

Dangerous Entanglements Collection

Danger up Close

Prologue

“Walking on sunshine,” Maude belted out the tune in her not-so-melodic screechy voice. She didn’t care if she sounded like a sick rooster. The band playing over the radio matched her cheery mood. It was eight in the morning. She had her sneakers and jogging clothes on, ready for her morning walk. It was late September and there was already a chill in the air so she made a mental note to grab her jacket. The trees were changing colors and Maude enjoyed taking in the scenery. Because of her years running the store, she always woke before the sun rose. Now it was habit. But she enjoyed the notion that a new day meant that everything was fresh again. That anything was possible. Never take life for granted, her Henry always said. She’d learned that lesson the hard way after his passing. It would’ve been all too easy to hide under the covers and let life pass her by. But that wasn’t her way. She’d lost her husband, then their daughter Nancy later. No one would’ve blamed her if she simply drifted off to sleep and never woke up. But she’d remembered the bright, intelligent eyes of her granddaughter Alice and it’d gotten her through. From one day to the next, they kept each other from falling apart.

A knock at the front door dragged her out of her reflections. She wasn’t expecting anyone so early. Then a thought struck, and Maude smiled. Christian, her neighbor. Sometimes he stopped by for coffee. Maude suspected it was his way of checking on her. He was young and good-looking and certainly had a thing for Alice. They were both in their twenties and would be terrific together, but Christian wasn’t the settling-down type and Maude worried her granddaughter’s soft heart would be bruised. So, she’d done what any protective grandmother would do, warned Christian that Alice was hands-off. Of course, Alice was a beautiful woman and Maude had caught Christian on more than one occasion watching Alice a little too closely.

Still, he'd respected Maude's wishes. He wasn't the type to overstep. She couldn't help her inner matchmaker though. There was just something about the pair. Chemistry. It'd reminded Maude of how she'd felt the day she'd met her Henry.

Maude shook the thought away and headed for the door, opening it amid another set of furious pounds. A dark-haired man in a tan overcoat stood on the other side of the screen door. He sported a pot belly and scruffy facial hair. Not Christian. His hazel eyes seemed familiar somehow though.

"Can I help you?"

His lips lifted upward at the corners. "I'm surprised you don't recognize me, Maude."

She frowned, trying to put a name to the face. His toothy smile sent a shiver traveling the length of her spine. She'd felt that same sense of foreboding the day Nancy had found out about the cancer. "Do I know you?"

"You knew my grandfather."

Maude's eyes widened as recognition slammed through her. "Oh, my goodness, you must be Jason." She pushed the screen door open and let him enter. "It's been years."

"It certainly has," he replied, as the screen door slammed shut behind him. "I meant to come sooner, but you know how it is."

"Well, come on in." She started for the kitchen, saying over her shoulder, "I just made a pot of coffee. None of those newfangled pods, I'm afraid. I still prefer the old drip method."

"Actually, I'm not here for coffee."

The flat, even tone forced Maude to stop and turn. Jason stood a few feet away, a knife clutched in his right fist. She glanced at the butcher block on the counter, noticing the empty spot. "What are you doing?"

He moved another step forward, forcing her against the counter. “You know what I want,” he bit out. “Give it to me and you won’t get hurt. Things are going to get messy if you lie. Neither of us want that, do we, Maude?”

The necklace. Oh, God, she should’ve known someone would come looking eventually. Her past had just caught up to her. She closed her eyes, praying it would end here. That Alice wouldn’t be touched by the sins of her grandparents. “I-I don’t have what you’re looking for, Jason,” she cried. “Truth is I never did.”

“Messy it is then,” he ground out.

The cold steel slashed a line across her stomach. Maude screamed and lifted her arms to fend off another. Strike after strike until her vision blurred and she fell to her knees. Jason came down on top of her, his heavy weight pushing all the air from her lungs, blood dripping from the blade.

The cold fist of death closed all around her and darkness sucked her under. Her last thought was of Alice. *My sweet darling, I’m so sorry.*

Chapter One

“Come on, Grammy,” Alice mumbled as she held the phone to her ear. When the voicemail picked up, her Grammy’s chipper voice filling the line, Alice ended the call. She’d already left two messages. Something was off. She could feel it. Every morning like clockwork her grandmother called to say good morning. They’d chat about their to-do list and Alice would promise to come by over the weekend for dinner. Except this morning. No phone call.

