



# Christmas Dreams (Beyond The Red Carpet #5)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Denise Adams, a 45-year-old Hollywood star, has always chosen fame over family, but the allure of stardom can't erase the scars of her past.

Returning to her quaint hometown after her father's sudden death, Denise reluctantly inherits the family's struggling tree farm—a place tied to heartbreaking memories from a Christmas that shattered her world. Dreading the holiday season, she is determined to sell the farm and escape her ghosts once and for all.

But local farm manager Alyssa, 30, is a passionate advocate for the town's Christmas traditions and the driving force behind the annual tree sale.

When Alyssa learns that Denise's return threatens their plans, she isn't afraid to confront the icy actress.

As they clash over holiday preparations, the undeniable chemistry between them simmers and ignites into a steamy romance. Denise finds herself captivated by Alyssa's warmth and spirit, forcing her to confront her emotional baggage and reconsider what she truly wants in life.

As snowflakes fall and Christmas draws near, can Denise confront her past and learn to embrace the magic of Christmas again?

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Under a gray sky, the first snowflakes of the season began to fall on Stony Creek, blanketing the small town as Alyssa Greene strolled down Main Street. The air was crisp and sharp, sending a chill through her as she headed towards the lawyer's office. Her mind was miles away, barely taking in the men climbing ladders and getting the Christmas lights hung all over town even though it would be another while before they were lit.

She wasn't completely naive. She'd known that there had been several moments since Alyssa had started working at Wayne's tree farm when the future wasn't certain for the business.

But Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm was more than just a business to this small town—it was a tradition, a symbol of the community's spirit. For decades, families had flocked to the farm to choose their perfect Christmas tree, sip hot cocoa, and bask in the holiday cheer. Alyssa had gone with her own family to pick out their tree every year, and then when she turned seventeen, she'd started working there, learning everything she knew from Wayne.

But now, with Wayne's passing, the future of the farm hung in the balance. Alyssa had been struggling to keep it afloat, pouring every ounce of her energy into managing Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm since Wayne had died suddenly a little over a month ago, at the start of October. She'd made the hefty loan payment earlier this month, a decision that had left her personal finances stretched thin. She'd been taking minimal pay too, prioritizing the farm's operating costs over her own needs.

The lawyer's office was a small, unassuming building sandwiched between Mrs. Higgins' bakery and the town's tiny hardware store. A faint smell of cinnamon lingered in the air, a comforting aroma that did little to ease the knot in Alyssa's stomach. As she opened the door to the lawyer's office, she spotted Mrs. Higgins emerging from her bakery next door.

"Mornin', Alyssa," Mrs. Higgins said with a smile. "You here for Wayne's will reading?"

"Morning, Mrs. Higgins," Alyssa said as she returned her smile. "Yes, Mr. Peterson called me earlier this week."

"Me too. I'm actually the secondary executor." Mrs. Higgins sighed. "Though I can't say I ever thought I'd see this day. Such a shame about Wayne... I still can't believe he's gone. Sixty-eight. So young."

"I know," Alyssa murmured. She pushed open the door fully. The office was warm and dimly lit, the scent of old books and aged paper filling the air.

Alyssa had to assume that she was inheriting the tree farm. She'd been working there for the last thirteen years as Wayne's equal almost, and as far as she knew he had no family. His wife had died years ago. There were no photos around the office or at his farmhouse. But even though she'd been expecting to take over the business side of things for the tree farm, a little inheritance money would certainly make things less difficult, and she just had to hope that he'd taken out some kind of policy.

"I wonder if his daughter will show up," Mrs. Higgins mused, following Alyssa inside.

Alyssa turned to face her. "His daughter?"

Before Mrs. Higgins could elaborate, the door to Mr. Peterson's office creaked open. Mr. Peterson stood in the doorway, his figure outlined by the light spilling out from his office. His neatly groomed hair was a mix of grays, and his suit was pressed and professional. He wore glasses, and a small smile played on his lips, the corners pulled tight in a polite way.

"Please, come in," he said, motioning them inside. "Have a seat. Apologies for the delay," Peterson said, glancing at his watch. "I held off for ten minutes, but we really should get started."

As Alyssa sat down, her eyes were drawn to the vacant chair beside Mrs. Higgins. Ten minutes. Who was he waiting for? The question echoed the strange comment Mrs. Higgins had made about Wayne's daughter. She pushed the thought aside. Her heart raced with anticipation as she waited to hear the details of the will. Even a small inheritance, a little cushion, would make a world of difference this season.

The room was silent except for the rustling of papers and the soft ticking of a clock.

Mr. Peterson cleared his throat, the sound amplified in the quiet office. "As you know, I'm here today to read the last will and testament of Wayne Addington."

Alyssa nodded, her heart pounding in her chest.

"First," Peterson continued, adjusting his glasses, "let me extend my condolences on your loss. Wayne was a pillar of this community, and he will be deeply missed."

"He will," Mrs. Higgins said, her voice thick with emotion.

Alyssa swallowed, the lump in her throat making it hard to speak. She simply nodded again.

Alyssa's heart thudded against her chest as Mr. Peterson began the will reading. She sat on the edge of her seat, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. The worry that had been weighing down on her for weeks intensified with each passing moment. She thought of the bills piling up on her desk—the electricity, the equipment maintenance, the seasonal workers' wages. With just three weeks until the farm's busiest season, every penny counted.

Mr. Peterson's voice droned on, the legal jargon blurring together in Alyssa's mind. Then, a phrase cut through the haze: "To Alyssa Greene, I leave the farmhouse and all its contents."

Alyssa blinked, momentarily stunned. The farmhouse. Wayne had left her his home. She'd assumed that it would just be sold, that it would be kept separate from the business.

She'd been living in the small cabin that was maybe one hundred yards away from the business, paying minimal rent. Wayne had offered it to her early on, saying that it was too much hassle to try and rent out, that he'd prefer someone he knew personally to live there. That it would be one less thing for him to worry about.

Mr. Peterson hesitated, the weight of anticipation hanging in the air. "Now, regarding the Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm itself?—"

The office door swung open, cutting him off mid-sentence. Alyssa spun around, surprise flashing in her eyes as she took in the figure in the doorway. Her tailored coat clung elegantly to her frame, complemented by heels that clicked confidently against the floor—a perfect picture of Hollywood glamour.

Recognition dawned on Alyssa immediately: Denise Adams, the famous actress.

"Sorry I'm late," Denise offered with an effortlessly charming smile, though there

was a slight breathlessness beneath her polished appearance. “I got held up at the airport.”

Alyssa stared, her mind reeling. What was Denise Adams doing here in Stony Creek? And then, with a sudden, sinking clarity, Mrs. Higgins’ earlier words came into her mind: Wayne’s daughter.

Alyssa’s heart dropped. This couldn’t be possible. In all her years working at the farm, Wayne had never once mentioned a daughter, let alone a famous actress.

Denise Adams took a seat beside Alyssa, her presence filling the small office. Alyssa could feel the weight of her gaze as she tried to process the situation.

Mr. Peterson cleared his throat again, drawing Alyssa’s attention back to the matter at hand. She forced herself to focus, pushing aside the shock of Denise Adam’s arrival. The future of Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm hung in the balance, and Alyssa needed to hear what came next.

Mr. Peterson glanced between the two women as he continued. “Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm is to be co-inherited, split equally between Alyssa Greene and Denise Addington.”

Alyssa’s breath caught in her throat. Co-ownership? With a movie star? She fought to steady herself, confusion swirling in her mind. What had Wayne been thinking?

Beside her, Denise mirrored her confusion. Her eyes widened slightly as if trying to process what this shared inheritance meant. For a moment, the tension hung in the air between them like the calm before a storm.

Alyssa gripped the arms of the chair. This wasn’t just a matter of money; it was about values and priorities. Did Denise even care about Stony Creek? Did she even know

how to run a tree farm?

As Alyssa watched, Denise Addington eyes bore into the lawyer seated across from her. It was as if time had stood still. Alyssa couldn't believe what was unfolding in front of her.

How could she have never known about Wayne's daughter? They'd worked side by side for years, shared countless cups of coffee in the early mornings and late evenings. And yet, not once had he mentioned having a child, let alone one who'd made it big in Hollywood.

The weight of it all pressed down on Alyssa's chest, making it difficult to breathe. The farm's precarious financial situation, the looming loan payments due soon, the crucial holiday season ahead—everything now hinged on this stranger. This woman who'd changed her name and apparently wanted nothing to do with Stony Creek or her father while he was alive.

Denise shifted in her seat. Her perfectly manicured hand rose to her throat, touching a delicate silver necklace. The gesture seemed unconscious, betraying a crack in her polished exterior.

"There must be some mistake," Denise said, a hint of drama lacing her words as they echoed the lines she'd delivered on screen before. Her gaze swept across the room, eyes settling on Alyssa with a sharp intensity. "I'm his only living relative. The business and my childhood home... everything should rightfully come to me."

Alyssa's stomach lurched. The room felt too small, too warm.

"My father and I may have had our differences, but legally speaking, this property should be mine to do with as I want." Denise's fingers drummed against the arm of the chair. "And what I want is to sell it. All of it."

The words hit Alyssa like a physical blow. Sell it? The farm. Wayne's legacy. Her home for the past thirteen years?

Black spots danced at the edges of her vision.

"The will is quite clear, Ms. Adams," Mr. Peterson said. "Your father specifically designated co-ownership between yourself and Ms. Greene."

"Co-ownership?" Denise's laugh held no warmth. "With all due respect, this is a family matter. How do you even know my father?"

"I've been working there for the last thirteen years," Alyssa said, her voice barely above a whisper. The nausea intensified as she watched Denise's perfectly painted lips curl into a dismissive smile.

"The point is," Denise continued as if Alyssa hadn't spoken, "I intend to sell this property. The real estate alone is worth a considerable sum, especially with the recent development in the area. This town could use a ski resort."

Alyssa pressed her hand against her stomach, fighting the wave of sickness that threatened to overwhelm her. The farm wasn't just property. It wasn't just real estate. It was thirteen years of her life, countless Christmas memories, Wayne's dream. And now this woman, this stranger with Wayne's eyes, wanted to destroy it all.

She looked at Denise again, trying to reconcile this glamorous stranger with Wayne's memory. The same blue eyes, yes, but where his had always held warmth and laughter, hers were cold and distant.



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Denise strode out of the lawyer's office, her jaw tight. She couldn't believe this was happening. The will reading was supposed to be a formality, a mere inconvenience before she could sell the tree farm and put this part of her life behind her. Once and for all.

But now, she had to deal with some employee her father had hired?

Denise's fingers tightened around the keys to her rental car as she made her way down Main Street, avoiding eye contact with anyone, hoping that she could stay anonymous for as long as she had to be here.

What kind of trouble would this employee cause? Would she try to stop her from selling the farm? What was her name again?

Alice?

No, Alyssa.

What if Alyssa had somehow manipulated her father into changing the will? The very idea made Denise's blood boil.

As she slid into the driver's seat, Denise took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure. She needed to think this through logically. Maybe there was a way to dispute the will. Her eyes narrowed as she started the car and pulled away. That could work.

Although, wouldn't that just delay things further?

The easiest thing to do would be to buy Alyssa out. If Denise had to guess, she'd say Alyssa was in her late twenties. What person her age would say no to... Denise started to think about how much she'd offer her, about how much the tree farm was worth and what that would mean for Alyssa's supposed half of it, but she stopped herself.

Now wasn't the time to be penny-pinching.

One point five million.

That's what Denise would offer her, and with any luck, she'd have full control of the property by the end of the month, and then she could sell it.

As Denise drove through the winding roads of Stony Creek, she took in the familiar landscape of the foothills. The snow fell heavily now, covering the road and turning the trees into a winter wonderland, and she tried to concentrate on the road. This place, this town, held too many painful memories – memories she had worked so hard to bury.

She pulled into the long, winding snow-covered driveway that led up to the farmhouse. The weathered wood and stone chimney stirred a mix of emotions within her – a hint of nostalgia, but mostly a deep, simmering resentment. This was not the homecoming she had envisioned.

With a heavy sigh, Denise stepped out of the car.

The designer luggage wheels caught in the snow, forcing Denise to lift and carry them the rest of the way. Her heels sank into the powder with each step.

