



CHRISTMAS

in Redemption Ridge

Dreaming

ABOUT
FOREVER

MANDI BLAKE

DREAMING ABOUT FOREVER

A SMALL TOWN CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

CHRISTMAS IN REDEMPTION RIDGE

BOOK 5

MANDI BLAKE

Dreaming About Forever

Christmas in Redemption Ridge Book 5

By Mandi Blake

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ALICIA

Alicia stared at her reflection in the mirror, trying to rationalize the stranger looking back at her. She'd attended countless red-carpet events, galas, and ceremonies. She'd worn layers of spandex, mounds of makeup, and heavy dresses since she was a child.

Why did she go through the same identity crisis every time she saw her made-up self in the mirror? Photos always brought on a moment of confusion too. Between the designer gowns, thick makeup, and fake hair pieces, she never recognized herself.

But that was the woman the world knew. The pop princess who sold out stadiums and had a fandom consisting of hundreds of thousands of "Crazies" as they called themselves. The celebrity idol who put on the most extravagant performances that needed special permits and permissions her team had to pull all the strings to get.

It didn't take much, really. People would do anything to be associated with her name. It was...odd. After twenty years, Alicia still didn't understand the hype. She wasn't special or exceptional. She smiled for the camera, did what she was told, and everything went smoothly.

"What do you think?" Lillian asked.

Alicia tore her gaze from the artistic rendering of herself and gave her attention to her manager. Lillian was more than an employee. She was the closest thing to a friend Alicia had. "It looks great."

It. Whatever *it* was in the mirror was truly beautiful, but it wasn't familiar.

Lillian turned her attention back to the phone in her hand. She spent so much time looking down at it that Alicia worried her friend would develop neck issues before she turned forty.

"The car is here," Lillian said. "We're meeting Ashton at The Plaza for photos before the event." She tapped out a message on her phone with speedy thumbs. "Your sister is calling."

"Tell her I'll call her back from the car, please." The Star Award's waited for no one, and despite the saying, being late usually meant arriving over served in the entertainment industry.

Lillian finished typing before looking up. "Done. Let's get you out of here." She looked over her shoulder. "Max? Will?"

The two men flanked Alicia's sides, bending to carefully gather the enormous folds of her dress into their arms.

Yes, the train was that big. She'd counted about five layers in the one-of-a-kind Lorenzo Bellini gown. The blush of the tight corset bodice faded into a beige about midway down the skirt. Gemstones covered every centimeter of the heavy fabric.

They were real gemstones. The designer had been sure to point that out with the understanding that she would mention the detail in connection with his name on the carpet.

"Step carefully," Lillian reminded her as they made their way toward the elevators.

Her penthouse in LA was as outrageous as the dress she wore, and she despised the whole place. Lillian had arranged to have it completely renovated for the filming of an episode of *Celebrity Homes: Open House* a few months ago, and Alicia hadn't gathered up the courage to ask to have it reverted back to the way it was before. It seemed like an enormous waste of time and money.

Most things did.

Dag and Raul met them at the elevators and fell into step beside Max and Will as they carefully spread her train behind her in the small space.

It wasn't small, but it seemed small when filled with six adults and a gown that had its own zip code.

Lillian ran through the itinerary on the way down, talking more to herself than Alicia, since someone was always standing by to either usher her in the right direction or give her a signal to migrate to the next photography checkpoint.

The move through the elaborate lobby was quiet, given the insane security detail for the building. Only the far-off sounds of cars honking could be heard in the distance as she stepped outside. The building's private entrance was far enough from the bustling city that it almost seemed like another world.

Alicia stood still and waited to be given directions as Max and Will squeezed into the back seat of the limousine and coaxed her train in first.

Seriously, the dress was massive. It was beautiful, but it also left no room to breathe or even move around on her own.

After slowly folding herself into the back seat, Lillian slid in and closed the door on the outside world. "Are you ready to call Stacy back?"

"Sure." So many calls had to be fielded for her, but Alicia always returned calls from her parents and sister. It was a tip her first producer, Milton King, had given her when she was a teenager. *When you make it to the top, don't forget the people who were there for you at the bottom.*

Lillian held the phone face-up on her knee as the rings filled the car. Well, there was only a ring and a half before Stacy answered.

"Alicia?"

Oh no. Lillian usually had to go through Stacy's assistant before the call was passed to her sister. It was standard procedure.

And that one word carried so much emotion—emotion Stacy so expertly disguised in front of the public eye.

“Everything okay?”

“Not really. Am I on speaker?” Stacy asked.

“It’s just me and Lillian.” Alicia spoke carefully, trying and failing to push down the rising unease that threatened to choke her.

“It’s Mom. And Dad. Lillian needs to know about this too, but I needed you to hear it from me and not Danielle.”

Danielle was Stacy’s manager. She and Lillian always worked well together to ensure Alicia and her sister had open communication.

“What do I need to hear from you? Are Mom and Dad okay?” she asked with a small plea in her words. She’d talked to them last week. Or was it the week before?

Please don’t have bad news. Please don’t have bad news.

Stacy scoffed. “Well, I wouldn’t say they’re fine. I just got a call from our accounting team. Mom and Dad have been stealing money from me. Like, a lot of money.”

Stealing? It didn’t seem possible. Alicia and Stacy gave their parents everything they asked for and more.

Though, a nagging in the back of Alicia’s mind said their mother had always been money-hungry. She liked the finest things in life, and money didn’t seem to have value to her anymore.

But stealing? There wasn’t a reason for it.

“What do you mean?” Alicia asked.

“Millions.” Stacy’s voice broke on the word and was followed by a sniffle. “I asked them to check your finances too, but they said I don’t have authority to authorize that for your accounts.”

Alicia’s heart beat like the thump of bass at her concerts, vibrating her whole body. “I don’t—”

“Call Henry. Just tell him to check. He already knows, and he’s probably already checked your accounts.”

The shock wasn’t letting the truth set in. It was almost as if she was watching her life unfold, but she wasn’t a part of it.

It was a lot like watching the footage from her concerts. She didn’t know that person on the stage. The words were hers, but the choreography and clothes weren’t.

“Alicia. Now,” Stacy demanded.

“Okay. Okay. I…” Alicia looked at Lillian, still unsure how to move her body and make it do what she was supposed to.

“Call me back,” Stacy said. “I’m on standby. I’m not due at the carpet for another two hours.”

Alicia and Stacy’s careers had followed similar paths. They’d both starred in the hit sitcom, *Family First*, as kids. Then, Alicia had pursued a music career, while Stacy stuck to acting. Now, in their twenties, they were equally successful in their own artistic circles. Their net worth was probably hovering around the same million range.

“We’re meeting Ashton at The Plaza in twenty minutes. If we don’t get back to you before we arrive, I’ll make sure Alicia gets back in touch with you after the event,” Lillian said.

“Thank you.” Stacy’s words shook, and it seemed the numbness of the shock was wearing off. She’d been spouting off in a mix between fury and anguish that mirrored Alicia’s own confusion.

Lillian ended the call and immediately placed a call to Henry.

Alicia didn’t talk to Henry much. She’d always trusted him and his team. Now, she was heading straight into a situation where she’d have to either solidify that trust or watch it crumble.

The rough under fabric of the dress irritated the skin on her legs and ankles. The lace tickled her arms. Hot air filled her

lungs as she inhaled, chasing a release from the tightening in her chest.

“Henry Goodson.”

“Hey.” The word came out in her media voice—the peppy and lively voice she’d perfected over the years. “It’s Alicia Carver.”

“I know. I was about to call you. I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

“Stacy already called me. What happened?”

And there was her business voice. Right on schedule. Running a multi-million-dollar company required her to be perceived as level-headed and authoritative—something she struggled to maintain, no matter how intelligent she proved herself.

“We were notified of suspicious activity early this afternoon. We’ve been combing through things ever since, and we have sound evidence that Marcus and Julia Carver have authorized inappropriate withdrawals to both your account and your sister’s.”

Alicia swiped at her temple. She was about two seconds from sweating off her meticulously applied makeup, despite the cool air blowing from the vents. “How much were these withdrawals?”

Henry sighed. “The total is just over ten million.”

A breath halted in Alicia’s throat. Over ten million.

She listened as Henry and his team gave her the rundown with numbers and transactions. Her teeth throbbed as she ground them together. How could they do this?

It was happening, unfolding in real life like a slow-motion train wreck.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give Stacy information about your accounts. I would never disclose your personal and financial information to anyone, but I feel like your sister’s intentions were good.”

“I understand.” She appreciated that standard. It was invaluable given her career, and Henry was known to represent many celebrity figures. Too bad his career would probably tank after this. “I have to go. We’ll talk about this tomorrow morning. I’ll be at your office at six a.m.”

“Yes, Miss Carver.”

She quickly ended the call and stretched and fisted her hands to dispel the tingling in her fingers. Her parents could have just asked. Alicia and Stacy would have given them anything.

Well, anything within reason. Their mom had asked for a “small villa” in the Greek Isles last year that was listed for thirty million. Alicia and Stacy had agreed to turn down that request together. Her parents already had multiple estates, and enough was enough.

Lillian placed her hand on Alicia’s shoulder. “We have to go. I’ll let Ashton’s team know this will have to be a quick appearance.”

Alicia looked up. They were approaching The Plaza. “Shoot. I’m not ready!”

“I’ll have Henry’s team send you a synopsis, and I’ll have everything ready for our early meeting. The Stars need your attention tonight.”

Alicia took a deep breath and blinked away the moisture in her eyes. It had been years since she shed a tear, and she wasn’t going to start today.

She needed to talk to Mom and Dad. Had Stacy already called them? What did they have to say about this? Did they have anything to say for themselves? The heat in her middle was rising, and it was the worst possible time to let her emotions get out of hand. She had to look like she’d just been poured out of a plastic mold of the perfect woman in less than an hour.

Lillian leveled Alicia with a stern look, furrowing her auburn brows that matched her long, straight hair. “You can do

this. I'll do my best to manage the fallout for the rest of the night, then you can give this your attention tomorrow."

With a small nod, Alicia turned to the door as it opened. Dag and Raul waited as Max and Will pulled the fluffy fabric of her dress out of the car.

Finally, Max reached for her hand. "Miss."

Her hand shook as her assistant grasped it in his. Piling out of the car, she tried to push the problem with her parents out of her mind, but forgetting about ten million missing dollars was nearly impossible.

Lillian was right. Tonight was the biggest music award ceremony of the year. All eyes would be on her as she stepped onto the red carpet beside her fiancé.

Ashton. Suddenly, she wanted a quiet room alone with him so she could let the frustration out. There would be no crying. The makeup took too long to apply, and only perfection was allowed on the red carpet.

Finally free of the car, her knees threatened to buckle, and her face tingled as the adrenaline rushed through her body.

Control it. Control it.

She'd been controlling her emotions her whole life. She'd gotten really good at stuffing everything into a box and closing the lid, never to open it again.

Lillian placed her hands on Alicia's shoulders, forcing her to make eye contact. "You can get through this. I'll handle things until the night is over."

Alicia wanted to sag into her friend's embrace, but that would have to wait until later. "Thank you for taking care of this."

Lillian turned Alicia around by her shoulders. "Let's face the music."

As soon as she turned toward The Plaza, Ashton walked out the front door flanked by his security team.

Finally. He would tell her that there had to be a reasonable explanation why her parents would steal from her and her sister. He would calm her fears and even offer to be there while she called her parents to find out what was really going on.

If things were really as bad as they seemed, he'd help her get past the betrayal.

Ashton strode toward her, and her shoulders relaxed. His dark hair was perfectly styled, his strong jaw was hard and slightly lifted, and his light eyes that earned him all the close-up screen time in the movies made for the hottest A-list actor, were shadowed by the luxury hotel behind him.

Ashton Warner was arguably the most popular actor in the world, and they'd been together since they met on the set of her sister's breakout movie, *Tuscan Dreams*.

Alicia checked to make sure Max and Will were ready to move before walking to meet him. "I need to talk to—"

Ashton raised his hand. "We'll talk after the event."

He didn't slow his stride. He didn't look back. He walked right past her and got into the back seat of a waiting car.

Lillian huffed and pulled out her phone. "Oh no. He's not getting away with that. Your time is important, and he waits till we get all the way here to cancel. I don't think so."

Alicia watched as Ashton's car drove away. The pressure in her chest rose as if it were climbing stairs. How dare he walk past her like that!

They always rode to events together. They never left each other's side during public appearances. Those were unspoken rules in the spotlight. It didn't matter if your relationship was on the rocks or not, if the media reported it, it might as well be true.

The media would know immediately that something was wrong if they didn't arrive together, and Alicia didn't need to see the forthcoming headlines to know that a storm bigger than her parents' deception was waiting for her at the red carpet.

ALICIA

Stacy's shouts woke Alicia mere seconds before her sister barged into her dark room. Pulling the covers to her chest and sitting up, she tried to focus her vision and prepare for the whirlwind invading her penthouse.

Light filled the room, sending a piercing stab behind her eyes. "Hey!"

"They got a lawyer. They hired the Rosche Firm!"

Alicia scooted back to rest against the headboard and covered her eyes. Right. Their parents had stolen over twenty million dollars from them and were now doubling down with counsel.

To be fair, their parents kept the Rosche Firm on retainer. For emergencies.

Apparently, stealing from your daughters was an emergency.

Alicia blinked past the sleep that pulled her eyelids down. She'd been in the land of the living for five whole seconds, and the nightmares of last night flooded in like the Hoover Dam bursting.

Mom and Dad's betrayal, Ashton leaving her in front of The Plaza, the brush-off at the Stars.

Her outburst. Yikes.

The bad afternoon had snowballed into a terrible evening. After arriving alone to the Star Awards, Ashton had reluctantly

stood beside her on the red carpet—stiff and unyielding, completely emotionless. Anyone with eyes could see the tension between them.

“And don’t get me started on that jerk, Ashton.” Stacy held up a finger. “He’s on my list. He’ll pay for last night.”

Alicia stretched her neck from side to side. “Trust me, I want to pluck his eyebrows out one by one too, Sis.”

She’d won four Stars at the ceremony, but no one wanted to talk about the long days and sleepless nights she’d endured to get them. Her family drama and expired relationship took center stage.

The hits kept coming. The sting in Ashton’s voice when he’d finally addressed her, claiming he couldn’t be associated with someone tied up in a scandal like this, would be hard to forget.

“Pull yourself together,” he’d seethed through gritted teeth, careful not to let anyone around hear his reprimand.

She’d never cried in public. She hardly ever cried at all, but losing trust in your parents and the kindness of your fiancé in one afternoon was enough to break anyone. Thankfully, she could still hold her head up high and put on a smile as fake as Ashton’s hairline.

Stacy gasped and pointed at Alicia. “Are you still wearing his ring?”

Alicia looked down at her hand. Sure enough, the massive rock of betrayal was still on her finger. She pulled it off and slammed it down on the bedside table.

Lillian stepped into Alicia’s bedroom behind Stacy. It was still dark outside the window, but Lillian was dressed in a gray-and-white pencil skirt and fitted white blouse, ready to tear someone’s ears off during the morning meeting.

“Sorry, but you need to get dressed,” Lillian said.

Alicia tossed the covers off and flopped onto her back. Wasn’t she entitled to feel? Being a celebrity apparently meant

she wasn't allowed to show emotion, but could she have ten minutes to get it all out in the privacy of her own home?

“Alicia! What are we going to do?” Stacy threw her hands in the air and paced beside the bed. “I want to strangle Mom and Dad, and I want to tie Ashton to a cinder block and throw him in the Pacific Ocean.”

Alicia opted not to respond. Her thoughts weren't running in kind circles either this morning.

Lillian sat on the edge of Alicia's bed. “Are you okay? Do I need to move the meeting back an hour?”

Alicia stared up at the ceiling, wishing the nightmare would end already. “No, I'm fine, Lil.”

“I've got Ashton's team on the line. He'd like a conference call.”

“A conference call? At five in the morning?” Stacy shouted. “He doesn't have the backbone to meet with her in person or at least wait until she's out of bed?”

The news about their parents leaked at the height of the event. Reporters stopped asking who she was wearing and started asking if she was going to go after her parents for stealing from her.

That was about the time Ashton had pushed away from her and left her paralyzed and alone in front of the entire world. She'd been broken open for the whole world to see, but no one had cared one cent if her family and relationship were falling apart.

It was funny how she could be surrounded by hundreds of people but be so completely alone.

Lillian had swooped to her rescue, pulling her from the crowd while the media followed, pressing close until she couldn't breathe.

The panic attack in the back of the car was tame compared to the onslaught waiting in her inbox and on every news headline.

The hits kept coming well into the night, and Alicia hadn't gotten to sleep until after three in the morning.

"Tell him he can man up and show up if he has something to say to her, and it better be a big apology," Stacy said with a lecturing finger in the air.

"Something tells me that's not why he wants to talk," Alicia whispered.

Stacy's ears were working because she whirled on her. "He's a loser. I know you grew up with him, but he's the worst. What kind of *man* leaves his fiancée like that when she's clearly upset?"

It wasn't something she'd expected from Ashton. He wasn't a mean person, but he also wasn't very emotional. Always so even keel. Still, the complete abandonment had been unexpected.

"I'm sure his team had already briefed him on what was going on and told him to distance himself from the sinking ship," Alicia said.

"You say that like it's an excuse." Stacy stalked over and looked out into the hallway. "Where are Dag and Raul?"

All of the color drained from Lillian's face. "That's something we need to talk about. They resigned this morning."

"They *resigned*? And it's not even morning yet!" Stacy shouted. "You mean they quit. I bet Ashton had something to do with that. I hate him."

"Stacy!" Now Alicia was getting in on the yelling too. All before breakfast.

"I meant it. He's awful. I can't believe you were with that guy."

Were. That tiny word was so powerful, sending a wave of nausea from her stomach up her throat. It seemed even Stacy knew why he was calling.

Alicia threw off the covers. "Tell him he can wait until after my meeting with Henry. He woke up and chose violence today, but I don't have to join him on the battlefield just yet."

“Make him wait. You don’t have to jump when he calls,” Stacy said, being the ever-loyal cheerleader.

“Maybe I should get it over with. I’m already awake!” Alicia threw her hands out to her sides. “Somebody stormed into my room like a ray of sunshine this morning.”

Stacy’s shoulders sagged. “Sorry.”

Alicia looked to Lillian. “Is Nenia here?” There would be dozens of reporters waiting outside, if not more, and Alicia would need her stylist’s help if she wanted to look like a boss instead of a dumpster fire.

“She’s waiting in the common room,” Lillian said.

Alicia stalked toward the bathroom. “Can you send her in?”

It seemed yesterday’s problems were going to carry over into today.



THE AFTERNOON WENT the same as the morning. New shocking reveals hit Alicia in waves.

Ashton had let his manager talk on and on about all the reasons their “relationship” was over. Yes, the man had used air quotes on the video conference every time he used the word relationship. As if he hadn’t dated her for four years and asked her to marry him three months ago.

There were actual forms to sign. NDAs and contracts detailing their respective duties to ensure the “relationship” was dissolved.

It was all ridiculous. Ashton’s team liked to dramatize everything, angling whichever way their star would fall in the most favorable light.

He was willing to cut all ties with her over her parents’ theft. Ashton Warner couldn’t afford to be caught up in such a scandal. He’d given no less than five interviews today, going

on and on about how he'd been blindsided and betrayed by her family.

He didn't realize they were capable of such a thing.

He hadn't known Alicia was involved with that kind of corruption.

He'd admittedly gotten tangled up in the nasty web the Carvers were weaving, and he'd been left with no choice but to let his relationship with her go.

For a man who had the emotional depth of a teaspoon, he sure knew how to lay it on thick.

There was one notable instance of the day: Ashton lost his cool on a reporter, leaving her crying and shaking for all the world to see. Alicia felt terrible for the poor woman, but at least everyone would see how awful Ashton was being about the whole breakup.

"Alicia?"

Lillian's soft question prompted Alicia to raise her head from where she cradled it. They'd been in this conference room for three hours, and her eyelids were begging her to let them fall into a peaceful slumber.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay with that?"

Sitting up straight, Alicia cleared her throat. "I'm so sorry. Can you repeat what you said?"

Lillian didn't seem hurt by the lack of attention. She was a wonderful manager and an even better friend, and the woman knew when Alicia was hitting her limit.

The limit zoomed by at a reckless speed over twenty-four hours ago.

"I think the first thing we should focus on is hiring a new security detail for you. Like I said, the media set up shop outside last night, and they haven't left."

Alicia slowly nodded. Dag and Raul had been wonderful to her. They'd done their job well, and she had absolutely no

complaints.

Until they sold themselves to the highest bidder.

“You’re right. That’s a good idea,” Alicia said, pinching the bridge of her nose and hoping the headache behind her eyes subsided.

Lillian tapped on the phone in her hands. “I have good recommendations for Field Inc. They’re based in Cleveland, but they offer temporary as well as full-time services.”

“Okay.” She really didn’t have anything else to add. The emotional onslaught had wiped her out, and she had to trust that Lillian was capable of making these decisions when Alicia wasn’t.

“I’ll arrange for a video conference. How soon do you think you could manage that?” Lillian asked.

Bless her soul. Lillian could see Alicia crumbling on the inside. “Tomorrow.”

“Perfect. I think we’re finished here,” Lillian said in dismissal.

The other members of her team rose and left the conference room, where Alicia remained alone with her manager. Lillian opened her arms, offering the hug she desperately needed.

Alicia gave herself permission to cry. It was warranted. But the tears wouldn’t come. They were held behind a strong wall, building and waiting for their moment to burst forth.

Maybe she just forgot how to do it. Was that even possible?

Lillian’s hand rubbed circles over Alicia’s back, and she allowed Ashton to enter her thoughts. Maybe the shock was numbing every part of her life because she couldn’t conjure up a memory of any loving feelings for the man. Had the last four years been a dream?

Ashton Warner was the golden boy. Everyone loved him. Women wanted him, and men wanted to be him.

Millions of people obsessed about her relationship with Ashton. The two child stars finding lasting love amidst the chaos of show business was the stuff of fairy tales, and the fans ate it up.

But he'd left her in her moment of need—when she needed a shoulder to cry on.

Now, those same people who'd loved them had gotten out their pitchforks, and they were ready to pick sides and draw blood.

Whoever said words can't hurt you had never been slashed apart by an enraged fan.

After a few minutes, Lillian whispered, "Are you okay?"

Alicia shook her head. "Not even a little bit."

JORDAN

Jordan walked into the office fifteen minutes before his shift. He liked to be a solid half hour early, but traffic was a nightmare.

Field Inc. had three offices, and he'd been stationed at the Cleveland location for two years. While it wasn't his ideal home base, he'd take it over the LA or New York locations any day.

Brent leaned against the wall in the hallway with his phone pressed to his ear. The guy chatted on the phone more than he worked, and the lack of productivity grated on Jordan's nerves.

It wasn't as if they had a job where slacking was even possible. Businesses came to them for protection, and in order to provide it, the job required one hundred percent.

"Hold on a sec," Brent said before pulling the phone from his ear. "Hey, man. You want to hit the Monsters game tomorrow night?"

Brent's work habits might annoy him, but Jordan couldn't turn down a hockey game. "Yeah. I'll be there."

Brent nodded before returning his attention to his phone call.

The guy had no self-motivation. It wasn't a secret Brent got the job because of his programming background, but would it kill him to take the work seriously?

Jordan stepped into his office and rolled his neck before sitting behind the desk. This was the part he dreaded. He'd joined the Marines for the physical perks, and he'd managed to get politely escorted out of his preferred career within his first eight years.

Losing part of a leg kinda made him a liability. He understood the reasons why he couldn't keep his job, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

His boss, Nathan, strode past the open office door before quickly backtracking to step inside. The guy was brushing against six foot six and clocking in at a solid two-twenty pounds of muscle. "Glad you're here. I need you in a video conference in ten minutes."

Jordan threw his hands out to his sides. "That's the notice I get? Do we even have a file on them yet?"

"Her. Not them," Nathan corrected.

Message received loud and clear. It was a celebrity, and probably a pampered movie star needing extra eyes and ears for a certain event. "Fine. I'll be there." He grabbed his laptop and started for the door.

Nathan raised a hand and cleared his throat. "One thing. If you can't say something nice—"

"Don't say anything. We go through this every time."

"It still needs to be said. Also, maybe try not to scowl during the whole video conference. Your facial expressions speak louder than your words sometimes."

"Noted. Now, can I get a cup of coffee before we start the Babysitters' Club meeting?"

Nathan scrubbed a hand down his face. "You're going to lose us the job if you don't—"

"I'm not going to say anything. And I'll even sit off to the side if you want so they can't see me."

"We have to be transparent," Nathan said.

“Okay, then I’ll pretend to take notes and look at my computer the whole time. I can’t help it if my face reads like a warning.”

Well, if there was a way to change the default message his face put out into the world, he hadn’t figured it out yet. People had been telling him for years he was unapproachable, too stern, closed off, and gruff, but no one bothered to tell him how to change it.

He wasn’t opposed to having friends, and he liked being nice to people, but he also laid everything out at face value and didn’t pull punches.

Nathan squared his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. “I think this might be a good job for you. Don’t shut it down before you get the facts.”

“She’s a celebrity, isn’t she?” Jordan asked.

“Yes, but this is a special case. I know you think they’re all spoiled little rich kids, but their lives require a level of security that we can provide. They call us because they need help. It’s our job to protect them and not ask questions.”

“I understand all of that,” Jordan said. He did. He wanted to provide protection for those who needed it. He just bristled at the idea of fame and fortune of a certain magnitude.

“Good,” Nathan said.

“And why do you think I’d be a good fit for this one?”

Jordan never did well with female clients. They wanted a sweet, doting guy, and he was about as closed off as Fort Knox. He wasn’t there to pat their ego either, and more than a few ladies had turned up their noses at his hands-off approach.

Nathan rubbed his jaw. “I spoke with her manager this morning, and I have an idea. I’m not ready to share it yet, but if this meeting goes the way I think it will...”

“Got it. We’ll see.”

Nathan slapped a hand against the doorframe. “You have a few minutes to get that coffee.”



JORDAN STRODE into the conference room with two minutes to spare. The large room had a rectangular table in the middle and a big-screen TV mounted on one wall.

Nathan slid a tablet across the table with an article already pulled up. “There are a few things you should read first. Scroll through them quickly.”

Jordan picked up the tablet, and the name jumped out at him.

Alicia Carver.

“You’re kidding me,” Jordan said.

“Her contract is up for grabs. It’s a temp job because she’ll be transitioning to her tour team soon. The contract is from now until the day after Christmas.”

One month. One month with the pop princess herself.

The photo in the first article wasn’t flattering. At least, it was clear they’d tried to choose a photo that didn’t show her in the best light, but Alicia Carver had beauty no one could deny.

She was gorgeous, but that meant nothing if she was a spoiled brat. Jordan didn’t know for sure, but ridiculous money like that made people insufferable.

“No way,” Jordan said.

“Read,” Nathan demanded.

The headline came into focus. “Alicia Carver hits rock bottom.”

He scanned the article before sliding to the next one.

“Alicia Carver: Her fall from grace?”

It seemed her parents had been stealing from her and her sister, Stacy Carver, and the articles seemed to imply her

connection with her criminal parents led to a swift breakup with her fiancé, Ashton Warner.

She'd probably dodged a bullet with that one. Ashton Warner was a tool with a capital T. Word spread quickly in the security circles of the rich and famous when a client was notoriously difficult.

The incoming call popped up on the screen, and Nathan answered it.

“Hi, Lillian,” Nathan said. “Nice to meet you.”

Lillian was an auburn-haired, petite woman somewhere in her thirties, and her smile was both welcoming and professional. “Nice to meet you too. I have Alicia here, and we’re ready to get started.”

Alicia moved into the frame and sat beside Lillian. She pushed her dark hair away from her face, revealing haunting shadows beneath tired eyes.

The grip in Jordan’s chest was instant and sharp, stilling his lungs in the middle of the breath he’d been inhaling.

When her eyes lifted and met his, the clip snapped off the pen he’d been holding and went flying across the conference table.

Nathan turned toward Jordan and leveled him with a look that silently said, “Dude, get it together.”

If he didn’t release his grip on the pen, the barrel was going to shatter. How was he supposed to let go when the ghost of the beautiful Alicia Carver was staring back at him?

Lillian cleared her throat. “As you may know, the news about Alicia’s parents was leaked during the Stars last night. The breakup with Ashton Warner followed closely behind, and he wasted no time stealing her security team. Dag and Raul had been with us for years, but it seemed their allegiance was fragile.”

Nathan sat forward, linking his hands and resting his elbows on the conference table. “I assure you, we cannot be bought, Ms. Harper.”

“That is what I’ve heard, and it’s what we’re looking for. You’ve signed the NDAs and contracts?”

“Jordan has not yet, but I sent mine over this morning.”

“I’ll have it back to you as soon as this meeting is over, Ms. Harper,” Jordan said. He’d barely been able to look away from Alicia during Lillian’s rundown, and he prayed none of them noticed.

“Perfect. Can you tell me about your standard operating procedures? I’ll share ours as well so we can negotiate the terms.”

Nathan jumped into the explanations while Jordan studied the hollow-eyed woman. Dark brows swooped over big eyes without a trace of makeup. Her long hair fell over her shoulders in messy waves, and her shoulders slumped as if a weight pressed down on them.

The woman on the screen held little resemblance to the celebrity that most people in the United States adored. She was on the verge of a breakdown. No doubt about it.

Why did it gut him to see the sadness? He didn’t even know her. She could be his next client. His job was to care about her safety, not her emotional state.

Nathan’s warning had been spot on. Jordan didn’t care for entitled celebrities. They tended to be rude and self-righteous, but he kept those thoughts to himself.

Alicia’s shoulders rose and fell in bigger and bigger swells. She was going to blow, and no one was paying attention.

Except Jordan. Nathan and Lillian were talking, but Jordan couldn’t take his eyes off the train wreck happening in front of him.

A little piece of his heart went out to her. He wasn’t heartless enough to ignore her while she was silently panicking.

“Excuse me. Miss Carver?” Jordan said.

Her chin lifted, and her wide eyes turned glassy.

He kept his gaze locked with hers, begging her to focus on something besides her spiral. “Are you okay?”

There were a few quiet moments before she blinked and said, “I’m fine.”

Jordan had a mom and a sister. Even though they were assertive and honest, sometimes he still questioned the “I’m fine” response when it was warranted.

This was one of those times.

Nathan looked from Jordan to Alicia. “Maybe we should continue the meeting another time.”

“Actually, I think we’ve heard enough,” Lillian said. “We’ll firm up the contracts and send them over this afternoon. How soon can Jordan be here?”

“Come again?” Jordan asked. He’d missed some key details while he’d been worrying over Alicia.

“You’re going to Taylor Ranch,” Nathan said. “You’ll spend the Christmas season there while Alicia takes some much-needed time off.”

Jordan’s eyes widened. Taylor Ranch? His home in Colorado?

He didn’t have an appropriate response to that revelation. Spending Christmas with his family wasn’t anything new. Spending Christmas in the small town he’d grown up in with Alicia Carver was beyond his comprehension at the moment.

He looked up and met Alicia’s stare. Were her shoulders lifted now? Her eyes were certainly brighter.

His stomach dropped. Apparently, he was going to have these intense physical reactions whenever she looked at him.

Jordan gave a passive acknowledgment and a brief farewell as Nathan ended the video call.

The room remained quiet for a few seconds, until Nathan spoke. “You can’t get involved with her.”

“Way to cut to the chase, boss.”

“I’m serious.”

Jordan picked up his laptop. “No worries. I’m not looking for my happily ever after.”

“I didn’t say happily ever after.”

“Or anything else. It’s not as if she’d even be interested. You’re giving me too much credit,” Jordan said, hoping his tone came off as joking and self-deprecating the way he’d intended.

Nathan narrowed his eyes and lifted a brow. “I know she’s beautiful. She’s Alicia Carver. But emotions prevent you from performing your job well, and we can’t take any chances.”

Getting attached was definitely not on Jordan’s to-do list. He’d done that once and had been willing to sacrifice everything for his friend.

Jordan rubbed the socket of his prosthetic where his knee should be. He’d lost half a leg, but it had all been for nothing. His friend had lost his life.

Yeah, getting attached was never a good idea.

“I understand the rules. I’ve been following them to the letter for years now.”

“You have. I just know this job isn’t your usual, but I do think Taylor Ranch would be a good place for her.”

“What makes you think that? It’s not a luxury resort. It’s not even a two-star hotel. It’s my parents’ house. Just a house. On a cattle farm. In the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s got some charm that I think our client will appreciate. She needs solitude and a place to recover. We can offer that.”

“I shouldn’t have taken you there.”

“Come on, man. We had fun,” Nathan said with his lopsided grin.

“Do Mom and Dad know?” Jordan asked.

“I called them this morning. They said yes before I finished asking.”

That was a typical response from his mom. She loved to host, and she was always looking for new friends. She'd have Alicia tucked under her wing in no time.

Nathan was right. Alicia would probably love it if she could get past the rustic vibe. His family wasn't exactly rolling in money.

And why did he care if she liked Taylor Ranch or not? If it wasn't a good fit for her, they could find another secluded hideaway for her.

A dark and foreboding thought pulled him back into the present, and despite Nathan's warnings and Jordan's assurances, he had to fortify his defenses. Any kind of personal relationship between security agents and clients was strictly forbidden, even if she was the most gorgeous woman in the world.

ALICIA

Alicia stared at the clothes in her suitcase. “This is ridiculous. I have multiple closets filled with clothes, but I have nothing to wear to a ranch in Colorado.”

Lillian tapped on her phone. “I’m having a wardrobe delivered for you.”

“Don’t you dare. They’ll think I’m crazy!”

Lillian looked up and quirked a brow. “But you need clothes.”

“I’ll buy some when I get there. I’m sure there are clothing stores. They have those in small towns, right?”

Lillian grinned. “Yes, you could buy something. When was the last time you went shopping for yourself?”

That was a good question, but Lillian knew the answer was never. Other people had been picking clothes for her to wear since she starred in *Family First*.

