

chapter one

The streets of downtown Charleston were deserted, almost silent except for the redundant racket of the occasional cicada. Dim street lamps hummed overhead, and the humidity of the August night wrapped everything in its thick presence. Elizabeth Wilcott's feet held to the steady rhythm as her running shoes connected with pavement still soft from the heat of the day. Her ponytail slapped against the back of her wet T-shirt, keeping time with her pace.

Elizabeth liked to run at night; that way she wasn't limited to sidewalks. She didn't like limitations. At night she could run in the middle of the street without the nuisance of vehicles or horse-drawn carriages or camera-laden, plaid-shorts-wearing tourists. Besides, no woman had ever been more determined to silence her demons, and fighting the ones that lurked in dark places was a commitment she had made to herself years ago.

At least that's what she thought running at night proved.

Her mind pounded with the rhythm of her feet. Tomorrow. The reading of the will. Her father, Clayton Wilcott, dead. She was an orphan. Siblings didn't count—not hers anyway. She was alone.

Yet her father's death also brought with it another redefining for her. His fortune. For her entire thirty-three years, his money had sifted to her through *his* fingers. Soon her own fingers would determine how it would filter into her world.

Elizabeth envisioned her inheritance, saw it piling up in places predetermined by her alone. From such a position of power she could control everything around her. She had known influence and success

as a commercial real estate lawyer. But more satisfying than that was the respect that followed her, and she had done it all without plastering her face on a billboard or a television commercial. The real estate market in Charleston was strong—the second largest industry in the city, next to tourism. She didn't suffer for work. The money was good, the authority satisfying.

But money like her father had—well, money like that could accomplish almost anything.

Yet still something nagged at her. A premonition, maybe. A pressure in her gut every time she thought about tomorrow. She had felt it since the funeral a week ago. The foreboding feeling that somehow, as good as it all sounded, it might not turn out the way she expected. And in the thickness of the hot, salty darkness she almost felt as if she were wearing the uneasiness.

She tried to shake off her pessimism—a futile effort. She had been shaking at it for years, and still it clung to her like the sweat hanging on her brow. She wiped the sweat away with the sleeve of her T-shirt, her own salt mixing with the brine from the harbor air. The shirt clung to her chest and stuck to her back.

Elizabeth stopped running and slowed her pace for a cool-down walk. She paced along the narrow pathways of what the Charleston guide books called White Point Gardens, but to the locals it was the Battery. Her breathing steadied as she let the familiarity of the city she loved soothe her anxiousness.

She walked through the Williams Music Pavilion, erected in the center of the historic space. Tourists flocked here during the day to hear its history, both real and make-believe. Tour guides loved to add their own local flavor to their narratives, and some of the stories had been repeated so often they had become part of the city's history, as real as the water bugs that scurried on sidewalks or lurked in bedrooms.

During the day many of the natives sat on their porches offering warm smiles and innate hospitality—and sometimes a glass of sweet tea—to passing tourists who had come to take a peek into their gardens. Later in the evening, when the tourists had wandered off to find some “taste of Charleston” or returned to their bed-and-breakfasts,

the locals would come out to tend their immaculate garden courtyards and reclaim the sidewalks as their own.

But few were ever out doing what Elizabeth was doing at this time of evening. At least not alone anyway. She continually had to remind her fear who was boss, and on most occasions it agreed. Her father had admired her tenacity, had actually helped develop it in her. Yet he had never really understood where the fear she fought so hard to hide had come from. She never told him. A father should know.

That same tenacity explained why Elizabeth Wilcott was so good at the law firm that bore her name—and hers alone. She had a couple of attorneys working with her who wanted to become partners, but she wasn't ready to carve out space on her placard. Besides, none of them would do it quite like she would, and sharing accolades wasn't one of her strengths. She had never really played well with others.

Nor did she willingly share space in her bed, at least not space that included a bag and a toothbrush. Commitment held the desire of unsweet tea. None. Sharing her bed meant sharing closet space and bathroom space. She needed her *own* space.

She had been independent since she was eleven, the year her mother, Rena Wilcott, died. That was the year her life changed. She went from being her mother's little girl to surrogate mother and surrogate wife. Her baby sister clung to her, her father depended upon her, and her little soul aged. The year she turned fourteen, when she realized no one had taken care of her the way she had taken care of them, she turned her back on them. If she was going to have to fend for herself, so would they.

