

Dangerous Ally

A Novel by

Michelle Grey

Copyright 2013 by Lucky 13 Unlimited

Cover design by Cover Me Darling

www.covermedarling.com

All Rights Reserved.

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part in any form, is forbidden without the written permission of the author.

ISBN-13:
978-1480189263

ISBN-10:
148018926X

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locations are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

Prologue

“You said he could handle the second dose.”

Panic laced the man’s words. He followed the instructions he was given and latched the handcuffs, staring at the figure lying across the bed. “I can’t tell if he’s even breathing.”

“He’s breathing. He’ll be fine,” the other man growled as he pushed him out of the room. “If you’d dosed him right the first time, he wouldn’t have started to wake up before you got him here.”

“What if he doesn’t wake up at all? If we can’t get the codes, this was all for nothing.” He could hear the whine in his voice and wondered again how the hell he’d gotten into this mess.

The smaller man snarled. “There shouldn’t have been any damn encryption. He must’ve suspected you. Why else would he have scrubbed the data?”

Cowering from the venom in his boss’s voice, his words tumbled out. “I was cool, I swear. I don’t know what spooked him.” A bead of sweat trickled down his spine. “At least we got the laptop.”

They locked the front door and stepped out into the cold chill of early morning. His boss’s lips curled into a ghost of a smile, his eyes gleaming. “Exactly. Nothing else matters. He’s playing my game now. And I’m holding all the cards.”

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 and locked the doors.

Folding her long legs into her vintage Firebird, she shifted gears from the busyness of the day to the relaxing evening ahead. She switched on her headlights in the rapidly encroaching dusk, then after a quick stop to drop off the bank deposit, headed to the farm.

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 she was concerned, it was about time. Mona's fun personality was a perfect foil for her dad's more serious side.

Lacey smiled as she rolled in and parked behind the house next to her dad's Buick. Her first foray into match-making and she was batting a thousand. Grabbing the bottle of wine from the front seat, she climbed out of her 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. In all her years growing up here, no one except strangers and salespeople ever used the front door. Lacey strolled into the shadowed kitchen, her tennis shoes squeaking with each step. Squinting, she noticed the table had been 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 meant no announcement.

She sat 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, she had to admit that his health crossed her mind more frequently than it used to.

Fighting her trepidation, Lacey mounted the steps. After scanning the empty rooms, 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 away 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. “A little bit, but not bad. Paige’ll 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 opened 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.

Retracing her steps to the house, she closed the back door against the cool night air.

Where on earth could he have gone?

“Mona, did Dad mention any errands he had to run?”

Wiping her hands, Mona looked up. “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.” Tugging a hair tie from her wrist, Lacey pulled her tawny hair off her face into a short pony tail before sitting 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?”

Lacey blinked. What the hell was wrong with her? She hadn’t even thought about calling his cell. Shaking her head, she laughed. “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. Dashing to the cabinet, Lacey dropped to her knees, her fingers reaching toward the sound.

The anxiety Lacey had tried to ignore came roaring to life. She looked at Mona, her fear reflected in Mona’s eyes. This wasn’t right. Not right at all.

Lacey hopped to her feet and tossed the phone to Mona. “I’m going outside. I need 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 school. Maybe someone there has spoken to him,” Mona said, digging her own phone out of her purse.

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 the older woman's face told Lacey that 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 quite nine. 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."

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's shoulders a quick, reassuring squeeze. "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. Had she missed something?

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."

"Riley County Police."

The monotone voice jolted Lacey. *Do not freak out.* With a deep breath, she explained her situation first to the operator and then again to the officer on duty.

Leaning against the wall, 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."

My thoughts exactly. 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, the night air causing 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.