She refused to be afraid of something as silly as shopping for clothes in a quaint town, but a tingle of unease rolled in her middle. Would people recognize her? Would they hound her with questions like they’d done everywhere she’d been for the last two days?

A comforting hand rested on Alicia’s shoulder. “Jordan will be with you.”

Jordan. The man she’d “met” yesterday on a video call who was now her designated bodyguard. The man who would

stay within throwing distance of her for the next four weeks.

The man who'd pinned her with an intense stare from across the continent. The man who'd sent a zing up her spine without speaking a word or lifting a finger.

"Is he here?" Alicia said.

"He's waiting in the common room," Lillian said.

Turning on her heels, Alicia brushed her hands down the cashmere sweater she wore. "Then let's get this over with."

Who was she kidding? Meeting him was only the beginning. Then she had to co-exist, preferably peacefully, with him on his family ranch. She'd be living in his parents' house for weeks. While the visit was supposed to be relaxing and restorative, she hadn't yet wrapped her head around it. She would still have to work but without the conveniences of her penthouse.

She took a breath for courage and walked into the common room. Her penthouse was an open floor plan, allowing her to see from one side to the other as she exited the hallway.

Her new bodyguard stood tall, back straight, with one hand gripping his other wrist in front of him.

Wow. Did he have to be so handsome? He didn't work for her directly, but the security firm he worked for did, and that made their connection strictly business.

His gaze found her as soon as she stepped into the room, and he stilled. His black hair was a little longer on the top and shaved close on the sides. Dark brows shadowed darker eyes, and the hard lines of his jaw were lifted as he greeted her.

"Miss Carver," he said as he extended a hand to her. "I'm Jordan Taylor."

"You can call me Alicia. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Taylor."

"You can call me Jordan."

One side of his lips lifted slightly, showing off a ghost of a grin, but it disappeared a half second after it appeared. She

jerked her gaze from his mouth to his eyes as a cold wave rushed down her spine.

Had he caught her looking at his lips? She'd known the guy for less than a minute, and she already wanted to melt into a puddle and slide underneath the couch.

How ridiculous. She associated with the top celebrities of her time—many of whom were only famous because of their looks. Yet, her new bodyguard was off-limits eye candy, and her cheeks were warming from their first meeting.

If he saw her blunder, he didn't let on. "Should I grab your bags, Miss?"

Miss. So many people had demeaning nicknames for her because of her age and size. She was well into her twenties, but her rounded face made her look at least five years younger. Even the media still looked at her like she was the same kid from *Family First*. Most reporters and journalists still called her a girl instead of a woman.

But Jordan's "Miss" didn't have an underhanded jab hidden within it. It sounded polite.

Lillian tapped on her phone. "The bellhop will be here any second to get the bags. You two can head downstairs. I'll wait for him."

Alicia turned and scurried off to her bedroom. "I'll just grab my phone." Hiding from Jordan's intense stare was a must, but she could feel the tingle of his gaze on the back of her neck as she slid into the safe space. Grabbing her phone from the bed beside her open suitcase, she let out a long breath through her rounded lips.

"It's not a big deal. He's cute. Just ignore him."

Right. Like that was possible. He'd be with her constantly in the upcoming weeks, and the man had a magnetic way about him. He had a presence that filled up a room—even her large common room.

Alicia walked back into the grand room with purpose as the bellhop arrived with a cart to load her luggage, but she couldn't focus on the man when Jordan drew her attention.

Jordan nodded to her as she approached. It was a very reverent gesture—one she wasn't used to, since most people thought her private life was theirs to rifle through.

“Are you ready, Miss?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Ugh. Why did that one, stupid word come out sounding so weak? She was used to using her big girl voice—something Stacy had taught her when they were in their teens and constantly got pushed around by the top dogs in the industry.

Why did this guy make her flustered? “Yes. I'm ready.”

Jordan gestured for her to lead, but he quickly found his place beside her.

Right beside her. As in, she could sway her hip on one of her steps and their hands would probably touch.

Nope. No touching. None at all.

They entered the elevator, and all of the air in the small space disappeared as the doors closed. Jordan stood close enough that a side glance gave her an eye-level view of his thick biceps. Seriously, his upper arm was as big around as her thigh.

No peeking!

The numbers lit up one after the other as they descended to the main floor. It was like waiting for her cue to enter the stage—a torturous test of patience.

“Relax,” Jordan said beside her. His deep voice reverberated in the small space. “You're safe as long as I'm around.”

ALICIA

Oddly enough, she wasn't afraid of the crowds of people waiting outside. They were either screaming her innocence and defending her name or coloring her with the same guilty red as her parents.

Alicia hated confrontation. She'd pursued approval her entire life, and she had an enormous fan following because of it.

Now, there were just as many people who wanted to cut her down as there were people who remained loyal to her. Ashton was the most beloved actor in the world. He was at the height of his career, and he had an equally powerful fan base who wanted to blot Alicia out of his record.

She hadn't thought about her parents or Ashton in the last quarter of an hour, and that was major progress. Until now.

The elevator doors opened, and Jordan put his arm behind her. His hand barely touched her shoulder blade as he ushered her toward the private exit.

Alicia always used the private entrance, but Jordan knew where he was going. Apparently, he was quite familiar with the building she called home.

Well, one of her homes.

Jordan stayed close to her side until they reached her car. Alexander, one of her drivers, stood rigidly beside the black vehicle. He was well into his forties and sporting a silver fox

look that made him the topic of many media bits when they wanted a headline that was out of the ordinary.

“Miss Carver,” he said as he opened the door for her.

“Alicia,” she whispered with a grin before dipping into the car.

She had a long-running game with Alexander. He put up walls, and she stepped over them.

Sweetly, of course.

Alicia settled in the leather seat, and Jordan took the one beside her. His broad shoulders filled his side of the back seat, and her skin tingled from the nearness.

“Lillian usually sits back here with me,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t be offended that she didn’t want to sit beside him.

Because she *did* want to sit beside him. Her curiosity was running wild, and the man who hadn’t strayed more than five inches from her since they walked out of her penthouse was a mystery she wanted to solve.

“She’s riding in the vehicle with your luggage,” Jordan said.

Well, that was news to Alicia, since Lillian just told them she would be down in a minute. “How do you know?”

Jordan pointed to his smart watch, then the simple earphone over the shell of his left ear. “She texted.”

Alexander slid into the driver’s seat and started slowly out of the parking garage.

Just like that, they were off. No reason to be nervous.

Right?

“Okay then,” Alicia said, pulling out her phone. Sure enough, there was a text from Lillian in a group chat with another number.

Jordan’s number.

She rested the phone in her lap and sighed. Lillian usually talked while they rode, preparing her for whatever interview or

event they were heading to, but Jordan was the only one who knew about Taylor Ranch, and he was a statue beside her.

Alicia swallowed and glanced at him. His big biceps were probably as hard as a statue too.

Ugh. It would be a lot easier if her new bodyguard wasn't attractive. She'd never had a single zing of attraction with someone who worked for her or with her until now. Nothing.

She could even argue that Ashton didn't make her weak in the knees. He'd always just been Ashton to her. Not Ashton Warner, A-list actor and *Spotlight Magazine's* 'Hottest Man' of the year.

Ashton wore a suit like he was a piece of art, unique and untouchable.

Jordan wore a suit like the thing was part of his arsenal.

It should be illegal for a man to be that handsome. Equal measures of masculine and classic.

And he wasn't paying her a bit of attention, which was nice...in a way. Almost everyone she met fell at her feet, so having a moment to rest when she didn't have to be at her best was welcome.

However, it wouldn't kill him to say something. Chat about the weather? Get to know each other?

She brushed her hands over the light-weight champagne skirt she wore and cleared her throat. Guess it was up to her to get things moving.

"So, you're aware of everything going on right now?"

"Yes, Lillian filled me in on the video call yesterday, and I received an update this morning."

Right. Alicia had been on that video call yesterday. Funny, she couldn't remember anything that was said.

Except when Jordan addressed her, asking if she was okay.

She hadn't been okay. Still *wasn't* okay. And a stranger had noticed.

She stared out the window, watching the tall, skinny palms of Los Angeles zip past them. “Which side are you on?” she asked without looking at him.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Jordan said.

Everyone she knew had already formed their allegiance. Many artists in the music industry were standing beside her. Almost every musician had either been deceived by a manager or producer, and if they hadn’t, they knew someone who had.

Jordan kept his gaze straight ahead. “I’m not the peanut gallery. I’m sorry all of this is happening to you, but I’m here to protect you.”

There was an implied “I don’t care about your problems” that stung. But wasn’t that what she wanted? A judgment-free zone.

“Fair enough. Can you tell me about the ranch?”

Jordan’s hand balled into a fist before stretching and flexing beside his thigh. “It’s quiet.”

“And...” she prodded. Did he have mixed feelings about his home? Was his family nice?

“Secluded,” Jordan added.

Alicia sighed. Getting information out of him was like pulling water out of a rock. “Anything else?”

“I’m not sure you’ll like it.”

That was unexpected. “Why not?”

There was a beat of silence before he answered. “It’s rustic.”

Oh, he was implying she’d prefer a luxury getaway. “Maybe that’s what I need. Anything else I should know? Is your family nice?”

“They’re as nice as they come. Mom will be a great hostess.”

The hint of fondness in his tone when he mentioned his mom was a stab in her chest. She hadn’t spoken to her mom in

days because her attorney advised against it.

Granted, her parents hadn't reached out to clear things up. Silence was as good as a confession.

Alicia stared at her hands in her lap, willing the sadness to leave her alone. Her parents' and Ashton's betrayal had her questioning everyone and everything she believed in.

"Are you okay?"

She looked up to find Jordan's piercing gaze pinning her down. A minute ago, she'd wanted him to give her an ounce of his attention. Now, she was painfully aware of how much he could see in just one glance.

"I'm fine. Anything else I should know before we arrive?"

"I'd rather you see for yourself," he said before turning his attention back to the window.

JORDAN

Despite living less than four hours from Denver International Airport and flying in and out of it for years, Jordan hadn't ever used the private side.

The plane touched down, and the pilot gave the all clear for them to unfasten their seatbelts.

Everything about the flight from Los Angeles to Denver was a first-class experience. Traveling in a private plane was one thing, but Alicia had her own flight attendant who'd offered her everything from mineral water to coconut water. She'd picked at a bowl of fresh fruit while staring at her laptop the entire flight.

She'd stopped her questions, thankfully. Her friendliness was unexpected, and he hadn't been prepared for how difficult it would be to keep the lines clearly drawn. If he gave in to the urge to chitchat with her, she'd quickly turn into a friend...or more.

"More" couldn't happen. He had to keep things on the safe side of friendship, or he'd be tempted to lean into Alicia's natural draw.

The larger-than-life Alicia Carver had been kind to everyone she'd encountered all day. She minded her Ps and Qs as if she were raised with Southern hospitality.

Jordan didn't like it. It was great for everyone she met, but it was bad for Jordan's resolve to keep things professional.

The pilot appeared from the front of the plane and spread his arms. “Welcome to Denver.”

“Thanks, Pat,” Alicia said as she stood. “It’ll probably be a while before I see you again. The tour doesn’t start for a couple of months.”

“You have plenty of pre-tour events. The next few weeks will fly by.”

Alicia stepped into the older man’s embrace. “You’re right. It won’t be that long.”

“Have a great vacation. You should really rest. You need it.”

She made quick work of putting away her laptop. “Thanks. I’ll tell you all about it the next time I see you.”

“I wish you the best,” Pat said as he turned to help the flight attendant open the airplane door.

Alicia zipped the bag, and Jordan reached for it. She took a step back as he hooked it over his shoulder. “Lillian said the car is ready.”

Pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, Alicia looked at everything except him. “Good. Thank you.”

Jordan gestured for Alicia to lead the way. He let her get a few steps ahead and inhaled a deep breath.

The extra oxygen hadn’t helped in the way he’d hoped. Alicia Carver even smelled out of his league. She had a fragrance that tingled in his nose, sending a pulse of electricity throughout his body.

He closed his eyes and shook his head as he followed her. The winter chill hit him like a brick wall as soon as they stepped onto the tarmac.

Alicia folded her arms but didn’t speak. Her sweater and skirt were perfect for the Los Angeles weather, but winters in Colorado were no joke.

A man wearing a blue uniform loaded Alicia’s luggage into a black car. She waved to him and said a polite thanks as

Jordan opened the door for her.

The man bowed to her. Bowed like she was the Queen of England and not an entertainer.

Jordan had a hard time wrapping his head around the whole celebrity thing. Singers, actors, athletes—what made them worth the hype? So what if their faces ended up on TV often. Jordan didn't see any of them as special enough to warrant the red-carpet treatment.

Celebrities got away with murder just because they had familiar faces, and it didn't make sense.

He slid into the car beside Alicia and closed the door, trapping them in the vehicle with unnatural silence.

Alicia adjusted her skirt around her legs and rubbed her arms. Jordan pushed his coat off his shoulders and handed it to her. She looked at him, then back at the coat.

“It's not pretty, but it'll keep you warm,” he said, hoping she'd take it. Watching her shiver made him uneasy.

She slowly reached for the coat as if she were waiting for him to pull it back at the last second, like Lucy tricking Charlie Brown in a *Peanuts* cartoon.

Alicia held up the coat, studying it for a bit before draping it over her chest and legs, tucking her shoulders in to keep her entire front covered. “Thanks.”

The thing swallowed her, and Jordan cleared his throat and looked away. He couldn't waste time thinking about her wrapped up in his coat. He'd seen her dressed to the nines, and he'd seen her colorless and broken on yesterday's video call.

Now, she was a combination of class and casual. She had the girl-next-door look, and it was messing with his head.

Jordan scanned the area and let Nathan's orders play on repeat in his thoughts. Agent-client protocol was strict. Never mix business with pleasure.

Too bad his addled brain couldn't forget the pretty woman—arguably the most beautiful woman in the world—sitting next to him.

“When was the last time you visited?” Alicia asked.

Jordan slid back through his memories. “Two years ago. For Christmas.”

“Looks like you’ll get to spend Christmas at home this year.”

Jordan didn’t correct her, but he had a strong feeling she wasn’t going to like his “simple” family ranch. He’d probably be accompanying her to Bali or New York City before the month was over.

Alicia commented on the scenery from time to time, and her innocent excitement drew him in. He’d grown up in western Colorado, and his home seemed ordinary compared to the extravagant places Alicia Carver saw on a regular basis.

“Are you excited to see your family?” she asked.

That was a loaded question. Yes, he loved his family. He missed them. He’d just thought his visits home would happen on his time off between deployments—not like this.

“I am. They’ll like you.”

He wasn’t about to claim Alicia would like them too. He didn’t know much about her, and his family was as close as they came. Some people liked to keep distance, and privacy was a myth in the Taylor household.

Pulling out his phone, he sent a quick text to his mom, brother, and sister.

Jordan: Please don’t smother her.

Caroline sent back a heart emoji, Clint sent a thumbs-up, and his mother didn’t respond.

His mom was sneaky. She’d get the text, read it, then pretend she never got the warning.

“Are we getting close?” Alicia asked.

“We should be there in about three minutes.”

Jordan stretched his neck and pulled at the collar of his shirt. Everything would be fine. His family would be

welcoming. Alicia would think his home was “quaint” or “cute,” and she’d be wide-eyed with wonder at the way poor people lived.

The Taylors weren’t poor, but they probably looked like they were to someone like Alicia Carver. Lower middle class was a pretty accurate label, and there was a gap between Alicia and himself the size of the Grand Canyon.

“Is this it?” Alicia said as she sat up straighter and peered out the window.

The old wooden sign with a silhouette of a cow on it that read Taylor Ranch hung at the end of the driveway. He’d helped his dad put it up about fifteen years ago.

“This is it.”

Alicia turned her wide smile on him, and something in his chest squeezed tight, pulling the breath from his throat.

If her sadness pushed a dagger into his gut yesterday, her happiness left him speechless today.

Yeah, this was bad. Really bad.

The car slowed to a stop, and Alicia flung the door open, hopping out before he unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Good grief,” Jordan huffed under his breath as he jumped out. She was supposed to let him check the area first.

His mom flung the front door open and jogged off the porch toward the car. “Hey, you! You must be Miss Carver!” she shouted as she approached with her arms open wide.

Not only had Mom disregarded his warning text, she filed it away as a complete joke. The woman had zero chill.

“I am!” Alicia said cheerily. “You must be Mrs. Taylor.”

“Why, yes I am,” his mom said as she went in for a full-frontal assault.

“Welcome to the ranch,” Jordan said under his breath. His family was going to chase her away before suppertime.

ALICIA

Alicia breathed in the warm woodsy scent of the stranger hugging her. It wasn't the careful, light hugs people in the entertainment industry liked to share that were all for show. Her arms fit snugly around the woman, and she wanted to lean into the comfort.

Mrs. Taylor radiated excitement. The beige flannel shirt she wore contrasted with her dark hair and eyes. Her bright smile welcomed Alicia before speaking. She wanted to bottle up that happiness and be friends with Jordan's mom.

Mom. The stab in her gut was raw again at the reminder of her parents' recent betrayal.

"Mom, she might need some space," Jordan said beside her.

Mrs. Taylor released her from the hug and dove straight for her son. "Jordan!"

Jordan stiffened as his mom's arms wrapped around him, but he quickly relaxed and pulled her in with a little squeeze. "Hey, Mom."

"There is plenty of space around here, and I'll hug whoever I want," his mom quipped.

Alicia swallowed. The sweet reunion pulled at her heartstrings. She missed her mom, but they hadn't been close like Jordan and his mom, even before the theft.

A tall man stepped out onto the porch. His dark tan matched his chestnut cowboy hat. "Well, look what the cat

dragged in.”

Jordan’s grin lifted on one side as he gave the man one of those manly pat-on-the-back hugs. “You still above ground, old man?”

“I figure I’ve got a few more good years in me. I haven’t gotten the chance to pester any grandkids yet, so I’m holding out for that.”

Jordan cleared his throat and gestured to his mom. “Miss Carver, this is Vicci Taylor. That pile of leather over there is Grant Taylor. Mom and Dad, this is Alicia Carver.”

Alicia waved. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

Vicci shimmied her shoulders. “We’re excited to have a celebrity in our home. It’s not much, but it suits us well.”

Alicia hadn’t paid much attention to the house yet. The hosts had captivated her attention. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Vicci wrapped an arm around Alicia’s shoulders. “Come on in! Let me show you around.”

“Mom. Space,” Jordan reminded her as he pulled her hefty suitcase from the trunk like it was as light as a feather.

“Hush back there. I’m talking to my house guest,” she shot back at him.

Alicia covered her mouth to stifle the chuckle. Jordan must have gotten his stoic demeanor from his dad.

Jordan grumbled behind her, and she fought the urge to look over her shoulder. Surely, his down-to-earth family would loosen him up a little.

Vicci led her inside and waved a hand around the room. “This is it. Feel free to wander around. Kitchen is over there. Back door is that way. Your room is upstairs, and the bathroom connects to it.”

“I’ll show you around,” Jordan said behind her. His deep voice reverberated in her bones.

The rumble of a truck drew her attention outside. A man wearing what seemed to be the official cowboy uniform

stepped out of the truck and quickly bounded up onto the porch.

“That’s our other son, Clint,” Vicci said.

Jordan straightened his shoulders, drawing her attention. He lifted his chin as his brother flung open the screen door.

Clint pushed his hat off and revealed the same megawatt smile his mother wore. “Hello, Miss Carver.”

Alicia held out her hand. “You must be Clint.”

He took her hand and lifted it to his mouth, placing a soft kiss to the sensitive skin. “The one and only.”

If Jordan was the strong silent type, Clint must be the carefree flirt. He definitely knew how to welcome a guest just like his mom.

“You can call me Alicia.”

Clint flashed a white smile beneath his short beard. One crooked tooth on the bottom only served to make him more charming. “And you can call me whatever you want, as long as you call me.”

Alicia’s eyes widened as her cheeks heated. Clint knew how to lay it on thick, but the flirting made her smile nonetheless.

Jordan stepped up beside her. She felt his presence like a breeze before a storm. Harmless, yet promising something stronger to come. “Cut it out, Clint.”

Clint held up his hands. “I’m just being friendly.”

A huff drew Alicia’s attention toward Jordan beside her. She had to look up at him, which was intimidating on its own. Add in the death stare he was giving Clint, and Alicia’s feet itched to run for cover.

“You can’t do that the entire time she’s here,” Jordan said.

Clint leaned in and whispered, “He’s always a wet blanket.”

“Clint,” Jordan said, low with a careful warning.

“Boys,” Vicci said with all of her motherly authority.

Alicia took a deep breath and clasped her hands in front of her. The tension was palpable in the small entryway, and the hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end.

“Well, um. Is there anyone else I might meet today?” Alicia asked, desperate to change the subject.

“You’ll meet our daughter, Caroline, soon. She’s working right now, but I’m sure she’ll be around later. She’s been chomping at the bit to meet you.”

“She’ll squeal. You’ve been warned,” Clint said.

Vicci leaned in to whisper, “She’s quite a fan of your music. She’s our only daughter, so she’ll be happy to have another woman around.”

“That’s sweet. She doesn’t work on the ranch?”

“She works at The Cakery in town,” Clint said, leaning against the doorframe.

“The Cakery?” Alicia asked.

“It’s a bakery, but they make specialty cakes too,” Vicci explained.

“That sounds like fun. I’d love to see it sometime.” Alicia hadn’t been to a bakery in years. Her pre-tour diet didn’t allow sweets of any kind, and type 1 diabetes only allowed them in moderation.

“Lillian sent me a list of approved foods for you. I’m sure cake is on there,” Vicci said with a wink.

“Oh, it’s probably not.” Alicia’s whole face burned. Not only was she invading the privacy of their home, but Lillian expected them to cater to her dietary restrictions.

Vicci shrugged. “It can be if you want it to be. I’ll just pencil it in at the bottom. Cake is good for your soul, sweetheart.”

Alicia looked around the cabin, blinking back the moisture in her eyes. Vicci was right. Alicia’s soul was starving. There

was a hollowness inside her that she hadn't been able to fill in years.

She cleared her throat and put her hands behind her back. "Are there any other Taylor siblings?"

"Well, there's Dom," Clint said.

"We don't talk about Dom," Vicci, Grant, and Jordan said in unison.

Alicia's gaze darted between the family members. "Who is Dom?"

Vicci pasted on a smile. "Dom is our middle boy. He's taking some time to himself."

"He's in prison," Clint clarified.

Alicia's eyes widened. "Prison?"

Vicci wrapped an arm around Alicia's shoulders. "Let me show you to your room. Jordan, get her bags."

Jordan still held her bags as if they didn't skirt the usual fifty pound weight limit for flying commercial airlines.

It didn't sound like she'd be meeting Dom anytime soon, but curiosity was already getting the best of her. *Prison?*

"I'll show you around the ranch if you want," Clint offered.

"That sounds like a great idea," Vicci said. "Give us five minutes to get her settled."

"No, I'll do it," Jordan countered.

Clint crossed his arms over his chest. "Dude, I offered first."

"And it's *my* job. I'll be going either way, so you might as well get back to *your* job."

"Lighten up. Everything is about work with you," Clint quipped.

Alicia glanced back and forth between the brothers. Stacy was her only sibling, and they'd had their share of tiffs over the years, but overall, they were best friends.

Vicci sighed. “Don’t mind them. They love each other, but they’re complete opposites. They’ll be laughing and planning a fishing trip before supper.”

“Everyone seems to have forgotten I’m working,” Jordan said. “It’s my job to make sure no one bothers Alicia.”

“I’m not bothering her. It’s called being *nice*.” Clint put plenty of emphasis on the last word. “You should try it sometime.”

Alicia bit her lips between her teeth. Jordan was cute when he was trying to be serious around his casual family.

“You got that tractor running, Clint?” Grant asked.

Clint’s shoulders sank. “Almost.”

“Give the lady some space. Jordan is right. She’s here to relax, and you two knuckleheads are making my blood pressure rise.”

Their dad even chastised them lovingly. Though, he’d erased all doubts about where Jordan got his stern demeanor.

“Thank you for offering, Clint,” Alicia said as she halted at the foot of the stairs.

“The offer always stands.” He flipped his hat back onto his head and gave her a wink. “See you at supper.”

Alicia turned to follow Vicci up the stairs and caught sight of the stern look on Jordan’s face.

“It’s no problem. You don’t need to be upset with him.”

Jordan turned his attention to her, and the lines around his eyes softened. “I know you’re here to relax. I just don’t want anyone bothering you.”

“I’m not bothered. Your family is nice,” she whispered, letting Vicci ascend a few steps without her.

“Clint’s harmless,” Jordan said.

“I got that impression. He’s nice.”

Jordan’s jaw tightened, and he looked up the stairs where his mother had left them behind. “Yeah. He’s nice.”

JORDAN

Jordan stood next to the front door in his parents' home and kept his attention on the phone in his hand. Alicia was changing clothes and getting ready to go out for a tour of the ranch, and he needed to use the time to check his emails.

He'd been staring at the screen for three minutes, but his vision wouldn't focus on anything.

Probably because his mind wasn't on emails or work. It was on the raven-haired beauty upstairs.

He opened a new screen and browsed the latest headlines about Alicia. Most of them were about her recent breakup with Ashton Warner.

Jordan didn't know anything about Alicia's relationship with the guy, but he knew she deserved better. You'd have to be heartless to dump someone the day she got robbed by her parents.

The headlines were good for one thing. He needed a reminder to keep Alicia at a safe distance. She wasn't here for romance or a fling or a rebound.

She was off-limits anyway. He could lose his job. After losing the job he really wanted, he couldn't lose his runner-up career too.

Everything about this trip was a mess. He was mixing his personal and business lives by just being here. His attraction to the client only made matters worse.

And Clint—he was going to push Jordan over the edge before the week was out.

Jordan shoved his phone in his pocket and let his head rest back against the wall. Clint was the golden child. He was Mom’s favorite, even though she swore she didn’t have favorites. Everyone loved him.

Everyone did *not* love Jordan. He was the one people called when they needed help, but Clint was the friendly one. They pushed each other about most things, but they’d never gone toe-to-toe over a woman.

And they wouldn’t now. Alicia was the client. She was not up for grabs, and all of the Taylors needed to keep their distance.

For Jordan’s sanity at the least.

A door creaked open upstairs, and Jordan lifted his head to face the music. Alicia appeared at the top of the stairs wearing a thin white shirt, tight black pants, and gray boots. She’d pulled her dark hair back into a high ponytail, and a thin belt encrusted with diamonds and jewels wrapped around her small waist.

Way too fashionable for the ranch, but Jordan’s pulse kicked up to running speed instantly. He’d changed out of his suit and into work clothes—ranch work clothes. She’d dressed for the Hollywood version of a rodeo.

It was her smile that kicked him in the gut. Excitement radiated from her in waves as she gracefully descended the stairs.

She bounced when she hit the bottom, bobbing her ponytail to one side. “You ready?”

No, he was not ready. He needed a quarter of an hour to settle his heart rate. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Dad left us the four-wheeler. My truck is parked in the South barn.”

Alicia’s eyes widened. “The what?”

“Have you been on a four-wheeler before? I’ll go slow.”

Alicia straightened her shoulders. "I haven't been on one, but if you're sure it's safe..."

"It's safe. I promise to be careful."

He would be more than careful. They might not hit ten miles per hour. The thought of causing her an injury turned his stomach.

She peeked out the window and studied her less-than-fashionable ride. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Do you have a coat? It gets pretty chilly with the wind."

Alicia looked down at her outfit. "Um, I have one, but it's not really for warmth."

Jordan pulled his mom's coat off the hook beside the door. "Use this one. I don't think Mom is going out for a while. I can take you to town to get a new one later."

Alicia accepted the coat and slid her arms into it. "Thanks. I'd love that. I wasn't prepared for this trip, so I assumed I could buy some things once we got here."

His mom's coat was a little big on her, but she wrapped it tight around her middle and looked down at herself.

"You want to do that now?" Jordan asked.

Perking up, Alicia stuffed her hands into the pockets. "I'd rather see the ranch first."

Jordan opened the door and let her exit first. "It shouldn't take long to see everything. Most of it is pastureland."

Alicia stopped on the porch. "That's it?" She pointed at the four-wheeler.

"Yeah. Are you okay? We don't have to use it if you don't want. I can drive Mom's truck."

"No, it's fine. I've just never been on one, but I'm up for it." She stepped up beside the four-wheeler and kept her arms tucked around her.

Jordan slung a leg over and held out a hand for Alicia. She looked back and forth between his hand and the seat before

resting her hand in his. It was so small, and the cold sent a jolt up his arm. The places where they touched burned white-hot.

She slung her leg over and wiggled into place behind him, careful to keep plenty of space between their bodies, even if their legs touched.

“You’re gonna need to hang on,” Jordan said.

Yep, this was a bad idea. He was a glutton for punishment.

Alicia’s small arms slid around his middle, and he closed his eyes, trying to block out his physical reaction to having her arms around him.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.” At least she sounded sure.

He started slow, letting the loud whine of the engine block out all thoughts of Alicia Carver.

Fat chance. Nothing was pushing those thoughts out. They were front-and-center, taunting him every second.

He hadn’t been on a four-wheeler since his leg injury, and thankfully, the mechanics of driving one hadn’t changed. He’d been forced to re-learn how to do a lot of things with a prosthetic leg, and it was always a toss-up as to whether it would be an easy transition or just difficult enough to flare his impatience.

“Losing a limb is a lifetime healing process.” His doctor’s words always fanned the flames, reminding him of the incident he’d never get over.

Alicia scooted closer, pressing her body to his back. Jordan let the wind hit his face and steal the breath from his lungs. Her gentle hands flattened against his middle, warming him from the inside out.

The South barn came into view, and Jordan picked up a little speed. He needed distance between himself and the woman clinging to him.

The client. Maybe if he kept thinking of her in a business mindset, he could solidify their platonic relationship in his

head.

He parked in front of the barn and killed the engine. Holding out a hand to help Alicia off first, he flexed and fisted his other one.

Space. That would help get her out of his head.

Hopefully.

ALICIA

Alicia slung her leg over the four-wheeler and planted her feet on the ground.

Sweet, sweet solid ground.

Clinging to Jordan had her heart racing just as much as the ride, and being plastered to his back did nothing to stifle the budding physical reactions she was having for her new bodyguard.

She clung to his hand, still tense from the ride.

“You okay?”

Alicia’s head jerked up at his question. “I’m fine.”

Jordan glanced at their clasped hands.

Oh. She hadn’t released him from her clutches yet.

“Sorry.” She pulled her hand back and wiped it down her pants.

“No problem. We’ll take the trucks from now on.” He slung his leg over the vehicle and steadied himself beside her.

She looked up at the old barn. One side was enclosed, and the other side just had a slanting roof. Round hunks of hay were stacked in the back, and a few older farming machines were parked in front of the hay. She’d never seen a real barn before, and this one had a musty smell.

“Grease and hay. I hope you’re not allergic,” Jordan said.

Alicia relaxed her expression. Oops. She must have wrinkled her nose at the smell.

Jordan pointed to the enclosed side. “This way.”

She followed him to the door, where he opened it and stepped aside to let her enter first. The inside was dark and vast, but she could make out the shapes and shadows of various large vehicles.

Jordan stepped around her and flipped on a single light that dimly lit the interior. She stayed close behind Jordan as he walked through the barn with purpose.

“There she is,” Jordan said, pointing at a pickup truck that had probably once been white. Now, rust had taken over whole parts of the body.

“That’s your truck?”

“My first truck,” Jordan said.

Alicia grinned at the reverence in his voice. “I take it *she* is your baby.”

Jordan ran his hand over the hood as he passed toward the driver’s side. “What gave it away?”

“Oh, you seem oddly proud of the inanimate object.”

“I paid for her myself, and she saved me more than once,” he said.

Alicia tilted her head, studying the truck. “Saved you?”

Jordan opened the driver’s side door and bent to rummage under the seat. “That’s a song for another time,” he said as he sat up and stuck a key into the ignition.

She hadn’t seen an actual car key in years. The thing probably didn’t have air conditioning or power windows either.

A dent on the front bumper caught her attention. “Are you sure it runs?”

Jordan turned the key, but the engine didn’t start. He tried it again, but the truck made the same sad noise.

“Nope.” Jordan got out of the truck and rounded to the front. He opened the hood and propped his hands on the sides.

Wow. Those arms were massive. And distracting.

Stop staring.

He reached inside and started pulling out sticks and straw. “A mouse built a nest in the air filter.”

Alicia’s eyes widened. “A mouse?”

Before she knew it, Jordan was on his back and scooting under the truck.

She stared at the big hunk of rusty metal. There was no way he was getting that thing running. “What are you doing?”

“Checking some other things,” he said from beneath the truck.

She shook her head as her smile grew. He was really trying to fix it. “Do you need to call a mechanic?”

“I am a mechanic, sweetheart.”

Alicia’s eyes widened as Jordan’s legs hanging out from beneath the truck stilled.

He cleared his throat. “Act like I didn’t say that.”

Her smile was ridiculously wide, and she didn’t want to hide it. “Okay.”

She’d do no such thing, but he didn’t have to know that.

Jordan scooted out from beneath the truck and got to his feet. He wiped his black-stained hands on the sides of his jeans. “The radiator’s busted. I can get what I need from town tomorrow and clean out the air filter. Looks like we’ll be taking the ranch truck today.”

“Ranch truck?”

Jordan pointed to another truck that actually looked like half a truck. The back part wasn’t like the beds of trucks she’d seen before.

“It’s a flatbed. We use it to haul things, but it’ll do the job.”

She looked back to Jordan. “You actually know how to fix the truck?”

Jordan’s brows pinched close as he looked down at her. “Yeah. I’ve been fixing trucks and tractors since I was five.”

“Five?” Alicia said with wonder. She’d been on the set of *Family First* when she was five, but fixing trucks? “How did you know how to do it?”

“Dad taught me.”

“Did you need to know how to do those things when you were five?”

Jordan wiped his hands on a rag he found by a toolbox. “I haven’t thought about that, but yeah. Necessity is the mother of invention.” His gaze swept from her head to her toes. “The ranch truck might be dirty. Do you want to go back and change?”