“What’s going on with you?”

Alice glanced up from her desk and stared at her roommate. It was eight in the morning and Trish worked nights. She was surprised she was even awake. “Why are you up?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Barry was being an ass last night and I’m all out of sorts. Now you.”

Alice frowned down at her cell phone, willing it to ring. “I’m worried about Grammy. She didn’t call this morning.”

“She always calls,” Trish stated, rubbing at her eyes and smearing mascara across her face. “Maybe you should check on her. She lives alone, right?”

“Yes.” She got to her feet, grabbing her phone as she went. “I’m heading over there. Everything is probably fine, but I want to make sure.”

Trish followed her to the front door. “Keep me posted.”

“I will.” Alice yanked her purse off the couch and took out her keys, then headed for her car. Her mind pulled up an image of her Grammy. The last time she’d seen her she’d seemed worried about something. Alice had tried to pry it out of her, but she’d kept telling her she was fine and not to bother about it. Now she wondered if something was going on with her health. She was seventy-two but with so much energy that Alice sometimes forgot her age. The woman still went to exercise class every day and did yoga every morning. Alice often teased her grandmother that if she didn’t stop acting like a sixteen-year-old, then one of these days she’d get

stuck in the downward dog pose. Her heart clenched tightly in her chest as she hit the accelerator, rounding a corner a little too fast. Alice sent up a silent prayer that the woman who'd practically raised her was okay. Just forgot to charge her phone. That had to be it.

When she saw her grandmother's street ahead, Alice slowed down. She lived in a residential area, and it'd given Alice peace of mind that there were neighbors close. She spotted a few teenagers shooting hoops, an elderly man taking out the trash. Normal everyday things. Nothing sinister. When she saw the familiar tan ranch-style house with the black shutters and the little grey sedan sitting in the driveway, Alice breathed a sigh of relief. No car accident. That was good. She gripped the wheel tighter and turned into the driveway. Pulling alongside her grandmother's car, Alice killed the engine. Scenarios spun through her mind as she jogged toward the front porch and rang the bell. Seconds ticked by, but no sound could be heard from inside. Alice fished around in her purse and pulled out the key with the happy face painted on it and jammed it into the lock.

She pushed open the heavy wood door and called out, "Grammy?" No response. Her heart raced as she ran toward the bedroom. "Grammy!"

The room was destroyed. Clothes strewn about. The pretty cherry jewelry box her grandfather had made the first year of their marriage in pieces. Necklaces, bracelets, and clip-on earrings were scattered all over the dresser and floor. "Oh, God," she groaned.

She sprinted from the room and called out for her again. When she stepped inside the kitchen Alice stopped and stared at the grotesque sight in front of her. The scene was like something from a horror movie. Her Grammy, sprawled out on the floor in a pool of blood. A kitchen knife sticking out of her chest. Eyes wide in death. Alice screamed and fell to her knees. It couldn't be real. Had to be a sick nightmare. *Oh, God, please no!*

A hand closed around her shoulder, and she scrambled to her feet, terrified her grandmother's attacker was about to shove a knife through her as well. Alice turned to catch her

grandmother's neighbor standing a few feet from her, his brows scrunched together as he stared at her. Christian Jackson had the muscular build of a fighter and Alice wanted to run. To scream. But her feet and mouth weren't budging. His white short-sleeved T-shirt showed off an impressive set of biceps and his usual faded blue jeans and scruffy, black work boots had seen better days. Fear should be spurring her into action, but as Christian ran a hand through his dirty-blond hair, messing it up beyond repair, a flicker of a memory surfaced. One where her Grammy had teased Christian about needing to see a barber. He'd only smiled and waved away her Grammy's censure. He'd always been kind to the older woman.

On the other hand, Alice had only gotten scowls from the man. Like now. As if he barely tolerated her. And yet in her vulnerable state, Alice had an overwhelming need to run to him, lean on his six-foot-two strength, and trust him to keep her from falling apart. Part of her hated him for that.

"C-Christian?"

"What the hell happened here?"

Could he be...? She pulled out her cell and held it in the air as if it were a weapon. "I'm calling the police. Don't move!"

