

## Chapter One

The Houston mansion was huge. Dark. Deserted.

Except for the corpse hanging in the living room.

Or whatever the hell rich people called the big, fancy room where nobody ever actually lived. The football-field-sized ones with the white marble floors and the giant crystal chandeliers dangling overhead. This one, just like the rest of the house, was empty, its furnishings, etc., in storage somewhere waiting for the government to auction them off.

“You should’ve talked when you had the chance, Jeffy-boy,” Finn Bradley said to the corpse as he grimly surveyed it. His voice was soft, but the words seemed to echo off the pale marble walls – hell, for all he knew the ceiling was marble. It soared thirty feet above his head, which made it kind of hard to tell

The electricity had been cut off, so pale moonlight pouring in through the windows was all he had to go by, but he was confident that the death looked like a suicide.

It wasn’t.

Jeff Cowan, the twenty-nine-year-old son of disgraced financier George Cowan, who had made off with billions of investor dollars in one of the biggest financial frauds in history, had just become one more piece of collateral damage in the war to recover the missing money. Jeff was slight – okay, so maybe nearly everybody seemed slight when compared to Finn’s own six-three, two hundred twenty pound self – blond and classically handsome. He’d had the most expensive of educations. The most expensive of everythings. His parents had doted on him. He had a host of rich-scion-type friends. Yet here he was, his bare feet dangling at approximately Finn’s eye level, wearing a pair of gym shorts and a tee shirt, his face contorted in death, the smell of ammonia from where he had pissed himself stinking up the air around him. To all outward appearances, he had wrapped an electrical cord around his neck, attached one end to the wrought iron railing of the second floor gallery looking down on the room, and leaped over, thus breaking his own damned neck.

Finding a motive was easy: the shame of his father’s crime, the unaccustomed poverty into which he had been plunged, the relentless investigations as every law enforcement agency under the sun tried to ferret out who else had been involved in the fraud and *what had happened to the money*, had proved to be too much for the pampered darling of one of Houston’s wealthiest families. The ME could bring in a suicide verdict and nobody would question it.

Only a select few would know the verdict was bullshit.

Finn wrapped a hand around Cowan's wrist. He'd seen enough death to know what it looked like, so he didn't bother to check for a pulse. What he was checking for was body temperature.

Cowan was still warm. No sign of rigor mortis. No sign of blood pooling in the extremities. The smell of urine was still strong.

He'd been dead under an hour. Maybe *way* under an hour. As in he could have been killed in the last fifteen minutes or so.

*Shit.*

It was possible that whoever had killed him was still around. Finn tightened his grip on his gun as he scanned the room, paying particular attention to the nearly impenetrable darkness shrouding the overhead gallery. He didn't get the feeling that anyone was up there, but -

"You find Cowan?" inquired the voice in his head. At least, that was how Finn thought of his unwanted partner, David Baxter. The ear bud was almost as bad as having Baxter in there with him. Not quite, though. Bax tended to lose his cool when things didn't go according to plan. If he'd been standing there beside Finn at that moment instead of waiting in a parked car across the street from the ornate iron gates that were closed and padlocked by order of the U.S. government, Bax would be shitting bricks.

"Yep," Finn replied, then added, "He's dead."

The shit bricks started to drop, as Finn had known they would. Bax's voice went shrill.

"Are you *serious*?" He didn't wait for Finn's confirmation, because he knew Finn wasn't a joking-around kind of guy. "Goddamn it! You weren't supposed to kill him!"

Before Finn could reply, the distant, barely audible click of a door being unlocked had him pivoting in the direction from which it had come. There was no mistaking the subsequent sounds: somebody was coming in the front door.

His eyes narrowed. His muscles tensed.

"Somebody's here," he growled at Bax, who was supposed to be keeping watch. "Do your fucking job."

"What?" Bax sputtered. "Me? Me do *my* job? You fucking do yours! You weren't supposed to kill -"

That was all Finn heard, because as he retreated into the shadows at the far side of the room he savagely pulled the damned annoying piece of plastic out of his ear and shoved it into his pocket.

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“Jeff?” Riley Cowan called. Her voice was tight with anger.

Flipping on the light switch near the door was a waste of time. The electricity had been shut off weeks before for non-payment, shortly before the government had seized the house, but out of habit she flipped the switch anyway. Big surprise: the darkness stayed dark. Fortunately she knew her way around. Her former in-laws’ former mansion once had been her home, too. When Jeff had first brought her here, she’d been a twenty-one year old newlywed straight from Philadelphia’s poverty-stricken North Side, where she’d been working as a cocktail waitress to put herself through college. Jeff’s parents’ wealth had been as much of a surprise to her as her existence had been to them. That was seven years ago. A lot had changed since then. To begin with, she and Jeff were divorced.