She took in her outfit. It was the most casual thing she had. “No. I’ll be fine.”

“Suit yourself,” Jordan said as he made his way to the flatbed truck. He opened the passenger side door for her with a metallic creak.

She stepped up to the truck and halted. He hadn’t been joking when he said it was dirty. Dark stains were rubbed over the cloth seats, a toolbox sat in the middle of the bench seat, and half a dozen empty Mountain Dew bottles littered the floorboard.

She hummed as she turned to Jordan. The smile he’d been hiding all day split across his face, revealing straight, white teeth.

“Told you.” He chuckled. “Let me get a shop rag for you to sit on.”

Looking back into the depths of the dirty truck, she mouthed, “What?” as he turned away from her.

He appeared by her side a minute later with a beige towel. “Dad likes Mountain Dew.”

“I don’t know how I would have guessed that.”

Jordan spread out the towel and moved back to let her in. He offered a hand to help her, and she took it, stupidly wanting to recapture the link to him.

She was fine. This was totally fine. She was in a dirty truck with an equally dirty man who probably knew seventy ways to kill someone and how to raise a dead truck from the grave.

Settling into the now covered seat, Alicia took in the small cab while Jordan rounded to the other side of the truck. When he got in, she turned her attention to the front windshield.

Staring at him while he drove was probably frowned upon.

He started the truck, and it roared to life with a loud rumble. Alicia covered her ears and turned to him with her brows pinched together.

“Everything okay?” he shouted above the noise.

“I don’t know. Is it? It’s so loud!”

Jordan grabbed the bar mounted to the floorboard between the seats and shifted it around. “It’s a diesel and older than me. It still runs fine.”

Jordan’s definition of fine probably didn’t match hers.

Unless it was the same fine she was using to describe her current situation in the small cab of a dying truck with her hot bodyguard.

Yep. Fine.

“What is that?” she asked, pointing to the long handle between them.

“It’s the gear shift. It’s a manual transmission.”

Okay. He might as well be speaking a foreign language because she had no idea what he was talking about.

He pointed to the knob on top of the stick. There were shallow grooves in it, but she had to look closely to see them.

“These are the gears. You have to change them yourself. An automatic transmission changes the gears for you.”

“And you know how to use it?” she asked.

Jordan smirked. “Yeah. I know how to use it.”

Oh, Alicia needed to add competence to the list of things she found attractive in a man.

The volume of the rumbling engine lowered slightly as they drove out of the barn, and the wide-open space of the ranch stretched in front of them.

“Wow. This is gorgeous. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a place like this.”

A thin sheet of white covered the gently rolling hills, contrasting with the cloudless blue sky. They drove in silence, slightly bouncing along the path until they came to another barn.

Jordan pointed at it as they passed. “That’s the woodshop. Dad likes to make furniture in the winter.”

“Furniture? Like, from scratch?”

Jordan chuckled. “Furniture from wood. So, yeah. From scratch. It’s also where we keep the firewood and extra supplies. I’m sure there are a couple of old trucks in there Clint says he’s fixing up.”

Alicia tried not to show her awe as Jordan kept listing things the Taylor family made “from scratch” or did on their own.

“Do you realize your home is the perfect vacation getaway?” she asked as she stared out at the sea of white.

“I’ve never thought of it that way. I guess if you’re used to Los Angeles, it’s a novelty. It was hard coming back here after...”

Alicia sat on the edge of her seat. “After what?”

Jordan glanced at her as if just realizing she was there. “After being away for so long.”

That was a coverup. There was no way that was what he'd been about to say, and her curiosity was piqued.

They drove along a fence, and she scoured her brain for anything she could say to convince him to give up more of that story. She opened her mouth to ask, and the truck jerked to a stop.

"Sorry," Jordan said with his hand gripping the gear shift. He looked out at the fence not too far off. "Stay right here. I'll be right back."

Alicia's mouth still hung open as Jordan jumped out of the truck and started running along the fence line.

"What is he doing?"

A big black cow stood beside the fence, and a small bundle of something brown lay beside it.

Alicia opened the door and stood on the running board to get a better view of what Jordan was doing. He'd slowed his jog to a walk and slowly approached the cow.

She wrapped the coat tighter around her as a gust of wind whipped her ponytail. What was he doing?

Jordan held up his hands and pressed them to the ground. Slowly, he scooted below the bottom row of wire on his stomach. He had to be checking on the cow. She knew nothing about caring for cattle, but Jordan was acting as if something were wrong.

Jordan pushed the ground to get to his feet just as the cow lowered her head and charged.

ALICIA

“Jordan!”

Alicia’s feet were pushing toward him before she had time to think. Jordan lowered back to the ground, and he quickly rolled away as the massive cow barreled past him—missing him by inches.

Alicia ducked to slide under the fence, careful to lie low enough that the barbed wire didn’t catch her back. The thin layer of snow wet the front of her outfit, seeping in and shocking her with its cold.

Wow. She had not anticipated rolling around on the ground today, but there was a first time for everything.

On the other side of the fence, she got to her feet and ran toward Jordan. He was back on his feet but barely standing as the cow turned and rushed him again.

“Jordan!” Alicia screamed as she got closer.

The animal grew larger as she got closer, and the implications of her actions hit her square in the face. What was she doing running out here? It wasn’t as if she could save Jordan. She’d just put them both in the angry cow’s crosshairs.

“Alicia, what are you doing?” Jordan shouted back, turning his attention from her to the animal and back.

“Helping?” Oh, no. That sounded like a question instead of an answer.

“Get back on the other side of the fence!” he said, pointing toward the safety she’d just abandoned.

The cow stood between them and the fence and shifted her attention between them.

Jordan waved his arms in the air and took a few steps back, drawing the threat away from Alicia.

The cow charged him again, and Alicia held her breath as Jordan dodged the animal at the last second. Was he limping? Had the cow brushed him on the last charge?

Before the cow had a chance to turn around, Jordan was running toward her.

“What...”

Jordan skidded to a stop beside her and shouted, “Hang on!”

He swept her feet from under her, and she yelped when he pulled her to his hard chest. Holding on as if her life depended on it, she clung to Jordan’s shoulders and closed her eyes.

Jordan stopped and pulled her away from him to lift her over the fence. Making sure she had her balance, he grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward him.

“Alicia.”

She looked up into his dark eyes, and a wave of cold rushed down her face.

“Get in the truck.” His command was direct as he held her gaze.

Movement behind him caught her attention, and she pushed against his chest. “Jordan!”

He turned in time to see the approaching cow and jogged to the side, leading it away from the fence.

She took two steps back, feeling useless as the cow ran after Jordan. Every muscle in her body tensed as he dove out of the way again, flipping his landing into a roll and hopping right back to his feet. He looked like a ninja dodging throwing stars.

Now he definitely *was* limping. He was favoring his left side and gritting his teeth.

The cow ran past him again, and Jordan set his sights on her as he ran. His boots closed the distance between them until he slid to the ground and crawled under the fence. One second he was on the side with the enraged cow, half a second later, he was on her side and safe.

“How did you...” Alicia looked back and forth between the man and the fence.

Jordan straightened and rushed to her side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Sure, she was fine, but she’d just been charged by a cow, and Jordan slid under a fence like it was nothing.

His gaze ran from her head to her toes and back again as he panted for air. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” The word was too high and squeaky, but maybe he’d believe her. Her brain wasn’t working at full speed after watching Jordan’s *American Ninja Warrior* performance.

He brushed off his shirt and reached for her hand. “Come on.”

Letting him pull her toward the truck, Alicia gasped for air. She’d seen photos of cows before, but she’d never seen one in person. Were they all so hostile?

Jordan dug his phone out of his pocket and dialed as they approached the vehicle.

With the phone to his ear, he commanded, “Hey. Bring Dad out to the north pasture. A calf is down, and the mama is protective. She charged me and wouldn’t let me get close to the calf to see what’s wrong. She’ll have the fence torn down soon.”

So, that was the problem. The cow was trying to protect her baby. The thought clenched Alicia’s throat.

“Got it. I need to get Alicia out of here. I’ll meet you back at the house.”

Jordan put his phone away and opened the passenger door for her. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

She reached for the hand he offered and noticed the shake in her own. She wasn’t injured, but a little bit of adrenaline still coursed through her. “I’m okay. Are you? You’re limping.”

“I’m fine,” he said as he closed the door.

Sliding into the seat, she watched Jordan round the truck, keeping an eye on the pacing mama cow. When he slid into the driver’s seat and closed the door, he let out a deep sigh.

“I thought I’d have to protect you from reporters.”

“Not cows,” she finished.

Jordan pushed a hand through his hair and looked out the windshield. “Why on earth did you get out of the truck?”

Heat spread over her chest and face, despite the cold damp still clinging to her clothes. “I thought I could help.”

“Help,” Jordan repeated.

Her ears burned, and she crossed her arms over her front. “It sounds silly.”

Jordan slowly nodded. “Yeah, it does.”

A stray chuckle burst from her chest, and she covered her mouth to hide the fit of laughter bubbling up. “It’s funny.”

“You almost got trampled by a cow, and you think it’s funny?”

Another wave of laughter crashed over her. When was the last time she’d laughed?

“No. It’s funny that I thought I could help you.” She held her sides as the muscles ached. “You threw me over that fence like I didn’t weigh anything. And then you crawled under it faster than I could blink.”

Jordan rubbed the back of his neck and cracked a smile. "I'll be paying for those twists and turns tomorrow."

"Are you sure you're okay? You were limping."

"The day I let a cow get the best of me is the day I retire." Jordan jerked his chin toward her. "Buckle up, buttercup."

Alicia leaned toward him, compelled by an invisible force. Jordan filled more than his share of the cab, and she was floating after his display of masculinity. "You're really serious about safety, boss."

Jordan gave her a slow wink. "What can I say? You bring it out in me." His gaze roamed over her, and the intensity in his stare dampened her laughs.

"What?" she asked, hoping she hadn't just made a complete idiot of herself. Well, more than she had when she'd run *toward* a mad cow.

"You're filthy," Jordan said, pointing to her once pristine outfit.

She was dirty, and probably for the first time in her life. Rubbing the snow-and-dirt mush between her thumb and fingers, she didn't hate the grit.

"Are you sure you're okay? I didn't mean for you to get dirty on this outing."

"I'm okay. It's not like I'm going to get the truck any dirtier." She shrugged and wiped her hands on the front of her pants, mashing the dirt against more dirt.

Jordan gave her another assessing look. "You might not hate it here after all."

"Who said I was going to hate it here?"

Jordan started the truck and shifted into gear. "I did. Not out loud, but I assumed you'd hate it."

"I don't hate it," she whispered. "I'm still a little stunned at all you did to try to check on that calf."

Jordan turned the truck around, heading back toward the house. "I still didn't get to see what's wrong with the calf. Dad

and Clint will have to separate them to get a good enough look. I hate that I can't help them."

"Because you're babysitting me?" The implied ending to his sentence hurt more than it should. It was his job, but she'd felt useless enough today.

"I don't think I'm babysitting you. It's not my job to keep you in line or tell you what to do. I'm just here in case you need me."

"I did need you today," she whispered.

"No, you wouldn't have gone toe-to-toe with an animal that weighs a literal ton if I hadn't brought you out here."

"Or if I'd stayed in the truck," she added.

Jordan's mouth lifted on one side. "Or that."

"You did a lot to help me. And the animals."

"It's what you do on a ranch. The animals need help sometimes, and it's part of the job. Working on a cattle ranch isn't as glamorous as movies make it sound. Winters are rough, and most people leave the western slope because they can't handle the cold."

"Western slope?"

"Anything in Colorado west of the Rockies."

Alicia picked dirt from around her cuticle. "I like it here," she said, low and careful.

Jordan glanced at her as he continued driving. "You won't for long. Women go stir crazy on ranches. It's a secluded, hard life."

"Your mom seems happy."

"My mom is tough as nails, and she doesn't back down from anything. She's different."

Alicia stared down at her ruined manicure. "Why did you leave? To be a bodyguard?"

"Security agent," he corrected.

"Okay, did you leave home to be a security agent?"

He kept his attention on the path ahead and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. “That’s not why I left.”

JORDAN

“Well, why did you leave?”

Jordan held a death grip on the steering wheel as the truck bumped over the uneven path.

Leaving was the part he'd planned. Coming back to Redemption Ridge wasn't supposed to happen until he retired. He left for the Marines. He left knowing he'd go wherever they sent him.

He was a Marine. Still considered himself one. He'd been honorably discharged, and losing the Marines had been like losing his limb. They'd quietly waved good-bye and said, “Have a nice life. Thanks for sacrificing your leg.”

They hadn't completely written him off, but it still stung to be pushed out. Nothing was worse than knowing you weren't good enough.

“I left to join the Marines. It didn't work out like I thought it would, so I joined Field Inc.”

Clint's truck appeared on the path ahead of them, and he gave his dad and brother a quick wave as they passed. He should be helping them, but Alicia was his first concern. He'd put her in enough danger today.

She ran toward the cow to help him. The memory dispelled some of his gloomy mood after the brief thoughts about the Marines.

“Are they going to be okay?” she asked as she turned to watch the truck pass.

“They do this all the time.”

Alicia didn't ask any more questions on the ride back to the house. He wasn't ready to talk about the losses that led him back to Redemption Ridge.

He parked in front of the house and quickly rounded the truck to get Alicia's door, but she was already getting out by the time he got there.

He'd expected a pampered princess, and Alicia was slowly proving him wrong. She'd been hesitant to get in the dirty truck, but she'd rolled around on the ground to come to his aid.

Jordan didn't mind opening doors for her. He'd do it whether she was famous or not, but it was surprising to see her do things on her own.

Her file was enormous. She'd been in the public eye since she was a kid, and just reading through her history took hours. She'd been through a lot over the years, but there were so many things she'd missed out on in everyday life.

His leg throbbed as they walked up the steps to the porch. Running from the cow had been tough, but he'd be paying for it later. His prosthesis was the best for advanced physical activity, but it wasn't anywhere close to a real, human leg.

The smell of supper hit his nose as soon as he stepped through the door.

“Wow. Something smells amazing,” Alicia said.

“Mom's making beef stew.” He'd know that smell anywhere. It was his favorite, and it didn't surprise him that his mom had made it on his first day back at the ranch.

Jordan thought back over the ingredients in his mom's beef stew. Surprisingly, almost everything was on Alicia's approved foods list.

His mom shouted from the kitchen when she heard the door close. “Supper is ready!”

Jordan held up a finger for Alicia to hold on while he walked to the kitchen doorway. “We're going to change

clothes before dinner. Alicia may want a shower too.”

“Take your time,” his mom said.

Jordan pointed toward the stairs, and Alicia started up. At the top of the stairs, she turned to face him. “I’d really like a shower, but don’t wait on me for supper.”

“I can wait. Put your clothes in the hamper in the bathroom, and Mom can wash them tonight.”

She looked down at her outfit. “That would be great. I don’t really know how to wash clothes myself.”

His mom had made him and all of his siblings learn to wash their own clothes early on, and the skill had helped him when he joined the Marines.

Alicia, on the other hand, didn’t need to know how to wash clothes when there was always someone around to do it for her.

“It’s not a problem.”

“Do you think she would teach me?” Alicia asked.

Well, that was unexpected. “I’m sure she’d be happy to.”

Alicia smiled. “Thanks. I might as well learn a few things while I’m here. Plus, working takes my mind off of the things going on right now.”

He’d been known to use work to avoid problems in the past. It was one of the reasons he’d recovered so quickly after the injury. Getting back up after the fall had pushed him to his physical limits, allowing him to escape the harsh reality of losing his leg, career, and best friend in one blow.

“Great. I’ll see you downstairs,” Alicia said as she stepped into the guest bedroom across the hall from his own.

He took the opportunity to take a shower too, washing away all the evidence of the run-in with the cow. Clean and shaved, he grabbed his laptop and headed down the stairs.

With no idea how long Alicia would be, he settled in on the couch with his laptop and opened his inbox. Alicia’s manager sent regular updates on the headlines regarding

Alicia's parents and the breakup with Ashton Warner, and the articles were a mix of supportive and scathing.

A few headlines addressed Alicia's sister, Stacy, and how she was handling the news about their parents. Stacy seemed to be the more assertive sister. She'd already spoken out about their parents' betrayal, holding nothing back.

After reading through the articles and sending Lillian a thanks for the update, he opened an incident report on the run-in with the cow and emailed it to Nathan. His boss would have questions later, and Jordan promised a phone call in the morning.

He'd just sent the email when his dad and Clint stepped through the front door.

"Man, that cow was fired up," Clint said.

"You get a look at the calf?" Jordan asked as he closed the laptop.

"Shot in the leg," his dad said.

"Shot?" Jordan repeated.

"Chuck," Clint said. "At it again."

"You're kidding. He's still bothering you?"

Chuck was their neighbor to the north, and the guy didn't have anything better to do than cause trouble. He'd been doing everything in his power to bother the Taylors since Jordan was in his early teens.

"Does the sun still rise in the east?" Clint said. "Of course he is. He's too bored and grouchy to do anything else."

"What did Judge Martin say?" Jordan asked. It had been a while since he'd heard an update on the ongoing lawsuit against Chuck.

"It doesn't really matter what Martin says. Chuck thinks he's untouchable. And really, he is. He gets a night in jail here and there, but I'm pretty sure he thinks it's exciting to sleep someplace new for a night," Clint said.

“No sense in worrying over it, boys,” their dad said as he slapped a hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “Let’s eat.”

“Where’s Alicia?” Clint asked.

“Coming!” Alicia shouted from the top of the stairs.

She descended in slow motion, swaying her hips slightly in the flowing navy skirt that hit just above her ankles.

It was a good thing it was his job to watch her because he could barely tear his gaze away from her.

His mom stepped out of the kitchen rubbing her hands on her apron. “Well, what’s the verdict?”

“Couldn’t save it,” Jordan’s dad said.

His mom’s mouth pressed into a thin line, but her voice was lower. “Come eat. We’ll take care of the rest later.”

Clint and his dad filed into the kitchen, but Jordan hung back. Alicia stepped up beside him with a small wrinkle between her brows. “Couldn’t save it?”

“The calf,” Jordan explained.

Alicia’s hand rose to cover her mouth.

“It’s a part of ranching. Death is a part of life.”

“I know. It’s just sad,” Alicia whispered.

Jordan watched her, waiting on the walls to crumble. He’d seen girls fall into a fit of hysterics over the deaths of bunnies and squirrels, and he half expected Alicia to do the same over the calf.

But the waterworks never came, and Alicia lifted her chin. “I’m sorry. That must be hard. Seeing death when you spend your life caring for them.”

Jordan swallowed hard as his throat constricted. It was his family’s job to care for the cattle, and while it was unfortunate when they lost one, it wasn’t a traumatic event.

But it was his job to keep Alicia safe, and he couldn’t slip up—couldn’t step out of line even once. He was protective of all his clients. All people. Hired or not. But it was different

with Alicia. It was more instinctual–ingrained in his DNA to protect her at all costs.

He'd come close to putting her in a situation that was out of his control today. That couldn't happen again.

His mom was as tough as a dump truck. She was made for ranch life. Alicia wasn't. She might not fall apart at the death of a calf, but this was an escape from reality for her. She'd get her fill of the rough life on this trip. She'd probably ask him to take her to get her manicure fixed in the morning.

He cleared his throat and gestured toward the kitchen. "Mom has dinner ready."

"I'm starving," Alicia said as she led the way to the kitchen.

His parents and Clint were settling down at the table, and his mom waved Alicia over. "Take this seat. What can I get you to drink?"

"Water would be great. I can get it myself if you'll let me know where it is."

"Sure. We have some bottled water in the refrigerator. Help yourself."

Maybe Alicia wasn't helpless. If she kept asking to do things for herself, his mom might turn the pop princess into a pioneer woman before the month was out.

Everyone settled in their seats, and Jordan's dad propped his elbows on the table. "Let's return thanks."

Jordan snuck a glance at Alicia whose gaze darted around the table before landing on him. He bowed his head, showing her what to do. They'd have to have a conversation later about praying. His family wouldn't stop praying, but at least he could get an idea about her feelings on the matter.

His father lifted his head when the prayer was finished and dug right into the stew.

His mom's shoulders bounced as she turned her attention on Alicia. "So, I have to run over to the church after we eat.

We're decorating the sleigh for the Christmas parade. Would you like to join us?"

Alicia's eyes widened. "Um. I don't know. Who will be there?"

"Just the ladies from the church. Grant just finished building it, but it needs a few coats of paint and some accessories."

Prayer and church within five minutes. The Taylor family was giving Alicia the crash course on Christianity.

"Mom, I think there might be too many people there. Alicia needs to lay low and be mindful of who she associates with in town. We don't want to draw a crowd."

His mom swished a hand in the air. "Don't be silly. We'll just tell everyone to keep quiet. It's not like we're a bunch of busybodies. We know how to keep a secret."

Clint pointed his fork at their mom. "They didn't wait two seconds to tell you when I let that pig loose in the school gym."

His mom pointed a finger back at her son. "Don't point that thing at me. Use your manners. And they should have told me what you did. You act like I wouldn't have found out otherwise."

Clint shrugged. "You're right, but we could have skipped the part where you marched into the classroom and dragged me out by my ear. Talk about embarrassing."

"Gideon Reynolds let a cow loose on the football field," Jordan said. "It could have been worse."

"Whose side are you on?" his mother shrieked.

Jordan held up his hands in surrender. "Just saying. Clint's senior prank was pretty harmless."

Their mother narrowed her eyes at Jordan and Clint. "The ladies at the church will speak up if the information is important. We'll just explain that Alicia is here for some R and R, and to keep it quiet."

“It sounds like fun,” Alicia said.

Wait. What did she say?

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea,” Jordan added.

“Do you think she should just hide out here all month? There are tons of Christmas events going on, and she should be a part of it,” his mom said. “You’re gonna love it here.”

Alicia smiled back at his mom. “I’m sure I will.”

It looked like Jordan would be hanging out with the church ladies for the evening.

ALICIA

Alicia stared at the church as they pulled into the parking lot. It was small and simple with a big white cross on the top, stretching into the dark sky.

“I can’t wait for you to meet everyone,” Vicci said.

Jordan shifted into park and looked over his shoulder. “Please make sure they know not to spread the word.”

Vicci unbuckled her seatbelt. “Stop being a worrywart. And relax a little bit. I doubt Alicia will be in any danger from the ladies tonight.”

Jordan killed the engine and stepped out of the truck. Alicia reached for the door handle, but her attention was drawn to the cross again. She’d never been in a church before. Her parents hadn’t been religious, preferring to worship money and popularity. They were the only things that mattered in the Carver family.

It wasn’t even Sunday, and the Taylors were planning to spend their time at church. She’d never given much thought to what Christians actually did at church. She thought it was a once-a-week thing.

The door opened, and Jordan offered his hand. She’d meant to get her own door, but the nervousness stirring in her middle had her frozen.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asked low, probably so his mom wouldn’t hear.

Alicia put on a smile and took his hand. “Of course. I’m fine. Just taking it all in.”

“This way.” Vicci waved as she led them toward a small door on the side of the church.

Alicia had performed in front of thousands of people and showcased herself for peoples’ opinions and scrutiny. Being the center of attention wasn’t anything new. Why were her hands sweating at the thought of meeting a few women?

The small door opened to a large room with fluorescent lighting. Folding tables were pushed against one wall, and the center of the room was dominated by an enormous sleigh. Paper was spread over the floor, and a few paint cans were dotted around it.

A woman in her mid-fifties with her light-blonde hair pulled up into a claw clip spotted them first. “Vicci! I thought we decided on crimson.” The woman stopped when she realized Vicci had others with her. “Oh! Who is this? Jordan, is that you?”

Jordan tensed beside Alicia. “It’s me, Mrs. Reynolds.”

“Well, look at you! It’s been too long. And call me Connie. You’re plenty old enough.” Connie opened her arms and walked straight toward Jordan, wrapping him in a motherly hug. “We missed you like crazy.”

“I missed you too,” Jordan said before clearing his throat. “I’m actually working right now.”

“He’s a bodyguard now, Connie. He works for Alicia Carver,” Vicci said as she wrapped her arms around one of Alicia’s. “The famous singer.”

Connie’s eyes widened, taking Alicia in from her head to her toes. “Well, that sounds like fun! I’ve seen you on those music award shows. My friend’s daughter went to one of your concerts once. She said it was the best show she’d ever seen.”

Alicia’s smile came easy at Connie’s kindness. “I’m so glad she enjoyed it.”

“And a bodyguard,” Connie said as she gave Jordan a once-over. “We’re so proud.”

“Security agent,” Jordan corrected, but his eyes lifted at the corners.

A young woman stepped up behind Connie and propped her hands on her hips. “Security agent. Sounds important.”

“It is important,” Vicci said. “And you know how serious Jordan is about his work. He has to go wherever Alicia goes, even though she’s not in any danger here with us.”

“Oh, not at all,” Connie said. “We’ll take good care of you, Miss Carver.”

The young woman narrowed her eyes at Alicia, and the piercing stare had her shoulders tensing. Her assessment was more intense than the others, and she hadn’t pasted on the fake smile like people sometimes did when meeting her.

“Mom! Where are the brushes?” another young woman shouted as she stepped out of a closet on the far side of the room. She gasped when she caught sight of Alicia.

“Cassie, come meet Alicia,” Vicci said with a come-hither wave.

The woman jogged over with a wide, genuine smile. “I’m Cassie. It’s so nice to meet you. I’m a fan of your music.”

Alicia extended a hand. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Vicci put her hands on Alicia’s shoulders. “Everybody, listen up! Alicia is staying with us for a while, and we don’t want any rumors. She’s here for a relaxing break, and we want to make her welcome.”

“Got it!” Cassie said. “Welcome to Redemption Ridge.”

“Thanks. I just got here today, and I’m loving it so far.”

Vicci went around the room and introduced Alicia to the half-dozen women. The names weren’t too difficult to remember, and they all gave her a warm welcome.

She sensed Jordan before he stepped to her side. His dominating presence pulled her attention in the large room.

“I’ll be by the door. Let me know if you need anything.”

Alicia nodded and whispered back, “Thanks.”

Cassie came back a minute later with a tub filled with paint brushes, and the women started pouring paint into trays around the sleigh. They divided up into teams and sections and started painting the marked parts of the sleigh bright-red.

The collective conversation never stopped, but the women worked continuously. When the first coat of paint was on and drying, everyone moved to the kitchen area for a water break.

“So, Jordan is home. That’s exciting,” Connie said.

“For about a month,” Vicci confirmed.

“He’s done a lot of filling out since he left,” Gertrude said with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

“He went through a rough spot after the accident, but he’s much better now,” Vicci said as she filled a Solo cup with water from the refrigerator dispenser.

“How’s he doing...with the injury?” Cassie asked.

Alicia lowered her plastic cup and held her breath. She’d heard brief mentions of an injury, but she hadn’t been able to piece together what happened to him.

“He seems great. He had a run-in with a riled-up cow earlier today, and I noticed he was limping a little. He didn’t mention any pain, but...it’s hard to tell what’s normal when we don’t see him very often.”

Connie rested a hand on Vicci’s shoulder. “He’ll get through this. Jordan is strong.”

“He’s such a good boy,” Gertrude said. “I used to appreciate it when he’d wait with Piper for the school bus to come by when they were little. That boy always had his head on straight.”

“I bet he picked up tens of thousands of pinecones in my yard over the years. I probably should have paid him more,” Gertrude said.

“Hard work never hurt anyone,” Vicci said. “He learned the value of a dollar.”

Alicia bit her lips between her teeth, piecing together the stories about Jordan with the stoic man she was getting to know.

She glanced out of the kitchen to see him sitting in a metal folding chair beside the door. His thick arms were crossed over his chest, and one leg was stretched out in front of him.

But his attention? It was glued on her.

Ducking back into the kitchen, the heat spread up her neck and face. His looks did more than see her. Jordan had a way of peeking into her thoughts, drawing out reactions she didn't mean to show.

“Is he single?” Destiny, the woman who'd given her the stony welcome earlier, asked without looking up.

“As far as I know,” Vicci said with a hand in the air. “The boys aren't usually forthcoming about those things.”

Destiny nodded once, then turned back to her phone in her hand.

Seemed like someone was interested in Jordan's relationship status.

Who was Alicia kidding? *She* was interested too.

“Let's get back to work, ladies,” Vicci said as she gathered everyone's disposable cups.

Everyone continued whispering stories about Jordan as they worked. Her mysterious bodyguard—er, security agent—was quickly morphing into a sweet kid who played every sport offered in his tiny hometown and charmed every female within a fifty-mile radius.

“He didn't tell me until after he'd eaten two bowls that he was allergic to ice cream,” Connie said.

“He's not allergic to ice cream! I'm not even sure you can be allergic to ice cream, unless he meant lactose intolerant,” Vicci said.

“I figured that out,” Connie said on a laugh. “Apparently, you told him he was allergic to ice cream because he had no restraint when it came to sweets.”

Vicci threw her head back, laughing strong and loud, while Connie wiped tears from the corners of her eyes.

Alicia snuck a glance at Jordan sitting rigid by the door. His arms were still crossed in front of his chest, but he had his chin down, shaking his head. The ladies didn’t care that he could clearly hear them talking about him, and he didn’t seem to mind too much. At least he wasn’t wearing a surly frown.

When the sleigh was painted and decorated, a few ladies made their apologies and slipped out early. Some had kids to get to bed or needed to be up early for work in the morning.

Jordan left his sentry chair to help clean up. He worked without speaking a single word, doing whatever he was told. Half an hour later, Alicia, Jordan, and Vicci were waving their good-byes to the remaining ladies in the parking lot.

Joy bubbled in Alicia’s chest as Connie wrapped her in a friendly hug. “Send me your friend’s address. I’ll have a signed poster delivered to her daughter,” Alicia said.

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you,” Connie said. “She’d absolutely love that.”

“It was nice meeting you.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you too.”

“Yeah, the guys are never going to believe we actually met you,” Cassie said.

Connie chuckled. “I doubt your brothers and husband are going to be as excited as we are.”

“No, but it’s still cool. Hope to see you around more.”

“I hope so too,” Alicia said.

And she did. Despite not knowing anyone at the beginning, she’d made some true friends this evening.

“I hope they were nice to you,” Jordan said as they walked toward the truck.

“So nice. I wasn’t even the main topic of conversation,” she said as she nudged his arm.

Hello, rock-hard bicep.

Nice way to step over a professional boundary, Alicia.

“I heard.” He looked down at her with a sly grin. “You got my full backstory tonight.”

“I could have just asked one of these ladies for your background check. They probably know your Social Security number,” Alicia joked.

“I wouldn’t put it past them.”

Alicia glanced up at him as they walked toward the truck. The night was quiet, and the single street light near the parking lot cast a dim glow over his face.

There were some things she still didn’t know about him. Like, why he’d left the Marines, and the injury the ladies had mentioned but glossed over.

Vicci held up her phone and waved it in the air. “Can we stop by The Cakery? Caroline said they have the raspberry macarons I like, and they’re fresh.”

Jordan looked to Alicia and raised a brow. “It’s up to you.”

Alicia shrugged. She’d heard quite a bit about Jordan’s sister, and she was still riding the bubbling happiness of the evening with the church ladies.

“Sounds good to me.”

ALICIA

The town of Redemption Ridge was straight out of a Christmas postcard. Every streetlight had a lit-up Christmas decoration on it, lights were strung from every storefront, and a huge Christmas tree adorned a small square in the center of town.

Alicia's boots crunched the light layer of snow on the sidewalk as she followed alongside Jordan and his mom toward The Cakery. The big pink name on the old brick building was impossible to miss, and the handwritten sign out front promised, "Every bite is happiness."

She glanced at Jordan and caught him looking back at her with an amused smirk. "What?"

"You look like a kid in a candy store," he said.

"I'm about to be a kid in a bakery. Don't judge me."

Jordan held up his hands. "I'm learning my lesson when it comes to judging you."

Good. That was progress. At least he wasn't treating her like a pampered princess or acting like she was made of glass anymore. Though he still told her to "Buckle up, buttercup" every time they got in the truck.

Oddly enough, earning his respect was important to her, and she wasn't going to get it if she didn't show him she could do things on her own.

Jordan opened the door to The Cakery, and the cheery bell above the door chimed. He stepped to the side for Alicia and

his mom to enter first.

The warm spice scent tingled in Alicia's nose, and the display case caught her attention.

Please have sugar-free. Please have sugar-free.

A pretty woman with dark hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head stepped out from a room behind the counter. "Welcome to The... Jordan!"

The woman who had to be his sister, Caroline, darted from behind the counter and launched herself into his arms.

Jordan lifted his sister off her feet as his strong arms wrapped around her. "Hey, sis."

The pang in Alicia's chest was bittersweet. Jordan's stone walls crumbled around his little sister, but Alicia missed her own sister. They'd always been close, but they'd never greeted each other with an embrace, even after months apart.

"I'm so glad you're home," Caroline said as she pulled out of the hug. "But I really need your help."

Jordan grinned. "At your service."

Caroline pointed to the door leading back out to the street. "I have one more strand of garland to hang on the front. Can you do it?"

Jordan turned to Alicia and said, "I'll be right back."

"The ladder is by the door!" Caroline called after him. As soon as her voice faded, she caught sight of Alicia and gasped. "Oh my cinnamon rolls! It's you!"

Despite Caroline's shouts, Alicia's smile broadened. "It's me."

Caroline bounced on her toes. "Jordan said you were coming, but I can't believe you're really here! In The Cakery! In Redemption Ridge!"

"Calm down, sweetheart," Vicci said. "You're going to alert the whole town."

Caroline covered her mouth, muffling her words. “Am I not supposed to tell?”

Vicci placed a calming hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Maybe just don’t broadcast it. She wants to have a relaxing visit, and that won’t happen if she can’t go anywhere without causing a scene.”

Caroline nodded. “Right. Right. Sorry about that.” She let out a long exhale and stuck her hand out. “I’m Caroline Taylor.”

“Alicia Carver. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Caroline said in a cutesy voice. “I’m a huge fan.”

