

Joanie Bruce

Alana Candler, Marked for Murder

Chapter One

Alana Candler glanced at the rearview mirror for the umpteenth time. The shadowy SUV she thought was following her finally turned off the lonesome road as she sped on ahead, trying to separate herself from the shadow behind her. A relieved sigh escaped her lips, and the tension in her head was released in the puff of air.

Stretching her neck from side to side relieved the tense muscles as she strained to see through the driving rain.

This downpour was getting worse!

She cranked up the radio speakers, hoping the loud strains of the new Casting Crowns' tune would jumpstart her sleepy brain as she slowed the car to a crawl. Finishing the trip tonight would be a nightmare. The storm was vicious, and the howling winds were trying to force her compact car off the road.

A bright blue and green sign flashed ahead—Lakeside Hotel.

The word “hotel” perked up her senses. Oh, how she craved the luxury of a bed for the night! Should she stop?

The sharp pains in her temple from lack of sleep and worry about the possible stalker following her all the way from the city of Landeville made up her mind.

The deluge of rain increased, and dime-size hail pelted her windshield. She cringed and quickly jerked her Nissan into the turning lane and up under the hotel's covered entryway.

A few hours of sleep, and she'd feel more like driving home in the morning.

Next to her car, a white box truck was parked with the motor running. She could see the ghostly shadow of a person behind the wheel. Fingers of anxiety traveled up her spine and spread across her back.

He just pulled in to get out of the hail, Alana. She chided herself as she slid out of the seat, locked her door dutifully, and darted through the door of the hotel.

Ignoring her, the hotel attendant faced the other direction with the phone pressed against his ear—enjoying his phone conversation. Tapping her fingers on her arms, she tried not to burn a hole in the back of his head by impatiently staring.

The wallpaper surrounding the information desk was a cheery, floral print, and the carpet was plush and inviting. A cherrywood table covered with a lacey cloth sat on one side of the information desk with a copy of a newspaper sprawled across the top. The headlines read, “Serial Killer Still At Large.”

Alana uncontrollably shivered and turned away from the newspaper to stare at the rain falling in sheets down the front of the building. The distorted image of the man in the box truck brazenly watched her. Shrinking back, she shifted her position further behind the drapes. Uneasiness settled on her shoulders, and she tensed.

The lightning in the distance flashed through the windows, and for a second, it cast a glow on the room.

She counted to gauge the distance of the storm.

One one-thousand, two one-thousand...

At ten one-thousand, the thunder boomed so loudly it rattled a vase standing on the counter in front of her.

Two miles away.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

Alana jumped at the voice behind her.

“Did you wish to register?”

The accent of the man behind the desk sounded almost soothing as he crooned the question. His smile and soft-spoken speech scattered the butterflies in her stomach, and she smiled in response.

“Yes, please. Do you have a single room?”

The frown that replaced the smile on those weathered cheeks was forced and misleading. Even though his words expressed sorrow for not being able to accommodate her wishes, her hobby of reading body language told her he was lying.

His blinking increased and the higher-pitched tone of his voice gave him away as he explained—the hotel was full. It seemed all he had left were double rooms with two queen-size beds.

A rush of air followed a scowl as she agreed to pay extra for the larger room. His lying bothered her, but she had no choice if she wanted a room.

An application appeared before her, and she filled out the information.

Name: Alana Joy Candler
Address: 3890 Ridgeview Drive, apt 201
Ross, Tennessee, 25144
Phone number: 865-555-7880
Occupation: Photographer
Driver's License#: 555731
Age: 27
Marital status: Single
Vehicle Description: Make/Model: Nissan Sentra
Color: white
Year: 2007
Tag#: 172blm

As he scanned her information, the surprise on his face was accented by his double take of the paper. Slowly he raised his head and stared at her—his eyebrows twitching.

“You are a photographer?” His accent, more pronounced than before, and the half-closed position of his eyelids rang alarm bells in her head.

“Yes, freelance mostly.”

His interest in her profession was confusing. Maybe he assumed Alana couldn't afford a room. “I'll pay with cash, please,” she said by way of explanation as she grabbed one of the hundred dollar bills in her purse.

This fact did nothing to alter the unreadable gleam in his eyes as he spoke quietly. “Would you excuse me for a minute?”