His head snapped back as if she'd slapped him. "You think *I* did this? You think for one second I'd ever hurt Maude?"

Did she? "I don't know, but my grandmother's dead and you're here." She tapped at the screen, then held the phone to her ear. "I-I need help."

Christian shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and stared at the floor. At her grandmother. He didn't try to escape. Didn't attempt to yank the phone from her hand. Just stood there. If he were guilty, he'd run. Right? Her brain seemed to be misfiring and she couldn't think straight.

The blood.

The knife.

The terror on her Grammy's face, as if frozen in time. A flash of images flooded her mind, and her knees began to buckle.

Christian leaped forward, catching her just before she hit the floor. "Easy," he murmured, helping her to one of the straight-back chairs at the round kitchen table. The counter separated her from the sight of her grandmother's body and she was grateful.

"Oh, God," she groaned.

"Just breathe," he gently ordered. "Deep breaths, in and out."

She shoved his hands away. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He sighed heavily. "I came to check on her." She glared at him, prompting him to explain further. "She always takes a walk around the block at eight in the morning. Every day the same routine. She didn't today. I got worried."

She frowned at him. "You know her schedule?"

"Yeah," he bit out, shifting from one foot to the other.

Alice didn't really think Christian was capable of killing her grandmother, but he was the only other person there. "Why? You're a grown man. Why do you care whether an old woman takes a walk or not?"

"Come on, Alice," he grouched, shoving a hand through his hair. "Maude and I have been friends for years. You know me. I didn't do this."

Unable to stop the out-of-control freight train of her thoughts, Alice shot right back, "All I know is that she was fond of you, but what I want to know is why?"

He let out a curse, then took the chair next to her. "I've known Maude since I was a kid. She helped me out. We've been friends since."

"Yeah, I know that part, but I never understood how you ended up moving in next door. Explain that to me."

“She told me when it went up for sale.” He shrugged. “I kind of liked living close to her. She’s a special lady.”

Tears filled her eyes, but she refused to let Christian see her cry. Forcing them back, she asked, “Did you hear anything? See anyone?”

A muscle in his jaw jumped as he ground out, “No. I wish I had, but no.”

Sirens off in the distance grew louder. The police would be here within minutes. They’d turn her grandmother’s life upside down. A chill went through her, and she rubbed her arms in a lame attempt to ward off the cold loneliness settling inside her. “Who would do this? She’s never hurt a soul. I don’t think she has a single enemy.” She threw her hands in the air as anger began to take hold. “She volunteers at the homeless shelter for crying out loud!”

Christian shook his head, then stood and moved toward the counter. He leaned forward and pointed to something, then looked over his shoulder at her. “Did you see this?”

A crumpled piece of paper no bigger than a sticky note was sitting on the edge of the counter. “She often jotted down things,” Alice explained. “Little reminders to herself.”

“This is definitely not a reminder,” he replied, his voice rough and low.

She leaned closer, reading the words aloud: “The necklace or you’re next, Alice.” She peered up at him. “What necklace?”

“Hell if I know.” Christian massaged the back of his neck and went on. “The police will want that. Maybe they can get fingerprints.”

“You’re next,” she repeated, as she began to shake. “Why me?”

His lips thinned as he stared down at her. “No one is going to hurt you, Alice.”

Anger radiated through her at his vow. “You’re going to watch out for me the way you did her?” she spat out, pointing toward the woman that meant the world to her. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

He stiffened, a muscle in his jaw flexing wildly. “You’re upset, I get it. So am I.”

“Oh, I can tell,” she muttered, shaking with fear. You’re next. *Oh, God.*

“I—”

“Police!”

“In here,” she called out, as two uniformed officers walked cautiously into the room, guns drawn. “My grandmother. She...she’s been murdered.”

Christian watched the EMTs wheel Maude from the room, her small frame barely visible in the body bag. Detective Morgan Grant had led them into the living room and began firing questions at him while an EMT examined Alice. Her slim arms wrapped around her middle as she stared sightlessly at the floor. Jesus, even amid all the destruction and death, Alice still shown through like a guiding light. Her light blonde hair hung down her back in loose curls and she had on a pair of black leggings that accentuated her lean, runner’s legs. The loose-fitting heather-grey t-shirt covered small, round breasts. Beautiful and extremely suspicious of him.