“She is. We tried to get tickets to your shows around here a few times, but they always sold out so fast,” Vicci said.

“Denver is on my tour schedule for next year. I’ll send you tickets,” Alicia said.

Caroline’s eyes widened. “You’re pulling my sweet tooth. No way!”

Alicia chuckled at Caroline’s sugary figure of speech. “Yes way.”

“That’s awesome. I can’t believe it,” Caroline said.

Jordan walked back into the bakery, drawing Alicia’s full attention. It was crazy how her chest warmed at the sight of him.

“All done. I see you met Alicia.”

“I did, and she said she’d get us tickets to her Denver show next year!” Caroline gushed.

Jordan’s brows lowered. “You’re not—”

“She didn’t ask. I offered,” Alicia explained. “It’s the least I can do for making me feel so welcome here.”

Jordan stared at her for a heartbeat before nodding once. “That’s nice of you.”

She shrugged. “Glad I could do something for y’all after all you’re doing for me.”

Caroline reached for a stack of colorful scraps of paper on the checkout counter. “I have to finish putting the wishes on the angel tree, and I’ll get those macarons for you, Mom.”

“What’s an angel tree?” Alicia asked.

Caroline pointed to an artificial tree in the front corner of the shop. “Kids who might not get much for Christmas come by and write what they want on an angel. People can get an angel and fulfill the Christmas wish.”

“I’ll take some of those,” Jordan said, holding out a hand to his sister.

“Me too,” Vicci said. “I didn’t know they were ready yet.”

“I’d like some,” Alicia added.

“This is great. We can go shopping together,” Vicci said.

“I guess that means I’m shopping too,” Jordan said, trying and failing to look put-out.

“Are we still decorating at your place tomorrow?” Caroline asked her mom.

“Yes. I’ll make supper, then we can get started. I think Jordan and Alicia have some errands to run in town tomorrow.”

“We do. I need new clothes,” Alicia said, holding out her arms. “I didn’t know how to pack.”

Caroline looked her up and down. “I have some sweaters and coats that are probably your size. I’ll bring them tomorrow for you to try on.”

Alicia could more than afford a new wardrobe, but Caroline’s immediate kindness caught her off-guard, and she couldn’t turn down the kindness. “I appreciate that.”

“Are you planning to go to the school Christmas play?” Caroline asked. “Some of our friends have kids in it, and it’s usually really entertaining.”

Alicia looked at Jordan. Her social calendar was filling up fast, and while she wanted to do all the things, how quickly would word get to the reporters about her little vacation?

Jordan raised one brow and nodded. "It's your decision."

That was a foreign thought. She rarely got to make decisions on her own. Her producers told her what to sing, her team planned her concerts and events, her designers chose what she would wear.

Even her parents had pushed her toward Ashton. Would she have dated him if her parents hadn't convinced her it would be good for her image?

"I'd like to go. I've never been to a Christmas play."

Jordan tilted his head. "As you wish."

Alicia rolled her eyes. "My boss says I can go."

Caroline laughed as she placed paper angels on the tree. "That's rich. Jordan has always liked to boss people around. He has a thing about control."

"I'm not controlling," he said.

"You just like things done your way," Caroline added.

"Not necessarily my way. I just like for things to be done the correct way."

Alicia took the opportunity to study Jordan. She could see what his sister was hinting at, but Jordan hadn't been controlling as much as protective of her, and she was coming to treasure his new trust.

Caroline placed the last angel on the tree and wiped her hands on her apron. "I'll get your macarons. I need to start closing up. Alicia, you want something?"

"Do you have anything sugar-free?"

She didn't look at Jordan. He'd seen her approved foods list, but he probably had formed his own opinions about her diet.

“Sure do. Come pick what you want,” Caroline said as she waved Alicia over.

After picking out a carrot cupcake, Alicia said her good-byes and followed Jordan and Vicci back onto the sidewalk.

“You find something you wanted?” Vicci asked.

Alicia held up the small white bag containing her treat. “Carrot cupcake.”

“Sugar-free?” Vicci asked.

“Alicia is diabetic,” Jordan said.

Alicia stalled for a moment. Had she told him she was diabetic?

He opened his hand, reaching for the bag. “I can carry that for you.”

She handed over the small bag without thinking. It weighed an eighth of a pound, and she could carry it herself, but her head was still spinning.

“It was in your file,” Jordan said.

“Oh.” Of course, he’d read her “file.”

“I take your diet seriously. Even if you just chose not to eat sugar, I respect that. As long as you’re okay with it and someone else isn’t forcing you.”

Alicia wrapped her coat around her middle, huddling against the chilly breeze. Jordan was turning out to be sweeter than she’d expected, she hadn’t thought about her family problems or recent breakup, and the people of the town were inviting her to events left and right.

They treated her like a normal person.

Vicci talked the whole way back to the ranch, pointing out where her friends lived and sharing about their families. She’d known these people her whole life. Jordan had too. It was oddly comforting knowing she was being hosted by a family who lived outside of the town business district but still had their hands and hearts in everything that was going on.

The house was quiet when they returned, and Vicci said a quick good night before slipping off to her room.

Left alone with Jordan in the entryway, she clutched the paper angels in her coat pocket, desperate for anything to curb the bubbling in her middle.

Jordan held up the bag containing the cupcake. “You want me to put this in the kitchen, or are you going to eat this before bed tonight?”

Alicia tried to hold back her grin as she reached for the bag. “I’ll just take that.”

Jordan looked up the stairs, then jerked his head that way. “After you.”

She ascended the stairs slowly. It hadn’t been an exceptionally demanding day, but the emotional rain cloud hanging over her was silently heavy. Dim moonlight shone through the window at the end of the hallway, and she paused at the guest bedroom.

“Thanks for everything today,” she whispered in the quiet house.

“You’re welcome.” His deep voice slid through the darkness, wrapping itself around her bones.

Alicia glanced at his bedroom door. The hallway was so small they could barely fit in it together, and she didn’t want an escape from Jordan. Not yet. He held her attention in large rooms, but his wide shoulders held full sway over her attention in the dark corridor.

“Your sister is sweet. I really like her.”

“She’s a good person. You won’t meet anyone else like her.”

Alicia grinned, wishing she could see his expression when he talked about Caroline. “I bet no one ever gave her trouble in school with you and Clint around.”

Jordan huffed. “They wouldn’t dare.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall, somehow making

his frame even larger. “She had a hard time after Dom got put away, but I think she came out of it.”

Dom. The other Taylors were so close. Dom’s absence seemed like a hole in a carefully smoothed concrete foundation. “What happened?”

Jordan rubbed the scruff on his jaw and looked at the floor. Conversation had danced around the missing brother earlier, and her curiosity was at its peak.

After a sigh, Jordan looked up. “He killed someone.”

Alicia had feared the worst, but her gasp couldn’t be contained.

“You’re not in any danger. He’s been in prison for years, and he’s not getting out anytime soon.”

“What? How?” Alicia asked.

Jordan shrugged. “He pled guilty. It didn’t add up for me at the time. It still doesn’t. Dom was a troublemaker, but he wasn’t a bad guy. I wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t pleaded guilty.”

“I’m sorry.” She *was* sorry. Sorry for the anguish the Taylor family must have gone through. They were still going through it.

“Mom doesn’t talk about it because she gets tired of defending him. Well, not necessarily defending him—she’d do that till her dying day. She gets tired of not being believed. She doesn’t think he did it. She’s not the kind of mom who thinks her kids can do no wrong, but she doesn’t think he had it in him.”

Alicia rubbed the zipper of her coat between her fingers. “I know what it’s like to watch your family do something you didn’t think they were capable of.”

She’d gone through most of the day without thinking about her parents, but the force of their betrayal hit her again. Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she scanned the lock screen. Dozens of messages and headlines waited for her.

“Looks like my own family crimes are still hot in the news,” Alicia said.

“You should turn it off. Let Lillian field the news and let you know about the important things. Everything else can be ignored.”

Bits of the headlines jumped out at her.

Family torn apart.

Carver sisters outraged.

Ashton Warner distances himself from scandal.

Like mother, like daughters?

Behind the big breakup. Ashton Warner speaks out.

Jordan’s hand covered the screen and gently pushed it down. She looked up at him, barely able to make out the anguish in his expression from the dim light.

“You’re here to get away from it. Don’t let the bad stuff follow you.” He slowly pulled his hand back. “Enjoy it while you can. You’ll be back in the spotlight soon enough, and you won’t be able to escape it.”

The kind words wrapped around her bruised heart like a warm blanket. She wished more than anything that she could reach out to him. She wanted his deep voice and strong arms wrapped around her. She wanted to fall asleep in the comfort he could give.

But there were so many lines, and none of them could be crossed. There were walls built between them with the sole purpose of keeping them at a safe distance.

She brushed a stray hair behind her ear and wrapped her own arms around her middle. “You’re right. I’ll talk to Lillian in the morning.”

Jordan nodded once, like the matter was settled. “Good night. I’m right across the hall if you need anything.”

Need. The meaning of the word was blurry, blending with want in a confusing haze.

“Thanks. Good night.”

When Jordan didn't move, she realized he was waiting to see her safely in her room before slipping off to his own. She tiptoed into the darkness of the guest room, and the door clicked closed behind her. Letting her back rest against the door, she relaxed her shoulders as the tension drained from her rigid body.

Jordan was here to watch over her, not help her cope. He was her physical caretaker, not her emotional support bodyguard.

But his kindness was slowly putting the pieces of her broken heart back together, and she wanted to be whole again. Taylor Ranch held the key to getting over the hurt, but what would she do when Jordan wasn't around anymore? What would she do when these people who were stitching her back together said good-bye?

She'd never see them again, and that might be worse than losing her family.

JORDAN

Jordan hung another strand of garland over the doorway leading into the kitchen. How much garland could one family own?

“Are there anymore?” he asked, climbing down the ladder.

His mother pointed toward a box in the corner. “Can you get the star out of that one? The silver one that goes on top of the tree?”

Alicia didn’t look up from the box of ornaments in front of her, but her grin said she was enjoying seeing him being bossed around by his mom.

Alicia had been curled up on the floor untangling strings of lights for the last half-hour, and the tension in her jaw faded a little more with every minute.

After the grueling morning, he’d decided decorating for Christmas was the lesser of many evils. The woman had been on the phone or computer all morning doing interviews and listening to boring meetings.

When the meetings were over, they ventured into town. Thankfully, no one had mobbed her. It seemed most of the people of Redemption Ridge either didn’t know who she was or didn’t care to fangirl over the pop star.

Jordan rummaged in the box and found the star. Holding it up, he turned to his mom. “How old is this thing?”

His mom’s mouth pursed. “Probably close to thirty. Your dad and I bought it on a trip to Branson right after we got

married.”

Jordan looked down at Alicia and mouthed, “Old.”

Her smile widened, and she quickly turned her attention back to the lights. She had her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, and the oversized gray sweater they’d bought earlier hung off one shoulder, showing way too much of her creamy skin.

He wasn’t sure how the woman could look like a runway model and the girl next door in the same day, but it was both bliss and torment.

“I’m finished with this box,” Caroline said. “And that one can go too.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jordan said as he moved the stepladder over to the tree and placed the old star on top. “Any boxes to bring down while I’m up there?”

He’d been moving boxes in and out of the attic all afternoon, and decorating for Christmas was turning out to be a training exercise. He needed practice scaling ladders with the prosthetic, and he was getting his fill today.

“There should be one with tablecloths and runners in it,” his mom said. “And I think that’ll be the last of it.”

Caroline yawned and covered her mouth. “Good thing because I’m beat. This is worse than working an eight-hour shift.”

“It went by much faster with the extra help,” his mom said. “You can head on home. I don’t like you being out on the roads at night.”

“I’ve been driving at night for almost ten years, Mom,” Caroline said.

“I know, but I’ll still worry about you, no matter how old you are.”

Jordan grabbed the boxes to go back to the attic and left the women talking about the school Christmas pageant. The attic wasn’t in bad shape, but bending down to fit into the

squat space was giving him a backache. He quickly stored the old boxes and found the one he needed.

He trudged back downstairs with the smallest box he'd carried all day. "Is this the last one?"

"Yep," his mom called back from the bottom of the stairs. "Thanks for doing all the heavy lifting."

"No problem." He looked around his childhood home at the decorations covering almost every surface and wall. Evergreen wreaths, Christmas lights, and snowflakes were spread throughout the house.

It had a cozy look, but he couldn't tear his gaze from Alicia. She sat on the floor, happily tugging at the lights.

The draw in his chest was a massive warning signal. Half of the people in the world were obsessed with Alicia Carver. It was his job to protect her from the ones who crossed the line.

He couldn't be one of them.

Caroline stood and stretched her arms over her head. "I think I'm gonna head out. See y'all at the pageant?"

"Save us seats," his mom said as she wrapped Caroline in a hug.

"You know I will." Caroline turned her attention to Jordan and held out her arms. "I'm so glad you're home."

Jordan wrapped his little sister in a hug. "Glad to be home."

"You've been gone a long time," she whispered. "I missed you. How long has it been?"

"I came home the Christmas before last."

"No, I mean since you left to join the Marines," Caroline corrected.

Jordan knew exactly when he'd left home. He'd counted down the days until it was time to finally start doing what he was made to do.

He left because of the Marines, and he came back because of them too.

Alicia looked up. “That’s cool that you were a Marine.”

She’d probably known before he told her. His prior job experience was front and center on his resume with “honorably discharged” right beside it.

What a fun way to say “Sorry, you’re not good enough anymore.”

Caroline turned around, keeping one arm wrapped around Jordan’s shoulders. “Oh, yeah. Following in Paw Paw Ken’s footsteps.” She laughed. “It was all Jordan ever talked about growing up.”

A flash of heat raced up his chest and neck. Talking about losing his career was almost as bad as talking about losing his leg and his friend.

Grief had many forms, and they all liked to torment him.

“Why aren’t you still a Marine?” Alicia asked.

Caroline held up a finger. “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

At least his sister had been paying attention. But the problem was that he wasn’t a Marine anymore. Marines were a rare breed. They didn’t quit, and lots of them set out for a lifetime sentence. Only, retiring from the Marine Corps was an honor, not a punishment.

“Oh,” Alicia said, tilting her head to the side. “What happened?”

“I think that’s enough talk about me,” Jordan said as he unwrapped Caroline’s arm from his neck. “Let me walk you out.”

“I remember the way to my car. It’s parked three feet from the front porch,” Caroline said.

Jordan nudged her with his shoulder and whispered, “Humor me.”

Realizing that he wanted to talk to her, his sister pasted on a smile and waved to their mom and Alicia. “Tell Dad I said good night.”

Once they were outside, Caroline rounded on him. “You haven’t told her, have you?”

“It’s none of her business. My job is to protect her, and she’ll think I can’t do that if you go into detail about my bloody dismemberment.”

Caroline winced. “It wasn’t like that, Jordan.”

The back of his neck tingled with heat, despite the cold winter air. “It *was* like that, and I’d love not to relive it.”

Caroline threw herself against him, plastering her face to his chest. “I’m so sorry. I hate that it happened. I hate that you lost your friend. I hate that you lost your job.”

Jordan rested his hands on her back. He hadn’t lost those things. They weren’t missing. His friend was dead, and the Marine Corps were right where they’d always been. He just wasn’t one of them anymore.

“I’m sure her manager knows about it, but if Alicia doesn’t know, I’d rather not bring it up.”

Caroline raised her head and wiped her cheeks. “I think she likes you,” she whispered.

A piercing ache hit him in the chest. “She doesn’t, and please don’t meddle.”

“Come on, Jor—”

“Please. We’re completely different. She’s in a different city every day, and I have a job that basically does the same to me. Plus, there’s a strict policy about relationships between agents and clients at Field. Just mentioning something like that could cost me my job.”

Caroline’s shoulders sank. “I want you to find someone and be happy.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think a woman can fix me.”

Caroline's hand rested on his arm. "You don't need fixing, but you need someone who can convince you that you're still lovable. You're one of the best guys I know, with or without two full legs. I mean, you're better than lots of guys with two legs and a trust fund. I just want you to wake up and realize that."

Every other word hit too close to home, but Caroline would let her crazy matchmaking idea run wild if he let her have an inch in this fight. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Get in the car. It's freezing out here."

"I think you like her too," Caroline whispered.

Jordan cleared his throat. "Please, get in the car."

She turned away with a quiet, "Good night," and Jordan waited until her car started and she shifted into reverse before going back inside.

Alicia and his mom were standing by the stairs. The soft glow of the lit-up Christmas tree cast an orange glow over the room.

"I can't take it. It's too special," Alicia said.

His mom pushed something back at her. "You can. I'm telling you to."

Alicia looked up at him with a slight frown. What had he missed?

"Your mom wants me to keep this ornament." She held it up for Jordan to see.

It was the ornament Jordan had made in second grade. The assignment had been to make something for someone you loved. He'd given his mom the lopsided circle with scrawled writing in the middle.

I love you more.

"She said she liked it. I think it's some of your best work," his mom said.

"But he made it for you," Alicia said, clutching the laminated circle. "It's special."

“It is special, but that makes it a good gift. I know my boy loves me. Although, he hasn’t ever loved me more than I love him,” his mom said with a wink to Alicia.

Despite the twinge of heat creeping under his skin, it didn’t bother him that his mom would gift it to someone else. She’d always been a generous person, and it was one of the things he loved most about her.

“Mom, I don’t think she really wants it.”

“Oh, I do want it. I love it, but I just think it’s special to her.”

“It is special to me. Now it can be special to you. You should have something to remember us by.”

Cold washed over Jordan, replacing the heat from moments ago. Alicia’s time here was limited. His time with her would expire, unless she decided to renew his contract after Christmas.

Even then, they would always be together but separate. They would always be circling each other but never touching.

His torment was either temporary or prolonged. Which was worse?

Alicia rubbed her thumbs over the ornament. “I love it. Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing fancy, but—”

“It’s perfect.” Alicia’s gaze shifted to Jordan, and despite how easy it would have been to tell his mom she didn’t want a twenty-year-old ornament, she seemed genuinely grateful.

“Well, I need to get to bed,” his mom said, stretching her back. “The guys have an early morning, and I want to have my coffee with Jesus before they start rushing around the house.”

Alicia’s phone rang, and she stiffened before pulling it out of her back pocket. “Good night.”

His mom waved and headed for her room before Alicia answered the call. Jordan disappeared into the kitchen, hoping to give her some privacy.

Out of sight didn't mean out of mind when it came to Alicia. He was used to getting immersed in the client's life while on duty, but Alicia was growing roots in his childhood home, making it hard to imagine the place without her in it.

He washed the few dishes in the sink and dried them before Alicia walked in. The light in her eyes dimmed in the few minutes he'd left her alone.

"You okay?" he asked.

Her lips thinned, and she stared at the phone in her hand for a second before slipping it into her pocket. "Ashton gave an interview with *The Buzz*. He did a fantastic job of distancing himself from the scandal, but I came out looking like an apple who didn't fall far from the tree."

"Does it help at all if I tell you he's an idiot?"

Alicia chuckled, but the sound was more sad than joyful. She sank into a chair at the old wooden table. "A little. You probably think my problems are stupid."

Jordan took the seat beside her and clasped his hands in front of him. "I don't. I can't imagine my parents doing something like that to me, and I can't really say I have an ex who badmouths me. Especially not to the entire world."

She rested her head in her hands. "I know it's just words. I'm used to people saying bad things about me. It just doesn't get easier."

Jordan tightened his grip, fighting the urge to reach for her. "He doesn't deserve a single thought from you. Forget what he said."

She ran her hands through her hair and sighed. "Thanks. I'll keep trying to figure out how to do that."

"You should get some sleep," he said, hoping the distance between them during the night hours would curb his need to be close to her.

"Thanks. I'm headed that way." She stood and pushed the chair back under the table. "You coming?"

“Yeah.” He followed her out of the kitchen, turning off lights as they made their way through the house.

Following Alicia to bed was dangerous. They’d be parting ways at the top of the stairs, but when she was the last person he saw before closing his eyes at night, his mind liked to play tricks on him.

She stopped just outside the guest bedroom and turned back to him. “I had a great day. Thanks for that.”

“Not sure I understand how meetings, clothes shopping, and decorating make up a good day.”

Alicia wrapped her arms around her middle. “I love hanging out with you and your family. I didn’t realize how much I needed this.”

Jordan swallowed back his response. Caroline was right. He wanted someone in his life. Knowing his job schedule and destructive past weren’t good for a relationship didn’t change the pull he felt toward Alicia.

She rested her back against the doorway as if waiting for something.

Nothing could happen. He couldn’t get involved with a client, no matter how much he wanted to lean in. It didn’t matter how gorgeous and sweet Alicia was, he couldn’t compromise her safety and his job.

But the pull toward her stole the breath from his chest. The lift in her chin and her waiting eyes said, “Come get me.”

He had to put distance between them. And doors. Locked doors.

“You should get some rest,” he said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Alicia straightened and opened the bedroom door. “Good night.”

Jordan watched her disappear into the darkness, swallowing his disappointment.

ALICIA

Jordan offered Alicia a hand as she stepped out of the truck. The parking lot was dark and packed with vehicles, but the small red-brick school was lit up like a lantern, shining from the inside out.

Alicia hadn't ever been in a real school, and the building wasn't anything like she'd expected. Schools on TV always looked big, with green lawns stretching out in front of them.

Half the town milled around in the lot, making their way toward the entrance where they would be funneled inside for the show.

"Caroline said our seats are about halfway up on the left side," Vicci said behind them.

Jordan stayed half a pace behind her, but she could feel his strong presence. She didn't think anyone in Redemption Ridge would be a danger to her, but knowing Jordan was with her allowed her to truly relax and enjoy the evening.

"I'm gonna go talk to Connie over there. I'll meet you two inside," Vicci said as she veered away from them.

They were approaching the entrance when a petite brunette woman turned and caught sight of Alicia. Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened.

Looks like at least one person in town knew who she was.

The woman slapped the man beside her on the shoulder. "Look!"

The man lifted his chin in greeting. “Jordan!”

Well, Jordan was the small-town celebrity in this case. The long-lost neighbor returning home after years away.

If only Alicia could figure out what happened to Jordan in those years.

“Not Jordan. Alicia Carver!” the woman said.

The man she was with leaned in and asked, “Did we go to school with her?”

The woman rolled her eyes and gave the man a friendly grin. “Hey, Jordan. We’re so glad to have you back, but could you please introduce us to your lady friend?” she sweetly asked.

“Alicia, this is Levi Thompson and Ruby—”

“Thompson,” Ruby finished, holding up her left hand and shining her ring.

“Congrats,” Jordan said before turning to Alicia. “This is Alicia Carver. She’s spending some time in Redemption Ridge.”

“Does this have anything to do with the *stuff* happening to you?” Ruby asked.

Her question didn’t sound like she was prying, and Alicia let out a small sigh. “Yes.”

“She’s looking for privacy,” Jordan explained. “I’m her security agent.”

“Oh! We won’t say a word,” Ruby promised.

“I don’t understand who we would tell,” Levi said.

Jordan slapped a hand on Levi’s shoulder. “She’s a singer.”

Levi’s mouth opened into a big O. “Gotcha. The pieces are coming together.”

Ruby glanced back and forth between Alicia and Jordan. “Are the two of you...”

“No. Our relationship is professional,” Jordan interrupted.

The happy balloon in Alicia's chest burst. Of course they weren't together, but it hurt that Jordan was so quick to squash the idea.

"Right." Ruby turned to Alicia. "You're better than that scumbag. You'll find someone else soon and forget all about him."

"I hope you're right," Alicia said, unwilling to openly badmouth Ashton in public, knowing that the things she said always made their way back to the tabloids.

"Do you know her?" Levi asked.

Ruby rolled her eyes. "No, but pretty much everything about her life is on display in the checkout line at the grocery store."

Levi shook his head. "It's nice to meet you. And it's good to have you back. How long are you staying?" he asked Jordan.

"Until after Christmas."

Ruby gasped. "We should do something together while you two are here. There are tons of Christmas events coming up."

"I'd like that," Alicia said before stopping to think about what she was agreeing to.

But she would like to hang out with people. Levi and Ruby seemed like Jordan's friends. If he trusted them, she could too.

"How's the leg?" Levi asked Jordan.

Alicia stiffened, trying not to sound incredibly interested in Jordan's response.

"All good," Jordan said, leaving no room for further explanation.

"Good to hear," Levi said, looking over his shoulder at the throng of people filing into the building. "We'd better get to our seats. Give me a call if you wanna hang out while you're in town."

"I'll do that," Jordan said.

“It was nice to meet you,” Ruby said with a cute little wave as she turned to follow Levi.

“Nice to meet you too.” It really was nice to meet some of the people in Redemption Ridge. Small introductions weren’t overwhelming, and they left her wanting more of those personal interactions.

Jordan gestured for Alicia to turn, moving around the crowd. “You need to use the side entrance.”

Oh. Side entrances were the story of her life, but she’d stupidly hoped she’d get to be a regular person here. Jordan had probably lined up a string of special treatments for her. She rarely asked about what all went into securing her safety. She was just a person like anyone else, but no one looked at her like a fellow human being.

“Hey!” a man called from behind them.

Jordan turned and stepped between Alicia and the man. “The entrance is that way.”

The guy waved, but it was more of a dismissal than a greeting. “Dude, is that Alicia Carver?”

Jordan rested his hand on his belt, and the small movement triggered a cold sweat on Alicia’s brow.

“Back off, Tim,” Jordan said, stern with a heavy warning.

Alicia peeked over Jordan’s shoulder to see Tim raise his hands.

“Come on, man. I just want to see her.”

“You can see her on TV,” Jordan countered.

Tim threw his hands out to his sides. “I don’t see a big crowd of bodyguards.”

Alicia tucked her shoulders in and prayed the man would go away. Most people were just excited fans, but Jordan’s reaction to this guy was the opposite of his carefree camaraderie with Levi and Ruby.

“I’m sure your wife is looking for you,” Jordan said.

“What do you know?” Tim scoffed. “Forget this.”

“He’s married?” Alicia whispered to Jordan’s back.

“To Destiny.”

Alicia remembered meeting Destiny at the church. Her cold and calculating appraisal didn’t give Alicia any friendly vibes, just like her husband.

She didn’t want to wish ill on strangers, but those two seemed to be made for each other.

Jordan turned around, and she found herself flush against his chest. Looking up into his shadowed face, she lost her breath before he spoke.

“We should get inside.”

Oh, right. Jordan was trying to make his way into the school play, and she was standing right in front of him as if she didn’t know how to walk.

She turned, putting a few steps between them, but Jordan moved back to her side.

He leaned close until his warm breath brushed her ear. “Stay close to me,” he whispered.

She wouldn’t have a problem following that order.



THE CHRISTMAS PLAY WAS ADORABLE. Alicia hadn’t laughed and gasped so much over a performance in her life, and Jordan had even cracked up at one point.

As soon as the kids started returning to the stage for their applause, Jordan got her attention, and they slipped out of the dark auditorium before the crowd started filing out.

“That was amazing. I can’t believe those young kids remembered their lines so well.”

Jordan chuckled. “I guarantee Mrs. Peterson had them practicing since Labor Day.”

Alicia followed him out of the auditorium to their waiting truck. Once inside the dark cab, she took a deep breath, decompressing from the fun. “Is your mom riding back with us?”

“She’s staying to help Caroline clean up.”

“Oh. Do we need to stay too?” Alicia asked.

“Nah. Mom and Caroline are pretty quick, and they have help.”

Alicia looked out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ruby and Levi. “Thanks for introducing me to your friends tonight. Do you want to hang out with them?”

“We’ll do whatever you want to do.”

Of course Jordan Taylor would be all work and no play. She loved his determination, but would she spend the rest of her time here wondering if she was keeping him from going after his own happiness?

Alicia sighed. “I know you’re here for a job, but you’re free to talk to people. If you want. We don’t always have to do what I want. You know more about things going on and the people who live here.”

Jordan gave an almost imperceptible nod in the darkness. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Sure, he would. She’d have to see it to believe it.

They arrived back at the ranch before everyone else and stepped into the quiet house. Jordan took her coat and hung it by the door.

“You need anything?” he asked.

Alicia couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face. “You don’t have to be my servant.”

“I don’t mind.” He scratched the back of his head. “I’m sorry if I came off like I thought you were spoiled when we first met.”

Alicia scrunched her nose. “There were only slight hints.”

“Anyway. I shouldn’t have acted like that. I’ve just been around my fair share of entitled rich people, and they tend to have a holier-than-thou attitude.”

“That’s pretty accurate,” she said.

“But it still wasn’t fair to judge you before I knew you. I’m sorry for that.”

The tightness in her shoulders dissipated. “You’re forgiven. Thanks for sharing your home with me. I’ve never been anywhere like this, and I’m having a great time.”

“You’re welcome.” Jordan jerked his head toward the stairs. “You heading up?”

Alicia wrapped her arms across her chest. “I need to catch up on my emails. I’ll probably make some coffee and set up my laptop in the kitchen.”

Jordan jerked a thumb toward the door. “I’m gonna bring in some wood for the fire.”

Alicia watched him walk out before heading up the stairs. She grabbed her laptop and headed back to the main floor where the warm smell of brewing coffee tingled in her nose.

Jordan was in the kitchen, with his back turned to her. She padded over to the table and put her laptop down.

“Want some coffee?” he asked without turning around.

“There won’t be any sneaking up on you,” she said with a smile.

“Not a chance. The coffee is decaf, in case you were wondering.”

“I’d love a cup.”

It seemed he was determined to do things for her, and knowing he wasn’t the type to cater to someone’s whims made his efforts even more appreciated.

He poured coffee into an off-white ceramic mug and set it on the table beside her laptop. “I guess we need to get on the road by about seven in the morning.”

Great. The interview in Denver she'd agreed to before her world turned upside down. It was one of the only commitments Lillian hadn't erased from Alicia's schedule for the next four weeks.

"I'll be ready."

Jordan knocked his knuckles against the wooden table. "Good night."

"You're not staying? You just made coffee."

"Nah. The coffee was for you. You got this pitiful sad face when you realized they didn't have coffee at the play tonight."

Alicia swallowed. The chill in the air had brought on a craving for something warm, and she'd asked if the small concession stand had coffee. Sadly, they'd only offered water and soft drinks.

"Thank you," she said, soft enough that he might not have heard her.

"See you early in the morning."

"Jordan."

He turned, and after all she'd asked of him, she hesitated to ask more.

But her curiosity won out. "What happened to your leg?"

Jordan stilled his features and held her gaze. "Nothing important."

"It sounded important. People were concerned about you."

For a few heartbeats, she thought he'd deny her again.

Finally, he nodded toward her laptop. "It's in my file." He turned and said a quick good night over his shoulder.

The loss of him echoed through the room—through her bones—but his hint spurred her into action. She opened the laptop and searched through her emails. Lillian had forwarded his extensive resume the morning before they left Los Angeles, but Alicia hadn't actually taken the time to read all

twenty pages, trusting Lillian and her team to hire a good security agent for her.

The document loaded, and she quickly scanned the words. She scrolled past a word that made her stop.

Purple Heart.

The dates he served in the Marine Corps were right above his award.

She backed out of the document and searched her inbox again. After a few key words, she landed on the one she wanted. It was an email she'd been copied on between Lillian and Jordan's boss, Nathan Fox.

“Jordan lost part of his left leg during his time with the Marine Corps, but he has made a full recovery since the injury and has very few limitations. The prosthetic he uses is top of the line, and he is in peak physical condition, despite the dismemberment. I wouldn't recommend him if I didn't truly believe he was the best agent for your needs.”

The creak of the front door opening jerked her attention from the email. Her heart hammered in her chest as Vicci padded toward the kitchen.

“Hey, you. I thought you'd be asleep by now.”

Alicia slammed the laptop closed with a bit too much force. “I was just heading that way.”

Vicci peeked over the laptop and jerked her chin toward the steaming cup of coffee. “You sure? Looks like you just got settled. I won't bother you. I'm on my way to bed myself.”

Alicia tucked her laptop under her arm and stood. “Sorry. I was going to work, but I'm really tired. Sorry about the coffee.”

“No problem, sweetheart. I'll see you bright and early in the morning.”

Alicia nodded, choking back the lump lodged in her throat.

Jordan lost his leg in the line of duty, and the pain and loss he must have endured had Alicia's skin heating.

She took the stairs slowly, searching for something—anything—she could do or say to help him move on, but nothing came to mind.

At the top of the stairs, she stopped at the closed door of his bedroom. Was he worried about what she'd think of him? That was a waste of his time. She'd already made up her mind about him. Injury or not, Jordan was one of the best men she'd ever met.

She'd just have to make sure he knew that.

JORDAN

A thud woke Jordan in an instant. His eyes flew open, and every muscle in his body tensed as he listened. The Marine Corps had taught him how to block out the pounding of his own heart when listening for danger, and the skill came in handy.

After a solid thirty seconds, Jordan eased from beneath the covers and sat on the side of the bed. It took less than two minutes to put on the prosthetic and the sleep pants he kept nearby in case of emergencies.

Emergencies. He was already two minutes behind, and that reminder always grated on his nerves.

Throwing on the white T-shirt draped over the foot of the bed, he grabbed his gun and slipped into his shoes by the bedroom door. With his hand on the knob, he listened one more time but didn't hear anything.

Pulling the door open, he stepped out quietly and surveyed the hallway. All was quiet. With his gun in hand, he snuck down the hallway and checked the stairs. Nothing there either.

There wasn't any movement downstairs, and he slid into his coat before stepping out into the freezing night. The sun would be up in an hour, but the predawn darkness covered everything in a thick blanket of black.

No tracks in the frost. No sign of movement. No noise.

It was possible he'd imagined the noise. His search was coming up empty.

Jordan slipped back inside and locked the door behind him. He had two hours before he had to be up and ready to head to Denver with Alicia, but there wasn't any sense in trying to sleep now. The adrenaline after the noise and the cold outside had him ready to run.

He crept up the stairs, checking everything again on his way back to his bedroom. His attention snagged on Alicia's door.

He shouldn't have looked. Giving Alicia an ounce of his attention always led to a landslide. He had to put up enough walls every single day when she dominated his thoughts. He didn't need her taking over his nighttime hours too.