But in spite of how she had come to regard her family, there was still the name to protect. Her pathetic excuse for an older brother, who should have shouldered more responsibility, had turned out to be a total failure at commitment and an embarrassment to the family name. Someone had to uphold the Wilcott name with the respect it was due. She was the only one capable.

Elizabeth ran her hands down the still-warm wrought iron railing as she descended the steps from the gazebo toward a nearby park bench. She sat back and tried to yield her body into its metal. It

didn't give. She didn't mind. She leaned her body over, resting her elbows on her knees, placing her head in her hands.

Her mind reviewed the last years of her father's life and the senility and oddness that accompanied him. Those years had only made her more certain that she needed to get out from under his influence—in business as well as her personal life. Five years ago she had set out to build her own firm, even though she had to use every penny of her annual \$200,000 trust to do it. She didn't need that trust fund anymore. She was making it nicely on her own. She only took it because it was the least she deserved for what it had ultimately cost her.

She had cried a couple of times since her father's death. Maybe some Wilcott blood still flowed through her veins after all—even if the tears were more self-pity than grief. But still she had cried.

Elizabeth raised her head and extended her arms across the back of the park bench. She could hear the lapping of the river as it hit against the stone barrier wall built to create a peninsula for South Battery Street. She closed her eyes, lost in the soothing rhythm of the water's sound.

The rough hands seized her from behind. As a black bag was jerked down over her head, she caught a glimpse of a white van parked in front of one of the stately mansions on South Battery. She must have run past it without noticing.

The hands lifted her from the park bench and dragged her toward the curb. But she didn't make a sound. Any scream she might have uttered died at the base of her throat, stifled by her own willpower.

Even the one who had heard her scream years ago had paid no attention, and he was supposed to have loved her. Why would strangers care?



Dr. Jeffrey Wilcott pushed the button on his laptop and watched as the computer screen went black in front of him. The silence was absolute. No phones, no voices, no opening and closing of doors—

all activity in the office had ceased hours ago. He moved the two invitations to upcoming social galas to the other side of his desk. He'd have his secretary send the RSVPs tomorrow.

Jeffrey smiled to himself. Being the top name on the Charleston social calendar had its perks. As the eldest sibling of one of the richest families in Charleston and now the *real* heir—as far as he was concerned—he would be invited to everything from galas to birthday parties to baptisms. He'd probably end up as godfather to most of the children born this year.

Maybe he'd be better at being a godfather.

He pulled back the French cuff of his white shirt and looked at his watch. Ten, and he hadn't called home. It hardly mattered. His current bride of two years was probably at a club with her friends while the babysitter watched the kids—his eight-year-old from his last wife, and his ten-month-old from this one.

Theirs was an amicable enough marriage, at the very least a smart business move. He repaired her drooping parts, and she hung on his arm as an example of his fine work. He had chosen plastic surgery a little over a decade ago, right about the time Southern women were catching on to what women in New York and L.A. had known for ages: the body you came into the world with didn't have to be the body you went out with.

Jeffrey picked up his cell phone and slipped it into the pocket of his suit coat. He locked the office door, closed it behind him, and headed for the elevator. It dinged and opened immediately, then slid shut, leaving him smiling at his own reflection in the polished glass.

He did love his job. Not only because it gave him a wonderful living—even if he didn't need it, given his large trust fund—but because he enjoyed the sculpting process: uplifting breasts, trimming thighs, tightening stomachs. Making noses daintier, cheekbones higher, lips poutier. He enjoyed the women who submitted to his scalpel. Why not? He had found his last two wives that way, after all.

Not his first though. He had met Claire in college, been crazy about her and certain it would last forever. But then a kid came early, and the first woman who came into his office wanting a boob job had

been a welcome diversion to a new baby at home and a hormonal wife. No one had ever warned him of the dangers of such distractions.

Claire now lived on James Island with their son, Jacob. The boy had contacted Jeffrey a time or two. Jeffrey would always ask if he needed money, but he never did. So, what else was there to offer him? Claire hadn't been interested in his money either. He couldn't understand it, but he didn't argue with her over it. Nor had he shed any tears over the loss of his marriage or his child. Their absence, in fact, made life less complicated.