The key was exactly where it had been twenty years ago – beneath the moss-covered rock to the left of the steps that led up to the porch. Her fingers brushed against the cold metal, and for a split second she was sixteen again, sneaking in past curfew.

The key turned in the lock with a familiar click. As Denise stepped into the farmhouse, the scent of pine and the faint, lingering aroma of her father's favorite tobacco washed over her. It was as if time had stood still here, preserving a piece of her past she had tried so hard to forget.

Her luggage echoed loudly on the hardwood floors. The furniture had been updated over the years, but the bones of the house remained the same. The fireplace where she had hung her Christmas stocking, the window seat where she had spent countless hours reading, the creaky third step on the staircase – all of it was still here, waiting for her.

She abandoned her suitcase and wandered further into the living room, her fingers trailing over the back of the worn leather couch. It was a replacement for the one she remembered, but the afghan draped over it was the same one her grandmother had knitted. Denise picked it up, holding it to her face and breathing in the scent of home.

But the memories weren't all happy ones. Her eyes drifted to the spot by the fireplace where she had stood, trembling, as she told her father the truth about herself. The look on his face, the disappointment and anger, was seared into her memory. That was the moment she knew she had to leave, to escape the suffocating confines of this small town and the expectations of a father who couldn't accept her for who she was.

Denise let the afghan fall back onto the couch. She was here to settle her father's estate, nothing more. She pulled out her phone, pushing the memory aside. "Hi James. I need you to find the best realtor in Stony Creek." She paced the living room, knowing her personal assistant wouldn't take long to get her what she needed. "Great, have them call me directly. And could you find a local contractor? The place needs

work.”

When Denise had left Los Angeles, she'd told James that she hadn't expected to be here for more than a week, maybe two, and that she might need his help organizing everything, because she really didn't want anyone to know that she was here.

Denise had felt like she was on a movie set when she was leaning against a tree at the back of the cemetery where her father was buried, her shades on, an elegant black hat pulled low.

But it hadn't been a movie.

She'd skipped her own father's funeral, hovering at the back of the cemetery instead, watching from a distance.

Denise knelt before the stone fireplace, arranging logs from the stack beside it. Her father's old newspaper kindling technique still worked – at least he'd taught her something useful. A few minutes later, the flames caught, spreading warmth through the chilly room.

When she was happy that the fire had caught, she went upstairs and yanked open the hallway linen closet. Fresh sheets sat in neat stacks on the middle shelf. She grabbed a set and headed to the guest bedroom, where the mattress was newer and larger than her old single bed.

Her stomach growled, and a thought popped into her head. She slid her phone out of the back pocket of her pants and dialed a number that she was sure she'd never forget, praying they still made the best pizza she'd ever had.

“Romano's Pizza, how can I help you?” a man asked.

“I’d like a large plain pizza for delivery. The address is 4 Pine Ridge Road.”

“The tree farm?”

“Yes.”

“Alyssa, is that you? You sound different.”

Denise sighed as she went back downstairs. “Please deliver it right to the farmhouse. I’ve left money under the doormat. Just leave it on the porch. Don’t bother knocking.”

“But—“

“Under the doormat,” Denise repeated firmly. “There’s a fifty. Keep the change.”

She hung up before he could ask questions. She just had to survive a few days, get the sale moving, then she could return to her real life in Los Angeles.

Denise grabbed a fifty from her wallet and put it under the doormat, the snow easing off a little now.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming email as she watched the flames catch. The realtor James had found could come tomorrow morning. Perfect. The sooner she got this place on the market, the sooner she could leave.

She opened her laptop at the kitchen table, creating a to-do list while she waited for the pizza to arrive.

Romano’s pizza had exceeded her memories – the perfect ratio of sauce to cheese, crispy yet chewy crust. Denise lounged on the worn leather couch, savoring another

sip of cabernet. Her laptop balanced on her knees as she researched local real estate prices. The fire crackled, casting dancing shadows across the room. Outside, occasional snowflakes drifted past the window.

A key scraped in the front door lock, and Denise's heart stopped as she stared at the door, hoping she was hearing things. She set her wine glass down with trembling fingers and eased the laptop onto the coffee table.

The door swung open.

Denise lunged for the fireplace, grabbing the iron poker. Her pulse thundered in her ears as she raised it like a weapon.

Alyssa stood in the doorway, grocery bags in her arms, her hazel-green eyes wide with surprise. Denise's gaze swept over her, taking in the way her black hair fell across her shoulders. She was wearing a stylish gray winter jacket and jeans. "What are you doing?"

Denise lowered the poker, feeling the heat rushing to her face. "What am I doing? What are you doing breaking into my house?" Her voice was sharp, masking the unexpected flutter in her chest.

"Breaking in?" Alyssa's eyebrows shot up. "I have a key." She held it up, the metal glinting in the firelight.

"Oh, getting cozy with my father's property already?" Denise's lip curled. "Half the business wasn't enough for you?" She could feel her control slipping, anger and something else, something dangerous, rising in her throat.

"If you'd bothered showing up to the will reading on time, you'd know your father left me this house." Alyssa's voice cut like ice. "So technically, you're the one

trespassing.” She set the bags down at her feet, her stance defiant.

The poker clattered to the floor. “He what?” Denise’s voice was a whisper, disbelief and fury warring inside her.

“The farmhouse is mine.” Alyssa stepped inside, kicking the door shut behind her. “Your father wanted it that way.” Her eyes met Denise’s, unflinching, a challenge in their depths.

Denise’s mind reeled, trying to process Alyssa’s words. Her father had left the farmhouse to this woman? This stranger who’d wormed her way into his life, into his business? The betrayal stung like a slap, reigniting the old pain of abandonment.

“I don’t care what he wanted.” Denise’s voice was low, dangerous. “This property is mine. All of it.” She stepped closer, her eyes locked on Alyssa’s. “I’m going to contest the will, and then I’m going to sell it. All of it.”

Alyssa didn’t flinch. “You can’t just erase your father’s wishes.” Her voice was steady, but Denise could see the anger simmering beneath the surface. “The tree farm, this house, they meant everything to him.”

“And what would you know about that?” Denise scoffed. “You think a few years of working for him gives you the right to claim what’s mine?”

“It’s not about claiming anything.” Alyssa’s jaw tightened. “It’s about respecting his legacy. Something you clearly don’t understand.”

The words hit their mark. Denise felt the rage bubbling up, hot and uncontrollable. “Don’t you dare lecture me about my own father.” Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “You have no idea what our relationship was like.”

“Well, I don’t know what kind of relationship you could have had when he never once mentioned you in the last thirteen years.”

Denise flinched as if she’d been slapped. She opened her mouth to retort, but the words wouldn’t come.

Alyssa continued, although her voice was level. She wasn’t hurling insults at Denise, she was simply stating the facts. “I had no idea that Wayne had a daughter.” Her eyes moved to the right of Denise, to the mantelpiece that lacked a single family photo. Instead, there was a photo of Wayne and Alyssa, standing in front of the tree farm with a group of maybe a dozen people, probably staff.

The words sliced through Denise’s carefully constructed walls. Her father had erased her from his life so completely that this woman hadn’t known she existed. It knocked the air from her lungs.

Her fingers found the edge of the mantle, steadying herself.

“I need you to leave,” Denise said. The words came out raw, stripped of their usual polish. Her throat burned with unshed tears.

Alyssa held her gaze. Was that pity in her eyes?

Denise was about to ask her again, but Alyssa’s voice cut through the silence.

“We’ll deal with this tomorrow,” Alyssa said, opening the door before she picked up her bags again. “I was thinking about getting settled in here, but... Anyway, I’ve been living in the cabin for years. I’ll just keep staying there, I guess, until we get this sorted.”

Denise simply nodded, her strength to fight back completely gone now. She just



wanted to be alone.

The click of the door shutting filled the room, leaving a deafening silence in its wake. Denise's vision blurred as the tears she had fought to hold back finally spilled over. She sank down onto the couch, burying her face in her hands.

Memories of their last conversation flashed through her mind – the bitter argument, the hurtful words exchanged, the slamming of the front door as she stormed out, vowing never to return. And now, more than twenty-five years later, she was here in this house, this place that was supposed to be hers, only to find that her father had given it away, along with half of the family business.

Denise's shoulders shook with silent sobs, the familiar ache of abandonment and loss clawing at her chest. She had worked so hard to distance herself from this town, from the painful reminders of her past.

But now, it seemed, the past had come back to haunt her.

Alyssa's truck crunched over the snow-covered driveway leading to the farmhouse. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as memories of last night's confrontation flooded back. The image of Denise Adams, backlit by the fireplace, brandishing that poker like some kind of weapon, brought a mix of disbelief and frustration.

Alyssa parked her truck beside the two cars and stepped out into the crisp morning air. One was Denise Adams's rental car. Alyssa had spotted it yesterday, thinking it was odd that someone was parked there, but she'd assumed it was a hunter. Wayne had a few friends who regularly parked here and went out for the day in the neighboring woods. Today, not only was the rental car there but a sleek silver BMW too. Alyssa wondered who that was.

She pulled her coat tighter around her, her breath visible in the cold as she got out of her truck. As she walked up to the farmhouse, she couldn't help but notice how out of place the expensive BMW looked in front of the old, weathered house.

"The Denise Adams." Alyssa shook her head, running her fingers through her hair. She'd watched plenty of Denise's movies over the years - that noir thriller where she played a detective, the rom-com about the coffee shop owner, even that period piece where she'd earned her Oscar nomination. But face-to-face, the actress had been something else entirely. Cold. Defensive.

The fact that Alyssa hadn't dissolved into a starstruck puddle surprised her. Maybe it was the shock of having a fireplace poker aimed at her chest. Or maybe it was the way Denise had looked at her - like she was nothing more than a nuisance to be dealt

with.

“Some people really live up to their reputations,” Alyssa muttered as her boots crunched against the snow. She wasn’t one to follow celebrity news, but over the years she’d heard enough to know that Denise Adams had a reputation for being difficult on set. Demanding. A perfectionist who expected everyone else to bend to her will.

Last night had proven every tabloid story true. The dismissive tone, the barely concealed disdain, the way she’d just decided to ignore her father’s wishes... It painted a clear picture of exactly who Denise Adams really was beneath the glamorous Hollywood facade.

Alyssa’s hand hovered over the weathered wood of the farmhouse door, poised to knock. Before her knuckles could make contact, the door swung open. A man in a crisp suit stepped out, followed closely by Denise. The actress’s hand rested lightly on his arm as they walked towards the silver BMW.

“I’ll have the paperwork drawn up by this afternoon,” the man said, his voice carrying across the porch.

Denise nodded, a tight smile on her lips. “Perfect. The sooner we can get this all sorted, the better.”

Alyssa’s heart sank as realization dawned. A realtor. Denise was already trying to sell the farmhouse. The farmhouse that, according to Wayne’s will, belonged to Alyssa.

She stepped forward, boots thumping against the porch steps. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Denise turned, her blue eyes widening slightly before narrowing. “Alyssa. I wasn’t

expecting you.”

“Clearly.” Alyssa crossed her arms, her gaze flicking between Denise and the realtor. “Considering you’re trying to sell my house.”

The realtor glanced between them, his brow furrowing. “I’m sorry, there seems to be some confusion. Ms. Adams hired me to assess the property for sale.”

“The property that was left to me in Wayne’s will,” Alyssa said, her voice tight.

Denise stepped forward, her chin lifted. “About that. I’ve decided to contest the will.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious.” Denise’s tone was ice cold. “And when I’m successful, which I will be, everything will already be in place to sell quickly. The farmhouse, the tree farm, all of it.”

Alyssa’s hands curled into fists at her sides. She could feel her nails digging into her palms, the pain a sharp contrast to the numbness spreading through her chest.

“You have no right,” she said, her voice shaking slightly. “Wayne wanted me to have the farmhouse. He wanted us to run the tree farm together.”

Denise scoffed. “Please. My father was clearly not in his right mind when he made that will. And I have no intention of running a Christmas tree farm in the middle of nowhere.”

Alyssa stared after Denise, her mind reeling. What was she thinking? Contesting the will, trying to sell the farmhouse out from under her? What planet was Denise Adams living on?

The realtor shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat. “Perhaps it’s best if I hold off until the ownership of the property is clearly established,” he said, taking a step back. “Ms. Adams, if you could provide proof of your claim...”