Resting his back against his door, he stared at hers. With his arms crossed over his chest, he settled in to torment himself with thoughts of her. She was behind that door, sleeping soundly.

Safely. Always safely. At least when he was around.

He'd never gotten attached to a client before. Not even close. The thought of parting ways with Alicia made his stomach roll. He wouldn't trust anyone else with her safety.

There was a creaking behind her door. One tiny noise before it opened, revealing Alicia in a silky tank top and shorts.

Jordan's eyes widened before he could temper his reaction. Her dark hair was only slightly out of place and hanging over her creamy shoulders, and she didn't have on a single bit of makeup.

Just his luck. She wore the natural, innocent look better than the glammed-up model look.

This was bad. Horrible. His chest filled with a thick excitement at the sight of her just-rolled-out-of-bed look.

"What are you doing? Sneaking around outside my room?" she asked. There wasn't a hint of annoyance in her tone, only playfulness.

"I think it's called surveillance when it's my job."

No, watching her bedroom door was not in his job description.

Her expression shifted into concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Just heard a noise. I checked things out.”

Alicia rubbed a hand up and down her arm. The house was warm, but she had more skin showing than covered. “Thank you. Sorry you had to get up so early.”

“Not a problem.”

It wasn't. He could sleep when he was dead. His time with Alicia was limited, and he didn't want to miss it.

He cleared his throat. “You can go back to bed. I'll stop staring at your door.”

He turned to go back into his room and lock himself inside where he wouldn't be tempted to think about Alicia on the other side of the hall.

“Wait.”

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He shouldn't turn around. He should walk away.

But he couldn't. Not when Alicia called.

He couldn't deny her anything.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to have some coffee with me? I won't be able to go back to sleep.”

Say no. Say no. Tell her to stop tempting you.

Instead of taking his own advice, he turned and said, “Okay.”

He was a glutton for punishment—as stupid as a deer standing in the headlights, waiting for the crash.

“Let me change, and I'll be right down.”

With that, Alicia closed the door, giving him some small relief. Jordan pushed his hands into his hair and pulled at the roots. What was he doing?

Back in his room, he stored the gun and changed into jeans. Creeping back into the hallway, Alicia's door was still closed, and the first dim light of morning filtered through the window. He snuck down the stairs and turned on the kitchen lights.

He'd just started a pot of coffee when Alicia walked in. Her torture outfit was gone, replaced with dark jeans and the thick, oversized sweater she'd worn when they decorated the house.

She looked just as good covered from head to toe as she did in silky pajamas. It really wasn't fair.

"Coffee?" he asked.

"Yes, please." She stepped up beside him as he poured the cup. "I found what you told me about last night."

Great. They were going to start at the bottom today. "And?"

He hadn't wanted her to know about his lost limb, but he didn't want to keep it from her either. Her life was an open book, whether she liked it or not. He could give her the same access to his history, even if it was at the expense of his reputation and pride.

"And Purple Heart looks good on you."

Jordan glanced at her, grateful she hadn't started with a pity apology for something she hadn't done. "A Purple Heart doesn't look good on anyone."

She crossed her arms and leaned one hip against the counter beside him. "I hate that you were injured, and I hate that you can't be a part of the Marine Corps anymore because of it."

Alicia reached out and rested a hand on his arm. A tingling spread its way up to his shoulder and dispersed over his entire body.

When he couldn't ignore the burning of her touch anymore, he looked up at her. There wasn't pity or sympathy in her expression. Was that a grin?

“I don’t know if you’re still recovering physically, but it sounds like you still haven’t wrapped your head around the changes in your life. That’s understandable. But I knew you were a great man and fully capable of protecting me before I knew about what happened to you. My mind hasn’t changed.”

She shrugged and took the mug of coffee from his hand.

Shrugged. As if that was all she had to say about it.

Thank the Lord.

“I’m a little hungry,” she said, looking around the kitchen.

Jordan took his coffee and walked toward the refrigerator. “What do you want for breakfast?”

She followed him and peeked inside when he opened it. “What do you have?”

“Bacon, eggs, biscuits. The biscuits will have to come from a can unless you want to wait for Mom to wake up.”

“That sounds great. I’ll skip the biscuits, though. Can you teach me how to cook those things?”

Jordan leaned to the side, giving her a full assessment. “You want to learn how to cook?”

She propped her hands on her hips. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

Jordan raised his hands in surrender. “Not at all. We can start now.” He grabbed the bacon and eggs and stepped back.

“Thanks. I’ve watched your mom make a few things, and it’s really interesting.”

Jordan scoffed. “I wouldn’t call it interesting, but Mom made us know how to cook the basics when we were young. Even back then, I knew I wanted to join the Marine Corps, and she assumed I’d need to take care of myself.”

“Are you saying she didn’t have much hope for you finding a wife and settling down in Redemption Ridge?”

Jordan made a show of wincing. “Ouch. That hurts.”

Alicia giggled, and the joyful noise skated over his skin. “The truth hurts. I bet you didn’t expect to be teaching me how to cook either, did you?”

That was an understatement. He put the pack of bacon and carton of eggs on the counter. “I didn’t.”

It took longer than Jordan had expected to cook breakfast. He stopped to tell her exactly what he was doing, and then she’d asked to have the bacon cooked two ways—crispy and “floppy.” Next followed the eggs, which she wanted to cook scrambled first, then fried.

When the food was all cooked and the kitchen cleaned, he turned around and looked at the remaining breakfast on the table. “So, are you hungry?” he asked.

Alicia covered her mouth as she chewed a piece of bacon. “Not really.”

“Because you ate the entire time we cooked?”

Her olive cheeks took on a rosy color as she nodded.

She looked amazing when she was happy. Smiling from ear-to-ear and staring at him like she was three seconds away from catapulting into his arms.

“What is this?”

Jordan turned to find his mom standing in the kitchen doorway.

He hadn’t heard her coming, and that realization dampened his joy from the moment before. His first priority was to protect Alicia. Not that she was in any danger from his mom, but anyone could have walked in, and Jordan wouldn’t have had time to react.

Because Alicia claimed his thoughts. Morning till night, all he thought about was her. He’d been a model professional his entire life. Why did Alicia take all of his skills and crumble them?

“Jordan taught me how to cook bacon and eggs!” Alicia shouted before covering her mouth. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that so loudly.”

“You made this?” Vicci asked, peeking over the remaining food on the plates. “It looks good.”

“It tastes good too.” Alicia’s hand rested over her flat stomach. “I ate too much.”

His mom smiled and grabbed a piece of bacon. “Good food makes you do that.”

Alicia bounced her shoulders and kept grinning like a kid who stole cookies. “Well, I need to get ready for the interview today. I’m not used to doing my own hair and makeup, so my stylist said she’d video chat with me and walk me through it.”

His mom chuckled. “I’d offer to help, but I don’t fix my hair or wear makeup very often.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I can figure it out. If I can make breakfast and do my own laundry, I think I can handle my hair and makeup.”

Alicia glanced back at him with a playful smirk on her way out of the kitchen. “I’ll be ready in about an hour.”

Jordan leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. “Take your time.”

As soon as they heard Alicia’s footsteps on the stairs, his mom rounded on him.

“So—”

“Don’t say it,” Jordan interrupted. “I know what you’re going to say, and there isn’t anything going on. Our relationship is strictly professional.”

Maybe if he said it enough, it would be true.

His mom pinched her lips between her teeth and gave him a single nod. “Okay. Just be careful.”

That was the problem. Being careful around Alicia was almost impossible.

JORDAN

Alicia was on the phone the entire drive to Denver. From what Jordan could tell, she'd talked to Lillian a few times, her stage coordinator, her costume designer, and conducted a phone interview with someone.

Being a celebrity was exhausting. Jordan had secondhand fatigue after those long calls, and he'd only heard one side of them.

When they pulled up at the studio, Alicia bounced in her seat. "Is it weird that I'm actually excited?"

"Excited about another interview?" he asked.

"Yeah. I've been doing interviews since I was five, and after what happened with my parents and Ashton, the thought of talking to a stranger about it and telling them what was going on was inconceivable. I was dreading this one, but being at the ranch with you and your family kinda gave me back my confidence."

Man, he hated what her parents and that jerk had done to her, but knowing she'd been happy in Redemption Ridge did something crazy to his chest. "You've got this."

She reached over and placed a hand on his arm, stilling him in the seat. "Thank you. I know you're here because it's your job, but I don't know if I could walk in there without you."

Oh no. Alicia was inching her way closer, and he didn't have the willpower to stop her. "You've done lots of things on

your own. It's inspiring."

He hadn't thought much about the lives celebrities lived other than to roll his eyes at some of the ridiculousness, but Alicia had been putting herself in the spotlight for decades. She'd walked into interviews and events as a child and won over half of the world. That took a lot of guts. Especially to Jordan who wanted to fade into the walls every time he walked into a room.

Alicia giggled. "I don't know if I'd call it inspiring. I'm no hero like you."

Jordan's jaw tensed. "I'm not a hero."

She shook her head. "You can say that all you want, but you're so selfless. You put yourself between me and danger, and you signed up for the Marine Corps where you're expected to willingly stand on the frontlines. *That's* inspiring."

He'd always embraced that role. He'd been willing to die.

He just hadn't been willing to live—not when it meant going through the rest of his life as half a man.

Jordan tilted his head toward the building. "Let's get you in there."

He rounded the truck and surveyed the parking lot. The studio was used to having big-name musicians stop by, so their security team was on top of things, which Jordan appreciated. He'd vetted their protocols and credentials as soon as he found out about the interview.

The radio station was known for their music, but they also had a massive vlog following, which required musicians to appear in person instead of conducting interviews over video calls.

He opened the door for Alicia, and her smile beamed as she stood. The hollow woman he saw on that video call was gone, replaced by the bubbly woman standing here waiting to take back her life after the people she loved tried to steal it from her.

They entered the building and signed in at various checkpoints. A short woman with round-rimmed glasses and a tablet attached to her hand led them to the sound room.

Danny and Jenny, the hosts of the vlog and radio station, were laughing about something as Jordan and Alicia walked in. Danny looked to be in his mid-forties with a full head of black hair and a slightly bulging gut. Jenny was younger with straight brown hair and a smattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose.

The radio personalities put their water bottles to the side to greet them.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Danny said. “I’ve heard word you’ve been canceling your interviews. Thanks for keeping this one. It would have put us in quite a bind.”

“I’m happy to be here. Thanks for the warm welcome.”

Jenny took Alicia’s arm and guided her to a padded leather seat in front of a table. “Make yourself at home. Would you like something to drink?”

“Water would be great,” Alicia said. “Jordan, would you like something?”

Jordan held up a hand. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Jordan,” Jenny said, wiggling her brows. She leaned in and whispered to Alicia. “He’s a handsome one.”

Alicia smiled, but it was forced.

Jordan would *not* read too much into that.

Well, if he could help it.

Jordan took a seat to the side. He’d watched dozens of Alicia’s interviews over the last few weeks, and each one revealed something new about her. It was no wonder everyone in the world felt like they knew her. She didn’t shy away from sharing her life and how she felt about things. She told funny stories and asked about the talk show host’s family.

She was America’s sweetheart for a reason, and Jordan could see why so many fans became obsessed with her.

They got the countdown call, and Danny and Jenny walked through their scripts before filming. Jordan had watched some of their interviews as well, and they had a knack for asking questions that were out of the ordinary. They definitely kept things fresh when they interviewed musician after musician.

Danny rested one arm on the table in front of him as the lights flashed, indicating the second before filming. “Hello, and welcome to More than the Music. I’m your host, Danny.”

“And I’m Jenny. Today, we have the pop princess herself, Alicia Carver. Alicia, thanks for being here with us today.”

“Thanks for having me.”

The questions were unique but surface-level at first. Asking about her upcoming tour, what she did for fun on the road, how she wrote her songs.

They were all things Jordan wanted to know, and he expected Alicia’s fans would be wowed at the peek into her life.

Danny sat forward, propping his elbow on the desk. “So, let’s get to the good stuff. What happened with Ashton Warner? I mean, you two were about to walk down the aisle, then bam!” He slapped his hands together like he was squashing a bug.

The jolt shot through Alicia’s shoulders, tightening her posture and jerking the smile from her face.

Jordan gripped the handle on the chair and watched. Her expression recovered quickly, but there was a hollowness in her eyes that said she’d taken two healthy steps back from the conversation.

“Things just didn’t work out. I think we can both move on without any hard feelings.”

Jordan held back a scoff. He had a lot of less-than-friendly feelings for the jerk who’d left Alicia alone on the red carpet in front of almost everyone in America. He’d watched so many versions of the pre-award show that he could pinpoint the moment her hope died.

That sadness in her eyes at the Stars was the precursor to the numb shell of a woman he'd met on that video call, and he never wanted to see that look on her face again.

Danny chuckled. "Wow. Just like that? You were planning to get married. I mean, celebrity marriages are a dime a dozen, but I had no idea they were so meaningless."

Jordan leaned forward, propping his elbow on his knee and rubbing a hand over his jaw. Danny was about one word from getting an interview with Jordan live on the internet.

Alicia inhaled a shaky breath. She was wilting right before his eyes. "It's not meaningless. I value marriage and the vows I would have made to him. I didn't end the relationship, but he had his reasons for doing so."

"Your parents," Danny supplied. "I can see why he wouldn't want to marry into that dumpster fire."

Jenny gasped and turned to her co-host, but Jordan was already on his feet.

Jordan flattened his hands on the desk beside Danny, towering over him like the storm headed his way. "If you can't stick to the music, we'll cut this interview short."

Danny narrowed his eyes at Jordan. "I'm doing my job. Why don't you do yours?"

"It's not your job to treat her like this. She's a person, in case you haven't noticed." He tore his attention from Danny to check on Alicia. Her eyes were wide and glassy, like she might cry at any moment.

"We're done here." Jordan offered a hand to Alicia, and she didn't hesitate to take it. Seconds later, he was whisking her from the room with Danny's shouts echoing behind them. He focused on the feel of Alicia's hand in his to keep from turning around and giving Danny something to whine about.

The woman with the glasses and tablet who'd escorted them in met them in the hallway and silently led them out. She had to jog to stay ahead of Jordan, but he didn't need an escort. He knew this building like the back of his hand.

Jordan burst through the double doors leading to the back lot, and a small group of reporters greeted them with the midday sun.

“Alicia Carver! We saw what happened in there. Who are you with? Are the two of you together?”

“Miss Carver, is Jordan Taylor part of the reason for the breakup with Ashton Warner? Who is he?”

Heat spread up Jordan’s neck, dampening the collar of his shirt, despite the winter air. He was supposed to blend in and go unnoticed. Now, he’d opened up questions about his relationship with Alicia.

The client. She was the client.

He tightened his grip on her hand. Why couldn’t he think of her as the client?

They knew his name, which he’d expected to be revealed at some point. All security agents attracted a little publicity. He just didn’t want it to be like this. He’d put another dagger in the hands of the media. One they could use to stab Alicia.

Releasing her hand and wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he strong-armed the reporters all the way to the truck. He made a way through the crowd and helped Alicia to her seat before rounding to the other side.

The station’s guards formed a barrier around the truck, allowing them a path out of the parking lot. Once they were on the road, Jordan glanced at Alicia.

Her hands covered her mouth, and she kept her attention on the road in front of them with a blank stare.

“Are you okay?” It was a ridiculous question, but he needed some kind of assurance from her.

She looked at him and dropped her hands. Straightening in her seat before she responded. “Yeah. I’m fine. That was just...unexpected.”

“I know you’ve had tough interviews before, and you know what to do in those situations, but I couldn’t just sit there while they treated you like that.”

She sat quietly for a few miles while he contemplated what he'd just done. He'd made the right decision, hadn't he? What if she didn't agree? Alicia was tough, and she could take care of herself.

But he hadn't been able to sit there while she was hurting. The urge to get up and help her had pulled him out of that chair.

"Thank you. For stepping in like that. I was blindsided, and things were going downhill fast. I was fighting tears. I've never cried during an interview before."

She might as well have stabbed him in the gut. "I'm sorry they did that to you. You're a great musician, but that doesn't give people the right to talk to you like that."

"I love the music. I love writing songs and performing. I just hate that I can't do it now without this cloud hanging over me. Like my personal life is more important than the music. I'm not sure they even care about my actual career."

"You should be able to do what makes you happy without putting yourself in danger. It's stupid that you even need a security agent. People forget you're a human being just like the rest of us."

"They do," she whispered. "Anyway, thanks for saving me. Pretty sure that wasn't in your job description."

Jordan gripped the steering wheel and focused on the road ahead. "I'll never let anyone hurt you."

"I don't ever worry about that when you're around."

They drove in silence for a few more minutes before Lillian called Alicia. From what he could tell, Lillian was sympathetic about the way Danny had treated her.

A sign caught Jordan's attention, and he waited until Alicia ended the call to ask, "How do you feel about making a stop on the way back?"

ALICIA

Alicia read a road sign as it passed. Apparently, Freedom, Colorado was ten miles away.

“Can you at least give me a hint?” she asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a surprise then, would it?”

She didn’t push him again. Jordan’s attempt to cheer her up was working, and while surprises were non-existent in her planned-out life, the excitement bubbling in her middle said she needed more spontaneity.

Jordan slowed the truck as they entered the quaint Christmas town. This place definitely embraced the holiday the way Redemption Ridge had, going all out with lights, trees, and decorations.

“Have you been here before?” Alicia asked as they passed a Victorian-style house with a sign out front that advertised the best breakfast this side of the Rockies.

“Mom and Dad brought us here one Christmas after we visited Mom’s folks in Kansas. It’s a good place to stop on the long drive back from Denver.”

“How old were you?”

Jordan shrugged. “Ten?”

“So you haven’t been here in about twenty years? What exactly are we looking for? Do you know where you’re going?”

Jordan cleared his throat. “Well, no. But I’m hoping it hasn’t changed too much.”

Alicia leaned back to stare at him. “Who are you, and what have you done with Jordan Taylor?”

He chuckled, and the warmth in the sound flooded over her. “I’m not that rigid.”

“You most certainly are. You know everything about the place you’re going at least a week in advance. And you’re telling me you don’t know where we’re going?”

“Are you thinking this is a security issue? Because I’m definitely starting to rethink this impulse decision.”

She pointed a finger at him. “Don’t you dare take this away from me.”

He nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll just silently overanalyze everything.”

“You can be off duty for the rest of the day.”

Jordan glanced at her, then back at the road. “I am never off duty when you’re around.”

Oh, that stern protectiveness definitely lit a fire inside her. His determination was admirable, and she loved that about him.

Love. She didn’t merely like Jordan and the life he’d introduced her to. He was making her question her goals, realign her morals, and think twice about the future she’d been planning.

Jordan stopped in front of a little information booth and parked the truck. “I’ll be right back.”

He talked to a man at the booth who pointed down the road and made motions like he was drawing an elaborate picture in the air. A minute later, Jordan shook the man’s hand and got back in the truck.

“It’s just down the road. You want to get something to eat before this adventure?”

Alicia clasped her hands in front of her. “Can we stop at that cute place that said they have great breakfast?”

“But it’s lunchtime.”

“It still looked cute. I’d love to go.”

Jordan nodded once. “Consider it done.”

They pulled up at Evelyn’s, and Jordan stayed close to her side as they walked right up to the hostess and requested a table for two. After being led to a small table with a beautiful view of the mountains, Alicia whispered, “This is so much fun.”

Jordan picked up the menu in front of him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m eating at a restaurant, and no one knows. Or cares.” She looked around, but everyone was just enjoying their meals. “We didn’t have a reservation.”

Jordan grinned. “It could change in an instant if someone recognizes you, but for right now, I think you can relax.”

“That’s rich coming from you.”

Jordan lowered his menu. “Are you saying I don’t relax?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m saying.”

Jordan tilted his head to one side, then the other. “Maybe you’re right.”

She enjoyed the meal in a blissful happiness. The view was breathtaking, the food was delicious, and Jordan was with her.

It wouldn’t take much to pretend this was a date—a real date between a normal woman and a normal man.

She’d never wanted normal so much in her life.

Jordan paid the bill and thanked the waitress before offering her his hand as they stood. Alicia looked at the waiting hand for half a second before she grabbed it, unwilling to miss a chance to be linked to Jordan. He held her hand all the way back to the truck. Even then, she was reluctant to let go.

He settled back into the driver's seat and turned the truck away from the mountain at their back.

“Ready to tell me where we're going now?”

Jordan's mouth lifted on one side. “Ever been ice skating?”

“Um, no! Are you serious?”

Jordan's eyes widened. “Is that a reason to shout?”

Oh, she had been a little loud. “Oops. I mean, no. I haven't been ice skating, but are we going ice skating? Because that sounds like so much fun.”

“As long as the guy back there wasn't giving me bogus directions, we should be there in about three minutes. He also said it shouldn't be crowded, but I can ask them to clear the rink for us.”

“No way! I'm skating with everybody else, and I don't care who gets a video of me falling on my butt.”

There was no way Jordan could've known she'd always wanted to ice skate. She'd taken plenty of dance classes in her life, and she was pretty sure ice skating wasn't going to get the best of her.

He stopped the truck in front of the most picturesque ice skating rink she'd ever seen. Snow covered evergreens encircled the lively area, giving it a cozy atmosphere.

“I don't have skates,” she said as she stepped out onto the fresh snow.

“We can rent some,” Jordan said, reaching for her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She grabbed onto him, wishing their gloves weren't boundaries against their skin. Holding hands was a complete novelty to her. The innocent touch was one she'd missed out on in her life.

Her relationship with Ashton had truly been surface level. He'd never initiated any physical contact when they were alone. He'd never wanted to talk to her just to get to know her.

He'd never reached out to her. He hadn't expressed any concern about her.

In fact, his first step after the breakup was offering her security team a better deal to leave her. That told her all she needed to know about how much he respected her.

Jordan walked her through renting skates, and they took their seats at one of the benches. He knelt in front of her and picked up one of the skates and helped her slide it on.

People had done things for her before. She'd been helped into hundreds of dresses and costumes between parties and concerts, but Jordan Taylor helping her lace up ice skates hit differently. She wasn't getting ready to put on a show. He was going to walk her through something new, and his patience had a wave of gratefulness welling in her chest.

"You want to lace the skates tight, so your ankles are supported," he said as he carefully wove the laces. When her skates were on, he put his on and stood, offering her a hand.

Alicia slowly got to her feet, using his hand for support way more than she'd expected. They carefully walked along the path to the rink.

"Just hold onto me when you need to. You're going to angle the blades like this," he said, showing her the stance.

"Like this," she said, putting her skates where he said.

"Just like that. Now, you're going to push out, shifting your weight from this side to that side."

Alicia made the move, shaking and keeping her death grip on Jordan's hands as he faced her, skating backward.

"You make it look easy," she said as a kid who looked to be about ten years old skated past them.

"I played hockey growing up."

Alicia jerked her attention from her skates to him. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's pretty common around here. I was a major Colorado Ice Hawks fan."

Alicia looked back at the skates. The image of a little Jordan dreaming of playing hockey with the pros brought a smile to her face. “You’re not anymore?”

Jordan chuckled. “I don’t have much time to watch sports anymore. Too busy studying maps and putting together security plans.”

They skated along, and moving came easier with every minute. “Do you miss it?”

“Sports? Not really. I love what I do.”

“Taking care of entitled celebrities?” she asked.

Jordan slowed their pace and squeezed her hands. “You know I don’t think that. Plus, it’s not always celebrities. I’ve worked for politicians, political families, CEOs. I worked for a murderer once.”

“A murderer!”

“Shh, keep your voice down. Yeah, he was up for trial, and because of the circumstances of his case, anyone who knew about it wanted him dead.”

“Wow. What was that like?”

It was getting easier to push through the steps, and Jordan swung around to her side, keeping his hold on one hand. “I love justice just as much as the next guy, but I still don’t want to see someone killed in the street before a fair trial.”

Alicia watched her skates and focused on balancing. “I’ve never seen a hockey game.”

“You’ve never been to a hockey game?”

“No, I’ve never watched one on TV either. I don’t watch a lot of TV. Everything is on the internet.”

Jordan was silent, and she looked up to meet his gaze. “You want to go to one?” he asked.

“That sounds like fun.”

The air halted in Alicia’s throat. Was he asking her to go with him? She wouldn’t want to go by herself. If she went

within the next month, he'd go with her as her security agent, but that wasn't the same as going as her date.

ALICIA

It was full dark before they pulled back up at the ranch. Alicia stretched her neck and groaned. “I think I worked out muscles that hadn’t been used in ages today.”

“Skating is a workout on its own,” Jordan said as he turned off the engine.

They trudged up to the porch, and Alicia wrapped her coat tighter around her. The chill in the air stung in her chest with every inhale. Clouds spanned the sky above the wide-open ranch.

“I think I’ll sit out here for a little bit. Want to keep me company?” Alicia asked.

Jordan held up a hand. “Let me get you a blanket.” He disappeared inside and came back a few seconds later with a thick blanket.

He wrapped it around Alicia, and she sat on the bench swing. Jordan sat beside her, and she swung the blanket over him.

Jordan hesitated but finally accepted the blanket, scooting closer to her so they could share.

“I’m exhausted,” Alicia whispered.

“It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah, but I keep thinking about that interview. I’ve had bad interviews before, but I’ve never frozen up like that. Now I’m hating on myself for breaking down like I did.”

“They were talking about things you’d recently gone through. The wounds are probably still raw.”

She picked at a stitch on the blanket. “I still don’t know what to think about Mom and Dad. Getting over Ashton has been a lot easier than I expected. I always knew he wasn’t emotionally invested in our relationship, but my parents...”

When her sentence trailed off, Jordan whispered, “I don’t understand how they could have done that to you.”

“Mom and Dad like money. It’s why they had Stacy and me audition for *Family First*. Losing the money isn’t as bad as losing that trust.”

“I don’t understand how they could have done that either. I mean, you might have liked acting, but knowing they were motivated by money makes it—”

“Icky. You can say it. They used the money to hire nannies who took care of us most of the time. We had tutors, assistants, and someone paid to be with us twenty-four-seven. My parents came around when the cameras showed up.”

Jordan rested his arm on the swing behind her. “I hate that they treated you like that.”

Alicia hated it too, but it didn’t change the fact. His family was building her up when she’d been slowly sinking. “Being here with you and your family really showed me what I missed out on. They’re great, you know that?”

“I do. They’ve been there for me through everything.” He sighed, releasing a foggy breath into the cold. “I haven’t been home in a while. I always thought I’d come back for good one day, but I didn’t know I’d come back like this.”

Alicia wrapped her arms tighter around her. “I feel like that’s my fault.”

Jordan’s arm rested on her shoulders and pulled her in. “That’s not what I meant. I thought I’d retire from the Marine Corps, then settle down here. It just didn’t pan out that way. I also felt bad coming here after the incident.”

“Why?” she whispered against his shoulder.

“Because I lost a leg. My friend lost everything. He died in the explosion.”

Alicia tightened her grip on the blanket and swallowed past the tightness in her throat. “I didn’t know.”

“Our mission was recon, so we were on the front lines. Neither of us were hit directly, but...”

She pressed her cheek against his chest. “You don’t have to tell me, but you can if you want. It must be hard to relive it.”

She didn’t have any idea what that would be like.

But she did, in a way. Her parents not only left her but stole from her as they fled. They hadn’t been ripped from her like Jordan’s friend. Her parents made a choice. They chose to walk away, taking a part of her heart and hope with them.

There were few people she clung to in her life, and losing any of them would be terrible. Her sister. Lillian. Now, Jordan and his family.

Alicia didn’t want to imagine life without any of them, but her international tour started in March, and between rehearsals and interviews, she’d be going nonstop for months with no way out. The path was already decided for her. Those months of her life were locked into a service, and she couldn’t back out.

She scooted closer to Jordan, and his arm tightened around her. She’d always loved the lights and performing. Writing songs and singing new ones lit a fire inside her that had kept her going through many lonely years.

But she had a feeling nothing would erase the ache of leaving Jordan behind. Alicia had a security team who followed her on tour, but maybe Lillian could secure Jordan as a full-time agent. Maybe he could come with her.

A resounding “no” echoed in her mind. He’d wilt in that world. It wasn’t anything like the ranch where he’d grown up or the life he probably had in Cleveland.

Jordan was made for this life, not hers. If he went with her, he’d resent her in the long run. Maybe even in the short run.

There was also the tiny fact that Jordan hadn't exactly said he wanted to stay with her. They talked more, he shared more about himself, but there'd been silence when it came to confessions of feelings.

Jordan's cheek rested against her head, and he turned, pressing his lips to her hair. "You probably need to get some rest," he whispered.

He didn't have to confess anything. She could feel how much he cared about her. With his arm wrapped around her and his lips to her hair, the humming in her bones said everything she needed to know.

She felt every move he made, every heartbeat. Every sad word he'd spoken about his friend tonight seeped into her skin.

Lillian had casually mentioned the clause in his contract today. After seeing photos of Jordan leading her out of the building, Lillian reminded Alicia that Jordan's career could be compromised by a personal relationship with her.

Why did she have to be a client when she wanted to be something more? She wanted his protection, but there was so much more to Jordan that hid behind a locked door.

He wouldn't cross that line. His loyalty and responsibility would keep him from her, and there wasn't anything she could do to change it.

He'd lost so much already. She couldn't ask him to give up a single thing for her.

Stretching her back, Alicia sat up straighter. "You're right. I'll see you in the morning."

"Alicia."

She turned at the quiet word. He stood tall beside her, looking down with shadows covering his face. "You did okay in the interview. You're human, and you're allowed to have feelings."

She'd been beating herself up on the drive back, and she'd almost come to terms with her live fumble. "Thanks. I'll try to

be more prepared next time.”

Jordan followed her inside the quiet house. His parents must have been asleep because only the kitchen light was on. They ascended the stairs in silence, and Jordan stopped just past her bedroom door.

“Good night,” he whispered.

“Good night.”

“Sweet dreams,” he added.

Alicia bit her smile between her teeth as she slipped into her bedroom. Jordan’s softer side filled her with warmth, and she’d definitely have sweet dreams tonight about the strong, kind man guarding her across the hall.

ALICIA

Alicia stared at the ceiling of her bedroom. Moonlight cast streaks over the wood, bending in odd places. She'd memorized the pattern, and there was something comforting about retracing those paths.

It was either that or thinking about Jordan and how he was across the hall. He was probably sawing logs. Last she'd checked, it was four in the morning. It might be closer to a quarter till five now.

She closed her eyes and cleared her mind. The ladies she'd met at the church the few times she'd gone with Jordan's family always promised to pray for her. Alicia hadn't even told them she needed help. What were they praying about?

Better yet, there was a nagging in the back of her mind that said she needed to be doing some praying too.

But how?

She believed in God. There had to be a Creator. She knew that much. What little she knew about church was from movies and TV shows. She'd gone to church with Jordan and his family twice, and she'd listened when the preacher prayed. Was there a method to it? A formula?

That was something to ask Jordan about in the morning. Or maybe his mom. It wasn't fun admitting she knew nothing, and she wasn't ready to see the disappointed look on his face.

Her phone dinged on the bedside table, and she reached for it like a lifeline. Emails this early were never good, but Lillian

liked to get ahead of the disaster. She gave early-morning updates assuring Alicia that her career was in danger, but she'd have it all smoothed over by breakfast.

Alicia squinted against the bright light from the screen, blinking past the dryness in her eyes. Yep. Career in peril. Reinforcements on the way. Nothing to worry about.

She dropped the phone onto the comforter beside her. Why did she even care about what everyone else in the world thought? They rarely said nasty things to her face, and if she didn't have the internet attached to her hand, she wouldn't even know she'd been canceled.

Leaving the phone on the bed, she pushed back the covers and sat up. The mind games had to stop. Or she had to forget about them. Her heart raced, and her chest rose and fell in deep swells. The skin on her bare arms tingled, and her fingers throbbed with numbness.

Throwing her feet off the bed, she pressed her hands to the top of her head. Not now. Not now. Stress used to bring on migraines, but it seemed panic attacks were the flavor of the year.

She wasn't sure which was worse, but right now, she did not want to have a panic attack. Pacing wasn't working, and now the tingling had spread to her face.

Shaking out her hands, she formed her lips into an O and pushed air out. In the nose, out the mouth. She'd heard that somewhere once.

Breathing exercises weren't working. She followed the dim light to the bathroom and flipped on the switch. Her reflection in the mirror startled her. Dark bags pulled the skin beneath her eyes down, her cheeks were pale with a green tint, and the normally white parts of her eyes were a menacing pink.

“Good grief.” Alicia turned on the water and splashed her face. Bracing her hands on the edge of the counter, she chanted. “Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.”

Nothing changed. Her pulse still pounded in her ears, and her face was ice cold. She pushed her fingers through her hair and turned, not wanting to keep looking at the gaunt reflection.

Her dim field of vision swam, and she reached for the bed. She sat down before leaning forward, cradling her head in her hands.

“Stop. Stop. Stop,” she whispered. Why wouldn’t it stop? Her eyes were closed, but the room was spinning.

There was a knock close by, but it was drowned out by the heavy thud of her pulse in her head.

The knock sounded again, and Alicia jerked her head up. Someone was knocking on the door. But it was so early.

“Alicia?” Jordan asked. Her name muffled through the door and her racing heartbeat.

She tried to stand, but she couldn’t stay on her feet. Her whole body tossed to the side like she was on a ship in a stormy sea. Stars sparkled in her vision.

Slowly, she sat back down. Okay, so she wouldn’t be opening the door for him. “Come in.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before Jordan’s towering frame was beside her bed. He knelt in front of her, and his warm hand pressed to her forehead, brushing his thumb over her hairline. “What’s wrong?”

There was already an urgency in his voice. “Panic. Attack.” The words came out low, separate, and singular, like she didn’t know how to fit them together.

“What can I do? What helps?” he asked quickly.

Alicia shook her head, then immediately regretted it. “Nothing.”

Jordan stood and placed his hands on her upper arms, guiding her to her feet. The dizziness took over again, turning her until she wasn’t sure which way was up, but Jordan steadied her.

