

Chapter One

Bud Nevers stood at his bedroom window and stared into the inky darkness of yet another unseasonable storm pelting the San Francisco Bay area. Deep in thought, he didn't even flinch when the wet branches of the large oak tree slapped against the pane of glass.

Tonight he and Angie had invited a group of friends from work to help them celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Normally, he looked forward to entertaining guests, but tonight it had no appeal. Other worries troubled his mind. Like the young eager beaver intern Bill Crane, who the company had hired for the summer, who'd uncovered a questionable entry in the accounting books and brought it to Bud's attention

The young man had pointed out how he thought it odd that the ABC Wafer Company had been receiving fifty thousand dollars on the same day every month for the past year. He'd asked Bud if he knew who they were and what service they provided.

Bud couldn't answer the question. Crane went on to explain he'd never seen this company listed on the stock market nor had he ever heard of them. When Bud learned this, he immediately became suspicious.

He moved away from the window when Angie raced out of the bathroom, towels wrapped around her head and body. "We're running late," she said, her blue eyes twinkling. "Our guests will be here in thirty minutes." She sat down at the dressing table, turned on the make-up lights and rubbed her fingers over her cheeks. "Oh, look at these bags under my eyes." She stuck out her tongue at the reflection in the mirror.

Bud grinned. Not only did she appear in his eyes as the most beautiful woman in the world, but she also had a sense of humor, a rare combination. Desire filled him as he watched her unwrap the turban and shake her head. Dark brown hair, laced with gray, tumbled down her back. At forty-seven she still looked like a goddess.

Strolling over behind her, he put his hands on her bare, lightly freckled shoulders and winked at her image in the mirror. Then gently working his fingers under the towel, he fondled her full breasts. "Hmm, only thirty minutes. Then we'll have to hurry."

A smile twitched her lips as she turned toward him and let the towel fall to the floor. He wrapped his arms around her slender body and carried her to the bed.

Angie Nevers had been in love with Bud from the minute she'd seen him on the football field. He'd planned to make the game his profession, but a knee injury ended those dreams. Now he headed his own company, Nevers' Computer Technology, and was doing exceptionally well.

She ran her hands over his back, feeling the ripples of his muscles. How she loved this man. Since she'd not been able to have children, all her devotion centered on him.

After their lovemaking, he hugged her close, nuzzling the crook of her neck. When she started to laugh, he raised up and looked at her with narrowed hazel eyes. A twig of his dusty-blond hair lay across his brow.—

"Now what's so funny? Am I not doing this right after all these years?"

Kissing the tip of his nose, she shook her head. "You're wonderful, but we have company arriving and we're up here making mad passionate love. You're going to have to get dressed, go downstairs and make excuses for me." She wagged a finger at him. "And don't you dare tell our guests what we've been up to."

A lazy grin spread across his face as he padded toward the shower. "Hey, they wouldn't believe me. After twenty-five years of marriage, they probably don't think we do this anymore."

Angie laughed and tossed a pillow at him as he closed the bathroom door. Shortly, Bud dressed and hurried down the stairs, leaving his wife to finish getting ready.

Later that evening, champagne flowed and a buzz of happiness filled Angie. When the doorbell sounded, she spotted Bud across the room, deeply engrossed in conversation with some

of the company's employees. She set her drink on the table and proceeded toward the entry. When she opened the door, her gaze met the most piercing green eyes she'd ever seen. "Yes, can I help you?"

The young woman facing her calmly removed a raincoat revealing a striking green silk dress that matched those penetrating eyes. She smiled tightly. "Sorry I'm late."

Angie frowned. She knew everyone they'd invited, but not this woman. "I'm sorry. I don't think we've met."

"I'm Melinda. Could you tell Mr. Nevers I've arrived?"

A wave of uneasiness swept over Angie, but she stepped back. "Come in out of the wind. Wait here and I'll go get him."

She weaved her way through the crowded living room, pulled Bud into the hallway and whispered. "There's a woman at the door asking for you, but I don't think she's one of your employees. I've never seen her before."

He took a swig of his drink and glanced around the room. "Looks like everyone's here. What's her name?"

She shrugged. "Melinda."

Bud coughed, handed her his glass and hurried toward the entry.

Angie watched him take the woman by the arm and lead her back out on the covered veranda, closing the door behind them. She paced the living room, chatting with friends, and tried to steal a glimpse out the front windows without being too obvious. But after fifteen minutes, she couldn't stand it any longer and peeked out the front door. "Bud?"

When he didn't answer, she stepped out on the porch and found him standing alone, staring into the darkness, his hands stuck deep into his pockets. She slipped an arm through his. "Is everything okay?"

He looked out over the parked cars in front of the house. "Yeah."

Her gaze followed his and she squinted into the darkness. "Where'd that woman go?"

He patted her hand. "She left."

"What'd she want?"

"I'll tell you about it later." He guided her toward the door. "We better get back to our guests."

The minute they stepped inside, Bud dropped her hand and headed toward a group of men standing on the far side of the room, without giving her his usual wink. She sensed he didn't want to talk about the woman, but why? Who was this Melinda *and* what had she said that altered his mood so much?

Bud's drinking escalated as the evening progressed. After the last guest finally departed, he headed for the bedroom. She started to follow, but stopped at the foot of the stairwell and watched him stumble up the stairs. He didn't even glance her way or say good night. When the door slammed, she let out a long sigh and decided to stay downstairs to help Marty, her housekeeper and cook, clean up.