He left through a door behind him, and when he returned, the glow in his eyes was frightening. Never fully looking her in the face, he turned and pulled a key from the box behind him.

“It seems we do have a single room available.” Honey almost dripped from the words as he said them and handed her the invoice with the amount scribbled at the bottom.

Alana paid him and reluctantly took the plastic key card from his hands.

“Room three-thirteen. Top floor. Last room on the end.” As he gave her the directions, he pointed to the right side of the hotel. “Elevator’s at the end of the building.”

“Thank you,” she said.

She could imagine him watching her as she left through the automatic doors and got into her car parked at the curb out front.

The box truck had disappeared. Where had it gone? It wasn’t in the parking lot, and it was still raining too hard to drive safely on the road.

Immediately, Alana reached over and locked all the doors. Shivering in spite of the hot muggy air, she pulled down the drive to the end of the hotel building.

Five minutes later, she still sat in her car—staring at the whopping number of four cars in the hotel parking lot. Hadn’t the manager said the hotel was full?

Her uneasiness escalated when she realized the third floor room with three-thirteen painted on the door was at the end of the long walkway and stood by itself—a good forty feet from the other rooms and at least two hundred feet from the last car in the parking lot.

“Why am I nervous?” She mused aloud to the weathered dashboard. “What can happen? After all, there are locks on the doors.”

Gulping a couple of deep breaths, Alana unlocked her door and gathered her purse, overnight bag, and camera case. Grasping the hotel key firmly in her hand,

she locked her car and ran through the downpour toward the elevator.

While she waited for the elevator doors to close, a dark SUV, like the one following her, pulled into the hotel parking lot and froze in the middle of the exit lane. The shadow of a man inside leaned forward and gazed through the driving rain in her direction.

Alana shivered and ducked into the corner of the elevator—hidden behind the elevator walls. Thankful when the doors finally closed, she sank against the cool metal. Her heart thumped in her chest.

After reaching the third floor landing, Alana rushed through the door of room three-thirteen and slammed the door behind her. The dead bolt scraped as she snapped it tight and hurried to the window—peering through the blinds into the parking lot.

Her heart was beating as if it would come out of her chest, and her breath came in painful gulps. She made herself inhale deeply and evenly to gain control of her breathing and then strained to see if the SUV followed and parked in the lot below.

No SUVs lurked in the dim lot as far as she could see. Relieved, she stared at the ceiling and gave herself a pep talk. This was an ordinary hotel room. She would spend one night and be on her way in the morning. There was nothing to make her think otherwise.

Yeah, right! Only a weird hotel manager who looked at her like she could be his next meal and a shadowy stalker following her in an SUV. That's all. Nothing unusual!

She took another deep breath to calm her racing heart and then turned for the first time to survey the room.

The picture above the bed immediately drew her attention. It was an eerie arrangement of colors. The background was a peaceful country scene, but transparent circles of purple, yellow, and blue looked like angry raindrops splattered all over the picture. It spoke, in its own way, of agitation and unrest and

matched her mood perfectly.

The same nauseating purple in the picture was an accent color in the comforter on the bed, and the lamps on either side had yellow shades.

The room was cold and uninviting. In her opinion, even a single basket of artificial flowers would have added a touch of coziness, but the only accessories in the stark room were a clock and a phone.

A phone!

She threw her bag on the bed and picked up the receiver. If she hadn't left her charger at home, she would have been able to use her cell phone.

"Hello. May I help you?" A woman's voice picked up the call.

"Uh, this is Alana Candler in room three-thirteen. I'd like an outside line, please."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Candler. The outside phone lines are down because of the storm. Would you like me to call you when they're open again?"

Alana licked her lips and answered in a raspy voice. "Yes, please."

Was she really surprised? This whole day was like one big nightmare. She hung up the phone and sat down on the bed, feeling trapped.

She searched in her overnight bag for the book she'd grabbed at the last minute from her apartment that morning, hoping it would reduce her nerves from a boiling point to a simmer.

Murder in the Bayou was splashed across the cover. She quickly thrust it back into her bag.

No way! That was definitely not what she needed to read tonight—her imagination was wild enough already!

Digging deeper into her bag, her fingertips touched the worn leather of her Bible. It hadn't been read much lately, but she'd been busy. She sat down in the soft recliner and opened the pages to the calming book of Psalms—she would read for a while and make sure no dark stranger showed up on her doorstep.