Denise waved a dismissive hand. “Of course. I’ll have my lawyer send over the necessary documents.”

Alyssa watched, dumbfounded, as the realtor nodded and hurried to his car. She turned back to Denise, who was turning towards the farmhouse door, clearly intent on ignoring Alyssa’s presence.

Something snapped inside her. Before she could think better of it, Alyssa reached out and grabbed Denise’s arm, halting her in her tracks.

Denise whirled around, her eyes flashing with anger as they flickered down to her hand. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Alyssa swallowed hard, suddenly realizing that she had just laid hands on one of the most famous actresses in the world. But she couldn’t back down now. Not with so much at stake.

“We need to talk,” she said, her voice firm despite the way her heart pounded in her chest.

Denise scoffed, shrugging her arm free from Alyssa’s grip. “We have nothing to talk about.”

She turned on her heel ready to march into the farmhouse, leaving Alyssa standing on the porch. For a moment, Alyssa considered letting her go, letting her have her way. It would be easier, wouldn’t it? To just walk away and let Denise Adams do what she wanted, like everyone else seemed to?

But then she thought of Wayne. Of the countless hours they'd spent together on this farm, tending to the trees, planning for the future. He had trusted her with this place, with his legacy. She couldn't let him down.

Alyssa threw her hand up, catching the door before it could slam shut.

The actress whirled around, her eyes narrowed. "Did you not hear me? I said we have nothing to talk about."

Alyssa took a deep breath, trying to remain calm despite the anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Please. Your father's will was very clear. He wanted us to run the tree farm together. He put a lot of thought into this decision."

Denise scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "Please. He was clearly not in his right mind."

Alyssa opened her mouth to argue, but Denise's expression suddenly changed. It was as if a light bulb had gone off in her head. Her gaze raked over Alyssa, taking in her gray winter coat that hung open over her fitted navy sweater, her worn jeans, and her work boots. Alyssa felt a sudden wave of self-consciousness under the scrutiny.

"Were you with him?" Denise asked, her voice low and accusing. "Were you together?"

Alyssa blinked, not quite comprehending. "What?"

Denise took a step closer, looking her up and down again. "I know there's quite the age gap, but that never stopped anybody."

Realization dawned, and Alyssa felt physically sick. The implication was clear in Denise's tone, in the way she looked at her with a mix of disgust and suspicion.

“What? No!” Alyssa’s voice came out louder than she intended. “How could you even think that? Wayne was my boss, my friend. Nothing more.”

Denise studied her for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Alyssa’s heart pounded in her chest as she met the actress’s gaze, refusing to back down.

“You expect me to believe that my father just decided to give half his legacy to some random employee?” Denise’s voice dripped with disdain.

“I worked beside him for thirteen years.” Alyssa’s hands trembled. “I’m not just some random employee. As the years went by, we became close.”

“Oh, I’m sure you did.” Denise’s lips curled into a cold smile. “Spent lots of time with him, didn’t you? Getting close, making him trust you. What did you do, wait until he was vulnerable and then start suggesting changes to his will?”

The accusation hit Alyssa like a physical blow. Her chest tightened as memories of Wayne flooded her mind - teaching her about proper pruning techniques, sharing hot chocolate on cold winter mornings, celebrating successful seasons.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” Alyssa’s voice cracked.

“Right.” Denise crossed her arms. “And I suppose all those private conversations, all that time alone together-“

“I’m gay!” The words burst from Alyssa’s lips before she could stop them. She couldn’t take listening to anymore of it. “I’m gay, Denise. Your father knew that. He was one of the first people I came out to.”

Denise’s mouth dropped open slightly, her perfect composure cracking for just a moment.

“So no, I wasn’t trying to seduce your father or manipulate him or whatever twisted scenario you’ve conjured up in your mind.” Alyssa’s chest heaved as she fought to keep her voice steady. “He was my boss, my friend, and that’s it.”



Denise stared at Alyssa in disbelief. “I’m gay!” The words echoed in her head. Her father had known. He had accepted Alyssa, welcomed her into his life, altered his will.

The sick feeling in Denise’s stomach intensified, a bitter cocktail of shock, hurt, and anger. Twenty-six years ago, she had mustered the courage to come out to her father, her heart full of hope and fear. But his reaction had shattered her. He had practically thrown her out, his disapproval and disappointment etched into every line of his face.

And yet, here was Alyssa, standing in the farmhouse that her father had left to her.

Despite her being gay.

The unfairness of it all made Denise want to scream. How could her father have given Alyssa the acceptance and love that he had denied his own daughter?

Denise fought to maintain her composure, to keep the hurt and betrayal from showing on her face. But inside, she was crumbling, her carefully constructed walls of detachment and indifference cracking under the weight of this revelation.

Denise’s world spun, the room blurring as hot tears streaked down her cheeks. She hadn’t even realized she was crying until she felt the warm, wet trails on her skin.

Alyssa’s gaze bore into her, and Denise couldn’t bear it, couldn’t stand the pity she saw in those warm, hazel eyes. She turned away, desperately trying to regain her

composure, to stuff the hurt and betrayal back into the dark corner of her heart where it belonged.

But it was too late. The floodgates had opened, and years of repressed pain came pouring out in silent, shuddering sobs.

She could feel Alyssa's presence behind her, could sense the other woman's hesitation, her uncertainty about what to do. Part of Denise wanted to lash out, to push Alyssa away with cruel words and icy glares. But another part, a part she had long denied, yearned for comfort, for understanding.

Denise drew in a shaky breath, trying to steady herself. She couldn't fall apart, not here, not now. She had to be strong, had to maintain control. It was the only way she knew how to survive.

She could feel Alyssa's eyes on her. Of course Alyssa had no idea why Denise was reacting this way. How could she? No one knew the truth about Denise's sexuality, no one except her ex-girlfriend. Not her agent. Not her friends. Not her personal assistant.

Denise shook away any thoughts of her ex, of the secret relationship they had shared for so many years. It had been a constant source of stress and anxiety, always having to hide, always having to pretend. But it was the price Denise had been willing to pay for her career, for the image she had so carefully crafted.

And now, here she was, falling apart in front of a stranger, a woman who had somehow managed to gain her father's acceptance and love despite being gay. The irony was not lost on Denise, and it only served to deepen the ache in her chest.

She could only imagine what Alyssa must be thinking, seeing her like this. Denise Adams, the famous actress, reduced to a sobbing mess. It was humiliating, and yet, in

a strange way, it was also a relief. For the first time in years, Denise was allowing herself to feel, to acknowledge the pain and the hurt that she had kept buried for so long.

But she couldn't let Alyssa see any more of her vulnerability. She had to pull herself together, had to regain control. With a shaky breath, Denise wiped at her tears, trying to compose herself. She straightened her shoulders, forcing herself to meet Alyssa's gaze.

"Are you okay?" Alyssa asked, her voice soft, tentative.

Denise nodded, swiping at the last of her tears with the back of her hand. "I'm fine." The words felt hollow even to her own ears. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what came over me."

It was a lie, of course. Denise knew exactly what had triggered her breakdown. But she couldn't explain it to Alyssa. So instead, she did what she always did. She put on a brave face, a mask of indifference.

Alyssa shifted her weight, the movement subtle but betraying her restlessness. Denise watched her. This woman, this stranger, had somehow managed to earn her father's love and acceptance, something Denise herself had craved for so long. And yet, Alyssa also possessed something Denise desperately wanted: freedom. The freedom to be herself, openly and without fear.

The silence stretched, thick with unspoken words and tangled emotions.

"You don't have to tell me," Alyssa said, breaking the silence. "But...something's clearly wrong."

Denise shook her head, trying to regain her composure. "No, no. It's nothing. I'm

fine.”

But Alyssa wasn't buying it. She took a step closer, her hazel eyes searching Denise's face. “Are you sure? Because it doesn't seem like nothing.”

Denise sighed, running a hand through her perfectly styled hair. She didn't want to have this conversation, didn't want to delve into the painful memories of her past. But something about Alyssa's genuine concern, the warmth in her eyes, made Denise want to open up.

“It's just...I'm surprised, that's all. My father, he was...he was homophobic.”

“I never saw that side of him.”

Denise laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Yeah, well, I guess he changed.”

“You're not really going to contest the will, are you?”

Denise blinked, the question catching her off guard. She had been so sure, so determined to contest the will, to fight for what she believed was rightfully hers. But now, standing here in the farmhouse, faced with Alyssa's genuine concern and the weight of her own emotions, Denise found herself wavering.

“I...I don't know,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought I would, but now...” She trailed off.

Alyssa's gaze softened, and she took a step closer, her hand reaching out as if to offer comfort. But she hesitated, her hand hovering in the air between them.

“I know this must have been a shock for you,” she said, her voice gentle, “but you can't change what your father wanted.”

Denise felt the fight drain out of her, replaced by a bone-deep weariness. Since the moment she'd arrived in Stony Creek, she'd been on an emotional rollercoaster, her world turned upside down by the revelations in her father's will. Every step had been a battle, every interaction a struggle. And now, faced with Alyssa's gentle understanding, Denise found herself wanting to surrender, to let go of the anger and the hurt that had been driving her.

Alyssa must have sensed the shift in Denise's demeanor, the way she took a step back, giving Denise space.

"I should go," Alyssa said quietly. "I have to get back to work."

Denise nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She watched as Alyssa hesitated, her lips parting as if she wanted to say more. But instead, she simply turned towards the door and left.

Denise stood there for a long moment, staring at the closed door. Her father had known about Alyssa being gay.

And he had still left her the farmhouse. It was a level of acceptance he had never shown Denise.

The memories came flooding back again. The look on her father's face when she had come out to him all those years ago. The anger, the disappointment, the rejection. It had been the final straw, the push she needed to leave Stony Creek and never look back.

And now, to find out that he had changed, that he had accepted Alyssa...it was like a knife twisting in an old wound. The pain was fresh, raw, and overwhelming.

Denise stood, a plan forming in her mind. She would go to Alyssa tomorrow and

offer to buy her out. It was a fair solution. Alyssa would get a generous payout, and Denise would be free to sell the property and move on with her life. She'd toyed with the idea yesterday, but she had no other option now.

The bell jingled above the door of Stony Creek Christmas Tree Farm, interrupting Alyssa as she finished up for the day. “We’re closed,” she called out, emerging from the back room.

The clicking of boots filled the space, and Alyssa found herself face to face with Denise Adams. This time, the actress looked every bit the movie star, her hair flawless, and her outfit—a blazer, jeans, and stylish boots—oozing sophistication.

Alyssa felt a flicker of awe, but she quickly tamped it down. “Looking for a Christmas tree this early?” she joked, trying to keep her tone light.

Denise smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “No.” She pressed her lips together for a second. “I want to apologize for yesterday.” She looked away. “And the day before.”

Alyssa nodded. She wanted to say something, but the chances of it being something snarky were too high.

“I was hoping that we could start over.” Denise met her gaze. “I’m here to make you an offer.”

Alyssa’s heart skipped a beat. She had a feeling she knew where this was going, but she waited for Denise to continue.

“I want to buy you out,” Denise said, her voice smooth and businesslike. “I know my

father left you half of the business and the farmhouse, but I'm willing to pay you a fair price for both."

Alyssa's mind raced. She had expected Denise to contest the will, not offer to buy her out. The idea of selling felt like a betrayal to Wayne. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not interested in selling."

Denise's smile tightened. "I understand your attachment to this place, but I'm prepared to make it worth your while. Name your price."

Alyssa shook her head. "It's not about the money."

"One and a half million dollars," Denise said, her voice silky smooth. "For your share of the business and the farmhouse."

The staggering amount hit Alyssa. Her knees went weak.

One and a half million dollars?

Her gaze drifted past Denise to the window. Outside, rows of young saplings stretched toward the setting sun – trees Wayne had planted just last spring. Trees that would take years to mature. Trees she'd promised to tend.

"That's..." Alyssa's voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again. "That's a lot of money for a Christmas tree farm in the middle of nowhere."

"It's prime real estate," Denise replied, moving closer. Her perfume, subtle and expensive, mingled with the pine scent that was never too far away. "The location, the acreage – it has potential for development. The offer is more than fair."

"Development?"