A second later, she really was turning. A small gasp escaped from her throat as Jordan swept her into his arms. The warmth of his chest seeped into her side, and she rested her head against him. With her eyes closed, she focused on breathing.

The bed squeaked as Jordan sat down on the side. Holding her across his lap with his arms wrapped around her, he enveloped her in the safety of his arms.

Her breaths jerked out in half-seconds, bringing the stinging tears with them. Why couldn't she control it? She didn't care what people thought, but she'd been conditioned to care—to cater to everyone but herself.

Showing weakness wasn't allowed. She didn't even want this weakness. It burned in her gut like a fire, not a cowering puppy.

Jordan's hand stroked her hair, and the scruff on his chin brushed against her forehead. "It's gonna be okay. I know that doesn't mean anything, and words don't help, but I feel like I need to remind you."

He was everything she needed right now. Sweet, comforting, and reassuring. She clung to him as if he could save her from the invisible monsters causing chaos inside her head.

"Keep talking. Please," she whispered.

His calloused hand continued brushing against her hair, as he readjusted his chin against the top of her head.

"Well, you scared me tonight."

"Why?" she asked, curious and thankful he was talking about something to take her mind off the pounding in her head.

"I heard you moving around, but it didn't sound like the quiet rustling of someone just waking up." He swallowed, and she felt the movement of his throat. "I know it's my job to protect you, but I get this sinking fear whenever things aren't normal."

His chest swelled against her cheek as he paused. “I would do anything to keep you safe—would give my life for yours, and not because I signed a contract. I’m not a violent man, but I want to hurt the people who hurt you. They deserve it for making you cry.” He tightened his hold on her, squeezing her to him. “This is something I can’t chase away, and I hate that there’s something out there I can’t protect you from. I wish I could tell you to forget about what strangers on the internet think about you or that your parents don’t care about you the way they should, but I know it’s not that simple. I just wish those problems didn’t have to exist.”

She pressed her eyes closed and bit her lips between her teeth. The tears dripped onto her cheek anyway. “They really don’t have to exist. Not here. I love that about this place. As long as I’m not checking my emails or the news apps, I can almost forget that people either love me or hate me.”

They sat in silence while she listened to the beat of his heart. When the rhythm had soothed her, she sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck. Breathing in his comfort and strength, she whispered, “Thank you for caring about me this morning.”

“I always care about you. I just can’t let anyone know.”

The pain in her chest rivaled the panic attack. She wanted Jordan just like this all the time, but there were barriers between them.

He tightened his hold on her but didn’t say anything. She wasn’t sure how long they stayed there, but the rustling of his mom in the kitchen downstairs pulled them out of the private moment.

“I guess I’d better go see if Mom needs help,” Jordan said.

Alicia unwrapped herself from the tangled web they’d made and wiped her cheeks. “I’ll come with you. She said she’d show me how to make breakfast sausage this morning.”

“My favorite,” Jordan said with a wink.

Good grief, did the man have to be incredibly thoughtful *and* ridiculously attractive? It really wasn’t fair that the one

man in the world she wanted was the only one she couldn't have.

Alicia stood from where she'd been draped across his lap and pushed her hair away from her face. It was a complete mess, and no one had seen her like this in years. "I just need to freshen up a little. I'll be right down."

Jordan stood and made his way to the door but stopped before walking out into the hallway.

"Alicia?"

"Yeah?" Whatever he was about to ask, she would do it. He could ask her to quit her career and move to Redemption Ridge, and she'd probably do it.

That realization was both startling and thrilling.

Jordan looked around the room before leaning against the doorframe. "There's a barn dance at Redemption Ridge Ranch this weekend. I was wondering if you'd like to go."

"A barn dance?"

Jordan smirked. "It's exactly like it sounds, buttercup."

She'd been to a lot of events, but she'd never been to anything remotely close to a barn dance.

"With you?"

Good grief, she should have thought twice before asking that. She might not like his answer.

"You kinda have to go with me."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Funny. You know what I mean."

There was a beat of silence between them, but his stare didn't falter. "Yeah. With me."

She let out a tense breath. Okay, that was the answer she'd wanted, but now what did she do with it?

He'd have a pile of work to do on security checks, but he obviously wasn't bothered by that if he was asking her. "Sure. I'd like that."

Jordan rapped his knuckles against the doorframe. “Good. I’ll see you downstairs.”

With the tension of the panic attack gone, she fell back onto the bed as soon as he disappeared around the corner. He’d been through so much—lost so much. Yet, he hadn’t laughed at her when she couldn’t control her spiraling anxiety over words on a computer screen.

The words she hadn’t been able to grasp before solidified in her mind, and she closed her eyes.

“God, thank You for sending Jordan. Thank You for peace. Amen.”

The smile tugged at her mouth before her eyes opened. The morning sun lit up the ceiling she’d watched all night. Every line and crack were different, shouting at her to get up instead of staying stuck in the paralyzing prison.

Sitting up slowly, she ducked into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, her teeth were brushed, her face was washed, and her hair was tied in a tight bun on top of her head.

The warm scent of coffee and bacon greeted her before she entered the kitchen. Jordan’s dad sat at the table with a cup of coffee and a newspaper in front of him, while Jordan and his mom stood by the counter.

Jordan spotted her first, and his subtle grin greeted her.

“Morning, sunshine!” his mom sang. “You want your eggs fried or scrambled?”

Her stomach let out a low rumble at the mention of food. She’d been up half the night, and her other worries had overshadowed her hunger until now. “Fried. Can I have two? And can I watch you cook them?”

“Sure can,” Vicci said before turning back to the skillet on the stovetop.

His dad lifted his mug of coffee to her as she pulled a mug from the cabinet. “Morning. You sleep well?”

Alicia cut a glance at Jordan before answering. “Not really, but I’m feeling fine this morning.”

Better than fine, actually.

“What are your plans after church today?” Vicci asked. “I was thinking we could go clothes shopping with Caroline and Nora. They want new outfits for the barn dance, and I could use a little something new myself.”

“I have some meetings this morning before church, but I’m free for the afternoon.” Meetings were the bane of her existence, but they were a necessary evil that came with the job. She’d never wanted to skip them more than she had in the last few weeks.

“Perfect. Caroline wanted to run by the bakery and do a few things this morning anyway. I’ll help Grant feed the cattle, and we can have sandwiches for lunch before we head out.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Vicci turned around and pointed her spatula toward a chair at the table. “Oh, I bought that shirt for you at Maddie’s store the other day. I thought it would look good on you.”

Alicia ran her fingertips over the fabric. There were white and beige squares with black lines crossing over it. “I love it. Thank you so much.”

She’d seen lots of people wearing similar shirts around town, and she’d been hoping to get one for herself. In fact, she’d be wearing it on their shopping trip later. “How much do I owe you?”

That was a ridiculous question. No amount of money could pay the Taylors back for all they’d done for her. She knew her financial team had compensated the Taylors well, but Alicia had decided weeks ago that it wasn’t enough.

Vicci scoffed. “No, baby. It’s a gift.”

Alicia looked at Jordan, who rested his back against the counter and sipped coffee with his gaze attached to her. His mom’s kindness wasn’t anything new to him. They were family, and they looked out for each other.

“You’ve given me so much,” Alicia said as she stepped up beside Vicci. Not only that, but they never asked for anything.

So many people in the entertainment world sidled up to successful people because of what they could get from them. The Taylors had no idea how social circles worked, and they didn't seem to want to be a part of it.

Deception was the game public figures knew how to play, and resentment colored every relationship from the beginning.

Not the Taylors. They lived in a sheltered world where things were fair and good was rewarded.

Well, except for their awful neighbor, Chuck, who liked to terrorize them whenever he got the urge.

Vicci cracked the eggs into the pan and talked Alicia through the cooking, noting what to watch for and the different ways people might like their eggs. When they were cooked to Alicia's preference, or what she hoped was her preference, Vicci plated the fried eggs before handing it to Alicia. "Eat up. We blessed the food earlier. Jordan has been eating buffet style while I've been cooking."

"Did you think I was going to stand here and not touch the bacon?" he asked.

Alicia bit her lips between her teeth and dipped her chin. Logic told her this life wasn't always roses, but she'd jump in with both feet if there was any possible way. She'd leave the headlines and bright lights behind to plant her roots in Redemption Ridge.

But she had an international tour coming up, and millions of dollars and thousands of jobs were already tied up in the events. The tour itself was eight months long, but the rehearsals and interviews took up every second of her waking hours for the three months prior.

She'd just sat down at the table when the phone in her pocket rang, and she pulled it out to see Lillian's name. She wiped her mouth with a napkin and stood. "I'm sorry, I need to take this."

"I'll make you fresh eggs when you get back," Vicci said over her shoulder.

Alicia grabbed the flannel shirt off the back of the chair as she left the kitchen. She needed armor before heading back into the battle.

JORDAN

Sitting in the quiet kitchen, Jordan read the email from Nathan again. His boss had always been straightforward and clear, but it wasn't Nathan's fault that Jordan's attention was elsewhere. Alicia would be ready for church in a few minutes, and he'd spent too much time trying to guess which color she'd wear and how her eyes would light up when she saw him.

Because there had definitely been sparks kindling between them—no matter how much they pretended there wasn't anything going on.

Just because it didn't have a label didn't mean a relationship didn't exist. Their connection had blown past the professional line a long time ago and was currently waving and laughing at the line as it disappeared into nothingness.

Jordan pushed his fingers into his hair and grabbed it by the roots. He wanted his client—needed her. He couldn't imagine letting her walk away. His feelings for Alicia were so messed up he couldn't see a safe way out.

Heavy footfalls sounded on the porch, and the front door opened as his dad shouted, "Jordan!"

"In the kitchen," Jordan answered, smoothing his hair back into something presentable.

Jordan's dad stepped into the kitchen and did a quick look around. "Just you?"

That was a very telling greeting. Jordan sat up straighter in his chair at the table. “Just me. What’s up?”

“It’s Chuck. He cut every line along the north fence.”

“Are you serious? That’s at least a quarter of a mile.”

His dad nodded. “All of it.” He rested his forearms on the back of a chair and let his head fall.

“I’ll help get it back up,” Jordan said as he stood.

“You’re already dressed for church. I’ll call Clint.”

Jordan fisted a hand at his side. “I can help.”

“I know you can, but Alicia has to stay with you. I understand you’re not home on vacation. You’re working, and that’s important.”

Jordan looked to the door leading out into the living room where Alicia would appear at any moment. “Thanks for understanding.”

“I just wanted you to know what we’re up against. Chuck doesn’t care about property, and I’m not sure he cares about much else. He’s getting bolder.”

“What’s the latest on the lawsuit?” Jordan asked.

His dad shook his head. “There are half a dozen restrictions in place, but he plays by his own rules.”

“He thinks he’s above the law.” Jordan had met quite a few people like Chuck in his lifetime, and they all walked a dangerous road, skirting the law all while sticking their tongues out at the justice system.

His dad took a deep breath. “You need to consider Alicia’s safety.”

“Is it that bad?” He’d expected Alicia to get tired of the ranch and be long gone by now, but she loved it here. While she could spend her vacation anywhere in the world she wanted, he had a feeling she wasn’t going to be excited about the possibility of leaving.

His dad shrugged. “I’m not sure, but you need to be aware.”

Alicia’s footsteps set a rhythmic pace on the stairs.

Jordan closed his laptop and stepped around his dad. “Thanks for the heads-up. Call me if you need me.”

“See you later.”

Jordan tugged at the collar of his shirt as he went to meet Alicia. She floated down the stairs like the sophisticated celebrity she was. Her dark hair was pulled back into a low ponytail that hung over one shoulder, and she wore a tan sweater dress and brown boots.

Apparently, she didn’t need a fashion team to look like his dream woman.

Her smile hit him in the gut as she bounced off the last step. “Ready?”

Jordan offered her his arm, and her delicate hand wrapped around it. He opened the front door for her but stepped close as she walked through.

“You’re beautiful.” He whispered the words, half hoping she’d heard and half hoping she hadn’t.

Alicia stopped and turned to him, tucking her chin a fraction of an inch. “Thank you.”

He gave her a quick wink before jerking his head toward the truck. Her smile didn’t waver as she stepped outside. He had a few more weeks to spend with Alicia, and he was already breaking the rules.



IT TOOK an extra-long time to get a seat at church. While everyone was excited to see Alicia again, just as many were eager to let Jordan know just how much they’d missed him and remind him how long he’d been gone.

As if he needed a reminder. He hadn't been attending church nearly as often as he'd like, but that was a part of the job. His clients didn't only need his services Monday through Friday.

Not only had he not been to church lately, he hadn't spent time in the Word in a while. The guilt trip his friends were giving him was valid.

The preacher was wrapping up the message when Jordan glanced at Alicia beside him. It wasn't the first time he'd looked her way, and it wouldn't be the last.

She sat with his family Bible open across her lap. His mom had taught her how to look up books and verses a few weeks ago, and he'd seen her reading it a few times since then.

The old Bible was limp and cracked, but Alicia held it with care. The thing was probably close to a hundred years old, but his mom hadn't hesitated before loaning it out to Alicia. It was serving a better purpose—its only purpose—being used by Alicia instead of sitting hidden in a closet.

After the invitation, the congregation was dismissed. Jordan stood and almost bumped into Mrs. Lindsey when he turned around.

"I'm glad I caught you two. It's good to see you again, Jordan." She reached up to wrap her frail arms around his neck. Mrs. Lindsey was pushing eighty-five, but she was just as spry and active as when she'd been Jordan's Sunday School teacher.

"It's good to see you too. Have you met Alicia Carver?"

"Oh, I've heard about you," Mrs. Lindsey said with a smile as she reached out her arms to Alicia. "I'm Martha Lindsey. I hear you're a singer."

Alicia hugged Martha back. "I am. It's nice to meet you."

Martha stepped back and lifted her chin. "Good. Have you heard about our Christmas Choir concert?"

"I've heard it mentioned," Alicia said.

“Well, would you like to sing with us? I can’t offer you a solo part, but we’d love to have you join us.”

Jordan crossed his arms over his chest. It was good to see the people in town including Alicia, even if she couldn’t participate.

“When is it?” Alicia asked.

“Week after next. We have a few more practices between now and then, but I can get you caught up in no time.”

Alicia’s smile grew. “I’d love to. When is the next practice?”

Jordan’s eyes widened. She really said yes.

“Thursday at six,” Martha said before turning to Jordan. “We’d love to have you join us too.”

Jordan blinked past his confusion. “Sorry, but I can’t. I’m Miss Carver’s security agent, and I’m on duty.”

“Oh, all the time?” Martha asked.

“All the time.” He was on the clock twenty-four seven, whether it was his shift or not.

Martha clicked her tongue behind her teeth. “Well, that’s a shame. But you’ll be at the practices, won’t you? It’s so good to see your face around here again.”

Jordan glanced at Alicia. “Wherever Miss Carver goes, I go.”

For the next few weeks, at least. After that, all the professional and pretend ties they’d formed would disappear.

Martha nodded, seeming content with his answer. “Good. We’ll see you two on Thursday.”

ALICIA

Caroline stopped in front of a store window and gasped. “I love that necklace!”

Alicia stepped to Caroline’s side and looked for it. It was a simple black chain with turquoise pendants in the shape of teardrops. “Wow. It is nice.”

“Can I see how much it is?” Caroline asked the group.

Everyone nodded and shooed her into the store. They’d been shopping around town for hours, and the only one who had found a dress was Nora. At the first store they’d entered, she’d grabbed up a deep-green dress that reached her knees.

Alicia had thousands of dresses, and she could have any of them flown to Redemption Ridge within a few hours. Designers would send dozens within the day if she put out the word, but she wouldn’t trade this shopping trip with her new friends for the most expensive wardrobe in the world.

Nora and Vicci followed Caroline into the store, and Alicia hung back on the sidewalk with Jordan. He’d kept a few feet of distance behind the women all day, and despite the great conversation with her friends, she’d been aching to talk to him.

“Having fun?” she asked.

Jordan scanned the streets for the three hundredth time. He never let his guard down in public places, and rarely in private. “Fun is a strong word.”

Alicia swatted his arm and got a quick reminder of the carefully contained strength behind those rock-hard muscles. “Admit it. You love shopping with us.”

“I’m a big fan of the truth, Miss Carver.”

Alicia sighed, feigning exasperation. “Maybe we can herd some cattle later or something else more thrilling.”

“Now you’re onto something, but I’m not sure getting on a horse is the best idea.”

“Why not?” Alicia asked. Was there some reason he couldn’t ride a horse with his prosthetic?

“Horses are unpredictable. Even the well-trained ones. It wouldn’t be good if you fell off a horse and got injured. Your tour prep starts in a few weeks.”

Oh, of course, that’s what she should have been thinking about too. Her health had always been a top priority for the reason Jordan gave. Hundreds of people were employed because of her tour, and she had a responsibility to do anything and everything to make sure things went well.

Caroline stuck her hand into the small bag as she stepped out of the store. “Can you help me put this on?”

“Sure,” Alicia said as she took the necklace from her friend. “It looks great on you.”

“Thanks.” Caroline hooked her arm around Alicia’s. “Let’s get moving. We’re running out of time to find dresses.”

The next store they went into had a nice selection, and Caroline picked up a few. Alicia combed through the racks but didn’t find anything that caught her eye.

Except for Jordan, who stood like a statue by the entrance. His gaze met hers but quickly moved to the right, then back to her. Following his looks, she spotted two men whispering to each other near the dressing rooms. One had dark hair and wore a black coat, while the other had lighter brown hair mostly covered by a baseball cap.

The shop worker had her attention on the two men too. The store sold men’s clothing, but the two men in question

didn't seem to be looking at the selections. Their attention darted around the store as they whispered.

Caroline walked past them toward the fitting rooms, and the two men watched her until she disappeared behind the corner. Then, their focus shifted to Alicia.

Great. They'd either recognized her or were just plain creepy, and she didn't love either option. She pretended to browse the racks, but her attention kept flickering to the men. She inched her way closer to Jordan, but she could feel his keen attention. He was excellent at his job, and that eased the tension in her shoulders.

The men wound through the racks, making their way toward her. She picked up her pace in the slow move toward Jordan. The men reached her at the same moment Jordan appeared at her right.

The man in the coat tipped his chin at her. "You're Alicia Carver."

She was used to strange greetings. People rarely used hello or even an introduction when meeting her. The media coverage of her life led people to believe they knew her, and by extension, she should know them too.

"Miss Carver isn't signing autographs right now," Jordan said low and carefully controlled beside her.

The two men turned to Jordan, finally noticing his imposing frame. They must have been really focused on her to have missed her towering bodyguard.

"This ain't about you, man," the guy in the coat said.

"It's about me when you're bothering Miss Carver while she's trying to shop."

The man scoffed. "I'm trying to get a phone number, not an autograph. Buzz off."

Alicia's shoulders turned in. She'd never give her phone number out to a stranger, but the man must not have any instincts. Jordan was torqued and ready to strike. She could feel the anger rolling off him in waves.

Jordan took one step toward the men, and they both backed up. He leaned down, looming over the strangers and whispered, “This is your last chance. Run.”

One man glanced at his friend while the other didn’t hesitate. He turned and booked it for the exit. The remaining man got the hint and followed.

Alicia let out a heavy breath. “Thanks. I’m not sure they were dangerous, but—”

“I overheard them talking about you when they first walked into the store. You weren’t in any danger, but they were.”

Jordan’s jaw was so tight, she could see the muscles taut in his neck, and he’d barely taken his focus off the door where the men had fled.

“Um, I’m not going to ask what they said—”

“Good.” Jordan finally looked at her, and the stern set of his jaw eased a bit. “You can shop in peace now.”

Alicia nodded. She’d dealt with lots of people who had no regard for her personal space or privacy, but she’d gotten used to being anonymous here, and the intrusion had seeped into the perfect bubble she’d been living in.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He jerked his chin toward the back of the store. “I think Caroline is trying to get your attention.”

Alicia looked, and sure enough, Caroline stood in the doorway of the fitting rooms wearing a violet dress and waving her hands in the air.

Alicia swallowed, still trying to get her bearings after the intense altercation between Jordan and the men. “Okay.”

She’d witnessed his fierce intimidation before, and Jordan was great at his job. If Jordan hadn’t overheard whatever inappropriate things they’d said about her, she might have entertained a conversation with the men just to be nice.

Caroline twirled in the dress. “What do you think of this one?”

“It’s beautiful. It looks great with your skin tone.”

Caroline’s eyes narrowed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. There were a couple of men hanging around, but Jordan took care of them.”

Caroline chuckled. “He has a lot of practice running men off. He scared away half my dates in high school.”

The image of Jordan being a protective big brother only made her love him more.

A shock jolted in her chest as warmth spread up her neck. Love. She loved him, and that made this careful dance they were doing incredibly dangerous.

Caroline’s laughter died, and she clasped Alicia’s hand. “Hey, let me get out of this dress, and we can meet Mom and Nora at the next store. Hang tight.”

“We don’t have to rush. I’m fine.”

Caroline disappeared around the corner, and Alicia risked a glance back at Jordan. He was back in his post by the exit, and his attention was focused on her.

Maybe she didn’t love him. It would be so much easier to leave if she didn’t.

She glanced at him again and thought about being away from him. Nope. The ripping pain in her chest said she couldn’t walk away from him in a few weeks. She couldn’t imagine her life without him.

It was love—something she’d never felt for a man before. She’d wondered how it would feel, but no one had prepared her for the bittersweet moment when she realized the one man she couldn’t have was the only one she wanted.

Caroline zipped out of the dressing room with the violet gown hanging over her arm. “I just need to pay for this one, and we’ll be on our way.”

Alicia hung out by Jordan while Caroline checked out, then the three of them walked to a shop on the next corner. Jordan's mom and Nora were in the back with their arms filled with dresses.

Weaving her way through the store, Alicia stopped to look at a few things. She was much more interested in the options here, and she grabbed three before heading to the dressing room.

The first one was a definite no. The second one was a red sequined cocktail dress with a low-cut neckline that had short drapes of fabric hanging from it.

She stepped out of the stall to find Caroline standing at the end of the hallway.

Caroline's brows raised, and her mouth opened wide. "Oh, that's gorgeous. It looks great on you!"

Alicia smoothed her hands over the frills on the front. "Do you think it's a little busy in the front?"

"It definitely draws the eye there. If you don't want people looking at your chest all night, it might be best to look for something else."

Alicia chuckled. "You said it. I'll try again."

The last dress was a blush color a few shades lighter than her skin tone that hugged her tight at the top and flowed out after cinching at her waist. There was a sheer sash that draped over the front, covering any cleavage while still keeping the form-fitting look of the dress.

It was her favorite. Her dark hair contrasted with the light color, and she turned a few times in front of the mirror before stepping out of the stall.

Caroline was in the same spot as before, and she looked up from her phone when she heard Alicia's door open. Caroline's eyes widened, and she bit her lips between her teeth. She gave a very animated nod before chanting, "Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

A lightness bubbled in Alicia's chest. This was the dress she wanted to wear to the barn dance, but she needed to check

one last thing.

“Can you ask Jordan to come back here?”

Caroline jumped to her feet. “On it!”

Alicia checked the dress in the mirror again. She’d made up her mind, but it would be a bonus if Jordan liked it too.

His shadow slipped into the dressing room hallway. “Alicia?”

“You can come in. No one else is in here.”

Jordan stepped into view, and the neutral expression on his face shifted the moment he caught sight of her. His eyes widened, and he jerked to a stop.

“Wow,” he whispered.

She couldn’t contain the smile pulling on her cheeks. It was the reaction she’d hoped for, and there was a deep tug in her middle, reaching for the man frozen in the doorway.

“You like it?” she asked, swishing the skirt from side to side.

“Love it. Love—” He stopped short, jerking his attention from the dress to her face. His hands fisted and flexed at his sides before he straightened. “You’re beautiful.”

His last compliment was tempered, guarded.

Had he come to the same realization as she had? Were they two people in love but doomed to be separated?

“Thank you. I guess I’ll just pay for this one, and we can see how your mom and Nora are doing.”

Jordan nodded once and stepped out of the fitting room area. “I’ll wait for you by the register.”

Alicia took a deep breath and walked back to the dressing room. If Jordan felt the same way she did, the barn dance was going to be a night to remember.

JORDAN

Clint and Nora whispered in the backseat as Jordan parked the truck in front of the church. The night was pitch black, but the lights from the parking lot shone dimly on the white snow.

“It’s go time,” Clint said as he bolted out of the truck.

Nora didn’t wait for Clint to walk around and get her door, and Alicia had started doing the same. Jordan liked opening her doors, and it was a requirement in most cases for the job.

“What are they doing?” Alicia asked when they met up in front of the truck.

“Forming a strategy.”

Alicia pressed her lips together and stared at Clint and Nora as they walked ahead. “We need a strategy.”

“For cookie decorating?”

Clint and Nora were both competitive, but Jordan only had strong motivation to win if the situation required it.

Protecting clients? Always win.

Recon? Always win.

Battle? Always win.

For years, the majority of his days had been spent in battle mode. It was subtle, but every step had the potential to start a war between the major powers or end lives.

Cookie decorating? He'd like to win, but it wasn't at the top of his to-do list.

"Yes. I need to show them I can do this. I need to prove to myself that I can do it," Alicia said. "I feel like I'm being initiated into the town."

And there was his reason. She wanted to belong here, and he'd make sure she knew she was welcome here. "Then we'll win. Don't worry about it."

"You act like it's in the bag. I've never decorated a cookie before. Have you?"

"Yes, I was an artist in my other life."

Alicia swatted his chest. "This is serious."

Jordan suppressed a laugh as he held the church door open for her. "Yes, ma'am."

They walked into the fellowship hall where teams were already dividing up at tables. Jason and Cassie Keen were paired up. Levi and Ruby Thompson were arranging the cookies and bags of icing at their station. Jordan's mom and Connie Reynolds were passing out supplies.

Alicia grabbed his hand. "Let's get a table. We need to form a plan."

Jordan allowed her to guide him to a table where she studied the bags of colorful icing.

Clearing his throat, Jordan turned to her. "Okay, I might be in over my head. I have no idea what I'm doing."

Alicia jerked her attention up to him, and her ponytail whipped to the side. "What?"

"How do we get the icing onto the cookies?" he asked.

Alicia's eyes widened. "Are you kidding me? I thought you knew what to do. I don't know either!"

Jordan pressed his lips into a thin line as he tried to swallow the grin threatening to make an appearance.

"Jordan, we have to win. Get your head in the game."

His mom stepped up to their table and handed them a tiny cluster of toothpicks. “You two ready?”

“No. Not even close. We just realized we’re both clueless,” Alicia said, flopping her hands out to her sides.

Jordan’s mom looked at him as if she were waiting for an explanation.

He lifted his hands. “I never claimed to be the best partner choice for this.”

His mom tsked. “When you’re ready to start, cut a tiny hole in the point of the bags. Tiny. Then, start by outlining the cookie. Don’t go all the way to the edge. Just get close. Then, fill it in. If you want the other colors to flow together, add them before the icing dries. If you want the next color to sit on top of the base color, let it dry first.” She held up the toothpicks. “Use these to help push your icing to the edges where you don’t want to get too close while piping it out of the bags. Got it?”

“Got it,” Alicia said with a stern nod.

Jordan didn’t answer because one or both of the women were going to throttle him if he told the truth. His mom’s instruction might as well have been Greek.

“You have ten minutes until the timer starts running,” his mom said. “Use it to decide on your ideas. The judges are looking for neatness and creativity.”

“Thanks,” Alicia said as she started grouping the cookies with colorful bags of icing.

“I feel like I should apologize in advance,” Jordan said.

Alicia pointed to the cookie in front of him. “Can you draw a snowflake?”

“Um, maybe.” He’d never regretted skipping art class in high school as much as he did right now.

“Make the base light blue, wait for it to dry, then put a white snowflake on it. I’ll start filling these in with green, and I think we could make a Christmas tree out of them.”

Jordan looked at the set of round cookies in front of her. “I think the shape is off.”

“They’ll all connect to make a tree. Do you have any better ideas?”

Jordan shook his head. Alicia was scary when she was in boss mode. “Nope. That sounds like a good idea.”

Connie raised a hand and whistled to get everyone’s attention. “Thanks for coming to the tenth annual cookie decorating contest. This is one of our best fundraisers of the year, and all benefits go to the Redemption Ridge Fire Department.” She flicked a piece of paper in front of her. “A few housekeeping points first.”

Alicia wrung her hands beside him as Connie read off the rules. Jordan leaned closer and whispered, “Relax.”

“I’ll relax when we win.”

Jordan bumped her shoulder with his. “If you want to win, I’ll make it happen. Don’t worry about it.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“It is. Don’t you trust me?”

Alicia looked up at him, and the force of her gaze hit all the way to his gut. He’d do anything she wanted, and winning a cookie decorating contest just became his top priority.

Her gaze flicked to his mouth, then back up again. “I do.”

Man, his body’s reactions to a single look from her were unreal. He felt the wave of that look all the way to his toes.

“Let the games begin!” Connie shouted.

Jordan grabbed the bag of light-blue icing and cut a small hole in the tip like his mom advised. Alicia did the same with another bag of green and leaned over the cookies.

There were some slip-ups with the initial outlining process while he figured out exactly how far the line needed to be from the edge of the cookie, but soon he had four cookies outlined and filled in.

“What do you need while I wait for these to dry?” Jordan asked.

Alicia pointed to a cookie with a strip of icing draped over the edge. “Can you scrape the icing off that one so I can start over?”

Next, he outlined some of the cookies that would make up the center of the tree. Every once in a while, he checked on Alicia and pointed out how good her cookies were looking.

“Shoot,” Alicia said. “The colors aren’t blending.”

Jordan picked up the cookie and started scraping the icing. “I’ve got this one.”

Alicia sighed but moved on to another. They worked in silence for a few minutes, and Jordan went back to the cookies that needed snowflakes. He took extra time making sure the lines were perfectly straight and that each design was different. He might not be able to draw a sunset or a mountain scene, but he could draw a straight line with the best of them.

“Those look amazing,” Alicia said. “They’re so pretty.”

“I was going for beautiful, but I’ll accept pretty as a win.”

Alicia tilted her head, resting it against his shoulder. “Thank you for this. I’m having a lot of fun, even if we don’t win.”

“We’re going to win.”

“I don’t know. Levi and Ruby have reindeer heads on each cookie.”

“I’m not worried about their reindeer. Those are trash,” Jordan said as he finished up the last snowflake.

“I think the only thing we have left to do is put the decorations on the tree,” Alicia said.

“You’re really intent on beating these old ladies,” Jordan said.

“I don’t care how old they are. I want to win.”

Jordan grinned as he moved the snowflakes to the side and picked up a bag of white icing. “I’ll do the lights. You do the ornaments.”

Every bit of his focus went into creating draping lines that flowed from one cookie to the next, then spacing the little light bulbs evenly across the lines. He swapped sides with Alicia more times than he could count, but their masterpiece was coming together.

“Ten-minute warning!” his mom shouted.

Jordan looked up to check on Alicia just as her icing bag fell onto the cookies.

“No!” Alicia shouted.

Jordan picked up the icing bag. “It’s only three. We can fix them.”

“Ten minutes,” Alicia whispered, but she didn’t hesitate. She picked up the bag she needed and started piping. When one part was finished, she passed the cookie to Jordan and started working on the next one.

His mom started the ten-second countdown just as Jordan was finishing up a cookie. “Almost finished.”

“Drop your weapons!” his mom shouted.

Alicia tossed her almost empty bag onto the table and brushed her hands over her hair. “Done.”

“We did it?” Jordan asked. Honestly, he hadn’t expected them to make it.

“I think so.” She let out a quick exhale through a smile. “I think we did it.”

Alicia launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Jordan dropped the icing bag and held her. It was the second time they’d been this close, and it kicked him in the chest just as hard as the first time.

“Thank you for being on my team,” she whispered against the shell of his ear.

Jordan's grip tightened around her. Did he have to let go? Did he really have to give her up? He'd give anything to keep her.

"Judges! Line up at table number one," Connie said, gesturing to where they should go.

Alicia released her hold on him, but Jordan loosened his grip while still keeping his arms around her waist.

"You feeling good about our chances?" he asked.

Alicia glanced around the room, but she didn't spend a lot of time studying the competition's cookies. "I think we win either way."

Man, this woman had him fighting the urge to kiss her.

In public. In front of the church congregation. She was his client. He was on the job.

Wow. Those roadblocks came flying at him rapid-fire style, breaking the trance he'd been stuck in.

Jordan released her and took a step back. "We make a good team."

Clint stepped up beside them and slapped a hand on Jordan's shoulder, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from Alicia. Not yet.

"So, you ready to lose?" Clint asked.

"We're not going to lose," Alicia told him point-blank.

"You think your tree is better than our ornaments?" Clint asked, pointing to their table.

Jordan looked over to check out Clint's cookies, hoping for a distraction from the beautiful woman who was doing a great job of making him forget his responsibilities. Sure enough, Clint and Nora had a whole table covered in what looked like colorful Christmas tree ornaments. Each had a unique design.

"I'm not worried," Jordan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Nora walked over and sighed. “I’m starving. Do we get to eat the cookies after they’re judged?”

“Hide your cookies, folks!” Clint shouted.

Nora shoved his shoulder. “Shut up and buy me dinner.”

Clint looked to Jordan and Alicia. “Want to hit up the diner when this is over?”

Alicia bounced on her toes. “Can we go?” she asked, turning to Jordan for his opinion.

“Whatever you want.”

She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “We’re in.”

Nora and Alicia made their way around the room, inspecting all the cookies, while Jordan leaned against the wall with Clint. Every once in a while, Alicia would look over at him with a smile bright enough to light up the night.

“Hey, man. I’m not trying to pry, but what’s up with you and Alicia?” Clint asked.

“Nothing.”

Clint scoffed. “And I’m not crazy about Nora either. Serve that cop-out to someone who might believe it.”

Jordan turned to his brother and worked his jaw from side to side. “There can’t be anything between us. It’s a part of my contract.”

“And your contract is up when?”

“Twelve days and four hours. That’s been on my mind a while.”

“Sounds like you can hang on that long.”