When the clock on the other side of the bed read 1:15, her heavy eyelids begged her to get a shower and go to bed. She picked up a pamphlet advertising the waterfalls a couple of miles away and stuck it in her Bible to bookmark the page.

It was quiet outside. The storm had finally passed. Her nerves were calmer, and she convinced herself the uneasiness she felt when she arrived was because of an overactive imagination and the horrifying job she completed in the city of Landeville, Tennessee.

Noise from the television would help dispel some of the cobwebs of isolation, so she punched the number of a cable news station on the remote and pulled her gown from her bag. The pungent odors of pine-scented cleanser and potpourri assaulted her nostrils as soon as she stepped into the tiny bathroom. They reminded her of similar scents she'd spent all day trying to ignore. It triggered an immediate reaction, and sweat popped out on her forehead.

Unbidden, her thoughts raced back to the events of the last twenty-four hours, and she shivered. Closing her eyes could not shut out the disturbing images she photographed of the last victim murdered by the madman terrorizing the city of Landeville.

The victim was a woman. She was stabbed in one of the most exclusive apartment houses in the city. Her costly possessions were stolen, and the apartment was ransacked.

Alana was asked to take crime scene photos because of the heavy workload of the police photographers and because some sort of flu bug had wiped out half of the city police force—not to mention the fact that her brother, Brad Candler, was the Landeville City Police Chief.

Brad called in the middle of the night and begged for help. She drove the four hour trip from Ross to Landeville at 4:00 a.m. yesterday morning and spent the rest of the day taking pictures.

Her mind flew back to the gruesome images she snapped. Taking pictures of a dead person was hard enough, but taking pictures of a bloody sheet wrapped around the body, mummy style, was unsettling.

There had been a series of murders in the last few weeks—all using the same method. All widows, all wealthy, and all five of them were wrapped mummy style and stabbed through the sheet.

When she finally finished acquiring the pictures Brad asked her to take, she downloaded the pictures to her laptop and printed two duplicate CDs. One she dropped off at the police station and the other she mailed to her apartment in Ross. Then she started the long trip home. After driving for almost an hour, her fatigued brain finally noticed the SUV following her.

Had it been following her since leaving the city, or did creeping fatigue cause her to imagine a stalker? She rebuked herself for not accepting Brad's offer to spend the night with him, his wife Lisa, and their three children. It was ridiculous to assume she could make it without sleep for two nights in a row.

Ignoring the odor in the small bathroom, she confronted herself in the mirror.

“Just brush your teeth, Alana, and stop thinking!”

Reaching for the faucet to heat up the water in the shower, she paused when the dialogue from the television suddenly became deafening. The voice of the newscaster blared in the other room.

Had someone ... turned up the volume?

A cold chill ran through her veins as she inched open the door to the bedroom and listened. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow move in front of the bed and toward her.

She slammed the bathroom door and pushed the button lock. Frantically glancing around the small room, she realized there was nothing she could use to defend herself. She crouched low inside the tub and wrapped the shower curtain around her. Her heart pounded against her rib cage.

Lord, please protect me.

Suddenly, the bathroom door burst open, and she screamed.

A hooded figure dressed in black forced the shower curtain from her rigid hands. Flames of fear coursed through her veins as she was forced back against the tub and a white cloth pressed against her face. Screaming into the cloth and clawing at her attacker, Alana could only see glowering eyes above her—dark and sinister. His bushy eyebrows were drawn together in anger. A strong, sweet smell filled Alana’s lungs as she struggled and screamed against the cloth. Gradually her limbs became weak, and her mind refused to function. Then, the creeping numbness squeezed out the presence of everything near, and the world around her slowly disappeared.

Chapter Sixty-six

Jaydn sat with Alana in a navy-blue Honda Accord and stared out the window. After an hour of trading cars and making one unexpected turn after another, he was comfortable making the final turns toward the cabin.

Alana was silent. She had been quiet since his men brought them a new car in the cul-de-sac. Was she finally curious about what he was doing? The apartment. The cabin. The multitude of plush “company” cars he summoned with one phone call. The unlimited access to a helicopter. These events had to make her curious. Had she finally pieced together the facts?

Even as he formulated these thoughts in his head, she turned in the seat to face him. Curiosity seasoned her words, and confusion sharpened her tone.

