

Chapter 1

Lacey Jordan had figured today would be the day from hell. Sometimes, it was good to be wrong. She smiled as she flipped the sign in the front window of the flower shop and locked the door. She grabbed the deposit and slipped out the back door, ready to shift gears from the busyness of the day to the relaxing evening ahead.

Her faithful classic Firebird, a college graduation gift from her dad a few years back, waited for her. She switched on her headlights in the rapidly encroaching dusk, then after quick stops at the liquor store and the bank, she headed to her dad's farm.

In the years since she'd moved to her place in town, Friday night dinners with her dad had become a favorite tradition. But she had a feeling tonight would be extra special. Her hunch told her he was finally going to ask Mona Nicholson to marry him and as far as Lacey was concerned, it was about time. Mona's fun personality was a perfect foil for her dad's more serious side. Her first foray into matchmaking and she was batting a thousand.

Lacey rolled in and parked behind the house next to her dad's Buick. She grabbed the bottle of wine from the front seat then climbed out of the car. The bright orange and yellow mums she'd brought from the shop adorned the walking paths between the house, the barn, and her dad's office.

She twisted the handle on the back door and stepped inside the comfortable old farmhouse. No one except strangers and salespeople ever used the front door. Lacey strolled into the shadowed kitchen, her tennis shoes squeaking with each step. The table was set for three instead of four, a sure sign that Spencer was still being a jerk about letting his mom get on with her life. Which probably meant no announcement.

She set the wine on the counter and sighed. That was a battle for her dad and Mona to fight.

"Dad? Where are you?" Silence greeted her, broken only by the steady *tick-tock* of the grandfather clock.

She moved through the kitchen and living room, turning on lights as she went. Her pace slowed as she approached the stairs that led to the bedrooms.

"Hello? Dad?" More silence drifted back down the stairs, raising goose flesh on her arms. He'd sounded fine when he called this morning but since his last doctor's appointment had revealed an uptick in his blood pressure and cholesterol his health crossed her mind more frequently than it used to.

Fighting her trepidation, Lacey mounted the steps. After scanning the empty bedrooms, she released the breath she'd been holding. Her dad was her rock, the one constant in her life since cancer had stolen her mom when she was eight. Just thinking about something happening to him caused a pit in her stomach.

Sounds from below interrupted her thoughts. Smiling, she bounded down the stairs and rounded the corner into the kitchen. "Dad, you had me worried. I didn't know where you went." She stopped short as Mona turned from the fridge, a head of lettuce in hand.

"Hey, honey. I'm surprised you beat me here. Was the shop crazy today without Paige? I thought about coming down to help out, but I figured you'd rather I stay home and work on the Christmas quilts."

Lacey shrugged, smiling. "Not terrible. Paige will be back from her honeymoon before the holiday season gets moving. And you know we'll sell out of those quilts as fast as you can make

them.” She grabbed her jacket. “I’ll be back in a minute to help with dinner. Dad must be out in the office.”

Mona winked then reached for the colander. “He’s probably lost track of the time. Call me if you need reinforcements. If he’s knee-deep in a file, it’ll take both of us to pry him out of there.”

With the sun long gone, a brisk chill rode on the autumn breeze. Lacey jogged down the path, her way illuminated by the stark yellow yard light. She unlocked the door to the metal outbuilding that served as her father’s private research retreat, the fluorescent light spilling out into the yard. A quick glance at the two computer workstations yielded no information, and no dad, so she strode past them to the supply room.

Certain she was about to solve her mystery, Lacey turned the handle. “You’re going to be in the doghouse if –”

The words died on her lips as she yanked open the door and was greeted by darkness. She switched on the lights, but a quick walk through revealed that this room, too, was empty.

After retracing her steps to the house, she closed the back door against the cool night air. “Mona, did Dad mention any errands he had to run?”

Mona looked up from chopping lettuce. “He’s not in his office?”

“No. He’s not here anywhere.”

“That’s odd. His car’s here.” Mona paused. “Do you think one of the neighbors came by and needed some help?”

“I guess it’s possible. I’ll make a couple calls.” Lacey tugged a hair tie from her wrist and pulled her hair off her face into a short ponytail then sat down at the table. She dialed the neighbors on either side of their property but neither one had seen her father. Lacey gnawed on her lip her brow furrowed.

“Did you try his cell?”

Wide eyed, Lacey shook her head and laughed. “I’m an idiot. I’m still not used to him carrying it. I tried for years to bring him into the twenty-first century, but all it took from you was a look.”