Riley waited just inside the front door: Jeff didn’t answer, didn’t appear. Oakwood – all the mansions in Houston’s exclusive River Oaks neighborhood had names - was a big place, eight bedrooms, ten baths, 15,000 sumptuous square feet, with its own swimming pool and tennis court and guest/staff house. Given that, even though Jeff was expecting her it was possible that he hadn’t heard her calling him. It was also possible that he was drunk off his ass and passed out somewhere, or so drugged up he was practically out of his mind. Actually, knowing him, one of those scenarios was more than possible: it was likely.

The question she should be asking herself was, exactly how had she ended up becoming her ex-husband’s keeper?

He’d tried calling her first. When she hadn’t answered, he’d texted her: *Got trouble. Meet me at the house ASAP.*

Typical Jeff: the only thing he ever thought about was what *he* needed. The sad part was, she hadn’t followed through on her impulse to text back, *Go to hell.*

Instead, here she was. *Stupid much?*

She’d been finishing up at work when the text had come through. As one of two assistant managers of The Palm Room, one of Houston’s most exclusive clubs, she was in charge of closing for the night on weekends, which Jeff knew. This was Saturday – well, Sunday now, because it was after three a.m. – and he’d known that she would be leaving work just about the time he sent the text. For about three seconds she’d thought about ignoring it, ignoring *him* – working two jobs as she was doing tended to leave her exhausted at the end of the week, and she’d had just about enough of pulling his chestnuts out of the fire – but Jeff had been so unstable lately that she hadn’t been able

to bring herself to do it. She hadn't blasted him, either. Instead, she'd come.

Just like he'd known she would.

Because, despite everything he'd put her through, despite the drinking and drugs and other women that had torpedoed their marriage, part of her still cared about him. She was no longer in love with him – thank God; loving Jeff had been a nightmare – but during the tumultuous years they'd been together he'd somehow managed to become family to her.

Didn't mean she couldn't get ticked off at him, which she definitely was, for dragging her out at this ungodly hour to this place which was full of bad memories and which was government property now, even if the authorities hadn't yet gotten around to doing anything beyond officially seizing it, which so far hadn't included changing the locks. The front gates were padlocked, for God's sake: she'd had to park in a neighbor's driveway – they always spent the summer in Maine, so no one was home to notice or be disturbed – and walk across about an acre of the neighbor's grounds before coming through the garden gate, which the government either didn't know about yet or didn't care about. Trespassing was what she was doing on Jeff's behalf, and last time she'd checked that was a crime.

The knowledge that she was committing a criminal act for him ticked her off even more.

“*Jeff?*” Anger sharpened her voice.

Still no answer.

*Damn it – him – anyway.*

Standing in the cavernous hallway calling to him obviously wasn't going to get the job done. Lips firming, high heels clicking on the vast expanse of white marble floor that was missing the pricy oriental rugs that had softened it just like the house itself was missing its paintings and furnishings and the bowls of fresh flowers (changed every other day) and the uniformed staff that had made it so intimidating to the new bride she had once been, she walked away from the elongated rectangle of moonlight that spilled through the door she was leaving open behind her into the deepening darkness. The house used to smell of furniture polish and flowers: tonight it smelled of mildew and some undefinable stink. Inside, it was hot as an oven because this was July, and Houston was hot as an oven in July, and the air-conditioning had gone with the electricity.

Coming from Jeff, *I got trouble* could mean anything, from *I'm too drunk to drive home* to *I'm dead broke and need to borrow a hundred bucks*. Now that he was no longer Vice-President of Cowan Investments, the defunct family firm, he was essentially unemployed. To be fair, that wasn't entirely his fault. Nobody in Houston, or in Texas, or possibly even the United States or the whole wide world, was going to employ George

Cowan's only son, especially when the feds still suspected that he'd aided his father in his schemes and were investigating him relentlessly. (Jeff hadn't had a thing to do with it; he'd been as clueless about the whole mess as she had been herself.) Of course, there was always employment available at places like McDonald's, or Wal-Mart, as Riley's exasperation had recently led her to snap at him, but she'd known even as she'd said it that the idea of Jeff Cowan working a minimum wage job was laughable.

It wasn't in his DNA.

Good thing *she* wasn't such a delicate flower, or they'd all starve. She'd said that to him, too.