“This town could use a ski resort,” Denise said. “It would bring in jobs, tourists, money. It’s the perfect location.”

Alyssa stared at her, disbelief and anger bubbling up inside her. How could Denise even consider such a thing? Did she have no respect for her father’s legacy, for the generations of memories tied to this land?

“No,” Alyssa said, her voice trembling slightly. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. “No, I won’t sell. Not for any price.”

Denise’s perfectly shaped eyebrow arched. “Are you sure about that? It’s a lot of money, Alyssa. More than you’ll ever make running this place.”

Alyssa’s jaw tightened. She knew Denise was right about that much. But it wasn’t about the money. It had never been about the money.

“I’m sure,” she said, lifting her chin.

For a moment, something flickered in Denise’s eyes – surprise, perhaps, or a hint of respect. But it was gone as quickly as it had come, replaced by a cool, calculating look.

“Two million,” she said, her lips curving into a smile that was more of a smirk. “That’s my final offer.”

Alyssa’s frustration boiled over. Denise thought she could waltz in here and throw money around like it was nothing, like it could solve everything. But this place, this farm, it meant more than Denise could ever understand.

“You’re wasting your time,” Alyssa said, her voice sharp. “I’m not selling. Not for two million, not for ten million. This place isn’t for sale.”

Denise's eyes narrowed. "What's the solution then? Are you going to buy me out?"

The question hit Alyssa like a punch to the gut. Buy Denise out? She almost laughed at the absurdity of it. She barely had enough in her savings to cover a month's expenses, let alone buy half a farm.

"I..." Alyssa faltered, her mind racing. She hadn't thought that far ahead. All she knew was that she couldn't let this place go, couldn't let Wayne's legacy be bulldozed for some soulless ski resort.

But Denise was right. If Alyssa wasn't going to sell, and she couldn't afford to buy Denise's share, then what was the solution?

"I don't know," she admitted, hating the way her voice shook. "But I know that selling isn't the answer. This place, it's not just a farm. It's a part of this town, a part of people's lives. You can't put a price on that."

Denise scoffed. "Everything has a price. You're just too naive to see it."

Alyssa bristled at the condescension in Denise's tone. "And you're too jaded to see the value in anything beyond money."

They stared at each other, the air between them crackling with tension. Alyssa's heart raced, her palms sweaty. She knew she was treading on thin ice, but she couldn't back down. Not on this.

"I'm not selling," she repeated, her voice firm despite the tremor she felt inside. "And if you try to force me out, I'll fight you every step of the way."

Denise laughed softly to herself. "You really think you can run this place on your own?" She gestured around the shop, her perfectly manicured hand sweeping through

the air. “I called Mr. Peterson this morning and he put me in touch with my father’s accountant.” Her voice took on a sharp edge. “The financial records show the farm’s barely breaking even. Do you have any idea how much debt this place is carrying? My father took out loans he couldn’t afford. There are credit card debts piling up. The property taxes alone—” She broke off, shaking her head. “You’re living in a fantasy if you think you can manage this on your own.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” Denise stepped closer, her boots clicking against the wooden floor. “Because from where I stand, you’re in over your head. This isn’t some quaint little hobby farm. It’s a business that requires capital, planning, proper management-”

Alyssa clenched her jaw, hating the way Denise’s words cut straight to her deepest fears. She’d been running the farm for years, but always with Wayne’s guidance. The thought of doing it alone, with the added pressure of debt hanging over her head, made her stomach churn.

But she couldn’t let Denise see that. She couldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“I’ve been working this farm since I was a teenager,” Alyssa said, lifting her chin. “I know every tree, every trail, every inch of this place. I can handle it.”

Denise’s lips curved into a smug smile, and Alyssa hated the way her heart skipped a beat at the sight. Even in the midst of an argument, with her condescension and her infuriating superiority complex, Denise was strikingly beautiful. It was a fact that Alyssa resented deeply.

“Knowing the trees and trails is one thing,” Denise said, her voice smooth as silk. “Running a profitable business is another. But if you’re determined to run this place into the ground, be my guest.”

“I’m not going to run it into the ground. I’m going to make it thrive, just like Wayne always wanted.”

Denise laughed, the sound rich and mocking. “You really believe that, don’t you? That you can save this place with sheer stubbornness and some Christmas magic?”

“I believe in this place,” Alyssa said, her voice steady despite the riot of emotions inside her. “And I believe in myself. I’m not going to let you or anyone else take that away from me.”

“We’ll see about that,” Denise said, her voice a low purr. “I have a feeling this is going to be an interesting Christmas.”

With that, she turned on her heel and strode out of the shop, leaving Alyssa alone with her racing heart.

Denise swirled the ruby-red wine in her glass, her brow furrowed in thought. She couldn't understand Alyssa's refusal to sell her share of the tree farm, even for an offer as substantial as two million dollars. That kind of money could have transformed Alyssa's life, given her the freedom to do whatever she desired.

As Denise took another sip, her mind replayed their earlier conversation. Alyssa's determination to preserve the farm's legacy and the town's Christmas traditions had been so earnest, so passionate.

Denise sighed, setting the glass down on the worn, wooden table. This wasn't how she had envisioned her return to Stony Creek. She had expected a quick, clean transaction – sell the property to a developer and return to the life she had built in Los Angeles. Instead, she found herself caught up in a battle with a woman whose values were so fundamentally opposed to her own.

As she leaned back in the chair, Denise couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy. Alyssa's sense of purpose, her deep connection to this place, was something Denise had never experienced. Her own memories of Stony Creek were tainted by the pain of her past, the loss of her mother and the subsequent rift with her father.

Denise traced the rim of her wine glass, her fingers moving with practiced elegance. She had spent years perfecting the art of emotional distance, of keeping people at arm's length. It had served her well in Hollywood, where vulnerability was a weakness to be exploited. But now, in the face of Alyssa's warmth and compassion, she felt lonelier than she ever had.

Denise rose from the table, her gaze drawn to the bookcase in the living room. Curiosity piqued, she wandered over, her fingers skimming the spines of the books. But it was a photo album that had caught her attention. She slid it out, realizing it was more of a scrapbook as she flipped it open.

The pages were filled with newspaper clippings about the tree farm. Nearly every photo featured Alyssa and Wayne, sometimes accompanied by a few other people - likely other employees. Denise's eyes lingered on Alyssa's smiling face, the genuine joy radiating from her in each image.

As she turned the pages, an idea began to form in Denise's mind. If Alyssa wasn't going to accept the money, Denise needed to find another way to convince her to let go of this dream of keeping the tree farm going. And if Denise had any chance of doing that, they needed to be on friendlier terms.

The scrapbook could be a peace offering of sorts, a gesture of understanding. If Denise could show Alyssa that she recognized the farm's importance, the memories it held, maybe they could find common ground.

It was a small step, but one that could potentially shift the dynamic between them.

Alyssa added another log to the fire in her cabin, watching as the flames licked hungrily at the fresh wood. She topped off her glass of red wine, the bottle resting on the coffee table beside her. The warmth of the fire and the smooth, rich taste of the wine were just what she needed after the day's confrontation with Denise Adams.

A knock at the door interrupted her quiet evening. Alyssa furrowed her brow. None of her friends would show up without texting her first. Curious, she set down her wine glass and made her way to the window, peering out into the darkness.

There, standing on her porch, was none other than Denise Adams herself. Alyssa's heart skipped a beat, a mix of surprise and apprehension coursing through her veins. What could the actress possibly want at this hour, after their heated exchange earlier?

Alyssa hesitated, her hand hovering over the doorknob. Part of her wanted to ignore the knock, to pretend she wasn't home and avoid another confrontation. But the other part, the part that had always been drawn to challenges and the opportunity to understand others, urged her to open the door.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for whatever lay ahead, and turned the knob. The door swung open, revealing Denise's striking figure illuminated by the soft glow of the porch light. Alyssa's eyes met Denise's, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

Alyssa's heart raced as she took in the sight of Denise standing on her porch, a photo album tucked under her arm. The actress's face was unreadable, and Alyssa braced

herself for another confrontation. She had hoped their earlier conversation would be the end of it, but apparently, Denise had other plans.

“Hi,” Alyssa said, her tone guarded. She searched Denise’s face for any hint of her intentions, but the actress’s expression remained neutral. Alyssa had caught herself just in time. She’d nearly said, ‘Hi, Denise Adams.’ It still felt strange thinking of her as just Denise, Wayne’s daughter, and some the elite Hollywood actress that she was.

“Can I come in?” Her voice was softer than it had been during their previous encounter, but Alyssa remained wary.

She hesitated, her hand still gripping the doorknob. The warmth of the cabin spilled out into the cool night air, and Alyssa could feel the tension between them.

“I’m not here to argue,” Denise added, as if sensing Alyssa’s apprehension. “I just want to talk.”

Alyssa studied her for a moment longer, weighing her options. She could send Denise away, close the door and return to her quiet evening by the fire. But something in the actress’s demeanor, a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes, made Alyssa pause.

“Okay,” she said finally, stepping aside to let Denise enter. “Come in.”

Denise’s gaze swept over the interior of the cabin, taking in the cozy furnishings and the crackling fire.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Alyssa asked.

“That would be nice, thank you.”

As Alyssa went into the kitchen to get another wine glass, she couldn’t help but



wonder what had brought Denise to her doorstep. Was it a change of heart, or simply another tactic to convince her to sell the farm?

Alyssa came back into the living room and poured her a glass.

“I wanted to apologize,” Denise said, accepting the glass from Alyssa. “For earlier, I mean. I was out of line.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, surprised by the admission. “I appreciate that,” she said cautiously, taking a sip of her own wine.

Denise set the photo album on the coffee table, her fingers tracing the worn edges. “I found this at the farmhouse,” she said softly. “I know we have a lot to sort out, but for the moment anyway, I thought you should have this.”

Alyssa picked up the album as Denise talked, her fingers gently tracing the worn leather cover. As she opened it, she realized it wasn’t just a photo album, but a scrapbook. Her eyes moved over the carefully preserved newspaper articles as she turned the pages, each one a testament to the tree farm’s history and its place in the community.

Denise’s voice seemed to fade into the background as Alyssa focused on the contents of the scrapbook. She heard Denise mention something about returning to Los Angeles and sorting things out in the new year, after the busy holiday season had passed. Denise even suggested that Alyssa move into the farmhouse, insisting that it was rightfully hers.

But Alyssa struggled to concentrate on Denise’s words, her attention captured by a particular article about last year’s Santa event. The memories came flooding back – the twinkling lights, the laughter of the children, and the joy on Wayne’s face as he handed out gifts dressed as Santa Claus.

“Shit,” Alyssa cursed under her breath, the realization hitting her like a ton of bricks. The Santa event was less than a month away, and with everything that had happened, nothing had been planned for it. Wayne had always taken care of the details, and now, with his passing and the uncertainty surrounding the farm’s future, the beloved tradition was in jeopardy.

Alyssa’s mind raced, trying to figure out how she could possibly pull off the event on such short notice. She knew how much it meant to the community, to the children who looked forward to it every year. The thought of disappointing them, of letting Wayne’s legacy fade away, made her heart ache.

Denise’s voice trailed off as she noticed the change in Alyssa’s demeanor. She tilted her head, studying the younger woman with a curious expression. “Alyssa? Is everything okay?”

Alyssa realized she had completely tuned out Denise’s words. She felt a flush of embarrassment creep up her neck. “I’m sorry, I just... I got distracted by this article.”

Denise leaned in, squinting at the small print. “What’s this?”

Alyssa took a deep breath, trying to calm the rising panic in her chest. “It’s something Wayne started years ago,” she explained, her voice trembling slightly. “Every December, we transform the farm into a winter wonderland for local underprivileged children. Wayne would dress up as Santa Claus and hand out gifts...” She trailed off, her throat tightening with emotion.

Denise’s eyes softened as she listened to Alyssa’s explanation. She took a sip of wine, letting Alyssa explain.

“I completely forgot about it,” Alyssa admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “With everything that’s happened, with Wayne’s passing and the uncertainty about

the farm's future, I just... I didn't even think about it until now. It's less than a month away, and I have no idea how I'm going to pull it off on my own."

Every interaction they'd had so far had been filled with animosity, but now, as Denise's gaze softened, Alyssa saw a glimmer of something different. It was as if, for a moment, the actress's icy exterior had melted away, revealing a hint of compassion beneath the surface.