His second wife, Priscilla, made up for that. She could drink her weight in Jack Daniel's and ended up trying to knife him one night in a drunken rage over his affair with wife number three. He had gotten out of that with their kid, Matthew, and no alimony. Unfortunately, prison didn't provide child care, but he had to consider himself lucky anyway. He had come out alive, and the kid had turned out to be a rather unobtrusive add-on to his life. Jennifer, wife number three, had signed a prenup as tight as her recently Botoxed forehead and given him his first daughter, Jessica.

He rarely saw Jennifer or the kids. Jeffrey spent his days at the office and his nights—well, most of those were spent with Pamela, the exotic publicist he had hired for his recent ad campaign on the new hair-removal cream. Half the billboards around town had her face on them—reason enough for any woman with peach fuzz to head straight to his office. He had seen an almost 20 percent rise in sales since the campaign started. And even though Pamela's flawless Portuguese beauty didn't require any improvement from his professional skills, he had managed to convince her of his personal ones.

The bell dinged and the elevator doors opened at the parking garage. A stale smell struck him at the entrance—he had never been sure whether it was mold or just what a garage smelled like. An unidentified hum, possibly an air-conditioner compressor, provided the background white noise to the slap of his own soles against the pavement.

This had been Jeffrey's first day back to work since his father's death. He had taken a week off for the sake of his image, to show a

semblance of grief. Only he would have to know any feelings for his father had taken a week off years ago. The work had piled up. And he'd be gone most of the day tomorrow with the reading of his father's will.

Tomorrow would officially change his life. With all the wealth he was about to inherit, he might never show up again. He could get rid of wife number three and the baby she'd had, send his son off to a nice boarding school up north, and travel the world enjoying good wine and good food and—well, the delicious Portuguese Pamela.

But there was something else that money would buy him. Respect. He'd no longer just be the son of the man with the money. After tomorrow, he would simply be the man.

And for some reason that respect mattered. His mother had always seen his potential, but she died when he was thirteen, and something died inside of him too. His father had been too consumed with his own success to care about a grieving teenage son. And so Jeffrey created his own kingdom, one that never merited his father's attention or approval until about five years ago.

But by then it was too late. There had been no reconciliation.

He reached his car, pushed the remote, and extended a hand toward the unlocked door. But before he caught hold of the handle, he heard the roar of an engine and the squeal of tires. Footsteps sounded behind him. A black hood was thrown over his head. He grabbed for his cell phone, but it slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor. A powerful grip subdued his struggling and flung him into the waiting van. He heard the metal doors slide shut.

Jeffrey was not accustomed to fear, but at the moment his heart was hammering so hard it threatened to burst. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. It would have worked had such a situation not perpetuated honesty. And that honesty let him know that not a soul in the world would even care if he came home tonight or not.

And then he smelled it. Cologne. Expensive. Familiar.

But he couldn't place it.



Mary Catherine wiped the spaghetti sauce from her army green tank top and inspected her jeans for any more thick red dots. Her husband, Nate, had run out to grab a box of spaghetti. It was nearly ten, and they hadn't eaten yet. But they hadn't recovered from European time since they returned to the Isle of Palms from their honeymoon, and then with her father's death, her whole system had been thrown off kilter. Now her internal timer thought dinner was better at bedtime.

The sheer white curtains rustled slightly in a breeze from the open French doors. The scent of salt water came off of the ocean and mixed pleasantly with the rich smell of her sauce. From the stereo Michael Bublé was singing "Try a Little Tenderness." Mary Catherine sang along, doing a shuffling little dance with the wooden spoon. Coco, her chocolate Lab, lapped up the stray sauce from the hardwood floors beneath her bare feet.

The sheer pleasantness of the evening brought a tender aching for her daddy. Mary Catherine was the only one of his children who really spent any time with him. She had checked in on him often during his last stages of cancer, had sat at his bedside remembering her mother with him, even though her own memories were few. She had been so little when her mother had died.