“Then she leaves for her tour prep, and I get assigned to another client.”

Clint sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Yikes.”

“We could easily be on opposite sides of the world at any point in time for the next year. Her tour is international.”

Alicia and Nora made their way back toward Jordan and Clint, smiling and leaning close to whisper to each other.

“Sucks to be you,” Clint said.

“It’s not so bad. I could be you.”

Clint nodded, not taking his gaze off Nora. “That’s the truth if I ever heard it.”

It didn’t make Jordan feel any better that he was in the same sad boat as his brother. At this rate, their parents would never have grandkids to spoil.

The three judges approached Jordan and Alicia’s table and made notes on their clipboard for a minute. Then, they whispered together and pointed at the cookies.

If someone told him a month ago that he’d be wound up tighter than a double knot over a cookie decorating competition, he would have laughed in their face.

Today, he wanted more than anything to win and make Alicia happy.

Fifteen minutes later, the judges stood at the front of the room with pleased grins. No doubt Mrs. Lindsey was enjoying her position on the judges panel, and Chaz Buchanan looked ready to tear into the cookies he’d just scrutinized.

“In third place, we have Clint and Nora!”

The room roared in applause, and Clint gave a deep bow.

“Our runner up is...Piper and Gertrude!”

Piper wrapped her grandmother in a hug, and nearby people congratulated them with more hugs and smiles.

“And finally,” his mom said, pausing for dramatic effect. “Our winning team is Jordan and Alicia!”

Alicia jumped, throwing her hands in the air. “We won!”

She was back in Jordan’s arms, celebrating the win she deserved after the hard work and dedication she put in tonight.

He released her quickly, not wanting everyone in Redemption Ridge to see them so close. People rushed over immediately to congratulate them, and his connection to Alicia was lost in the crowd—just like they would be pulled apart in a few weeks.

ALICIA

Jordan's dad lifted his hand so Alicia could twirl. The light-pink skirt of her dress fanned out around her, and the twinkle lights on the ceiling flashed by in a blur.

When she faced Grant Taylor again, she caught sight of Jordan over his dad's shoulder. He'd been screening guests at the entrance for an hour, and Redemption Ridge Ranch security personnel were dotted throughout the barn.

Who knew barn dances were a real thing? The dude ranch went all out with the Christmas decor, and a band in one corner played upbeat country songs.

Grant looked over his shoulder. "I think it's Jordan's turn to take over."

Alicia couldn't help the pull toward Jordan. She'd only looked his way a few hundred times, and each time, she found him watching her too. He'd let her know earlier that he needed to screen attendees for at least the first hour, but he'd promised she'd have his full attention once the extra security agents arrived.

After dancing with half the men in Redemption Ridge, she was more than ready to be in Jordan's arms.

He shook hands with a man at the door and pointed to his ear. She hadn't expected him to completely relinquish control of the security. His dedication was one of the things she loved most about him.

Why did love have to be so bittersweet? She was in love for the first time, and she couldn't even be honest about her feelings.

The melancholy didn't have time to take over before Jordan made his way toward her. "Can I cut in?"

Grant passed Alicia's hand over to Jordan and gave her a single nod. "It was a pleasure dancing with you."

"Thank you for the dance." She owed Grant more than he realized. He'd saved her from dancing with Tim. Grant was a married man too, but dancing with Jordan's dad felt a hundred times safer than dancing with Destiny's husband.

Jordan took her hand, and a tingling warmth spread over her palm and up her arm. The song was ending, and instead of swaying to the dying music, Jordan pulled her in close.

"I can't take my eyes off you," he whispered against the shell of her ear.

A wave of warmth rushed over her. "You're supposed to watch me."

Jordan's arm wrapped around her waist. "Not like this."

There would be dozens of photos of her dancing with different people tonight, but photos of her and Jordan would look starkly different. Simply holding her this close could cost him his job.

A slow song began to play, and Jordan took the lead. "Don't think about it. Just dance with me."

Alicia looked up at him. "Your job."

He pulled her closer. "Don't worry about it."

But she *was* worried about it. Jordan had already lost the job he'd always wanted. She couldn't let him lose this one too.

Jordan brushed a hand over her hair. "You're tense."

"Everyone is watching," she whispered back.

Jordan leveled her with an intense stare. "Just say when, and we'll get out of here."

She looked over both shoulders. The hype over her attendance had settled down, and few people were still watching her. “Let’s go.”

Jordan whispered into his earpiece and took her hand. He led her toward the back of the barn where they’d entered earlier. A tall man stood beside the door with his hands clasped in front of him, and he gave them a single nod before opening the door.

The cold night hit her bare arms and legs with all the shock of a cold shower. A single light lit up the few trucks parked behind the barn. Another guard patrolled the back of the lot, and he gave them the same nod as the other man seconds before.

Jordan opened the passenger door to the truck, and she slid in quickly, running from the cold that clung to her skin. Seconds later, Jordan slipped into the driver’s seat and started the truck.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have forgotten our coats.” He reached into the back seat and grabbed hers, holding it up for her to slip her arms into it.

“Thanks. It feels colder than usual.”

He reached into the back seat again and pulled out another one. “Put this one over your legs.”

She tucked his thick coat around her legs and shivered. “Are you sure you don’t want it?”

“I’m fine.” He adjusted the heat settings and rubbed his hands together. “We’ll be home in fifteen minutes. The heat in this old truck won’t even have time to warm up.”

Home. Was it a bad thing that she wanted to think of his home as hers too? She’d been so welcomed at Taylor Ranch that she hadn’t wished for her LA penthouse a single time over the last month.

On the ride back to the ranch, Alicia named off every person she’d met at the barn dance, and Jordan told her a little more about them. It was strange how invested she’d become in the town, and getting to know the people here didn’t seem like

a chore the same way networking did in the entertainment industry circles.

“So, did you get to talk more with Jason Keen about the New Year’s concert?”

“I did!” She’d gotten to know Jason and Cassie in the last few weeks, and they were the co-founders of a non-profit called Harmony House that protected women and children who’d been abused.

Alicia pulled out her phone and opened a new email to Lillian. “We actually talked about it more tonight. I can’t wait. He said I could take a tour of The Mesa next week, and I need to make sure Lillian can be here.”

“You think she can put the concert together this quickly?” Jordan asked.

“Don’t let Lillian know you doubted her. She’ll prove you wrong in a heartbeat.”

“I didn’t say that. I just assume putting on a concert of this magnitude takes a lot of work.”

Alicia fired off the email to Lillian and put her phone down. “I’m more excited about this concert than the whole tour.”

“Why?”

Wasn’t that the question of the hour. Why was her thrill for the music dying? “I think it’s because I’m expected to put on a bigger show, despite writing and singing better songs.”

Jordan reached over and wrapped her hand in his. He didn’t need to say anything, and he didn’t let go until the headlights illuminated the Taylor Ranch sign.

The ranch was quiet when they pulled up in front of the house. One light was on in the living room, and the light out front lit up the porch.

“Sit tight,” Jordan said as he hopped out of the truck and rounded to her side.

The burst of cold hit her again when he opened the door, and she quickly grabbed his hand and walked as quickly as she could in her heels toward the door. Jordan unlocked the door in record time and ushered her inside.

Jordan hung their coats by the front door, then turned to her and wrapped her in his arms.

Alicia sank into the warmth of his embrace. Jordan put off more heat than any coat.

His lips brushed against the top of her head as he whispered, "I love this dress." His grip on her waist tightened. "But do you want to change into something warmer?"

She nodded, brushing her cheek against his chest. The blush dress was a lot simpler than some of the things she'd worn to awards shows and events, but she'd never had Jordan's gaze on her the way she did now. The softness of the fabric against her skin when Jordan touched her had every nerve ending in her body sparking to life.

Alicia stepped back, sliding her hand down his arm and linking her hand with his. She held onto him as they walked up the stairs, unwilling to let go until forced.

When they reached their bedroom doors, Alicia turned to face him. "I had a great time tonight."

Jordan's phone beeped, and he checked his watch. "Mom and Dad are on their way home."

It was just after nine in the evening, and while they wouldn't be going to bed for a while, their time alone was coming to an end.

Jordan rubbed the pad of his thumb over her hand, tracing a ring of fire on her skin. "I had a great time too. I wish I could have spent more time dancing with you."

His expression fell a fraction of an inch. The change was almost imperceptible, but Alicia could see his guilt clouding his thoughts.

"Me too," she whispered.

Jordan's gaze locked with hers before dipping lower. Her stomach turned flips and her breath hung suspended in her chest. As much as she wanted to act on her feelings, she had to take her cues from Jordan. So much was at stake for him, and did she really want him to put his dreams on the line for her?

No, she didn't. She wanted him to kiss her, but she wanted so much more than that. She wanted everything with him.

Alicia turned to disappear into her bedroom—the safe place where she could hide her uncontrollable feelings for him.

But Jordan's hold on her hand tightened, and he pulled the link between them, spinning her back to him in one quick whirl. She crashed against the hardness of his chest, and his fingers threaded their way into her hair in the same moment his lips met hers.

The gasping breath she'd been inhaling stalled, and her heart raced loudly in her chest. Jordan's arm slipped around her back, holding her close as his lips danced over hers.

Her moment of surprise gave way to elation, and she linked her arm around his shoulder while the other brushed over the stubble on his cheek before sliding into his hair.

He kept the kiss slow at first, adoring her as they discovered each other. But the pressure began to build, and the fire that raged behind his walls started to seep through.

She opened herself to him, welcoming the rush as they gave into the feelings that had been building for weeks.

Weeks?

The reality of what they were doing crashed into her, and she pulled back. She gasped, breathing in as much reason as she could through the cloud of her feelings for Jordan. "Wait. Your job. We can't."

Jordan pulled her back to him. "We've been dancing around each other, but we need to talk about it now. I want this, I want us, but it takes more than just me."

Alicia pulled him closer and lifted onto her toes to press her lips to his. Her hands shook as she held onto him. "I want

this too, but I don't want you to risk your career.”

Jordan pressed his forehead to hers. “I don't know how to approach the subject with Nathan, but I'll be up-front with him. He can either fire me, pull me from your contract, or give me the hint that I need to resign.”

“We have a week left. It's Christmas. I don't want to miss this with you and your family. Can we wait until after Christmas to talk to him? We can keep our distance and be professional until the contract ends. We could talk to Lillian about adding you to the tour security team. It wouldn't be the same job, but we could be up-front about our relationship before the move.”

Jordan swallowed hard. “We have a lot to think about.”

Alicia wrapped her arms around his neck. “You can't lose your job though.”

“We've blown past all the lines tonight, and we're not going to be able to hide it forever. If I keep the job I have, we'll be separated right after Christmas.”

“No,” Alicia said. “We can work it out. You can come on tour with me.” She pulled her hands back and covered her cheeks. “If you even want to come with me. I know that's a lot to ask. It's a completely different world.”

Jordan smiled down at her and wrapped her hands in his, pulling them down from her face. “I'd go anywhere with you. I love you. I can't imagine being without you.”

Alicia threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “I love you too.” A bubbling laugh escaped her throat. “We're going to get roasted by the media.”

Jordan tightened his hold on her. “Who cares what they think?”

She buried her face in the crook of his neck. “I was thinking we could spend next Christmas here with your family.”

Jordan's soft chuckle vibrated against her chest. “I'm trying to figure out how to get us past Christmas unscathed,

and you're making next year's holiday plans."

She laughed, thrilled and terrified at the same time. "I've heard balance is a good thing to have in a relationship. You be the rational one, and I'll be the impulsive one."

Jordan inhaled a deep breath against her hair. "Let's get into something comfortable and talk about it downstairs. We'll figure everything out."

"We have to."

So much was at stake. There were lines they needed to talk about, options to explore.

But none of it seemed impossible if they went through it all together.

JORDAN

Jordan opened the front door for Alicia and stepped to the side. “What did you think about the toy drive?”

“I can’t believe people donated that many presents.”

Jordan held onto the collar of her coat as Alicia slipped her arms out of it. “People get generous around Christmastime.”

Alicia scoffed. “Not everywhere. Christmas events are notoriously the worst in the entertainment industry. It’s all big lavish parties to see who can outshine everyone else with their money.”

Remembering that Alicia’s life was completely different from ninety-nine percent of everyone else’s was becoming tougher and tougher. He’d only known her to exist in this quiet world with his family in his hometown, and the hours of interviews he’d watched seemed somehow removed from reality.

Alicia flopped onto her back on the couch and sighed. “I’m out of shape. Workouts are going to kick my butt when tour prep starts.”

Jordan lifted her feet and sat on the other end of the couch, resting her feet back onto his lap. “We could work out sometime. I’m off my regular routine too.”

Alicia steepled her fingers in front of her lips. “Tell me more. The idea of watching you lift weights fascinates me.”

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest as he rested his arm on the back of the couch. “You like what you see, buttercup?”

She gave him a playful wink and reached for her notebook on the coffee table. “I need to write something down.”

Jordan flexed his arm. “Did my bicep inspire you?”

Alicia lowered the notebook to glare at him. “No comment.”

Jordan’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out. A lead weight sunk to the bottom of his stomach when he saw the name. “It’s Nathan.”

Alicia quickly lowered her notebook. “What do we do?”

Jordan had checked in with his boss through texts for the last few days, and it had been easy to avoid the talk they needed to have. Leaving out important information on a phone call with his boss was too close to lying for his taste.

Jordan’s thumb hovered over the button to accept the call. “Now is as good a time as any.” He answered, hoping his throat wouldn’t close up when his job was on the line. He’d come to grips with the reality that Nathan might fire him, but it still didn’t sit well.

“Hey, boss.”

“Hey, how’s the pop princess?”

Jordan glanced at Alicia and tried to put on a smile. “Safe and sound.”

“Did you get the Hawthorne file I sent you? He signed all the paperwork, and Jill booked your flight for the Thursday after next.”

Jordan gripped Alicia’s jean-clad leg in his lap. “I got the file, but there’s something we need to talk about before I sign it.”

“You’ve worked with him before. What’s the problem?”

Jordan inhaled a deep breath. “Alicia and I have violated the no fraternization policy.”

Nathan swore under his breath, something he never did. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t think I’d be confessing if it wasn’t the truth. It’s not something we can hide.”

Nathan let out a heavy breath. “Come on, Jordan. I know she’s Alicia Carver, but I thought you had better control than that.”

Jordan’s jaw clenched. “It’s not a lack of control.”

“What happened?” Nathan asked.

Glancing at Alicia, who was white-knuckle gripping the notebook, Jordan said, “I never thought I’d be one to kiss and tell.”

“Kissed? Anything else?”

“That’s all, but it’s not just a kiss. I love her.”

Nathan was silent for a moment. “And what does she think about that?”

Alicia nodded. Something about that small movement—that little reassurance—gave him the push he needed to handle business.

“She loves me too.”

Nathan grumbled. “What does this even mean? Your contract is up in a week.”

“I know. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Are you gonna sign the Hawthorne contract? It’s for three months.”

Jordan swallowed, not liking the way the conversation was going. “I guess that depends. Are you firing me?”

There was a beat of silence on the line. “I can’t make exceptions for you. I like you. I respect you. Always have. I’m glad you’re happy together, but how long could this really last?”

Jordan looked at Alicia. Getting to know her had been the most exciting time of his life. He loved being with her more than he wanted his job with the Marines back, more than he

wanted his missing limb, more than he wanted to keep the job he loved.

“It’ll last.”

“You sound certain,” Nathan said.

“Because I am. I won’t sign the contract. I’ll call Hawthorne and explain it to him myself.”

Nathan sighed. “You were the perfect man for that job.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“You’re sure about this?” Nathan asked.

Jordan sat up straighter as a wave of peace washed over him. He was doing the right thing. They were doing the right thing. They didn’t have all the pieces put together yet, but Lillian was already working on getting him moved into the tour team.

“I am.”

“You want to resign?”

“If you’ll let me. I’d rather not have a black mark on my resume.”

Nathan huffed again. “Man, I hate this. I don’t want to lose you. You’ve been my number-one for years.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. This job has been great. You put me back on my feet after—”

“Despite this plot twist, you’ll always have a recommendation from me.”

“Thanks, man.” Jordan gripped Alicia’s leg. “What’s the status of the rest of Alicia’s contract?”

“I could send someone out to finish your contract, but I’ll have to move some things around. I’ll have to call Alicia’s team and explain the situation.”

Jordan sucked air in through his teeth. “You’re gonna hate this.”

“You didn’t. Jordan, you did not tell them first.”

“I didn’t, but Alicia did.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“If it makes things any better, Lillian isn’t upset about it.”

“She’s a major industry rep. She’s never going to recommend Field Inc. again.”

“Lillian knows I’ve put Alicia’s safety first. My feelings for her don’t change my duty.”

In fact, he’d been hyper-vigilant with Alicia from the beginning. His responsibility to his clients had never been compromised. He believed those people deserved the bodily protection they paid for, but his need to ensure Alicia’s safety was instinctual. Her well-being was one of his basic needs.

The clicking of keys on a keyboard came through Nathan’s side of the call. “Let me get in touch with Lillian. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Thanks for not kicking me out the door when this conversation first started,” Jordan said.

“I guess I forgot to say I’m happy for you. Alicia too. You deserve a good woman. I hope she treats you right.”

Jordan looked at Alicia. There was a humming in his bones that said he could trust her. Sure, there’d be mountains ahead of them, and he knew next to nothing about her lifestyle, but they’d weather all of it together. They’d already been over hours and hours of talks about how they could manage things going forward. A relationship in the public eye wasn’t going to be met with all cheers and well-wishes.

“Thanks.”

“Keep your hands to yourself in public.”

“We’ll be perfectly professional,” Jordan promised.

When he ended the call, Alicia let out a long exhale. “How’d it go?”

“Better than I expected. He’s calling Lillian to talk things through. He hasn’t decided if I’ll be finishing out the contract or not.”

Alicia's eyes widened. "I am not a fan of hanging out with a new security agent for the next week. I'll talk to Lillian after her call with Nathan."

Jordan pointed at the notebook. "What are you writing?"

Alicia's smile widened. "A new song. Well, it's an old song I started a year or so ago. It needed a new framework, and I had an idea after the dance last night."

"What's it about? Is it a secret?"

She looked at the page. "It's not a secret. Actually, it's about you."

"Uh-oh. Should I be worried?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's a good song."

Jordan propped an arm on the back of the couch and leaned over her. "A love song?"

Alicia's breath hitched as she inhaled. "Yeah."

"What else is it about?" he asked low as he stroked a thumb over her hand holding the notebook.

"Forever." Her gaze dipped to his lips. "Something I didn't understand until recently."

She sat up, holding the notebook in front of her. "There's nothing missing when you're here. I've found all the pieces of forever."

Jordan brushed a hand up her arm, over her shoulder, and up to cradle the side of her face. "I've been dreaming about forever."

"Really?" she whispered. "What about it?"

"It's gonna be the adventure of a lifetime with you."

He closed the distance between them and sealed his lips with hers. They'd both had a newfound peace about the road ahead, and he breathed in Alicia's contentment. Her lips brushed softly over his, sending a shockwave through his entire body.

She broke the kiss and tipped her nose against his. “Can we ask Lillian to plan a getaway for us in one of the tour breaks?” she asked.

“Why would you want to travel more than the tour requires? Won’t you need a rest?”

She tossed the notebook onto the coffee table and wrapped her arms around him. “I was thinking we could come here and visit. I’m going to miss your family.”

Hearing Alicia talk about his family like they were her own did crazy things to his chest. The lawsuit with her parents was still going strong, and her sister had been tied up in LA. They hadn’t seen each other in weeks.

“I’d love that. They’re gonna miss you.”

Alicia tapped her delicate fingertip against the tip of his nose. “I think you’ll be missed more. I love seeing the way people around here light up when they find out you’re in town. It’s like you’re everybody’s long lost friend.” She swallowed, and her voice dropped. “I want that.”

Jordan kissed her forehead. “They’ll miss you too. You’ve won everybody over.”

Alicia’s phone rang beside her, and she answered it quickly when she saw Lillian’s name, putting it on speakerphone so Jordan could hear.

“Hey, did you talk to Nathan?”

“I did, but I had to cut our call short. We have a media crisis to get ahead of.”

ALICIA

“I’m sending you the photos,” Lillian said.

Alicia scrambled for her laptop on the coffee table and flipped it open. The notification number on her email icon struck her first. She got hundreds of emails a day, but that number was ridiculous.

Scrolling down to the bottom, Alicia said, “You’re normally chill about these things.”

The last time Lillian had shown even a hint of panic was while the news about her mother and Ashton was breaking during the Star Awards.

Alicia knew how to move with the ebbs and flows of media love and hate, but the headlines that were true or involved her personal life really struck a nerve.

“It’s about you and Jordan,” Lillian said.

Great. They’d been official for less than forty-eight hours, and the media was already sinking their claws in.

“Some of the articles are from people excited to see you moving on after Ashton. Some are less than friendly. Don’t worry. I’ve been preparing for this since you told me the news, so I’ll have it cleared up quickly.”

Jordan scooted closer to Alicia on the couch as she scanned the articles. The photos of her and Jordan were mostly from before they’d made things official. Walking into church, walking down the sidewalk, walking into shops in downtown Redemption. It was all mundane.

Except they didn't look like a high-profile musician and her security agent. No, the looks they were giving each other looked like the adoring looks of a couple in love.

Had they been so obvious? Jordan was even smiling in most of the photos, all while looking at her like she was the object of his affection.

Wow. Anyone who saw these would know their relationship wasn't professional. They'd denied it for weeks, but the feelings were obvious to anyone.

"Some of the photos are from a week after the breakup. Some people thought you moved on too quickly," Lillian said.

Alicia continued to scan the articles and photos. There were so many already, all posted within the last few hours.

"You need to give Jordan a heads-up. People are going to want to know anything and everything about him," Lillian said.

"He's here with me." The warmth beside her was the anchor she didn't know she needed.

"Hi, Lillian. Thanks for the heads-up," Jordan said. "I'm not very interesting, so they might get bored. Plus, Field Inc. has everything I own pretty well secured."

Alicia had only dated men who were accustomed to the high-profile lifestyle. After seeing the comfort and privacy of Jordan's life, it was jarring to think of the invasion that was headed his way.

Jordan leaned close and whispered, "We'll handle this. It's nothing."

She shook her head. He was making light of the slander. She'd never minded having most of her life picked apart and studied by the media, but the onslaught to their new relationship made her want to hide. She'd been doing just that for over a month, and the quiet town she'd come to love was no longer a safe haven.

"I thought we'd have at least a little time before the news broke," Alicia whispered.

Jordan rubbed a hand over her back. “It’s okay. I don’t have anything to hide, and I don’t really care if someone thinks I’m a rebound.”

Alicia flinched as he read the bolded word on the headline she’d just passed.

“Hold on a second,” Lillian said. “Here’s another one that says Ashton revealed in a closed interview that the two of you were trying to work things out, and he’s devastated about the news of you and another man.”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “He’s such a good actor. He hasn’t reached out to me *once*. His manager canceled all of our shared events with you. That’s it. Oh, and he stole my security agents. Yeah, we are so over.”

Lillian let out a hearty laugh. “Your fans are screaming not to take him back.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea either. Just for the record,” Jordan said.

Alicia rested her head on his shoulder. “You’re the best.”

“Okay, some of these have a negative vibe to them that I’m going to get the PR team on. Overall, you have the best fans, so I’m not too worried about it,” Lillian said.

“Thank you. Let me know what you need from me,” Alicia said.

“Hmm. I’ll see what Kennedy wants. I’ll send the proposal over soon.”

After quick good-byes, Alicia ended the call. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jordan said, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his chest. “I can handle it most of the time, but it’s you I’m worried about. It’s a lot to ask of you to put yourself in front of the entire world and their scrutiny just to be in a relationship with me.”

“I’ve never cared what strangers thought about me. I don’t plan to start today.” He leaned over and touched the laptop screen. “This warning sounds cryptic. ‘I feel sorry for this poor guy. She’ll be slaying him in her next chart-topping hit soon. She did it to her other exes.’”

Alicia lifted her head. “I will not write songs about you.” She gasped and covered her mouth. “I did write a song about you!”

Jordan laughed. “That’s a song I’ll happily claim.”

“And I don’t have a long list of exes. I dated Henry Jordison after he left Heart Struck to go solo. We didn’t have a very eventful relationship. We barely saw each other. Then there was Ashton. That’s it.”

Jordan pressed another kiss to her forehead. “Let’s do something to take your mind off this. Want to go get some of the sugar cookies Caroline made for you?”

Alicia pushed her hair away from her face. “That actually sounds like a good idea.”

The rumble of an engine grew nearer outside.

“That sounds like mom,” Jordan said.

“Let’s invite her to go with us.”

Quick footsteps ran onto the porch, and the front door flew open. Vicci panted, keeping her hand on the doorknob.

“I can’t find your dad.”

JORDAN

Alicia was on her feet first. “What do you mean?”

Jordan’s usual reaction time was nothing compared to Alicia’s when she was worried.

“I’ve been calling him for half an hour. He was supposed to meet me at the hay barn forty-five minutes ago,” his mom said quickly.

“Where was he working?” Jordan asked as he headed for his boots. Accidents on the ranch were bound to happen, but his dad knew to answer the phone when one of them called if he was able. The ranch was so big it could take them hours to search it, and hours could be too late.

“He was supposed to be at the north barn, but I checked there.” His mom turned to look back out the door as if her husband might arrive at any moment.

Jordan’s stomach rolled in warning. His mom didn’t get worked up about much, so seeing her clearly concerned spurred his adrenaline into action. “Call Clint.”

His mom pulled out her phone. “I already called him. He’s on his way to the shop. Clint said he didn’t see him on the eastern border.”

Jordan grabbed his coat. “Tell him to stay on the east and south sides. I’ll take the north.”

“I’ll go west,” his mom added as she pressed the phone to her ear.

“I’m coming with you,” Alicia said as she grabbed her coat.

Jordan opened his mouth to protest, but his job required him to stay with her. While his parents’ house was about as safe as it could get, he didn’t like the idea of leaving her alone.

Although, the stern look on her face said she could handle anything that came at her.

Jordan and Alicia jumped into his old truck and headed north. They had about an hour of decent daylight left, and every minute counted.

“What’s the worst that could happen? Prepare me, please,” Alicia said after a few minutes of scouring the pastures.

“Not sure we want to talk about that,” Jordan said.

“Right. Should I keep calling his cell?”

Jordan handed over his phone. “That’s a good idea.”

Alicia called his phone one right after the other for the next ten minutes. They were running out of daylight and perimeter.

“Nothing,” Alicia said with a huff after another missed call. “Does he have one of those tracking apps on his phone?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t, but I’ll be adding one after this.” Assuming his dad had another chance to go missing on the ranch. Wolves, bears, mountain lions. The number of predators on the ranch outnumbered them exponentially.

“There!” Alicia pointed toward a red four-wheeler parked near the fence. The intrusive color stood out against the snow on the ground and trees.

As they got closer, Jordan’s gut twisted. There was something dark on the ground, and it had to be his dad. “Call Mom. Tell her to send Clint this way and have help on standby.”

Jordan shifted into park and darted out of the truck before it came to a full stop. He slid to his knees next to his dad.

Blood splattered over the white snow, and his dad's face was covered in red.

“Dad, talk to me. Dad.” Jordan checked for a pulse on his dad's neck. It was faint but steady. “Tell Mom we need an ambulance, and tell Clint to get out here with the medical kit and blankets.”

He turned to look over his shoulder, and Alicia was standing right behind him with the phone to her ear. He'd assumed she'd stay back at the truck, but she'd followed him.

“Do you have anything in the truck we can use?” she asked while she waited for someone to answer the phone.

Jordan pulled off his coat and laid it over his dad. “Nothing. I'm afraid to move him. I don't know what's injured.”

Alicia relayed the information to his family while Jordan assessed his dad's wounds. Most of the blood seemed to be coming from around his eye. It was already swelling along with his cheek.

“Dad, can you hear me?”

His dad groaned and slowly lifted his hand to his face.

“Don't touch anything. Just tell me where it hurts.”

Wincing, his dad pointed to his face, then his side.

Jordan lifted the coat, then started unbuttoning his dad's shirt. “What happened?”

His dad lazily pointed toward the tree line beyond the fence.

Jordan scanned the trees as he worked to unbutton the shirt. “Are we in danger?” Alicia stood right behind him, and his dad wasn't in any state to help if they were all attacked.

When his dad didn't answer, Jordan moved to yes or no questions. “Wolves? A bear? Moose?”

His dad gave a soft no to all three.

Jordan opened his dad's shirt to find a bulging bruise on his right side. Which was more urgent, an open head wound or internal bleeding?

“Dad, spell it out for me. What happened?”

“Chuck.”

Jordan's vision narrowed, clouded by red and black. His parents' stupid neighbor had a death wish. “Chuck did this.” The pieces fell into place. The swelling and bruises around his dad's eye, the bruise on his side. Chuck hadn't pulled punches or kicks.

Neither would Jordan when he got his hands on Chuck.

Knowing it was a fight eased some of Jordan's worries about a spinal injury. Should he move his dad to the house to make things easier for the paramedics?

“They're on their way. Clint and the paramedics,” Alicia said as she squatted beside him. She brushed a delicate hand over Jordan's dad's hair. “Mr. Taylor, help is coming.”

Jordan's stomach rolled. His dad wasn't a small man, and his body was formed from long hours of back-breaking work. Chuck must have blindsided him to do this kind of damage.

Alicia grabbed Jordan's hand and lowered her head. “God, please help Mr. Taylor. Please ease his pain. Please let help come quickly. Please give us the strength to be what he needs.”

Jordan laid the coat back over his dad's chest and echoed Alicia's prayer. It was the first time he'd heard her pray out loud, and her cries for help eased the storm inside him.

The rumbling of an engine grew in the distance behind them. It was Clint followed by an ambulance and a police officer.

“They're here, Dad. Hang in there,” Jordan said, lifting his dad's cold hand and gripping it tight.

Clint and their mom jumped out of the truck first and ran over to him.

“Grant!” Jordan’s mom shouted. “What happened?”

“Chuck,” Jordan said.

His mom’s chin lifted, and her mouth pursed into the thin line she reserved only for blind fury. “What?”

Two paramedics jogged up behind them. “Mr. Taylor, can you speak?”

Jordan told one of the paramedics everything he knew, while the other crouched beside his dad with an open medical bag beside him.

When he’d answered all the questions, Alicia appeared at his side and slid her arm around his, holding tight against the fear and cold. “He’ll be okay. I have a feeling.”

Jordan wrapped his arms around her. “A feeling.”

“I felt it while I was praying. I just knew he’d be okay. It was like someone told me not to worry.”

Pressing his lips to the top of her head, he thanked the Lord for sending her into his life—to remind him where his focus should be, to bring him back home, and to show him how to be a better man.

A month ago, he’d been pointing her toward the Lord. Now, she was doing the same for him.

“Thank you for praying and for calling Mom and Clint.” He rubbed a circle over her back. He’d worked the farm with his family when he was young. He’d been a part of too many sports teams to mention, and he’d learned to trust his brothers in the Marines. Learning how to be a team and weather storms with Alicia was the most fulfilling adventure yet.

His mom came over and let out a heavy breath that billowed out in a cloud. “They’re taking him to Mercy Regional Hospital.”

“We’ll come with you. Do you want us to stop by the house and get anything for you?” Alicia asked.

“They said there’s a good chance he has internal bleeding. I don’t know what that means, but they said he needs to get to

the hospital quickly. Can you bring me a bag of clothes and things in case I stay overnight?”

Alicia nodded. “Text us a list. We’ll gather everything up.”

His mom wrapped an arm around Alicia’s shoulders. “Thank you, sweetie. We’ll see you there.”

Jordan knew enough to suspect internal bleeding, and the urgency behind his dad’s transfer was starting to weigh on his shoulders.

Alicia grabbed his hand. “Hey.”

Her nose was bright pink, and she blinked rapidly against the cold wind.

“Let’s go,” she said, pulling him toward the truck.

There were few things that would make him step foot back into a hospital, and this was one of them. After spending months under the care of doctors and nurses and added months in rehab, the smell alone triggered flashbacks he’d hoped to forget.

But he’d be there for his dad, and he would help his mom with whatever she needed. He’d take over ranch duties and make sure things got done.

And after everything, Alicia was still standing beside him, and that meant more than anything. Whatever happened with his dad, they’d weather it together.

ALICIA

“Send it over. I’ll look at it in a minute.”

Alicia stared at the lines connecting the colorless tiles on the floor. She’d paced this hallway a hundred times since they arrived at the hospital. She’d never had to sit in a waiting room worrying about someone she loved before. Worrying about Grant had her stomach in knots.

She’d take any distraction Lillian could throw at her.

“Are you sure? I know you have a lot going on right now.”

Alicia rubbed the back of her neck. “Thanks, but I need to work. Send me those interview questions and the photos. How many do I need to approve?”

“Three. Four just in case.”

Sucking in a breath through her nose, the air was thick and nauseating as it clogged her throat. “What else?”

Lillian paused. “Well, there’s news about your parents.”

Alicia closed her eyes and said a quick prayer for peace. After praying for Grant on the ranch, she’d been in and out of prayer ever since. “What’s the news?”

“They’ve set a hearing date. It’s the week after Christmas. The day after your contract with Jordan ends. I talked to Nathan about it this morning. He can’t extend Jordan’s contract because Jordan has already put in his resignation with Field Inc. Do you want to offer Jordan a contract through AC

Rights Management? Or do you want to extend a contract through the tour security team?"

Alicia glanced behind her, down the hall that led to the room where Jordan was sitting at his dad's bedside. "We've talked about both ways, but we didn't come to a definite decision. Let me talk to him when we get home and see what he wants to do."

Their time was running out, and changes like this only reminded her that their peaceful time in Redemption Ridge was coming to an end. His parents' place had become her home over the last month, and she wanted nothing more than to dig in her heels and stay.

A piercing pain shot behind her right eye. She hadn't gotten a headache in weeks. The stress of her parents' betrayal and the breakup with Ashton had been tempered by the welcoming she'd received from the Taylors and everyone else in Redemption Ridge.