Alyssa took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "Would you be willing to help?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly. "I know that, you know, things weren't great with your father..." Alyssa still had no idea what had happened, but it must have been something big for Wayne to never even have mentioned her. "But this event was never about him. It's always been such an important part of the holiday season for the area, for those kids. I can't mess this up."

She held her breath, waiting for Denise's response. The actress's eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across her face. Alyssa could see the gears turning in Denise's mind, the conflict playing out behind her eyes.

The silence stretched between them, the crackling of the fire the only sound in the room. Alyssa's heart pounded in her chest, her fingers gripping the scrapbook tightly. She knew she was taking a risk, asking for Denise's help after everything that had transpired between them. But something in the actress's demeanor, the way she had come to Alyssa's cabin with the scrapbook and an apology, gave her hope that maybe, just maybe, they could find a way to work together.

Denise took a sip of her wine, her gaze never leaving Alyssa's. "I..." she began, her voice trailing off. She cleared her throat, seeming to search for the right words. "I don't know if I can promise anything, but..." She paused again, her eyes flickering down to the scrapbook in Alyssa's hands. "I don't really want anyone to know that I'm here."

Alyssa's heart sank at Denise's words. Of course - a famous actress wouldn't want to be seen at a small-town charity event. She set the scrapbook down on the coffee table, careful to keep her disappointment from showing on her face.

"I understand. The last thing you need is the press finding out you're here." Alyssa took another sip of wine, letting the warmth spread through her chest. "I just thought... never mind."

"No, that's not-" Denise shifted on the couch, her perfectly manicured fingers tapping against her wine glass. "I meant I could help behind the scenes. With planning, organizing. That sort of thing."

The unexpected offer caught Alyssa off guard. She studied Denise's face, searching for any sign of insincerity, but found none. The sharp edges that had defined their earlier interactions had softened, replaced by something almost... hesitant.

"Really?" Alyssa couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. "You'd do that?"

Denise nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I can take care of buying all the presents," she said. "Get them delivered here or to the tree farm. And maybe help with decorating in the evenings when no one else is around."

Alyssa's eyes widened. She hadn't expected Denise to offer such substantial help, especially given their rocky start. The idea of the actress using her resources and connections to secure gifts for the children warmed Alyssa's heart. She watched Denise take another sip of wine.

"That would be amazing," Alyssa said, her voice thick with emotion. "I can't even begin to tell you how much that would mean to me, to the kids."

Denise's smile grew, a genuine warmth spreading across her face. "It's the least I can

do,” she said, her tone sincere. “I know how important this event is to the community, and I want to help keep my father’s legacy alive, even if...”

She trailed off, her gaze dropping to her wine glass. Alyssa could sense the unspoken pain behind Denise’s words, the complicated history between her and Wayne that she had yet to fully understand.

“Thank you,” Alyssa said softly, reaching out to place a gentle hand on Denise’s arm. “It means more than you know.”

Denise looked up. For a moment, they simply stared at each other, a silent understanding passing between them. It was a small step, but it felt like the beginning of something new, a tentative bridge being built over the chasm that had separated them.

Alyssa’s heart swelled with hope, the weight of the event’s responsibilities feeling a little less daunting with Denise’s support. She knew there was still much to be done, but for the first time since Wayne’s passing, she felt like she wasn’t facing it alone.

Denise strode through the woods behind the farmhouse, her boots leaving marks in the fresh snow. The weight of the snowfall bent the pine needles, forming natural arches throughout the forest. Morning sunlight illuminated the air, reflecting off the snow's crystalline structure and transforming the quiet woods into a sparkling wonderland.

Three weeks. She'd been back in Stony Creek for three weeks, and now it looked like she'd be staying through the new year. The knowledge settled on her like the snow blanketing the countryside. Her initial plan to strong-arm Alyssa into selling had failed spectacularly. And now, she'd volunteered to help with her father's annual Christmas event - a decision that still puzzled her.

Denise had even started venturing into town to buy her groceries and she was still blown away by the fact that people treated her as Denise Addington, Wayne's daughter, rather than Denise Adams. There were no paparazzi. A few people had done double takes when she'd walked by, but no one had bothered her.

It was so different to her life in L.A., where every trip out in public required sunglasses, a hat, and a carefully planned escape route. Here, she'd slowly started to feel more comfortable with being in town, with being seen, without the fear of being ambushed by cameras.

She'd even had a conversation with the cashier, an older woman named Nora, who'd known her father for years. Nora had shared a story about Wayne helping her change a flat tire on a snowy night. Nora had said that he'd refused any payment beyond a

cup of hot cocoa.

“Your dad was a real gentleman,” Nora said as she bagged Denise’s groceries. “Always ready to lend a hand. We sure do miss him around here. And you,” she’d added just as Denise was ready to leave. “It’s good to have you back in town.”

Denise had nodded, unsure how to respond. These glimpses into her father’s life reminded her so much of the man she’d known before she’d decided to come out to him. Then it had all changed. And she’d pushed her life here so far into a box that she’d forgotten about all the people who had known her as a child, as a teenager. People like Nora who Denise couldn’t remember but who clearly remembered her.

The silence of the woods surrounded Denise as she walked, the only sound her footsteps crunching through the snow. Despite her initial reservations about being in Stony Creek, the past three weeks hadn’t actually been bad. The discovery of Alyssa’s inheritance had completely blindsided her, but as the weeks went by, Denise found herself enjoying the break from the craziness of Hollywood.

Out here, there were no paparazzi hounding her every move, no constant pressure to maintain a perfect image. She was between projects, so her absence from Los Angeles would go largely unnoticed. Her agent had called once, just last week, wondering when she would be back, and Denise said she honestly didn’t know.

As much as Denise hated to admit it, there was a certain charm to the slower pace of life in Stony Creek. The town’s quaint storefronts and friendly faces had begun to feel less like an inconvenience and more like a welcome change of pace.

Of course, the situation with Alyssa and the tree farm still loomed over her, a constant reminder of the unfinished business that had brought her back to this place. But for now, in the stillness of the forest, Denise allowed herself to savor the unexpected peace that had come with her return to Stony Creek.

Denise's thoughts drifted to the quiet evenings she'd spent alone in the farmhouse, curled up in front of a roaring fire with a book. The crackling flames and the warmth from the logs had become a part of her evening routine, but she had to block out any memories of her younger self sitting by that same fireplace. She couldn't think about all of the years that had gone by. She'd always been so sure of herself, of her decision to never come back here, to ignore her father's calls years later thinking that he was only trying to get in touch with her now that she was rich and famous.

Because maybe he had changed.

And if she'd picked up the phone, if she'd given him another chance...

Denise shook her head. When she thought about the way she was around Alyssa in those first few days... It was jealousy really. Anger, for sure. But jealousy. Alyssa had slid right into her old life, essentially replacing her.

Denise blinked back tears now as she stepped over a fallen log covered in snow. She hadn't heard from her father in years, but she could trace that first phone call back to twelve years ago. She remembered it clearly, because she'd won her first and only Oscar the night before. She was thirty-three and at the height of her career, and her cynical mind went straight to the idea that her father was only reaching out because of her win, because if she already wasn't one of the most recognizable faces in Hollywood, she was after that win. Because while she'd been getting paid well for the five years before that, a win like that would certainly allow her to earn more.

But it had never been about that.

Alyssa had said that she'd started working at the tree farm thirteen years ago and that her father was one of the first people Alyssa had come out to. Denise hadn't pressed her about it, but Alyssa had given her no indication that her father had had any kind of negative reaction. The opposite apparently.



And a year later, her father had tried to get in touch after all those years?

What if he'd regretted the way he'd treated her and was looking to start over?

Denise walked back to the house in a daze. She'd been trying so hard not to think about it, but it was impossible to ignore now. Not with the timing of it all.

There was nothing she could do about it now, and she'd never really know what he'd been thinking.

Denise returned to the farmhouse, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She pushed open the heavy front door, grateful for the warmth that surrounded her as she stepped inside.

Bending down, Denise unlaced her boots, peeling them off her feet one by one. Then she shrugged out of her coat, hanging it on the hooks near the door. The farmhouse was starting to feel like home again, though she still felt a twinge of guilt at the thought.

Technically, this was Alyssa's now.

As she went over to the fireplace to get it ready for this evening, she realized that the best thing she could do was to try and help Alyssa as best as she could with this Christmas event. The longer Denise was here, the more she remembered how important her father had always been to this town. Everyone she'd met that either remembered her or maybe had heard through local gossip that she wasn't just a famous actress in town, she was Wayne Addington's daughter, had nothing but nice things to say about it.

The thought of him, dressed as Santa, handing out gifts, and spreading joy, was so vivid she could almost see him there.

It was a side of him she'd chosen to forget. The side that was generous and kind. She'd been so focused on her own pain, on the rejection she'd felt when she came out to him, that she'd pushed away all the good memories.

This event was a perfect example of who he was. He'd always been about giving, about making others happy. It was no surprise that he'd started this tradition, that he'd continued it year after year.

She couldn't change the past, couldn't go back and fix what had gone wrong between them. But she could honor his memory, could make sure his legacy lived on. And the best way to do that was to make sure this event went off without a hitch.

Alyssa looked up from the balsam fir she was tagging, surprised to see Denise walking towards her. Denise's blonde hair shimmered in the sunlight, giving her an unexpected glamour, despite her casual attire of jeans and a stylish black winter coat.

"What are you doing here?" Alyssa asked, glancing around the tree farm. It was the middle of the day and anyone could see Denise. Alyssa knew that Denise was afraid of being recognized, given her celebrity status.

Denise smirked, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Hello to you too."

Alyssa couldn't help but smile. Over the past few weeks, they'd managed to slowly build something that almost felt like friendship. Alyssa didn't see Denise more than once or twice a week, usually when Denise came up to the tree farm in the evenings or stopped by Alyssa's cabin to update her on the progress with planning the Christmas event. But Alyssa hadn't seen that diva side of Denise since those first few days after she'd arrived.

"Sorry, I just wasn't expecting to see you here in broad daylight," Alyssa said. "Is everything okay?"

Denise nodded, stuffing her hands into her pockets. "Everything's fine. I've actually been seen around town and the world hasn't ended."

Alyssa's eyes widened in mock disbelief. "No one recognized you?" She wiped her hands on her jeans, unable to hide her grin. "How's your ego?"

Denise's lips curled into a playful smirk, her eyes gleaming with a challenge. "My ego is just fine, thank you," she said. "It's refreshing to walk around without being swarmed by paparazzi or fans asking for autographs."

The two women stood amidst the pine trees, the tension that had once clouded their interactions now dissipated into a comfortable banter. Alyssa found herself enjoying these lighter moments with Denise, moments that seemed to come more frequently as the days passed.

"Anyway," Denise said. "I just wanted to know when you were planning on decorating. I thought I could help."

Alyssa brushed pine needles from her sleeve, considering Denise's question. "I usually start the weekend after Thanksgiving. It's our last quiet period before the Christmas rush hits."

"What about Thanksgiving itself?" Denise's voice carried a note of curiosity. "Any plans?"

Alyssa shrugged. "Not really. I used to spend it at the farmhouse with Wayne." The memory of last year's dinner flashed through her mind. It had been Wayne, her, and a guy who'd been working at the tree farm for just two weeks and didn't want to make the journey home when the weather had been so bad.

Alyssa wondered when it would end. She'd thought she'd handled herself well in the almost two months since Wayne had passed away, but every so often a memory would hit her along with another wave of grief. There'd be no more days like that, sharing cooking duties between the three of them, sipping on a beer while they watched football.

Denise's brow furrowed. "Your parents have passed too?"

Alyssa blinked, pushing away those thoughts. “No. They live about a half hour away.”

Denise stared at her, confusion evident in those striking blue eyes. The silence stretched between them, and Alyssa’s chest tightened as she met Denise’s gaze.

“They told me not to come home until I’d straightened myself up,” Alyssa said. “And that was thirteen years ago.”

Denise visibly swallowed. She took a step forward, as if to close the distance between them. “They what?”