"*Jeff?*" Okay, she was screeching now.

Her voice was still echoing off the walls as she paused at the first arched doorway to her left. It opened into a corridor that led to the green salon, the sun room and the music room. An identical arched doorway to her right led to the library and the card room and the conservatory. When she'd first arrived at Oakwood, she'd thought, *Geez, who has rooms like that?* Now it seemed normal to have pretentiously named rooms that were rarely used.

"*Jeff?*"

Still no answer. Jeff was probably either in the billiards room, which had built-in cushioned benches that could serve as a bed, or out back in the pool area, she calculated. Either choice required her to traverse thousands of square feet of unnervingly empty house. It was dark as pitch toward the end of the hall, where she needed to pass between the two sections of the ornate divided staircase that led to the second floor and walk past another pair of arched doorways to reach the gathering room. The gathering room – a fancy name for what was really a big family room – opened out into the pool area, which was going to be the first place she checked because she didn't want to go all the way down to the lower level where the billiards room was located unless she had to: she had a feeling that the dark down there would be stygian.

*It would serve him right if I turned around and left.*

She would have done it, too, if she hadn't known herself well enough to know that she would have been awake for the rest of the night worrying about him.

*Jeff, you ass.*

Her phone was already clutched tightly in her hand: she pressed a button and held it up, using it as a flashlight. The faint white beam was woefully inadequate, but it was all she had. She continued on toward the gathering room with dogged determination, refusing to let a little thing like a huge, dark, echoing empty house spook her.

*Yeah, right. Who are you kidding?*

“Jeff?” she shouted again.

The twin white marble staircases with their black wrought iron railings curved like swans' necks over her head to meet up on the second floor landing. Faint sounds – a creak, a hiss, a rattle – made her breath catch. She shot a quick glance upward, then aimed the beam of light that way. Nothing but a whole lot of dark. Any one of the sounds might have been made by Jeff, but then again, they could have been made by anything. Houses settle, she reminded herself firmly as she continued on, but that didn't really help the creeping uneasiness that was making the back of her neck prickle.

The mansion felt – alive. That was the only way she knew how to describe it. There was a kind of pulsing energy to it that was unsettling. It was almost like the house had a heartbeat that was throbbing around her. If she'd been imaginative, which thank God she wasn't, she would have sworn that she could hear it breathing.

That she could hear *something* breathing.

*Get a grip.*

If there was any breathing going on, who was it going to be but Jeff? If, say, he was passed out somewhere nearby and hadn't heard her calling him.

On the other hand, it could be anyone – or *anything*.

Her heart thumped.

*Don't be such a wimp*, she told herself impatiently. But as she neared the end of the hall, as darkness swallowed her up and her makeshift flashlight found the closed, arched double doors that opened into the gathering room, she had to admit that she was (maybe just a little bit) afraid. And that ticked her off more than anything else had done so far.

She'd already texted Jeff when she'd arrived. Now she phoned him, using her index finger to savagely punch his contact number. When she heard the muffled sound of his phone ringing – she knew the sound of his ringtone as well as she knew her own - she stiffened, listening.

He was close.

The sound cut off after four rings as his phone went to voicemail, but not before she had zeroed in on its location: the gathering room. Which was right in front of her. Riley frowned. If he was in there, no way he hadn't heard her yelling for him. Either he'd just come inside from the pool, or he had his earphones in, or he was in there passed out.

Or, less likely because he was rarely separated from his phone, he'd left his phone in there and he was elsewhere.

In any case, she knew where to start looking. She took the few steps needed to reach the heavy double doors and pushed them open.

After the darkness at the end of the hall, the moonlight flooding the huge room made it seem almost bright.

"Jeff?"

Her shoes sounded especially loud on the marble as she walked through the doorway and looked around. In here, the faint musty smell had an acidic overtone that she couldn't quite place. The room was the approximate size of a gymnasium, all white marble with a domed ceiling, half-a-dozen French doors looking out onto the pool area, a huge carved-marble fireplace at one end and a gallery – the back side of the second floor landing – running its length. The modest two-bedroom brick house she'd grown up in would have fit in this one room twice over, a fact that she had once found impossibly intimidating. What she'd learned since could be summed up in four words: mo' money, mo' problems. Once upon a time, she wouldn't have believed that, when she was back in Philly scrambling for every dollar.

