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Danielle STEEL

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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. Présentation de l'éditeur

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