



CHAPTER 1

“CAN YOU STAY?” HE asked her.

“Jens is picking me up at eight,” Michelle explained.

“Forget about him. I’ll give you a ride home,” Roy offered.

“I’m tired,” she protested, tilting her head from side to side to stretch her weary neck and shoulders. “Not that I don’t appreciate what you’re doing for me, Roy, letting me work extra hours so I can afford to pay off the last of my college loans, and I only have—”

“Two weeks left before graduation,” he interrupted. “I know, I know. You’ve always wanted to be a doctor and you’re one step closer. It’s great that you’re following your dream.”

“My dream right now is to go home and get some sleep. You have me scheduled to be back here at six o’clock tomorrow morning. Or did you forget?”

“I never forget,” he said, staring at her through his glasses. “You punched in at exactly five fifty-eight, two minutes ahead of time. You probably arrived at five forty-five, drank your first cup of coffee, and put your lunch in the employee break room refrigerator.”

She glanced sideways at him and said, “Okay, that’s weird, Roy.”

It was as if he hadn't heard her. "You took your morning break at nine ten until nine twenty, shorting yourself five minutes."

Ever since they'd first met in high school, Michelle had known he was a bit off. She had felt sorry for him and he'd had a crush on her. Maybe that's why they became quick friends. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered if he'd ever truly outgrown that schoolboy crush. But after almost fifteen years of deflecting his advances, she hoped he had moved on and was only an attentive friend. His account of her every move didn't give her confidence in that assumption.

"You took a lunch break from eleven thirty-five to noon, again shorting yourself five minutes. You ate your lunch while reading a book, probably a mystery," Roy recited mechanically, handing can after can of fruits and vegetables to Michelle to shelve.

"Stop!" Michelle felt her breath catch as she realized Roy Barker was not kidding.

Her mind flashed to all the times in recent months when she and Jens had seen Roy around town when they went out. He just happened by their table at the Millstone, hinting that he should join them for brunch. And they caught a glimpse of him at Canyon Lake Park when they were feeding the ducks, as though he'd stood watching them before he jogged away on the bike path. Maybe Jens had been right about Roy's obsession with her, Michelle thought.

"You took a ten-minute afternoon break at four fifteen and haven't taken a break since. You expertly averted the advances of that wannabe biker dude shortly after, even though he was putting a full-court press on you to become his lady."

"His lady?" Michelle shot back, disturbed that his creepy mania was spiraling out of control. "Roy, what are you talking about?"

Just as her mind raced to find an excuse to end this conversation, Michelle saw Roy's eyes narrow as he stared past her shoulder and down the aisle. She turned slowly to see what had distracted him from his bizarre fixation on the minutiae of her life.

Three bikers were walking toward them. These were motorcycle club bikers, the real deal, the kind who were known for illegal activities like selling drugs. The outlaw bikers who often started trouble—mostly with other such

bikers, but trouble nonetheless. The police watched them closely during the rally; authorities by the hundreds were flown in from all over the country for the week. And because Jens had pointed it out to her last year, Michelle knew what it meant to be flying colors, and that the authorities generally prohibited it during the rally to help prevent knife fights and shootings. These three bikers, however, were most definitely flying their colors.

The well-worn black leather jackets were decorated with patches and badges, and the skinny biker on the right was wearing a red and silver skullcap with the Lucifer's Lot logo stitched neatly across the front. The scary-looking guy in the middle was staring directly at her.

The Lucifer's Lot was one of the motorcycle gangs that were banned now and again from crossing South Dakota state lines because of the trouble they caused with the Inferno Force. Michelle had read about them in the newspapers years ago and tried to recall niggling details about a gunfight or ambush that involved the two gangs near Stockade Lake in Custer State Park. A drug deal gone wrong or something.

Roy stepped between Michelle and the men to shield her while she scuttled to her feet. Watching Roy draw in air to inflate his chest, Michelle thought he looked more like a puffer fish than the friend she'd known for so long and wondered why she had been loyal to him all these years.

She barely recognized his tone when he barked, "What do you want?"

The scary biker in the middle, who wore a black-and-gray ponytail and a black mustache, ignored Roy's question, never taking his eyes off Michelle. With a velvet Trace Adkins voice, he said, "Excuse me, ma'am. Can you help us find a few things?"

"Sure," Michelle said, relieved by the interruption. She definitely preferred a hardcore biker's attentions to Roy's disturbing interest in her at that moment.

"Michelle, no," Roy said, grabbing her elbow as she stepped around him.

The two bikers flanking the ominous one growled like two guard dogs. Michelle turned to Roy, removing his hand from her arm, and whispered, "It's okay. Really. They just want a little help finding things."

Roy scowled.

Michelle turned toward the bikers. "The customer's always right, Roy."

“My name’s Mully,” the biker said, cutting his eyes at Roy and walking alongside Michelle down the aisle, the two other bikers falling in behind them. She could almost feel Roy’s glare burning a hole through her as she turned the corner with the strangers. She imagined his disappointment that she didn’t wither or faint from the fear of it all, allowing him to protect her as the hero he was meant to be.