Grinning, Mona shrugged her petite shoulders. “What can I say? It was a very stern look.”

Lacey punched in the number and waited through two rings before a ring tone pierced the silence. They turned in unison toward the corner hutch. Lacey dashed to the cabinet and dropped to her knees to retrieve the phone.

The anxiety Lacey had tried to ignore came roaring to life. She sat up and looked at Mona, her worry reflected in the older woman’s eyes. This wasn’t right. Not right at all.

Lacey stood and tossed the phone to Mona. “I’m going to see if maybe the four-wheeler’s out of the barn. He’s got to be somewhere around here.”

“Good idea. I’ll call the lab on campus. Maybe someone there has spoken to him.”

Lacey spent an hour combing the property, industrial strength flashlight in hand, before she called it quits. Bone cold and shivering, she prayed Mona had news. But a quick glance at her face told Lacey she wasn’t the only one who’d struck out.

“No luck on the calls?”

Mona shook her head. “I couldn’t get anyone at the school. I was hoping someone would be working late, but no one answered his office line or the phone in the lab.”

Lacey checked her watch. Not surprising. Although the lab rats in the K-State Bioscience department weren’t known to be big partiers, it was still a Friday night in Manhattan. She took a deep breath then blew it out slowly, rubbing her frozen hands together. “Okay. We need to slow down a minute. He’s not here, but there are a million places he could be.” She couldn’t think of a

single one, but that was beside the point. “Let’s not let our imaginations run away with us. We should go ahead and eat. He’ll probably be here before we’re even finished.”

Looking relieved to have a task, Mona nodded. “I’ll toss the salad, if that works for you. I’m not up for a steak and it’s too dark to grill anyway.”

Lacey’s appetite was gone, but she pasted a smile on her face. “Sounds good.”

Minutes later, Mona brought the large bowl of salad to the table. “So,” she said a little too brightly, “everything went smoothly today at the shop?”

The question didn’t fool either of them, but Lacey played along. Filling their plates, she nodded. “Very well actually. Sam’s a huge help.”

Mona smiled. “I think she’s the sweetest young lady. Seems to have a lot of potential.”

Lacey agreed. In the few months since they’d hired her on as their first employee, she’d developed a real knack with the floral arrangements, and she was a natural with the customers. After two years of pinching pennies and running the shop on their own, Lacey and her best friend turned business partner Paige, agreed that Sam was just about perfect.

As Lacey shared the details of her day, she looked at her watch. Again. Time dragged. By ten, the dishes had been dried and put away, the entire pot of coffee finished off, and still her dad hadn’t come home.

Mona ran a hand through her short spiky hair, her normally bright eyes smudged with worry. “Is it okay to say I’m more than a little concerned?”

Lacey rose and gave Mona a quick, reassuring hug. “Yes. And I’ll even give you first dibs on dressing him down when he gets here.”

Minutes ticked by as Lacey paced the kitchen. She replayed the conversation she’d had with her dad that morning and he’d obviously been here this afternoon to set the table.

Mona stepped in front of her, her words chilling Lacey’s blood. “Should we call nine-one-one?”

Their worried gazes locked. Nine-one-one meant emergency. And Lacey didn’t want this to be an emergency. She turned and started digging through the stack of industry magazines on the hutch until she located an old phone book in the back. “I’ll just call the station. Somebody there should be able to help.” She punched in the number and waited through a couple of rings.

“Riley County Police.”

The monotone voice jolted Lacey. With a deep breath, she explained her situation first to the operator and then again to the officer on duty. She answered several questions then, with shaking fingers, punched the end key on her phone before turning to face Mona. “He said twenty-four hours was pretty standard before they start getting concerned.”

“Twenty-four hours is an awfully long time.”

Lacey stretched to loosen the knots in her shoulders. “I know. I’ll call them first thing in the morning. If I need to.” She blew out a deep breath and said a quick, silent prayer that she wouldn’t. “You might as well head home. I’m going to stick around here tonight. I’ll call you with any news.”

Mona looked poised to object but didn’t. She heaved a sigh of her own. “I probably should. Spencer may call the house and wonder why I’m not there.”

Lacey refrained from commenting. Spencer’s issues were the least of her concerns right now.

Mona pulled her jacket around her shoulders. “Will you be okay out here by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine.” Lacey pushed the door closed behind Mona. The night air caused her to shiver. As she twisted the lock and heard it click into place, a thought came unbidden to her mind.

Maybe this was the day from hell after all.