Now her father was dead too. And though she hated to admit it, his passing did do one thing that his living would not have accomplished. Her trust fund was nice, but she could spend that up in a month. With what she was about to inherit tomorrow, she and Nate could spend the next year traveling the world—the only real desire she had in this life.

The others in her family thought Mary Catherine was obsessed with travel. They had never understood. She didn't care. Let them be responsible; she wanted to see the world, appreciate its food, its architecture, its beautiful treasures. She wanted to make love with Nate in exotic countries and unexpected places, and when they returned home open up a surf shop for him and an antique store for her. She would sell all the amazing things she had purchased on her travels, then travel more to acquire new things. They could do what they

wanted, and she wouldn't have to worry about using that education her father had insisted upon.

Every one of Clayton Wilcott's children was required to go to college. It wasn't an option. To get your trust, you had to go to school. Her older two siblings had taken the whole school thing to the extreme—one a doctor, the other a lawyer. Mary Catherine had resigned herself to study education with an emphasis in literature because she figured it would be easy. As many books as she consumed, it seemed practical.

But Danielle Steel hadn't been a good segue into Updike and Hemingway, so five years and two summer schools later, she had barely passed. Then came the torturous student teaching semester, and again she scraped by, doing just enough to convince her supervisor that children wouldn't be harmed under her care. She had met Nate her final year of school, and after two years of living together—much to her father's disapproval—they figured it would take, and went ahead and got married. Nate quit his job, and she had taken him to surf all the great oceans of the world. It was the perfect life.

Mary Catherine sang quietly as she picked up the wooden spoon to taste the spaghetti sauce. But the spoon never made it to her mouth.

Without warning, someone jerked a hood over her face. There was a noise. A bark. A scuffle. The scent of salty night air. The slamming of a van door.

As the van squealed away into the night, Mary Catherine began to pray. She wasn't sure why she prayed, or whom she was praying to. But somewhere, ingrained in her memory, her mother's prayers rose to the surface of her mind. And if there ever was a time for prayer, this was probably it.



Will closed the door of his new Porsche and let the crumbs from the hamburger he had just eaten fall from his weathered jeans. Two boys hollered from the window of a passing car. He gave them a wave, their music still reverberating long after they were gone. He fingered

the soft leather strap of his key ring and blew upward, trying to shift his tousled brown hair out of his eyes. He could smell his own alcohol-laden breath as he headed across the street to the fraternity house. Poker with the boys usually got started around ten. They'd be waiting for him.

His frat brothers loved having him around; his trust fund gave him deep pockets. And they would be even deeper come tomorrow after the reading of his father's will.

Will wasn't sure if he missed the old man or not. He had pretty much stayed drunk since the funeral. But it didn't matter. It had never mattered.

He had never mattered. His birth, he knew, had been unplanned and unexpected. His mother had died when he was three. His father had never been available. None of his multiple caregivers had ever—well, cared.

Nothing mattered. So he just enjoyed living his life. No responsibilities, just school at the College of Charleston. As a senior for the second year at age twenty-three, he figured he could milk at least three more years out of college. Just last year he had told his father to consider his first year like redshirting on the football team. He'd be eligible awhile longer.

His fraternity kept him on as president for reasons he was certain had everything to do with his charming personality. He took them to his family's plantation and to the beach for an oyster shuck. Fine food, fast women, endless alcohol. It was the perfect life. Good buddies. Good beer. Good fun.

Yet Will had found one conquest not readily attainable. She had caught his attention last year, but she wouldn't have anything to do with him. Said he had a reputation for things she wasn't interested in.

She was the only one who wasn't interested. Other women hounded him like a dog to a bone. She never even sniffed.

That drove him crazy. *She* drove him crazy. He had made a bet with the boys that he would have her by summer's end. It didn't happen. They offered him an extension until Christmas. At the rate of the wager, it was worth the risk.

His key ring slipped from his hand and jingled as the keys hit the pavement. Maybe he'd had one too many before he left his condo on Laurens Street. His knuckles brushed the warm asphalt as he reached down to pick them up, but before he could get to them somebody threw a black hood over his head and began to drag him away.

Will laughed. He loved it when the frat brothers pulled a prank. Last one ended up at a strip club. Who knew what they had up their sleeve tonight? He didn't put up a fight, didn't struggle. Why should he? He'd just go along for the ride.