Great.

And though she was twenty-five years old, Alice appeared so young and innocent. She sure as hell didn’t deserve what was happening to her now. Shock, they’d said, offering to take her to the hospital for observation. Alice had refused. Of course. He’d never met a more hard-headed woman in his life. She’d since shrugged off the blanket and sat staring at him, as if by sheer will she could extract a confession from him. Unfortunately for her, there was nothing to confess. He hadn’t killed Maude. But he swore to find the person responsible and make them pay.

Frustrated that he was sitting around wasting time, Christian bit out, “We’ve both given our statements already, Detective.”

“Uh-huh. So, you just happened to stop over?” Grant asked, a single brow arched.

For the umpteenth time. “I told you; I was checking on her. I was concerned.”

“A concerned neighbor.” He snorted. “My neighbor lets his dog shit on my lawn.”

Christian just barely kept his cool. Losing his shit now wasn't going to help Alice. “Yeah, well, I don't have a dog.”

Grant watched him intensely before asking, “Can I assume you have an alibi?”

“I was on Zoom meetings all morning. From Six o'clock until a little after eight. Three clients. I can give you names and numbers.”

“That'd be great,” he replied, his gaze darting back and forth before landing on him once more. “Does the note mean anything to you two?”

Christian shook his head, then Detective Grant focused his attention on Alice. “What about you? It's directed at you. Clearly.”

She ran a hand over her hair and stared across the room. “My grandmother didn't own anything expensive,” she answered, her voice raw from emotion. “Nothing that would get her killed. It doesn't make any sense.”

“Well, judging by the bedroom, whoever did this was looking pretty hard for something.”

“Do you think there will be prints?” Alice asked, her eyes filled with hope.

“Never know.” He stood, then handed Alice a card. “If you can think of anything that might help, call that number. We'll be in touch.”

Christian got to his feet, then reached for Alice. She refused and shot from the couch, then started for the door, but stopped short and said, “My purse. I dropped it when I...when I saw the bedroom.”

The detective nodded. “Wait here,” he left the room, and within minutes he was back and handing her the small black bag. Alice clutched onto it as if it were a lifeline.

Neither of them said anything until they reached the driver's side of her car. Christian called her name and she turned, staring up at him with those deep green eyes of hers. “I'm not sure it's safe for you to be alone.”

“Because of the note,” she surmised.

“Yeah,” he grumbled, watching her closely. She was pale. Too pale. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

She shook her head. “No, but I have a roommate. Trish. So, I won’t be alone.”

“Look, you could be putting her in danger too,” he explained. Christian hated to be so blunt, but she needed to be aware of the danger she was in. And damned if he’d let Maude’s granddaughter suffer the same fate.

She bit her lower lip and stared at the blacktop. “Jesus, I hadn’t considered that.”

He pointed toward his house. “I have a spare bedroom. You could stay with me.” She frowned at him and didn’t budge. “Look, Alice, we both cared about her, and we both want answers.”

“Here’s the thing, Christian,” she stated, her back ramrod straight. “I don’t fully trust you. You might not have killed her, but I still think there are things you aren’t telling me. And until you come clean, I’m not putting my life in your hands.”

Christ, she was stubborn. He’d always admired her spirit, her strength, but this time it could get her killed. “Do you have a security system at least?”

“I do. Thanks for the concern,” she bit out as she turned away, completely ignoring him.

Christian watched until she drove out of sight. When he looked back at Maude’s house, he caught the detective standing on the porch, watching him. *Great, I’m a suspect.*

He crossed through the yard and headed for his house. Once inside, Christian went to the computer and did a quick search on Alice Layne. It didn’t take long to find her social media page. He found a phone number for her, then ran another search. A local address popped up. An apartment building about fifteen minutes away. Christian grabbed his keys and headed for his black Mustang. She might not want his protection, but to hell if he was going to let her get stabbed. Maude would have his hide if anything happened to her precious granddaughter.

He glanced in the backseat, ensuring that his black bag was there, then took off down the street. The sun was high in the sky and the police had Maude's house cordoned off. A crime scene. He choked back a lump of emotion as he thought of the kind woman. She'd been the only one to give a damn about him when he was a kid. Nothing more than street trash, but she'd seen something in him. Something he hadn't even seen in himself. He would find her killer. And he would make them pay with blood.