Alyssa turned her attention back to the tree in front of her as she spoke. “My mom called me the year after I left home. She told me they were saying a prayer for me at Thanksgiving dinner, that they still loved me, but that I couldn’t come home until I’d, well, until I wasn’t gay anymore.” The words came out in a rush, like a confession she’d been holding back for years. She traced her finger along a branch, not trusting herself to meet Denise’s gaze.

“Alyssa...” Denise’s voice was soft, almost pained. “I’m so sorry.”

Alyssa shook her head, forcing a smile. “Don’t be. My parents made their choice and I made mine. They have their lives and I have mine, and we’re all doing just fine.” She inhaled the crisp, pine-scented air, feeling the familiar sting of loss. She’d built a good life for herself, but there were still moments when the ache of her family’s rejection resurfaced.

Denise inhaled a deep breath. “I wish that hadn’t happened to you.”

Alyssa’s gaze flickered to Denise, seeing the hurt in her eyes. “They’re extremely religious. They thought it was for my own good. That I was making a choice that

would damn me to hell, and they didn't want to enable that." She paused, the pain of her parents' rejection still fresh even after all these years. "I guess, I thought they'd come around eventually, but..." She exhaled, her breath coming out in a cloud of smoke. "They never did."

"Come to the farmhouse tomorrow." Denise's words cut through the heavy silence. "For Thanksgiving dinner."

Alyssa's hands stilled on the tree branch. Three weeks ago, they'd been at each other's throats, Denise threatening legal action and throwing accusations. Now here she was, inviting Alyssa to spend Thanksgiving with her. And she wasn't just anyone - this was Denise Adams, Oscar winning actress.

Usually when they talked, Alyssa forgot about Denise's celebrity status within a few minutes. Something about the way Denise carried herself here in Stony Creek - more relaxed, more real - made it easy to forget. But right now, with this invitation hanging between them, Alyssa was very aware of who Denise was.

"I mean, there's no point in both of us being alone tomorrow." Denise shrugged, her casual tone belying the weight of the offer. "And since we're keeping my father's traditions alive, why not this one too?"

The mention of Wayne, coupled with the simple logic of Denise's words, pushed away Alyssa's hesitation. She nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Okay. Yeah, I'd like that."

"Perfect," Denise said with a smile.

"What time should I come over?" Alyssa asked as she moved to tag the next tree. The sharp scent of fresh-cut pine filled the air.

“How about two? That gives me time to prep everything.”

Alyssa glanced sideways at Denise. “So... you cook?”

Denise’s perfectly shaped eyebrows shot up. “You don’t think I can cook? Why would I invite you over if I couldn’t cook?”

“No, I just-” Alyssa fumbled ribbons in her hand.

“You just assumed I have a personal chef who handles all my culinary needs? That I’m some helpless Hollywood actress who can’t even fry an egg?”

Heat crept up Alyssa’s neck. “That’s not what I-”

“That I survive solely on green juice and kale smoothies prepared by my army of domestic staff?” Denise’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Now you’re just being ridiculous.” Alyssa couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’ll have you know...”

“It’s a normal assumption to make!” Alyssa folded her arms across her chest. “But I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have judged you like that.”

Denise nodded slowly, like she was deciding whether or not to forgive her. She said in the most deadpan voice, “I actually do have a personal chef at home.”

Alyssa swatted Denise’s arm. “You’re unbelievable!”

Alyssa shook her head, a soft smile playing on her lips. “You’re distracting me, you know that?” She glanced at Denise, who stood there with an amused expression.

“Either help me tag these trees or leave. Your choice.”

Denise raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in her eyes. “Is that an order?”

“It’s a request,” Alyssa corrected, handing her a bundle of red ribbons. “Here, take these. We need to mark the ones that are ready for sale.”

“And how do I know which ones are ready?”

Alyssa pointed to the trees around them. “Look for the ones that are full, with no gaps in the branches. They should be around six to eight feet tall. If you’re not sure, just ask.”

Denise nodded, her eyes scanning the rows of evergreens. “Alright.”

Alyssa watched as Denise began to inspect the trees, her fingers tracing the needles gently. There was something endearing about seeing Denise, the Hollywood star, carefully examining each tree with a focused determination. A warmth spread through Alyssa, a sense of contentment she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Alyssa turned her attention back to her own row of trees, her hands working efficiently as she tagged each one. But her mind was elsewhere, already looking forward to the next day, to spending more time with Denise. There was something about her presence, about the way they were slowly opening up to each other, that made Alyssa feel hopeful that they could work this out between them, and that the ugliness of those first few days were well in the past now.



Denise swirled the last sip of wine in her glass, sinking deeper into the couch cushions. The day had flowed with an unexpected ease. She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed cooking, and with Alyssa helping her, it hadn't been overwhelming or stressful. It had all gone better than Denise could have expected.

Alyssa reached for the wine bottle. The flames from the fireplace cast a warm glow across the living room, catching the subtle highlights in Alyssa's dark hair. Without her hair in a ponytail and practical work clothes, she looked different tonight. The emerald sweater complemented her skin tone, and her hair fell in loose waves past her shoulders.

Denise blinked, realizing she'd been staring.

"More wine?" Alyssa's voice broke through her thoughts.

Denise cleared her throat. "Yes. Please."

Denise's gaze drifted back to Alyssa as she topped up their glasses. The way the firelight danced across Alyssa's features, softening her usually determined expression, caught Denise off guard.

Denise quickly looked away, pushing those thoughts aside. She chalked it up to being single for as long as she had been. It was just a natural response, nothing more. After all, it had been nearly eight years since Melanie left, unable to bear the secrecy any longer.

The memories of those final arguments still stung. Melanie had been out and proud, while Denise remained firmly in the closet, terrified of the consequences. Their time together had stirred up rumors, but they'd always maintained the facade of friendship.

Denise sighed, swirling the wine in her glass. She knew she wouldn't be the first actress to come out. Times had changed. Maybe now, she could finally be honest about who she was. But back then? The risk had seemed too great.

"You okay?" Alyssa's gentle question pulled Denise from her thoughts.

She met Alyssa's concerned gaze, forcing a smile. "Yeah, just... thinking about the past."

Alyssa held her gaze, her eyes soft with concern. "What happened with your father, Denise?" Her voice was hesitant, treading carefully on delicate ground.

Denise looked away, the warmth of the fire suddenly feeling too close. She didn't answer right away.

Alyssa quickly backpedaled. "Forget I asked. I didn't mean to pry." She reached for her wine glass and took a drink.

Denise sighed. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. I just don't want to bring down the mood. Today has been... nice."

But Alyssa's curiosity was piqued. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, the wine glass cradled in her hands now. "It can't be that bad."

Denise took a long sip of wine, letting the rich cabernet coat her tongue. The warmth spread through her chest, but it did nothing to ease the tightness there. Her fingers traced the rim of the glass as she weighed her options.

No one knew. Not her agent, not her co-stars, not even the tabloids that had spent years speculating about her love life. Melanie had been the only one who truly knew her, and that relationship had crumbled under the weight of secrecy.

But Alyssa... Alyssa understood what it meant to lose family over something you couldn't change.

The fire crackled, sending sparks dancing up the chimney.

“My father and I were close once. Until I was nineteen, we did everything together. He taught me to drive in his old pickup truck. We'd spend weekends maintaining the trees. He came to every high school play.”

Denise's voice trailed off, the memories of happier times with her father lingering in the air. She hesitated, the weight of her secret pressing against her chest. Did she really want to open that door? To let Alyssa see the parts of herself she'd kept hidden for so long?

Alyssa waited patiently, her eyes soft with understanding. She didn't push, didn't pry. Just sat there, a steady presence in the flickering firelight.

Denise took a deep breath, her fingers tightening around the wine glass. She could still back out. Change the subject, steer the conversation to safer waters. But something about the way Alyssa looked at her, the way she listened without judgment, made Denise want to tell her.

“What changed?” Alyssa asked gently, her voice barely above a whisper.

Denise closed her eyes, the memories rushing back. The day she'd come out to her father, the shock and disappointment on his face. The way he'd looked at her like she was a stranger, like he didn't recognize his own daughter anymore.

“I told him I was gay,” Denise said, her voice barely audible over the crackling of the fire. “I was nineteen, and I couldn’t keep pretending anymore. I thought... I thought he’d understand. That he’d love me no matter what.”

She opened her eyes, meeting Alyssa’s gaze.

Alyssa’s eyes widened, her mouth falling open in shock. She set her wine glass down on the coffee table. “I had no idea.” She looked away and then turned to look at her again, disbelief still written all over her face. “I can’t believe it if I’m being completely honest.”

A smile tugged at Denise’s lips. “I managed to keep my private life private. I always put my career first, or at least that’s what I let the public believe. “

Alyssa’s brow furrowed, confusion etched across her features. “But your father... I only ever knew Wayne to be understanding. He never judged me.”

Denise met Alyssa’s eyes. “So you can see why I was so shocked that you had his support, that you were included in the will. It was the exact opposite of what I’d experienced.”

Alyssa leaned back, her expression softening with sympathy. “I’m so sorry. For all of it.”

Denise shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but the tightness in her chest betrayed her true emotions. “It’s in the past now. But it’s why I left, why I never came back. I couldn’t face him, couldn’t bear to see the disappointment in his eyes every time he looked at me.”

She took another sip of wine, letting the rich liquid warm her throat. “I threw myself into my career, determined to prove that I didn’t need his approval. The one time I

did put myself out there, she left me. Because she couldn't handle keeping us a secret."

Alyssa looked like she wanted to ask her a question, but she didn't, her eyes searching Denise's. "I wish I could tell you what happened... What changed."

Denise brought her glass to her lips and took a sip. "I think it was you."

Alyssa just stared at her. "Me?"

"When I think back... My father tried to reach out about twelve years ago. I'd just won an Oscar and I thought he was just trying to cash in on my fame or I don't know..."

"That's when I came out to him," Alyssa said softly. "I was a senior in high school. My girlfriend picked me up after work one evening, and she kissed me. I knew Wayne must have seen us. He'd been standing just a few feet away. So I decided to tell him the next morning."

"And what did he say?"

Alyssa looked up as if she was trying to keep her unshed tears from falling. "Nothing. He just pulled me into a hug."

Denise inhaled a shaky breath. Even though she knew something like that had happened, it was still hard to hear it. How she wished her father had reacted like that.

Alyssa kept talking. "If that was twelve years ago, you'd already been gone... What?"

"Fourteen years."

“Jesus.” Alyssa wiped away a tear. “He must have regretted the way he’d left things with you.”

“I don’t know. He never tried to get in touch. Not until after you came out to him it seems.” Denise downed the rest of her wine. “I don’t know what to think, really, other than he didn’t want to make the same mistake twice.”

“And when you said that he tried to reach out...”

Denise shook her head. “I ignored his calls.”

Alyssa exhaled. She wiped a hand across her face. “I’m sorry.”

Denise gave her a lopsided smile. “It’s all in the past now. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

She’d shared more with Alyssa than she had with anyone in years. It felt strange, but for once Denise wasn’t worried about the consequences. She glanced at Alyssa, who was watching the fire. Denise knew Alyssa wouldn’t tell anyone. She wasn’t sure why she trusted her, but she did.

“I still think, especially this time of year, that my parents will reach out,” Alyssa said softly, turning to meet Denise’s gaze. She looked away again. “I know it’s silly to think that, but I do.”

Denise swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “It’s not.” She pressed her lips together. “I’d like to think that my mother would have just hugged me and told me she loved me, but I’m not really sure.”

Alyssa topped up both of their glasses without asking. She turned to face Denise on the couch then. “I knew that Wayne had been married, but he never really said what

happened to his wife. Just that she'd been gone a long time. I guess, I assumed that she'd been sick."

Denise shook her head. "She died in a snowmobile accident. On Christmas Eve." She took a drink. "When I was eleven."

The color drained from Alyssa's face. Her wine glass froze halfway to her lips, and she set it back down without taking a drink.

Denise's chest tightened at the raw empathy in Alyssa's eyes. She'd seen that look countless times - pity, sympathy, the awkward silence that followed whenever someone learned about her mother's death. But Alyssa's reaction felt different. There was understanding there, a shared pain that went beyond mere sympathy.

"Christmas Eve." Alyssa's voice came out barely above a whisper. She shifted closer on the couch, her knee almost touching Denise's. "That's why you..." She trailed off, realization dawning on her face. "I mean, one thing would be enough, but both of them? No wonder you wanted to sell and get out of here as soon as possible."