Lord, he was getting to be so annoying. Hang in there, she told herself. Money is freedom.

“My name’s Michelle. What do you need help finding?”

One of the guard dogs handed her a short list. She glanced at it: needles, thread, matches, and rubbing alcohol. Curiously, the handwriting looked more like a woman’s than one of these guys’. She wondered if they planned on sewing up a buddy’s knife wound or something. And was smart enough not to ask.

Michelle walked briskly toward the aisle of miscellaneous housewares with the three bikers in tow, Mully falling in step beside her once again. She scanned the shelves for the items, Mully standing so close beside her they were almost touching shoulders and arms. The other two bikers stood behind them. By the scruffy looks of them, she had imagined the three of them would stink. But the scent emanating from Mully was actually quite pleasant, suggesting a dash of decent cologne.

“Where did they relocate the Harley-Davidson dealership?” he asked.

“So, you’ve been here before? To Rapid City?” she replied, handing the scrawny biker his list, and pointing to the shelf where sewing items were displayed. She watched him double-check the list while one of the other bikers gathered items.

“Lots of times. The dealership moved, though. I forget where.”

“It’s out on the corner of Deadwood Avenue and I-90 by the Windmill Truck Stop. Hard to miss. Do you know where that is?”

Mully nodded. “I do. I take the back roads to Sturgis when I’m here, not I-90.”

They had moved over to the aisle where camping items were displayed, and the two minions were off to find the matches. She hadn’t noticed before, but the youngest biker had the word “Prospect” printed on the back of his jacket just below the logo. Once again, Mully stood shoulder to shoulder

with her, his eyes never once straying from her face. Michelle pretended not to notice. She glanced over toward the checkout lanes and realized Roy was nowhere in sight, which made her more nervous than having this gang leader stare at her. She saw the two grab a packet of wooden matches and snatch some light fishing line while they were at it, holding it up for Mully to see. He nodded an approval.

Michelle stole a quick glance up to the manager's loft. Through the tinted window she could just detect the light inside his office shining behind Roy's silhouette. She could feel his eyes on her and a shiver skipped down her spine. Feeling safer, with Mully standing beside her, knowing what he represented, underscored her deeper concern about Roy.

The last of the items, the rubbing alcohol, was over with the first aid supplies, and Michelle led the trio to the aisle farthest from the manager's loft. Watching the young biker retrieve not one, but several bottles, Michelle knew her suspicion that a wound was involved was probably accurate. Mully watching them from beside her, she marveled at how difficult it had been for the two to decide who would carry what, squabbling like little boys on a playground. She wasn't sure why Mully's silence made her more uncomfortable than their conversation did, so she decided to break it with more small talk.

"So, are you here for the rally?"

He nodded once and said, "Starts tomorrow. Officially."

Before she knew what was happening, he had turned to face her, smiling. She felt his groomed fingernails lightly drag across her left cheek as he brushed a strand of hair from her face, and she detected the faint smell of cloves on his breath when he asked, "Want to join me?"

Michelle took a step back, pushed the loose strand of hair behind her ear, and said, "No, thanks, but I'm sure you guys will have a great time up there."

The biker turned away with a shrug. Michelle wrapped her arms around herself and glanced over her shoulder toward the loft, surprised to see Jens waiting for her, pretending to be interested in the bandages until she was finished with the customer. He gave her a wink and she stood on her tiptoes to hug his neck and said, "Hi, hon."

Michelle sensed Jens's tension, then connected it to Mully and his friends nearby.

"Jens, I was just helping some tourists find their way around the store. You should meet—"

When she turned back toward them to introduce Jens, Michelle saw Mully walking away with the other bikers without even acknowledging his arrival and without saying another word to her. She suspected Jens was reading the Lucifer's Lot rocker above the familiar gang emblem on all three jackets as they ambled toward the checkout registers. Roy Barker, heir apparent to Barker Market, came scrambling down the stairs from the manager's loft to stand guard by *his* checkers, paying particular attention that Michelle, *his* bookkeeper and favorite employee, was nowhere near them as they completed their purchase.

"How long have you been waiting?"

"Long enough to hear him ask you to go to the rally with him."

Michelle shrugged and rolled her eyes. "As if."

"You have to be more careful."

"I know, thanks for the tip. By the way, why did you bring Char?"

"I didn't—"

Char was charging down the aisle toward them, fooling no one that she was old enough to carry off the platform sandals with the short shorts that might have been described as adorable on her the previous summer and if not for her obvious attempt to appear sexier than her youth could possibly allow.

Stopping in front of Michelle, nose to nose, she fumed, "We need to talk."

"Now?"

"Now. Let's go for a drive."

Michelle frowned. "Wait for me in your car. I'll be out in five minutes."

Char stomped off, the bikers at the checkout lane ogling her as she walked by them and out the door.

Turning to Jens with a sigh, Michelle asked, "Rain check on dinner?"

"Sure. Come by my house later, if that's okay." After a quick kiss he headed for the front of the store.

Before she could answer, Roy stormed toward Michelle and jabbed a finger at her nose.

"What the hell were you thinking?"