When he reached Alice's apartment building, he pulled into a parking spot, then turned off the car. He had no idea which unit was hers. He reached for his phone and pulled up her social media page again. Her profile picture caught his attention. Her pretty smile always got him. So sweet and genuine. As if she lived in her own world filled with joy and endless laughter. The long, wavy blonde hair surrounded a round face and full lips. He'd once imagined kissing those lips, until Maude had seen his intentions and warned him off. He'd respected the older woman's wishes, but he'd never stopped wondering what Alice tasted like. Would that smile of hers fill him with warmth and chase away his demons?

A noise at the front of the building caught his attention and he glanced up to see Alice coming out and heading to her car. "Where are you going?"

He waited until she left the parking lot, before starting his car and following her. They drove for half an hour before she turned left and parked. "Champion Fitness," he read aloud. She'd just lost her beloved grandmother. Curling into a ball under a mountain of blankets would make more sense. Instead, she heads off to the nearest gym.

Christian watched her grab a bag from the backseat, then jog towards the entrance. Large windows afforded him a view of a long line of treadmills and ellipticals. Within minutes Alice stepped onto one of them and got started. A gentle walk quickly turned into a run. Forty-five minutes later, sweat running down her body, Alice got off. Christian glanced around the parking

lot, looking for anyone suspicious. Someone out of place. Watching. He snorted. He'd just described himself. "Fuck."

A loud pounding on his driver's side window made him jump. Christian turned to catch Alice staring in at him, arms crossed over her chest and sparks flying from her eyes. He hit the button and opened the window. "I'm not going to apologize."

She threw her hands in the air. "What is your problem? I told you I don't need your help so just back off."

He shoved the door wide, then got out, hovering over her. "You don't seem to get it," he shot right back. "You are in danger. Someone just drove a knife through your grandmother and threatened to do the same to you. So, until this bastard is caught, I'm on you like a tick to a hound. Get it?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, God," she uttered, slamming a hand over her mouth.

Christian knew exactly what he was witnessing. A delayed response to seeing a loved one killed right before your eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She stiffened at first, then the floodgates opened. No words passed between them as she cried, soaking his shirt. After a minute or two, Alice pulled back and swiped a hand over her face. "You're right, and I'm way out of my depth. How do I stop a knife-wielding madman?"

"You don't. I do," he promised. "Your only job is to stay close and stay safe."

"And move in with you," she ground out, as if the very idea left a bad taste in her mouth.

"It would make it easier," he explained, trying not to let his frustration get the better of him. "If you're safe, then I can concentrate all my efforts on searching for this person."

She watched him for a few tense seconds, then asked, "and where do we even start?"

"Maude's house," he answered. "There's bound to be some clue."

"About a necklace that I've never seen. Something worth killing over."

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

Her shoulders fell. “Awesome.”

“There she goes,” the watcher muttered, surveying the scene from his dirty tan sedan on the far side of the parking lot. “Maude’s little princess.” God, he fucking hated her. She deserved to suffer, the way he’d suffered. She’d gotten everything. A loving parent, doting grandparents. What had he ended up with? An unstable mother and an abusive bastard of a father. He’d had to steal just to get by.

Alice and her perfect life made him sick. He wanted to slice her up, make her scream and beg for mercy before he killed her. That’d be a fitting end for the little blonde princess. He clenched his fists around the steering wheel as he watched her drive off. “In time,” he reminded himself. “She’ll get what’s coming to her.”

Maude’s neighbor, the big bruiser with the private eye business, got into his own car and took off after her. Neither of them noticed when his piece of shit car pulled out behind them. “That one’s going to be a problem,” he muttered, watching the black Mustang take a left turn. Maude’s protector. He’d thought for sure the bastard would catch him in the act. He’d gotten out of the house just in time.

Oh, he’d done his homework. Knew everything there was to know about Maude, and that included Christian Jackson. The poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks. He’d worked his way through college and started his own private investigation business. He hated the fucker. “No way Jackson sits by and lets Maude’s death go unavenged.” Not that it would matter. One way or the other, Alice was going to hand over the necklace.

Willingly, by the time he was through with her.