Denise looked away, unable to hold Alyssa's gaze.

"I'm sorry that I jumped to conclusions," Alyssa said softly. "I had no idea. I just thought you were..."

"I was what?" Denise asked, a hint of a smile coming to her lips.

"A stereotypical Hollywood diva?"

"No. Well, according to some people I'm difficult to work with," Denise said as she got up to put another log on the fire. "But no, I had my reasons for not wanting to be here, for not wanting to hold onto any of this for longer than necessary." She sat

down again. “I wish that we’d spoken about my mother more,” she said, thinking out loud. “I was so young. I don’t know. But my father didn’t like talking about her. After she died, he threw himself into the business. More than usual. Christmas became all about other people’s joy, other families’ happiness.” She took another sip of wine, grateful for its warmth. “I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t pretend to be happy during what should have been...”

“The most wonderful time of the year.”

Denise looked up, surprised by the lack of judgment in Alyssa’s voice. Most people didn’t understand how someone could hate Christmas. They’d tell her to move on, to create new memories, as if it were that simple.

“And now?” Alyssa asked.

“Now, I think I’ve come to terms with how things played out. Whether or not I’d had a good relationship with my father didn’t change the fact that I wanted to move to Los Angeles and take a shot at becoming an actress. I was always going to move away. I wish I’d answered those calls, twelve years ago, but there’s nothing I can do about that now. And I guess, I’m glad that he realized how wrong his reaction was, that maybe he was going to apologize, and at the very least, treat other people, like you, with a bit more understanding.”

The silence stretched between them, comfortable rather than awkward. Denise watched the flames dance in the fireplace, feeling lighter somehow. She hadn’t talked about her mother’s death in years, let alone shared the truth about her sexuality with anyone.

Alyssa shifted on the couch, tucking her legs under her. The movement drew Denise’s attention.



“You know what’s funny?” Denise met Alyssa’s eyes. “I spent so many years running from this place, but being back here... it’s not as painful as I thought it would be.”

“I’m glad.” Alyssa ran a hand through her hair. “And I’m glad we’ve moved on from those first few days. I’m not really one for conflict, but it was hard not to...”

Denise ran a hand through her hair as she turned to face Alyssa fully, her arm resting on the back of the couch. “I’m sorry about that. I just... You can see why I reacted like that now though, right?”

“Yeah.” Alyssa took another drink before setting her glass down on the coffee table. “I do.” She searched Denise’s eyes as she spoke. “What are we going to do about this? I can’t buy you out. And you’re right. I didn’t want to admit it, but this is a failing business. With your father, it was different. It was a family legacy. His father started the tree farm, so I think he was okay with barely breaking even as long as he could pay his staff. This house has been paid off. But for me? For us? I don’t know what we’re going to do after this year.”

Denise opened her mouth but quickly closed it again. She didn’t know what to say.

“Look, I know we said we’d talk about it in the new year,” Alyssa said, “but I can’t stop thinking about it. I know I should have taken your offer. I wouldn’t have to worry about where I’d live, but the idea of just walking away from this without even trying makes me sick.”

“Hey,” Denise said, reaching out to rest her hand on Alyssa’s. “Please, don’t be worrying about this. Whatever we decide, we’ll decide it together. I... I made that offer when I was still in shock. I can see how... Heartless it was. Considering everything. Look, you have my word that we’ll talk about this. Properly. When we get the numbers in from this season. Then we can see what we can do.”

“Yeah?” Alyssa’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“Yes. I called you out for making assumptions about me.” Denise closed her eyes for a second, remembering how she’d asked Alyssa if she’d been involved with her father, as if Alyssa had tried to con him out of his money. “I need to apologize for what I accused you of. It was so out of line. Especially when this is all so fresh. You’re still grieving, clearly.” Denise exhaled softly as she looked away, her eyes on the fireplace. “I was completely wrong about you. And I can see how you fit in so well here. I’m glad that my father had you around all these years,” she said, her throat tightening as she said those words.

Alyssa was watching her when Denise met her gaze. “Apology accepted. And for what it’s worth, I think Wayne would be proud of you for being here, for helping with the event.”

Denise shook her head, but she stopped herself from saying anything more. She couldn’t think too much about what her father might have thought of her. Because the more time she spent here, the more she was convinced that she’d got it all wrong.

Denise swallowed down the lump in her throat. “I’m just going to go get some more wood,” she said as she stood up.

“I should probably head home,” Alyssa said, standing too.

Denise glanced at the clock on the wall. It was somehow almost ten o’clock. They’d spent the whole day together, but it had flown by. And they’d also been drinking for all of those hours. “It’s too far to walk.”

Denise padded to the front door. A blast of cold air hit her face as she opened it. The porch light illuminated hundreds of fat snowflakes drifting down from the dark sky.

She grabbed an armful of logs from the stack by the door, the rough bark pressing into her sweater. The familiar scent of wood and winter filled her nostrils as she stepped back inside, pushing the door closed with her hip.

“And it’s snowing again,” she said, turning to see Alyssa still standing by the couch, gathering her things.

Denise carried the logs over to the fireplace added another to the blaze. The crackling sound filled the room. She turned to face Alyssa. “You can stay in the guest room if you want. I know there’ll be no one on the road to the cabin but...”

“No. I know. I’d never drive after I’ve had... Well, I don’t know how much I’ve had, but I wouldn’t take that risk.”

“And you can’t walk in that.”

Alyssa hesitated for a second. “Okay, I’ll stay.”

Denise felt a rush of warmth unfurl in her chest as she busied herself with the fire again, hiding her smile.

“Let me show you where the guest room is,” Denise offered as she stood up.

Denise led Alyssa up the stairs. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this light, but she pushed the feeling down, attributing it to the wine and the way things had been so easy today.

“This is it,” Denise said, flicking on the light. The room was cozy, with a queen-sized bed, and a dresser.

“Thanks.”

Denise nodded, trying to ignore the warmth that spread through her at Alyssa's smile. "I'll just grab some fresh sheets," she said, turning away quickly.

As she walked down the hall to the linen closet, she couldn't shake that light, fluttery feeling in her chest. More than once today she'd found her gaze lingering on Alyssa, especially when Denise knew she wasn't looking. When Denise had been in the kitchen, waiting for the timer to go off, she'd leaned against the counter, taking Alyssa in as she set the table. The way her hair fell across her eyes, the way her jeans hugged her hips...

Denise caught herself mid-thought, shaking her head. She was too old for this, and definitely too old for Alyssa. Plus, her life was in Los Angeles, not here. She'd be leaving in January, whatever they decided to do about the tree farm.

Denise grabbed a set of sheets from the closet and returned to the guest room. Alyssa stood by the window, watching the snow drift down through the darkness, its quiet descent illuminated by the soft glow of the farmhouse's outdoor lights. She turned as Denise entered, her expression soft.

"Let me help," Alyssa said, reaching for the sheets.

Denise handed them over, their fingers brushing briefly. She ignored the spark that ignited at the touch, focusing instead on the task at hand. They worked together in silence, the only sound the rustling of the sheets and the distant hum of the wind outside.

Their fingers brushed again as they tucked in the last corner of the fitted sheet. Denise's breath caught in her throat. She stepped back, needing space between them.

Alyssa smoothed the top sheet over the bed, her movements precise and practiced, and Denise's gaze lingered on her. The warm light from the bedside lamp cast a

golden glow across her skin. Just then, Alyssa straightened and turned, catching Denise's stare.

Their eyes met. Heat crept up Denise's neck, but she couldn't look away. Alyssa's lips parted slightly, as if she might say something. Denise's heart hammered against her ribs.

Alyssa tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and cleared her throat. "Could I maybe borrow something to sleep in? Just a t-shirt even."

Denise blinked, her mind still caught in that charged moment. "Yeah, sure. Just give me a sec."

She went down the hall to her bedroom, switching on the light. She pulled open the top drawer. She hadn't packed enough clothes to last her for two months, so she grabbed the freshly washed flannel pants and long-sleeved top that she'd planned on wearing tonight. She'd find something else to wear.

She brought them back into the guest room. "I hope these are okay," she said handing them to Alyssa. "They might be a little too big."

"Thanks," Alyssa said as she took them from her. "And I think we're more or less the same size. It's better than sleeping in this sweater, anyway."

Denise hovered in the doorway. "I'll say goodnight then."

"Thanks for today. For inviting me. I had a really nice day," Alyssa said, leaning against the footboard.

"So did I."

“Goodnight.”

Denise made her way back downstairs, her footsteps heavy on the wooden stairs. The living room held traces of their evening - empty wine glasses on the coffee table, the throw blanket rumpled on the couch where they’d sat talking for hours.

She crouched by the fireplace, positioning the metal grate in front of the dying embers. The flames had dwindled to glowing coals, casting a faint orange light across the hearth.

Standing, she collected their wine glasses and carried them to the kitchen. She moved through the downstairs, switching off lights. Darkness crept in, broken only by the soft glow filtering through the windows from the porch light outside. Snow continued to fall.

She was almost disappointed to be calling it a night.

Denise climbed the stairs, trying to focus on anything else - the creaking of the old wooden steps, the soft patter of snow against the windows, what they were going to do about the tree farm. But her mind kept drifting back to those quiet moments in the kitchen, to the brush of fingers as they made the bed.

At the top of the stairs, Denise glanced toward the guest room. The light was still on, a warm glow seeping under the door. She forced herself to look away.

This was nothing. Too much wine and too many months alone. That was all it was. Of course, she’d notice someone attractive, especially someone kind and passionate like Alyssa. But that’s all it was. Nothing worth dwelling on.

Tomorrow morning, she’d wake up clear-headed. She’d remember all the reasons why this was a terrible idea - the age difference, her life in L.A., the complicated

business situation with the tree farm. She'd remember that she was leaving in January, that none of this mattered.

Denise reached her bedroom door, her hand resting on the cool metal of the doorknob, fingers tightening around it.

Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow she'd forget about that fluttery feeling in her chest whenever Alyssa smiled at her, that dangerous warmth that spread through her body when their eyes met across a room. She'd push it all away, file it in that carefully locked box where she kept all her other inconvenient emotions, because she wasn't making the same mistake twice.

Alyssa descended the stairs, the floorboards creaking beneath her feet. She tugged at her rumpled clothes from yesterday, wishing she had something fresh to change into. As she entered the living room, she stopped short, surprised to find Denise lounging on the couch, cradling a steaming mug of coffee.

“Morning,” Denise said, her voice still husky with sleep. She looked surprisingly relaxed, her blonde hair tousled and her face free of makeup.

Alyssa’s heart skipped a beat at the sight. She quickly pushed the feeling aside, reminding herself that she needed to focus on the day ahead. “I didn’t expect you to be up so early,” she said, glancing at the clock on the mantel.

Denise shrugged, taking a sip of her coffee. “Couldn’t sleep. Too much on my mind, I guess.”

Alyssa nodded, understanding all too well the weight of unresolved issues. “I need to get going,” she said, gesturing towards the door. “It’s Black Friday, and even though we don’t have sales, people like to come and reserve their trees early. And then in the evening, I’ll be decorating.”

Denise raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a busy day ahead.”

“It is,” Alyssa confirmed, already mentally running through her to-do list. “I need to swing by my place first, grab a shower and a change of clothes.”



Denise set her mug down on the coffee table and stood up, stretching her arms above her head. Alyssa tried not to notice the way her shirt rode up, exposing a sliver of toned stomach. “I could come with you,” Denise offered, catching Alyssa off guard. “To the tree farm, I mean.”

Alyssa blinked, momentarily caught off guard by Denise’s offer. “That would be great,” she found herself saying, even as her mind raced with the implications of spending more time with Denise.

She couldn’t help but notice how effortlessly beautiful Denise looked, even in this casual state. Her blonde hair, slightly mussed from sleep, framed her face in a way that made Alyssa’s fingers itch to reach out and tuck a stray strand behind her ear. The absence of makeup only served to highlight Denise’s natural beauty, her clear blue eyes and full lips drawing Alyssa’s gaze.

Alyssa knew this wasn’t just starstruck admiration. No, what she felt for Denise was something deeper, more visceral. It was an attraction that went beyond the superficial, a pull that she couldn’t quite explain but couldn’t deny either. And considering how much Denise’s presence had aggravated her just a few weeks ago, it was kind of shocking.