"Can you have a contract drafted for Jordan to be hired through AC Rights Management? If we decide to go that route, I want everything to be ready to sign."

"Of course. I can have that to you by the end of business tomorrow," Lillian said. "You have a commercial filming with Olivia de la Cruz on January second. Your dress rehearsal and fitting are scheduled for December twenty-eighth. Have you chosen the set list for the tour? The event management team needs that finalized by Christmas Eve."

Lillian continued talking, but Alicia's attention faltered, flipping back and forth between worry over Grant and the long to-do list being sent to her by Lillian. If Alicia put the tasks in order, her days were packed from the day after Christmas until the end of next year.

The urge to race back to Taylor Ranch and hide was overwhelming.

"Alicia?" Lillian asked.

"Yes?"

"Did you hear my question?"

Alicia pressed two fingers to the painful spot above her eye. “Sorry. I wasn’t listening. Can you just send all of the things I need to do in an email?”

“Sure. Is there anything you want me to do?”

Caroline and Vicci sat side-by-side in the waiting room on the other side of the window. Caroline’s head rested against her mother’s shoulders, while Vicci read from the Bible. It was one of the things she’d asked Alicia to pack for her.

“Actually, can you have some meals catered for the Taylors? I think there’s a place in town that could pre-make meals. Flapjacks. They have casseroles and things like that.”

“I can do that. Anything else?”

“No, I think that’s all. If you think of anything else we can do to help them out right now, I’m all ears.”

“I’m so glad you got to spend time there. It was good for you,” Lillian said.

A tingling behind Alicia’s nose said tears were on their way. “I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“I know. A lot of people’s jobs depend on this tour. I haven’t forgotten that. It’s just...after.”

“You’re thinking about stepping down?” Lillian asked quietly.

“Maybe. A lot could change in a year. Jordan might decide he doesn’t want to spend the year on tour. It’s a lot different from what people expect, and it’s a lot to ask of him to follow me around.”

“He’ll do it,” Lillian said. “You know it. He loves you. I can hear it in his voice on the conference calls we’ve had. I still remember the look on his face when he saw you in that first video call. I think he knew then that you were different. He cared about you before he even knew you.”

Alicia bit her lips between her teeth, remembering the first time she’d heard him speak. He’d asked if she was okay when

everyone else around her hadn't noticed she was sinking into a dark pit with no way out.

"Thank you. For everything you do. I appreciate you more than you know, and even if I step back from events, I don't want to lose you."

Lillian chuckled. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You're the best. I need to go see if Vicci and Caroline are okay." As soon as she said the words, Alicia swayed on her feet. When was the last time she'd had water?

"I hope everything is okay. Keep me posted."

Alicia pocketed her phone and stepped back into the waiting room.

Vicci closed the Bible in front of her and rubbed her eyes. "Hey, everything okay? You were gone for a while."

"Sure. Just had a lot to talk over with Lillian." She took the seat across from Vicci and Caroline. "I think I'm going to take a trip to the vending machine. Anyone want some water?"

"I'll go," Caroline said as she reached both hands above her head. "I need to stretch my legs. What do you want, Mom?"

A faint buzzing drowned out everything in the hospital. The soft tap of sneakers walking down the hallways, the ding of the elevator—all of it filtered through a fog as if Alicia were listening from under water.

Jordan was still in his dad's room. He'd just woken up from the surgery, and the family had only been allowed one person to see him at a time.

Then, there were a few facial bones broken around his eye that would need reconstruction later, or something like that. Little pieces of what the doctors had told them were slipping in and out of her grasp.

A hand rubbed over Alicia's back. "You okay, sweetie?" Vicci asked.

Alicia lifted her head from her hands. The edges of her vision danced and swirled. “My blood sugar is low.”

Vicci stood. “What do you need?”

The answer was just out of reach. She knew everything about how to manage her diabetes, but the pieces of the puzzle were scrambling. “I don’t know.”

Her tongue tingled in her mouth, and her fingers followed suit.

“Alicia, hon, I need you to tell me what you need. Medicine? Food? Water?”

The brightly lit Christmas tree in the corner of the waiting room spun, mixing with the garland and lights around the chairs. “I don’t know.”

She should know. When did she take insulin? When did she eat?

Caroline was on her knees in front of Alicia, cradling both sides of her face and lifting her head. “Does Jordan know what you need?”

Jordan. She reached for that word and held onto it like a lifeline. “Yes.”

Caroline stood and darted down the hallway just as a cold sweat beaded on the back of Alicia’s neck. Closing her eyes, she tried to remember the last time she ate.

“Glucose tablets,” she whispered. “In my purse.” She always carried them in case of emergencies.

“You didn’t bring your purse in. Is it in Jordan’s truck? Can I get you something from a vending machine?”

“Water. Juice.” She was so thirsty.

Oh no. She’d taken insulin after working at the church, but she had forgotten to eat.

Vicci disappeared and came back with a cup of water. “Drink, sweetie.”

Alicia raised the cup to her lips, but her tongue was swollen as if it were too big for her mouth.

Heavy footsteps thudded through the haze, and she raised her head. Jordan was running toward her, and she stood to greet him.

“What’s wrong?” His face blurred as he opened his arms to her.

“Glucose. Tablets. I...”

What was she trying to say?

“Alicia!”

Her arms and legs grew heavy, and the edges of her vision engulfed Jordan as he raced to her side. His hands gripped her arms just as everything went black.

JORDAN

Jordan stared at the monitor beside Alicia's bed, but the numbers and lines blurred together. She'd been in and out for the last five hours, but the pain in his chest hadn't subsided.

Her hand was warm in his as he brushed the rough pads of his thumbs over her delicate skin. They were so different, in every way. He'd been on the fast track to thinking they were two parts of one whole—two pieces that fit together perfectly.

Now, he wasn't so sure. She'd been too worried about his family to eat, and now her body was in distress.

He didn't deserve her. Not before this. Not after this.

There was a soft knock at the door behind him, but Jordan didn't move or speak.

"Sweetie? How's she doing?" his mom asked quietly.

"Same." He hated that "update" because it hadn't changed. Her blood sugar was still low, her body still couldn't cope, who knew where her mind was in all this. She hadn't woken up for long enough to tell him.

His mom's shadow appeared at his side, and her hand rested on his shoulder. "She'll pull through. I know it."

"How can you know it? The doctors don't even know what's going on. They can't bring her blood sugar up. They've been doing all they know to do, but it's not working."

"Maybe it's working but just not fast enough for you."

Jordan huffed. “How long should I just wait around for her to get better?”

“As long as it takes. Sorry, son, but you’re not in charge of this mission, God is.”

His mom was right, but that didn’t mean he liked it. The helplessness had been tugging at his insides all day.

“How’s Dad?”

His mom pulled up a seat beside him. “He’s the same. Stable but not looking great. I hate seeing him like this.”

“That makes two of us.” Jordan’s dad had always been a model of strength. He was a provider and a protector. None of the Taylors had ever questioned whether or not their dad loved them. He’d been the spiritual leader of their family, and he’d taught them countless life lessons. It was tough to see the mountain brought low.

Jordan stared down at Alicia’s hand in his. “I hate seeing her like this too.”

“We all do, but it’s not your fault. I can hear it in your voice that you think it is, but that’s not the case.”

“I should have remembered that she took insulin and needed to eat after. I should have made sure she took care of herself. I should have paid more attention. I failed.”

“Oh, hush. Alicia is a grown woman, and she knows how to take care of herself. We all had a lot going on, and time got away from us. It’s no one’s fault.”

“It’s my job to protect her.”

His mom’s hand covered his and Alicia’s. “She’ll get through this, and so will your dad. Alicia won’t blame you. She was caught up in helping your dad too.”

Jordan ran a hand over his face. “Lillian is on her way. She’s been worried sick. Everyone trusted me.”

“And they still will.”

“Nathan is on his way too. If I wasn’t fired before, I definitely am now.”

“Nathan called me too, son. He’s not upset with you. Things happen, and this wasn’t your fault.”

His mom could say it all she wanted, but that didn’t change the gaping hole in his chest. Dad had multiple internal injuries, and Alicia was in and out of consciousness. The people who meant the most to him were both hanging on by a thread.

His mom squeezed his hand and bowed her head. “Lord, we come to You today with aching hearts. We lift up Grant and Alicia to You, and we pray for peace and patience as we sit by their beds. You are the Great Physician, and their bodies, minds, and souls are in your hands. We love You, we trust You, and we lay our futures in Your hands. Amen.”

Jordan looked up at his mom. The woman who’d always been a rock for their family was doing what she did best—she was pointing toward the Lord. It’s what she did when times were tough and when there was plenty to be thankful for. In all things, she looked to Him first.

Alicia had done that yesterday. She’d reminded Jordan that they didn’t have to sit by helplessly.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She patted his shoulder. “Anytime. I’m going to check on your dad.”

“Let me know about any updates.”

There was a knock on the door as his mom stood. Nathan tiptoed into the room, and Jordan stood to greet him.

“How’s she doing?” Nathan asked.

“Same. They’re doing all they can to bring her blood sugar up.”

Nathan shook Jordan’s hand and turned to his mom. “How’s Grant?”

“He has a lot to overcome, but he’ll be fine,” his mom said.

“If you need anything, just let me know.”

Jordan's mom lifted up onto her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around Nathan's shoulders. "You're so kind. I'm so grateful for all you've done for us."

Jordan tucked his chin. Nathan had become like a brother to Jordan over the years, and it was going to be a blow to the gut when their friendship and partnership imploded.

The damage was done. It was time to face the music.

Jordan's mom looked back at Alicia. She lay on her side, but the tense look on her face, even in sleep, said she wasn't resting soundly. "I'll be back shortly."

When the door softly clicked closed behind his mom, Jordan gestured to a chair by the bed. "I guess you're ready to talk."

Nathan took the seat Vicci had sat in moments before. "I'm not here to lecture you."

"That makes one of us. I know I screwed up. There isn't anything I can do to change it now."

"I know that. Alicia knows things can go wrong with her condition. It's no one's fault."

Jordan rested his head in his hands. "I don't know what to do. Mom and Dad are going to need my help, but I can't leave Alicia."

"We have backup on the way. You can stay with your dad."

"You don't understand. I can't leave her. Not because it's my job, but because I love her, and I couldn't walk away from her if I tried."

Nathan leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "I've always trusted your instincts. Sounds like you know where you're supposed to be."

Jordan looked up at his boss—his friend. Everything was changing, and there were important decisions to be made. Hopefully, he'd make the right ones.

ALICIA

Alicia blinked and stretched her back. Everything ached, and the simple movement pulled a groan from her chest.

Something tightened around her hand. “Alicia?”

It was Jordan.

She blinked, then squinted against the bright light. When her vision focused, she took in the dark figure beside her. His eyes were shadowed, and the stubble on his cheeks was longer than she’d ever seen it. “Hey.”

Jordan scooted closer and brushed a hand over her hair. “How do you feel?”

She stretched her arms out, dragging tubes with them. “Tired. Thirsty.”

Jordan reached to a table and handed her a cup of water with a straw. She drank a little, then a little more. She’d woken up a few times since the blackout, but remaining awake was tough. She hadn’t been released to eat, and she wouldn’t be able to until the doctors figured out the perfect medications and dosages to get her blood sugar stabilized.

“What else can I get you?” Jordan asked.

She hated seeing him like this. He’d spent enough time in hospitals after his injury, and now he was here for her. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel locked back up in the place that held so many bad memories.

“How is your dad?”

Great. Her voice was as rough as a gravel road. A jolt of anxiety shot through her chest. So many people depended on her to be able to sing and perform her best. In only three months. She'd have to start rehearsals for the tour in less than a week. She'd agreed to the Harmony House concert on New Year's Eve.

Jordan wrapped both of his large hands around hers. “He's okay. He has a long road ahead of him, but he's tough.”

“What can I do to help them? I asked Lillian to send some meals, but what else could I do?”

Jordan looked down at her hand and grinned. “You're in the hospital, and you're thinking about other people.”

“They're your family.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to add that they were her family too, but maybe she was jumping to conclusions. She wasn't actually a part of the family, but they'd treated her like one of their own.

“Mom hasn't stopped fussing over you either. She loves you. Not as much as I do, but she loves you a lot.”

If she wasn't so dehydrated, she would cry. Last she'd asked, her own parents hadn't checked on her, despite the media coverage her illness was getting. “I love her too.”

“Lillian is here. She said your sister called and is headed this way.”

Alicia tried to sit up. “No, she's filming. I'll be fine. She can't do anything to help me anyway.”

“She can join the club then,” Jordan said. “I hate watching you like this without being able to help.”

Alicia put her hand on Jordan's arm. “You are helping. Now go help your dad and sit by his bedside.”

“Sorry, I can't do that.”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “Ask Clint to stand guard for a little bit. I know you're worried about your dad.”

“I am, but you said it. There’s nothing I can do, and he knows I love him. Plus, I can’t leave your side. I’ve tried and failed a few times. Call me pathetic, but it’s a hard pass, buttercup.”

She covered her mouth with her hand. Jordan loved his family so much, and knowing he was here with her showed how much he cared about her.

There was a knock on the door, and Vicci stuck her head in. “You’re awake!”

“I’m awake.” It was crazy how much she could miss people when they’d only been away from each other for a few hours.

“I’ll have to alert the group chat. They’ve been hounding me about you all day.”

Alicia looked from Jordan to Vicci. “The group chat?”

“The church ladies. They’re so worried. Although a few ladies have been trying to calm everyone with lots of medical jargon about type 1 diabetes. Not sure that’s helping too much because we can’t understand a word of it.”

Did Vicci know how much peace she carried with her? Just seeing Jordan’s mom was calming the quick breaths Alicia had been trying to steady. “How’s Grant?”

“Strong as an ox. He’ll be fine. He’s awake and ornery, just as expected.” She waved her hand as if swatting a fly. “Have they approved you to eat, sweetie?”

“Not yet.” How much weight would she lose before she was released?

“Well, darn. I was excited about bringing you some home-cooked food. Gertrude brought some beef stew.” Vicci rested her hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “You need anything, son?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good. You just stay here. Don’t worry about your dad. He’ll be fine.”

Jordan looked at Alicia and winked. “I’ll do that.”

Good grief. She'd just calmed her quick breathing, but Jordan was getting her heart racing again.

There was another knock on the door, and Lillian stepped in. "Hey, you're awake."

"For now," Alicia said. The heaviness was already pulling on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but can I have a word with you?"

Vicci stepped over to Alicia's bed. "That's my cue to scam. I'll be back to check on you later."

Alicia sank into Vicci's motherly embrace. "Thank you."

Jordan's mom left, and he stood. Alicia grabbed his hand. "You can stay."

Lillian started swiping her finger on the tablet in her hand. She'd gotten used to Jordan being around when they talked about business.

"There are a lot of reporters outside. They've been relentless since early this morning. The crowd is controlled, but the problem is that some of their news outlets are sharing headlines saying you're in the middle of a mental episode."

Alicia's eyes widened. "A what? Are they really throwing mental health around like it's a joke?"

"I know. It's not something to play around with, especially in this industry," Lillian said. "We have the legal and PR teams on it, but getting the words taken down—"

"Doesn't change anything for those who already read it," Alicia finished. Once it was out there, people read it as truth.

Jordan's grip on her hand tightened. "What do we do?"

"I'll give a statement. Can I sleep for a little bit first, though? I'm getting tired again, and I'd rather face the music when I'm at my best."

"Honey, your best is a long way from here, but I get what you're saying. I'll have a film team approved through the hospital and ready to go when you wake up."

“You’re the best, Lillian. I don’t know what I would do without you,” Alicia said.

Lillian’s small smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. “You focus on getting better, and I’ll handle everything else. Sleep well.”

Lillian stepped out, and Jordan sat on the side of the hospital bed. “She really is great at handling things.”

“I couldn’t have asked for a better manager. She’s wonderful.”

Jordan brushed a hand over her cheek, letting his thumb trail along her jaw. “Get some rest. I’ll be right here if you need me.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too. So does everyone in Mom’s chat group.”

Alicia chuckled, and the small jerks sent echoes of pain throughout her body.

Jordan leaned down to press a kiss to her brow. “Sweet dreams, buttercup.”



ALICIA STRAIGHTENED the hospital gown on her shoulders as Lillian placed the tubes and cords out of the way.

“You ready?” Lillian asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” A stylist had come by to do Alicia’s hair and makeup, but she’d refused most of the treatments. If they did all of the styling they’d planned, Alicia would be ready for another nap before they finished with her.

It was time to step out. She’d conducted a few interviews since coming to Redemption Ridge, but this would be a tell-all. She wasn’t hiding anymore, and she wouldn’t be speaking from a script.

If they wanted the news, she’d give it to them. Once all of the cards were on the table, she didn’t care what they did with

the information. Her life couldn't continue to be shaped by the whims of others. If she was going after the life she wanted—the one God had led her to—she'd have to protect it first.

Of course, the future wasn't promised, but Jordan would be going with her on the tour, and they'd be back to visit his family whenever the tour schedule allowed. She had something to look forward to—something to strive for—and it wasn't a multi-million dollar international tour. It was a home on the land Jordan had grown up on, and it couldn't come soon enough.

Lillian opened the door and called to the first reporter. The media outlets she'd chosen to participate in the surprise interview had been carefully vetted. They were all from sources known for integrity and respect.

A blonde woman Alicia recognized walked in with a subtle grin on her face and shook hands with Lillian. “Thanks for this opportunity.”

Lillian gestured to a chair set up beside the bed. “You'll have one question and one follow-up question.”

The woman took the seat and shook Alicia's hand. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“Thanks for coming.”

The camera man gave them the signal, and the reporter got straight to business.

“Miss Carver, I think we're all curious about your health. Can you tell us a little bit about what's going on?”

Alicia grinned and found Jordan standing against the wall on the other side of the room. Things were off to a good start if the first question was about her well-being instead of rumors about her love life.

“I have type one diabetes. Without going into too much detail, my blood sugar dropped dangerously low, and my body has been in a state of distress while the doctors and nurses work hard to get things stabilized. The simple answer is that I took insulin and then forgot to eat.”

The woman leaned forward. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I appreciate your concern. Yes, I’m feeling better already. Things can take a turn quickly with diabetes, and thanks to the quick work of the medical professionals here, I should be discharged by Christmas, if things continue as they have been lately.”

Lillian thanked the woman for her time and made quick work of escorting her out and bringing in the next reporter.

A tall, gorgeous woman was next, and having been informed about the previous question, she chose to ask about the scandal with Alicia’s parents.

“My parents have always been involved in my career without being a part of my life. The reports were true that they stole millions of dollars from Stacy and me, but that’s the only news. We trusted our parents, and they took advantage of us. My sister and I both have legal teams involved, and we’re keeping a close watch on the development of the cases.”

“How do you feel about your parents after this?” the woman asked.

Alicia searched her heart. Surprisingly, the emotions were tempered. She definitely didn’t have any hate or ill will.

“I’ve gone through many emotions since this happened over a month ago, but I think I just feel sorry for them now. Stacy and I have always been generous with our parents, and we were willing to give them most anything freely. All trust was broken when they decided to take things into their own hands. Now, I just feel sorry for them.”

There were so many more things she wanted to say about her parents, but the complexities of her relationship with them would take away from her concise answer. She pitied them because they were missing out on healthy relationships with her and Stacy.

The second reporter thanked her for her time and was escorted out by Lillian. Alicia reached for her cup of water as the next interviewer entered.

Ted Ferguson, who hosted one of the top entertainment media outlets, walked in. He was a household face, and his bosses must have pulled all the stops to get their top reporter to the hospital in time for the exclusive interview.

“It’s great to see you, Miss Carver, and you’re looking well considering all you’ve gone through lately.”

Alicia held her expression. Ted’s words were meant to be friendly, not condescending. He was notorious for networking in the more affluent circles, and he wouldn’t dare step out of line right now. “I’m feeling much better.”

Truly, she was. Her body seemed to be responding well to the last round of medications the doctors administered.

“We’ve heard about your health and your parents. Can you tell us about the breakup with Ashton Warner?” Ted asked.

Alicia had been tight-lipped about the breakup, even when Ashton hadn’t pulled his punches. Even now, she didn’t have any desire to drag him through the mud.

“I understand the situation created by my parents evokes a certain amount of caution. Our relationship wasn’t on the rocks at the time of the breakup, but I don’t think he was prepared for the onslaught. We’ve gone our separate ways, and I wish him the best.”

Ted gave a small nod. “That’s very diplomatic of you. We’ve seen so many rumors thrown back and forth, no one was sure what to think of the breakup.” He leaned back and crossed an ankle over his knee. “Now, can you tell us about the new man in your life?”

Alicia’s gaze flicked to Jordan. He gave her a wink, which only served to set her blood on fire.

They’d talked about what she should say, and now, she had her chance.

“I’ve been spending time with someone new. After the Stars, I came out here to spend some time at a ranch. I just wanted to get away from the mess with my parents and Ashton before the tour started. I met some wonderful people here, including Jordan Taylor, my security agent.”

Ted placed his foot on the ground and leaned forward. “You mean to tell me you’re dating your bodyguard?”

Alicia chuckled. “Be careful, Ted. You’re supposed to only get two questions.”

Ted threw his hands in the air. “You’ve been hiding a whirlwind romance with your bodyguard. How can I not ask questions? We all want the scoop!”

Alicia’s smile was so wide her cheeks ached. “It’s very new, and while things are going well, we’d love some privacy. Relationships are difficult in the spotlight.”

Ted looked over his shoulder. “Is that him?” he asked, pointing at Jordan.

“It is,” Alicia confirmed.

Ted leaned closer to Alicia and held a hand up beside his face, making a show of sharing a secret. “Can I interview him after this?”

Alicia held her hands up. “That’s up to Jordan.”

Slapping his hands on his thighs, Ted straightened. “Well, we wish you both the best.”

Ted shook Alicia’s hand before turning to Jordan. “I hope we’ll be seeing more of you in the future.”

Jordan glanced at Alicia. “I’m sure you will. I’ll be accompanying Alicia on her tour in a few months.”

Ted tilted his head back and let out a hearty laugh. “This just keeps getting better and better.”

Alicia’s chest warmed at Jordan’s words, and she had to agree with Ted. Things kept getting better and better.

JORDAN

Jordan held tight to the candle in his hand as he watched Alicia beside him. She'd been tense throughout most of the candlelight service. After finally being released from the hospital just in time to make it to church for the Christmas Eve service, would she tell him if something was wrong?

She would. He had to trust her. He didn't want to go back to the hospital either, but waiting could set her healing back by days if they didn't make a quick decision.

Jordan had been in awe of her strength from the beginning, but he had a new respect for her after she gave the media a piece of her mind in the hospital.

Alicia stared at the small flame she held as the choir sang "Silent Night." It was one his mom used to sing on Christmas Eve. With a house full of kids, silence in the Taylor house was rare, but when his mom had asked for peace at Christmas, they'd all listened.

Alicia's hand that cradled the candle started to shake, and Jordan turned to make sure the path to the exit was clear. They were about half an hour from the nearest hospital, if the roads were recently treated.

Just as he rested a hand on Alicia's back, she turned to Caroline on her other side. She whispered something as she handed the candle over.

When she looked up at Jordan, there was determination in her eyes, not fear. "I need to go."

He'd anticipated this and passed off his candle to the person behind him as he fired off a text from his watch.

She rested a hand on his arm. "No. I need to go there," she said, pointing to the front of the church.

"To the altar?" Jordan whispered. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I need to go now." She gently pushed him out of the pew and into the aisle.

"Is everything okay?" Good grief, the woman was going to keep him on his toes for the rest of his life.

If he was lucky.

"Everything's great. You can stay here."

"Stay here? You can't be serious."

Alicia looked up at him as she stepped into the middle of the church. "This is between me and God, but you're welcome to come if you insist."

"For the love of cupcakes, let her go," Caroline whisper-screamed. "She's giving her life to the Lord."

Jordan's eyes widened. "She's what?"

Alicia was already halfway down the aisle, headed for Pastor Lyle.

Okay, this was one of those moments when he could let Alicia forge her own path. She was making the biggest decision of her life, and she'd told him in plain language that she had things covered.

Caroline grabbed Jordan's hand and dragged him back into the pew. "Your girl's a rockstar," she whispered.

"Yeah. I already knew that."

Alicia had been paying attention at church over the last month in Redemption Ridge, and patiently waiting for her to go to the Lord on her own time had proven a challenge. Through everything, he'd known she'd choose to follow Jesus. He'd seen it in her eyes from the first time they walked into the church together.

Jordan gripped the back of the pew in front of him as he watched Alicia with Pastor Lyle. Half the people in the congregation were sniffing and blowing their noses, but he'd barely taken a half-breath since she left his side.

Pastor Lyle wrapped Alicia in a big hug before lifting her hand in the air. Alicia's smile was radiant as she faced the room filled with her new friends.

Caroline crashed into Jordan's side, strangling him with her tiny arms. "This is the best Christmas ever!" she shouted as the whole congregation cheered.

Jordan watched with wonder as Alicia raced back down the center aisle toward him. She leapt into his arms and tucked her face into the crook of his neck.

"Thank you for everything. Thank you for bringing me here, for letting me be a part of this church and your family."

Jordan held her close with one hand on her back and the other cradling her head. "This was all you, buttercup. I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered back.

Everything was changing so fast, but some changes were for the better. With God between them, they were stronger than ever.

EPILOGUE

ALICIA

One year later

Alicia held onto Jordan's hand as they walked through the back entrance of the arena. The roar of the crowd echoed through the hallways, but the fans weren't here to see her.

"I can't believe I'm going to see the Kings play the Nightcrawlers!" Caroline's high, squealing voice overpowered the cheering from the arena.

"I think we should go to games more often," Levi said as he lifted Ruby's hand to his lips.

Ruby laughed and rubbed a hand protectively over her rounded belly. "I doubt there will be many hockey games in our future."

Levi shrugged. "Maybe we'll be watching our boy play here someday."

Ruby's eyes widened. "I'm not going to think about the injury risks associated with that dream."

Caroline covered her mouth to hide her laughter. "You two are as sweet as pie."

A tall man dressed in black with the event center logo on the chest led the way down the gray stone hallway and gestured toward a door on the right.

Inside, Alicia was swept into a whirlwind of hair and makeup. Ruby, Levi, and Caroline chatted on a sectional sofa as Jordan kept his place beside her.

“You can hang out with them if you want. This has to be boring,” Alicia said as she shooed him toward their friends.

“We’ll have plenty of time to catch up this weekend,” Jordan said.

She hadn’t expected him to take her up on the suggestion, though she wished he would. They’d been on tour together for almost a year, and he’d barely left her side, even when he was off duty.

Neither of them had known what to expect on the road, but they’d handled it surprisingly well. Her fears that Jordan would get tired of the media onslaught and constant travel had been unfounded. He seemed happy to be with her.

It was a good thing because she couldn’t imagine the tour or her life without him beside her. She’d been on the road plenty of times before, but this one was different. Despite his tendency to stick to the sidelines, Jordan was an ever-present light in her days.

He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. “A penny for your thoughts?” he asked.

Oh, she had plenty right now, but one took center stage. “Just thinking about my next show.”

“It’ll be a big change,” he reminded her.

She’d signed a contract with The Mesa weeks ago. Her tour was over, and after her single song tonight, she’d be performing regularly in Redemption Ridge. The whole town was involved in the new partnership. Her concerts would benefit charities and local businesses, and Redemption Ridge would likely be a household name and one of the top family vacation destinations in the west. Most of the shows were already sold out.

“I have no regrets. I love what I do, but I know this is where the Lord is leading us.”

Lillian had been the first to suggest the new direction, and Jordan had been quick to back it, though he'd waited patiently for Alicia's opinion first.

Making decisions with Jordan over the last year had been a learning experience. He always met her with honesty, and she gave him the same. She'd seen so many relationships crumble under the pressure of the industry, but having Jordan in her life only made things easier.

His lips lifted on one side, showcasing that handsome grin she loved. "I think so too. I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"For doing what you want. For not letting anyone pressure you into staying in the spotlight when you wanted something else. For standing up for what you believe in."

Those had been some of the easiest decisions of her life. Leaving LA, moving to Redemption Ridge, and putting her music to work helping others had all come with a peace from the Lord. A new album was in the works, and she'd never been more excited about the direction of her career. It would be her first Christian album, and she'd already written three songs for another.

Cindy, Alicia's hair stylist, brushed through the soft curls in her hair, spraying it as she went. "Almost finished here."

"One more song, and we get to go home." Alicia said, pressing her hands together in front of her chest.

"Mom and Dad can't wait to see you."

"Same. I've missed them, but I'm glad Caroline, Ruby, and Levi could come tonight."

Alicia had grown closer to her own sister over the last twelve months, despite their demanding schedules, but Caroline had become a friend as close as a sister, and nothing could change that relationship.

Alicia's parents hadn't spoken to her at all, and she'd only seen them in person during court proceedings. Her parents had

looked like strangers, avoiding eye contact with her and Stacy at all costs.

She would give anything to fix the relationship between them, but they had to be willing to let her in, and so far, it seemed they weren't willing.

While her own parents were distancing themselves from her, Jordan's parents called to check on her regularly and even flew out to meet her and Jordan in Atlanta for her birthday.

There was a knock on the door, and the head of her tour security team, Marcus, stepped in. "The sky box is ready. Would you like for me to escort your friends to their seats?"

Alicia turned to look over her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

Levi stood first, offering a hand to Ruby. "Let's watch some hockey."

Caroline, Ruby, and Levi said their good-byes as they followed Marcus, leaving Alicia alone with Cindy, Lillian, and Jordan.

"Almost time," Lillian said. "They're doing a kids goal competition right now, then a word from the sponsors. After that, you'll be introduced."

Cindy made the last touches to Alicia's hair and makeup. "Ready."

James, another member of the tour security team, led Alicia, Jordan, and Lillian to the staging area where they waited for her cue.

Alicia reached for Jordan's hand and squeezed it. After she sang the National Anthem tonight, a chapter in her life would be closing, making way for a new beginning—one where she would have a home in a town that had welcomed her with open arms last year.

"And now, we have a special guest performing the National Anthem tonight. Please welcome ten-time Star Award winner, Alicia Carver."

Cheers filled the arena as Alicia gave Jordan's hand one last squeeze before stepping out onto the floor—a slightly

raised platform that led to a circular stage in the middle of the ice.

She'd sung the National Anthem at events before, and the performance wasn't about her. Her goal was always to put herself aside and draw attention to the freedoms that her country protected.

The Anthem was met with reverence and silence as she sang, and a roaring ovation followed. Alicia waved as she finished and turned to make her way off the platform.

Jordan waited on her in the archway, and she walked straight into his arms.

"That was amazing, buttercup," he whispered close to her ear to be heard above the crowd.

"Thank you." She grabbed his hand and jerked her head toward the hallway. "Let's go find our friends."

Marcus led them to the sky box and held the door for them to enter. The box was shared with a few other entertainers, and a dozen people stood around talking before the face-off.

Caroline spotted them first and gasped with wide eyes. "They're here!"

Everyone else in the room turned and shouted different greetings. Alicia opened her arms to Caroline, who seemed a little too excited for a regular season hockey game.

When she released Caroline, Alicia looked around the room. The faces that greeted her weren't famous faces but the friends she'd been missing from Redemption Ridge.

Alicia's eyes widened, and her mouth gaped open when she saw Vicci and Grant. "What are you doing here?" She launched herself into the arms of Jordan's parents, with his mom on her left and his dad on her right. "I thought I wasn't going to get to see you until next week."

Vicci squeezed Alicia's middle. "We couldn't wait that long. Plus, Jordan extended an invite we couldn't refuse."

Alicia pulled out of the hug to look at Vicci. "What do you mean?"

Grant pointed behind Alicia, and she turned around.

Jordan gave her a heart-stopping smile and knelt before her.

Alicia gasped as her hands flew to cover her cheeks. “Jordan, what are you doing?”

“I’m getting to that,” Jordan said with a chuckle. He pulled a hand out of his pocket and lifted a box. “Alicia Juliet Carver, I love you with all that I am, and this year together has been the best of my life. We’ve been all over the world, and I learned one thing. You are my home.”

The tingling behind Alicia’s eyes said tears were coming, but she didn’t care if every bit of makeup washed off her face. The tears spilling down her cheeks were born of happiness, and there were so many more waiting in their future.

“I didn’t talk to your parents before planning this, but I did ask Stacy, and she—”

“She gave her blessing,” Stacy said as she stepped around Levi and Ruby.

“Stacy!” Alicia wrapped her sister in a rib-crushing hug, and she sucked in a shaky breath.

Stacy whispered in Alicia’s ear, “You deserve a new family. One who knows how special you are.”

“You’re my family.”

“And I always will be,” Stacy added. “But they love you too, and I’m more than willing to share.”

Alicia pulled out of the hug and looked from her sister to Jordan, who waited patiently on bended knee. “And what did your parents have to say about it?” she playfully asked.

“They gave their blessing, but also threatened my life if I ever broke your heart.”

Everyone in the room laughed, including Alicia. She wiped at her cheeks and reached for Jordan’s hand.

He looked up at her and smiled. “I want to spend forever with you. Will you marry me?”

Bouncing on her toes, Alicia shouted, “Yes!”

Jordan stood, wrapping an arm around her waist as he got to his feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her. The room erupted into shouts and cheers around them.

“I love you,” she whispered to him.

The stubble on his face brushed against her cheek as Jordan whispered back, “I’ll love you forever.”

He rested her back on her feet and took her hand. He slipped the diamond ring onto her finger and handed the box to Levi. Resting one hand on her cheek and wrapping an arm around her waist, Jordan pulled her in and pressed his lips to hers. The world around them erupted into cheers again.

Forever wouldn’t be long enough with Jordan by her side.

Ready for more? Return to Redemption Ridge in [Bidding on A Second Chance](#), the next book in the Christmas in Redemption Ridge series.

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Mandi Blake was born and raised in Alabama where she lives with her husband and daughter, but her southern heart loves to travel. Reading has been her favorite hobby for as long as she can remember, but writing is her passion. She loves a good happily ever after in her sweet Christian romance books and loves to see her characters' relationships grow closer to God and each other.