Angie finally made it upstairs, kicked off her shoes and dressed for bed. She crawled under the covers and slid close to Bud, slipping an arm round his chest. He'd fallen into a deep sleep, snoring rhythmically. She worried about the distance that he'd put between them after Melinda's visit tonight. The questions would have to wait. She turned on her back and stared at the ceiling while listening to the house creak and groan as it settled for the night. The first thing tomorrow she'd find out what that woman wanted. Whatever she'd said to Bud had definitely bothered him.

The next morning, Angie rolled over to hug her husband, but her hand fell onto an empty mattress and her eyes snapped open. She glanced at the clock. "Damn. It's nine o'clock. He's already left for the golf course."

She shrugged into her robe, then slowly went down the winding staircase, smiling as she

slid her hand along the ornate bannister. She always imagined what a beautiful picture it would be seeing a daughter walk down these stairs in her first formal. All her married life she'd dreamed of having a girl to dress up and a boy to play sports for Bud. She sighed and pushed the sad thought away.

Marty Casale, only two years older than Angie, stood at the counter rolling out biscuit dough with a flour-speckled apron tied around her thin but shapely body. She turned and smiled, her face almost as pretty as Angie's, except for the deep lines etched in her forehead and around her mouth. A face depicting a hard life. "Good morning, Mrs. Nevers. What would you like for breakfast? Biscuits are almost ready."

"A nice cup of black coffee to start." Angie rubbed her temples. "Champagne always gives me a headache."

"You gave a nice party."

"Thank you. But no one would miss a celebration that served Marty Casale's hors d'oeuvres."

Marty's cheeks turned a rosy pink. She ducked her head, grinning broadly.

Pouring a cup of coffee, Angie touched Marty's shoulder. "I'll eat with Bud when he gets back from golfing. You know him, a creature of habit. Hell hit this door famished as soon as his game is over."

- Ken Weber, Bud's right hand man at the company, accompanied him on the golf course. They'd known each other since college and together had formed Nevers' Computer Technology: Bud, the CEO and Ken, the president.

Ken stood head and shoulders above the foursome of men as they said their good-byes at

the edge of the course alongside the parking lot. Bud turned his clubs over to the caddy and started for the club house. Ken's long strides soon caught up with his rapid pace. "Hey, Buddy, what's with you today? Your game showed maybe too much champagne last night?"

"Partly."

Bud had noticed Ken eyeing him through the set of eighteen holes and expected his questions.

"Something bothering you?"

"You could say that." Bud paused, "Melinda paid me a visit."

Ken stopped in his tracks, his sharp green eyes narrowed. "When?"

Bud continued walking. "Last night at the party."

"What the hell?" He hastened up alongside Bud. "I didn't see her."

"Fortunately, I stopped her before she got inside"

"Shit. What'd she want?"

"You realize shes graduated from college and is twenty-three years old? Hard to believe."

Ken nodded.

"She doesn't want the money to stop. If it does, she'll talk. Said her mother's furious, but she doesn't care. She's taking the matter into her own hands now." He halted and looked at Ken.

"But that's not all that's bothering me. What in the hell is ABC Wafer Company?"

Startled, Ken stepped back. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not an accountant, Ken. But something fishy is going on with the books."

Ken rubbed the back of his neck and looked out over the golf course. "Damn. Then we better get an auditor."

A woman's voice from across the parking lot distracted them. "Ken! Bud! How'd you do?"

Sandy, Ken's wife, who'd been playing tennis on the club's courts, came toward them.

"Oh dear, looks like I've interrupted a serious conversation."

Bud watched Ken put on a big grin and slip his arm around her shoulders. "No problem, just trying to figure out why Bud's swing fell so short today."

Sandy raised a finely-arched brow and grinned. "What you're saying is the other guys whipped your butts."

Bud forced a smile. "Yeah, something like that."

She glanced at Ken. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." He threw a skeptical look over his shoulder at Bud. "We'll talk later."

Bud watched the couple walk away. Then with a sigh, he headed toward his car in the parking lot.

Driving home, he thought about how he'd broach the subject of Melinda to Angie. It wouldn't be easy, he knew she'd be full of questions. Suddenly, a news bulletin came over the radio mentioning the local high school. Bud turned up the volume. He learned that Highway Seventeen had been closed due to a serious accident involving a semi-truck and a school bus full of high school seniors heading for the beach. He remembered Ken mentioning that his twin girls were going to the beach with their school today. Swerving to the side of the road, he made a U-turn.

The minute he approached the Weber's driveway, he saw Ken and Sandy backing out. He sensed the twins were on that bus. Ken rolled down the car window, his face pallid. "There's been a wreck."

Bud nodded. "I heard on the radio. That's why I'm here. Any news?"

In tears and looking on the verge of hysteria, Sandy wiped her eyes. "Not yet." Her voice trembled. "We're on our way to the hospital now."

Bud watched as they gunned past him. "Dear God," he said aloud. "I do believe things come in threes. First the accounting entry, then Melinda's visit and now this wreck."

When he got home, he rushed inside and tuned the television to the local news station.

Angie hurried into the TV room. "What is it?"

He pointed at the screen. "Bad wreck. The Weber twins were on that school bus."

Her hand went to her mouth as she stared at the overturned yellow bus hanging half way over the edge of the road. "Are you sure the girls were on it?"

"Yeah, I just left Ken and Sandy. They're pretty shook up and were headed for the hospital."

Angie slid into the chair, her eyes glued to the TV coverage of the grisly wreck as paramedics lifted a stretcher with a covered body into an awaiting ambulance.

Bud shot a sideways glance at her, folded his arms across his chest and continued to watch the news. He felt guilty that this tragedy bought him time at the expense of the Webers' girls. At least for a while, he wouldn't have to answer questions about Melinda.