“Jaydn, I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Dread made him feel as though his face might crack. His eyes never left the

road, but his breathing slowed.

He quietly replied, “What’s that?”

“You told me the apartment in Ross belonged to your company. What about the helicopter, and the cars you’ve been driving? Do they belong to your company as well?”

Jaydn nodded warily. “Yes.”

She looked at him for the longest minute of his life.

“And?” She waited patiently for him to supply an explanation, but when none was forthcoming, she pushed for more. “What aren’t you telling me?”

The air seeped from his lungs like a deflating balloon. The moment he’d been dreading since the trip to her apartment in Ross was here. He had to tell her the truth.

“Alana, the company does own all those things, but what I haven’t told you is ... I own the company.”

The statement was flat and without emotion, but Alana jerked back as if she had been burned. She slowly nodded. The next question took forever to leave her lips.

“What’s the name of your company, Jaydn?”

“International Enterprises.”

She shook her head. “I should have realized. The expensive office building. The luxury cars. Helicopters summoned at your command.”

At first, she seemed surprised, but then he felt her tense. The truth hit her like a tidal wave, and he could feel her anger in the air.

“You lied to me.”

“No, Alana. I never lied. Legally, the company does own it all. I just didn’t tell you that I own the company.”

“Not telling me the whole truth is the same as lying.”

The words sizzled in the air. Her face was red. He was sure it was both from

anger and embarrassment. She was angry that he kept the truth from her and embarrassed because she exposed her heart to him. She confided the pain of her past experiences with rich, aristocratic bosses to someone who obviously fit into the same mold.

“So you own International Enterprises.” Her lips puckered as if the statement was bitter when it rolled out of her mouth. The next sentence she spat at him as if it burned her tongue. “International Enterprises!” She turned to glare him down. “You own the building the orphanage is leasing?”

Jaydn flinched. The strongest wish he had at that moment was to be someone else. To be able to say, no, he knew nothing about the lease with the orphanage. The shame and anguish of having to answer was nothing in comparison to the humiliation of her knowing the vile and greedy thing he’d done.

“You’re the one forcing the orphanage to move.”

She wasn’t expecting him to answer. Her tone implied she already knew the answer. All her past relationships would have warned her about the type of man he was. In her experience, wealthy businessmen were only concerned with making more money—not the people’s lives they damaged while filling their bank accounts.

“I don’t know what to say, Jaydn. Except that after this is over, I don’t want to see you again. You’re not the person I thought you were.”

If his face could have felt any hotter, it did at that moment. Pain and shame burned inside of him. He pulled the car off the road onto an overgrown gravel driveway and turned to stare out the window. He couldn’t look at the accusations in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Alana. I promise I didn’t know the people renting the building were running an orphanage.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “I will admit, I told my lawyer to check into seeing if we could get the tenant to move, but I didn’t know it was an orphanage.”

She crossed her arms and threw him a pained expression. Her stance proved she was dying a slow emotional death.

“I didn’t want to lie to you, Alana. You made it no secret that you despise wealthy business owners. They’re ‘tyrants in suits,’ remember? After hearing you rant about it, are you really surprised that I didn’t mention it?” He shook his head regretfully. “I felt a closeness to you I’ve never felt with anyone before. My heart seemed to bond with yours, but I was afraid to tell you that I ... have a successful business. I was afraid it would influence your opinion of me.”

Alana glared at him. “Do you think?”

The silence in the car grew deafening.

She turned to him and studied his face. Then, unexpectedly, she sighed deeply.

“Jaydn, I’d be lying if I said I don’t feel a special attraction when you’re near, but I just can’t get past the way you deceived me. Relationships are built on trust—not deception. The experiences I’ve had with rich businessmen have never turned out well. They’ve always used money for power and personal *projects*, not caring who it would hurt. And now, it seems you fit right into that mold, just like all the others. I can’t handle going through another relationship like that.”

He said nothing but put the car in gear and pulled back out onto the road. His jaw line tightened with each mile.

Regret weighed heavily on him. He had tried to keep the truth from her to protect what they might feel for each other.

Who are you kidding, Holbrook? You kept the truth from her for purely selfish reasons. Now, you’ve hurt her.

A quick glance to the right revealed the pain etched deep in her features. The pain he felt radiating from her traveled across the seat and into the center of his heart, but there was nothing he could say to make it better.