad grabbed her arm and stopped her. The look on his face spoke volumes, and there were tears in his eyes.

“Steph, don’t . . .” She looked from him to the others, and she could see that something terrible had happened before they said a word.

“What happened? Is he okay?” she said with a look of panic, reaching toward her husband again, but Bill hadn’t moved.

“He collapsed while we were skiing,” Brad explained in a tense voice, looking stricken. “I think he had a heart attack. I gave him CPR until the ski patrol came. I couldn’t revive him,” he said with tears in his eyes as he looked at her.

“OhmyGod.” She popped her skis off and knelt on the snow then, wondering why they weren’t doing anything to help him, and when she pulled the blanket back to see him, he looked like he was sleeping. Brad shook his head at the two other women then, and they instantly understood. Alyson’s eyes filled with tears as she looked at her husband, and Jean was shocked as she glanced at Fred, and he shook his head too. Stephanie was still kneeling on the snow, holding Bill in her arms, but it was obvious that he was dead. Brad put an arm around her then and helped her stand up, and told her he hadn’t suffered. He said Bill had died instantly, as Stephanie stared at him in disbelief.

“That can’t be . . . he’s fine . . . he doesn’t have a heart problem. He had a checkup last week.” As though saying that would cancel what had just occurred, but it didn’t.