If Jeff was in there she couldn't see him, but then again shadows lay everywhere and the silvery moonlight didn't quite reach the corners, which made them as dark as the end of the hall. She really didn't scare easily – a lack of imagination could be a useful thing – but right now, under these particular circumstances, she discovered that she was - uneasy. The feeling she was getting that she was not alone wasn't surprising given the fact that Jeff was almost certainly somewhere nearby, but it was annoying. She didn't like having her arms tingle with goosebumps. She didn't like having her stomach flutter, or her pulse quicken. She didn't like having her heart pound like it knew something she didn't.

She didn't like being here, period.

"*Jeff?*" Now *that* was loud. Her voice bounced off the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the resulting echoes putting her even more on edge than before. No answer, either, which ratcheted up her annoyance to a whole new level.

*This is the last time I go running after you*, she promised her ex-husband silently, on the verge of doing what she knew was the smart thing: turning around and leaving him to sort out his own damned mess.

Instead, lips tight with impatience, she scanned the shadowy corners. Could he be passed out on the floor in one of them? Narrowing her eyes, focusing on the darkest part of the room, she cautiously stayed where she was and pressed the redial button on her phone so it would call him back and pinpoint his (or the phone's) location, which

would save her from having to search the entire room. At the same time, she stared hard at one corner in particular, on the left side of the fireplace well beyond the reach of the moonlight. She got the jittery-making feeling that someone was there, and directed her phone/flashlight beam toward it accordingly.

Her voice was sharp. "Jeff! Are you -?"

She broke off abruptly as, behind her, Jeff's phone rang, so close it startled her. Doing a quick about face, she saw nothing but moonlight and shifting shadows.

Puzzled, she peered into the gloom, the words *Damn it, Jeff* just about to fall from her lips.

Then his phone rang again, making her look up. One of the shadows resolved itself into a pair of bare masculine feet dangling limply in the air a little higher than her head.

Riley blinked. The feet were still there.

Her throat tightened.

Long, slim feet. Slightly crooked toes.

She knew them.

*Oh, God. She knew them.*

Riley stopped breathing. She stopped everything. Time seemed to stretch out into an eternity between one heartbeat and the next. She stared at the feet while her stunned mind did its best to reject what she was seeing.

The ringtone blared once more. The sense of being caught in a moment out of time shattered. Riley sucked in air. It was Jeff's ringtone. From Jeff's phone. Following the sound, her gaze slid up over lean bare calves. He was wearing black gym shorts, a black tee: exercise clothes. The phone was *there*, on the lifeless body that hung motionless not ten feet away.

*Jeff's lifeless body.*

Riley's heart lurched. Her stomach dropped straight down to her toes.

There was no mistake: the moonlight streaming in through the French doors touched on Jeff's blonde hair. Fine and pale, it was one of the first things she had noticed about him.

She must have made some kind of strangled sound, because her throat ached like something wild and fierce had just torn its way out of it. She must have moved, because she was suddenly close enough to discover that what she smelled was the ammonia-



like odor of pee: he had wet himself.

*Jeff. My God.*

Limp and pale, he hung suspended in mid-air. Unable to believe what her eyes were telling her, Riley touched his leg. It was solid, all muscle and bone. Of course it was: Jeff was a runner. The fine hairs on it felt silky. His skin was warm. Did that mean...?

She tried to call out to him, but no sound emerged. His wrist was out of reach. Frantically she grabbed his ankle, felt for a pulse. Nothing. No beat. His leg was heavy and inert. She let go, and his whole body moved, but not in a good way. He swung a little, back and forth, from where she had tugged on his ankle.

Horror surged through her in an icy tide.

*Holy Mary Mother of God....*

In this moment of extremis, the teachings of her childhood took over: the Catholic prayer for the dead unspooled with frantic urgency through her head.

Hands shaking now, Riley drew back a step and ran the light from her phone over him.

His head was tilted at an odd angle. Something narrow was wrapped around his neck, digging into the skin beneath his jaw. His face was dark. Purplish. His handsome features were hideously contorted.

His eyes were open. They gleamed dully as the beam hit them. He didn't blink. His pupils were fixed. Unseeing.

It hit Riley then like a thunderclap: *Jeff* was hanging by the neck from the gallery railing. He was *dead*.

Agony exploded inside her chest.

*Oh God. Oh God.*

A scream ripped into her already aching throat, where the constriction of the muscles there strangled it before it could escape.

Everything seemed to blur. The room spun. Her phone fell from her suddenly nerveless fingers. Realization merged with grief merged with fear, combining into a deadly lance that stabbed her through the heart.

*Jeff. Oh, God. Jeff.*

Her knees gave out abruptly, and she crumpled to the floor.