The realization hit her hard just then, and suddenly, the cozy living room felt too small, too intimate. Alyssa’s heart pounded in her chest as she took a step back, needing to put some distance between herself and Denise.

“I should get going,” she said, her voice sounding strained even to her own ears. “I’ll see you later?”

Denise nodded, a flicker of confusion crossing her features at Alyssa’s abrupt change in demeanor. “Sure, I’ll be there.”

Alyssa managed a tight smile before turning on her heel and practically fleeing the room. She grabbed her coat and scarf from the hook by the door, her hands shaking slightly as she bundled up against the cold.

Before she opened the door, Alyssa remembered that it had been snowing last night. She'd have to clear off her car.

"I don't suppose you have a shovel I could borrow?" Alyssa asked.

Denise met her eyes over the back of the couch. "I already took care of it."

Alyssa blinked, not quite sure she'd heard correctly. "You did what?"

"I cleared the snow off your car. I figured you'd want to get an early start."

Alyssa was stunned. She couldn't remember the last time someone had done something so thoughtful for her, especially without being asked. And for that someone to be Denise Adams, the woman who had swept into town with the intention of selling the farm out from under her? It was almost too much to process.

"Thank you," Alyssa managed, her voice thick with emotion.

Denise shrugged, looking almost embarrassed by Alyssa's gratitude. "I just thought it might make your morning a little easier."

"Well, it definitely has. Thank you. I'll get going then." Alyssa pulled open the door, turning to look back at Denise one more time. "Bye."

"See you later," Denise said, her warm smile making Alyssa's heart stutter.

As she stepped out into the crisp morning air, Alyssa took a deep, steadying breath.

She got in her truck, turning the key, and patiently waiting for the heat to defog the windows before she set off towards her cabin, hoping that a hot shower and a change of clothes would help clear her head and prepare her for the busy day ahead.

Alyssa trudged through the snow, her boots leaving deep imprints in the fresh powder. The afternoon sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the farm. She pulled her scarf tighter around her neck, trying to ward off the chill that had seeped into her bones after hours spent outside.

Despite the cold, Alyssa couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. She'd spent the morning and early afternoon helping customers select and reserve their Christmas trees, and the numbers were already looking better than they had at this time last year.

But even as she reveled in the success of the day, Alyssa couldn't shake the exhaustion that was starting to take over. She hadn't slept well the night before, being in an unfamiliar bed at the farmhouse. And her mind had been filled with thoughts of Denise, of how well yesterday had gone.

It was funny how quickly things could change. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been ready to go to battle with Denise over the fate of the farm. Now, she found herself looking forward to the other woman's company.

Alyssa hated that she'd spent most of the day keeping an eye out, hoping that Denise would appear. She'd tried to focus on work, but her gaze kept drifting towards the path leading to the farmhouse. As the afternoon wore on, she began to lose hope that Denise would show up.

But then, just as she was about to pack it in for the day, Alyssa caught sight of a familiar blond head moving through the crowd of tree shoppers. Her heart skipped a beat as Denise came into view, her boots crunching through the snow. She was bundled up in a sleek black coat. Her blue and red Bills beanie covered her head, but

her blond hair cascaded over her shoulders in loose waves.

Alyssa tried to suppress the smile that threatened to spread across her face, but it was no use. She couldn't help the warmth that bloomed in her chest at the sight of Denise. She busied herself with straightening a nearby wreath display, trying to act nonchalant as Denise approached.

"Hey," Denise said, her voice soft as she came to a stop in front of Alyssa. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, her eyes bright.

"Hi," Alyssa replied, her own voice barely above a whisper. She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure.

Denise glanced around, taking in the crowded farm. "Business seems good."

"It's been a busy day, yeah." Alyssa looked past Denise, watching a young couple debating between two Douglas firs, their mittened hands intertwined. Behind them, a father hoisted his daughter onto his shoulders so she could inspect the top of a towering spruce.

She turned back to Denise, worry creasing her brow. "Are you sure you want to be out here? Someone's bound to recognize you."

"It hasn't happened yet." She gestured at the families around them. "Everyone's too focused on finding their perfect tree to notice me, and I don't exactly look like the Hollywood version of myself," Denise said with a little tilt of her head. "A Bills beanie hat? Hardly any makeup? I'm not worried. Besides, I'll be leaving in January anyway."

The casual mention of Denise's departure knocked the air from Alyssa's lungs. She had no reason to think that Denise would want to stay any longer than necessary, but

hearing it stated so matter-of-factly made it feel more real.

Denise kept talking, seemingly oblivious to Alyssa's inner turmoil. "Should I get a head start on the decorating?" she asked, her eyes scanning the bustling tree farm.

Alyssa blinked, pulling herself out of her thoughts. "Yeah, that would be great," she said, nodding towards a nearby building. "I already brought in the decorations. They're in there."

Denise followed her gaze, taking in the small, rustic structure. "Anything in particular you want me to do?"

Alyssa shook her head. "It's a little different every year. Just make it as festive looking as possible."

Denise nodded, a determined look settling over her features. "I can do that." She paused, a thought occurring to her. "Have you found a Santa yet?"

Alyssa felt a small smile tug at the corners of her mouth. "Actually, yeah. One of the women who works here, Jess, her grandfather jumped at the idea when Jess said we were looking for someone."

Denise's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That's great. One less thing for you to worry about."

"Definitely," Alyssa agreed.

She watched as Denise turned towards the building, her boots crunching through the snow.

As if sensing her gaze, Denise glanced back over her shoulder, catching Alyssa's eye.

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth, and Alyssa felt her heart skip a beat.

She quickly looked away, busying herself with straightening a nearby garland. She couldn't let herself get caught up in the way Denise made her feel. Not when she knew that Denise would be leaving in just a few short weeks.

But even as she tried to push the thoughts away, Alyssa couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if Denise stayed.

She shook her head, pushing the thought away. It what world did she think she had a chance with someone like Denise Adams. Just because she was gay didn't mean she had any kind of a chance with her. The woman was a Hollywood star, used to rubbing elbows with the rich and famous. She probably had her pick of gorgeous women falling at her feet.

Although, a memory from last night flashed through her mind. What had Denise said? Something about putting her career first? 'The one time I did put myself out there, she left me. Because she couldn't handle keeping us a secret.'

Alyssa sighed, her breath clouding in the cold air and turned back to the task at hand, helping a family select the perfect tree. But even as she chatted and laughed with the customers, her mind kept drifting back to Denise.

Alyssa had found herself completely mesmerized by Denise last night. Not the glamorous, world famous actress side of her. The vulnerable, casual, relaxed version of her. The one who had shared things with her that Alyssa was pretty sure very people knew.

As the evening had gone on, and Denise opened up to her more, Alyssa forgot that they had been enemies just a few weeks ago and were barely friends now. It had felt

like they'd spent countless days like that together before.

But Alyssa knew it was just a fantasy. Women like Denise Adams didn't end up with women like her. It just wasn't the way the world worked.

There was only another hour of daylight left and the busy rush was over. Alyssa went over to the building where they held the Santa event each year and stamped the snow from her boots before she pushed open the heavy wooden door. Warmth rushed over her face as she stepped inside. The scent of cinnamon and pine needles filled the air.

She stopped short. The space had transformed. Twinkling lights cascaded from the ceiling beams, creating a magical canopy overhead. Garland wrapped around support beams, adorned with red and gold ribbons. In the corner, a grand chair draped in red velvet waited for Santa, surrounded by wrapped prop presents and life-sized wooden nutcrackers.

Denise stood on a ladder, reaching up to adjust a string of lights. Her beanie was gone, and her hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders.

"This looks amazing," Alyssa said, taking in every detail.

Denise startled slightly, nearly losing her balance on the ladder. Alyssa instinctively stepped forward, but Denise quickly steadied herself.

"You scared me," Denise said, climbing down. She pushed her hair back from her face. "I found these old decorations in some boxes. I hope it was okay to use them."

"More than okay." Alyssa's chest tightened as she recognized ornaments from past events, each one carrying memories of Wayne and the joy he brought to so many children. "I can't believe you did all this by yourself. Wayne would have loved this."

Denise pressed her lips together. “The only thing that’s missing really is a tree.”

“Do you want to help me pick one now?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Alyssa led Denise through the rows of trees, their boots crunching in the snow. The setting sun painted the sky in shades of pink and orange, casting long shadows across the white ground. Her breath came out in visible puffs as she pointed out various trees, explaining why each one might or might not work for the event.

“This one’s probably too tall for the space,” Alyssa said, passing a towering Fraser fir. “And that one’s already been tagged for the Millers.” She gestured to a blue spruce with a red ribbon tied to one of its branches.

The cold air nipped at her cheeks, but Alyssa barely noticed. She was too aware of Denise walking beside her, their shoulders occasionally brushing as they navigated the narrow paths between the trees. The actress had pulled her beanie back on, and loose strands of blonde hair peeked out from beneath it.

“What about this one?” Denise stopped in front of a Douglas fir, reaching out to touch one of its branches.

Alyssa stepped closer to examine it. The tree was full and symmetrical, standing about eight feet tall. Its needles were a deep green, and it had that perfect Christmas tree shape that seemed almost too good to be true. Her hand brushed against Denise’s as they both reached for the same branch, and Alyssa quickly pulled back.

“This might be perfect,” Alyssa said, circling the tree. “It’s the right height for the space, and look how full it is - plenty of room for ornaments.”



“Should we take it then?” Denise asked, tilting her head to study the tree from a different angle.

“Yeah,” Alyssa nodded, pulling a ribbon from her pocket. “This is definitely the one.”

“Speaking of trees, have you picked one out for the farmhouse yet?” Alyssa asked.

“Oh.” Denise blinked, caught off guard. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“You are putting up a tree, right?”

A small smile played at Denise’s lips. “I suppose I should. It would look pretty sad to have one of the owners of a Christmas tree farm without a tree.”

“Have a look.”

“Now?”

“No time like the present. Besides, all the best ones get tagged early.”

Denise nodded. “Okay. I’ll start looking.”

Alyssa turned to help Denise find the perfect tree for the farmhouse when a familiar voice called out her name. She spun around, a smile already spreading across her face as she recognized the figure walking towards her in the fading light.

“Sabrina!” Alyssa exclaimed, stepping forward to meet her halfway.

Sabrina grinned as she pulled Alyssa into a tight hug. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, her voice muffled against Alyssa’s shoulder.

Alyssa squeezed her back, relishing the familiar comfort of Sabrina's embrace. They had been friends long before they started dating in their senior year of high school, and even though their romantic relationship had only lasted two years, their friendship had endured.

As they pulled apart, Alyssa took a moment to study Sabrina. She looked good, her brown eyes sparkling with warmth and her cheeks flushed from the cold. Her dark hair was longer than it was this time last year. Even though she was just a few hours away in New York City, they rarely saw each other, just at Thanksgiving and then again at Christmas.

"So, did you have a good day yesterday?" Sabrina asked, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "I thought you might take me up on the offer to join us. Mom made her famous apple pie."

"I actually had a really nice day." Alyssa's mind drifted back to the evening spent with Denise, sharing stories and opening up to each other. "I wasn't alone."

"Oh?" Sabrina's eyebrows lifted with interest.

Alyssa ignored her inquisitive tone. "Besides, how could I spend Thanksgiving with you and your family with your girlfriend there too? There's no way that wouldn't be awkward." Alyssa shook her head, remembering the warmth of Sabrina's family home, her mother's welcoming hugs, her father's terrible jokes.

"True." Sabrina laughed softly. "My parents always did love you. Sometimes I think they were more upset about our breakup than we were."

Alyssa felt a gentle pang in her chest at the memory. Not of lost love - that had faded long ago - but of the family she'd once considered her own, especially after her parents had cut ties. She glanced over her shoulder, suddenly remembering Denise,

but the actress had disappeared among the trees.

“So, are you here to pick out your tree?” Alyssa asked, pushing aside thoughts of Denise’s disappearance.

“Yeah, I hope it’s not too late.” Sabrina pulled her coat tighter around herself. “I was supposed to come this afternoon, but I got caught running an errand. I won’t take long though. I’m not as fussy as my mother is about finding the perfect tree.”

“Don’t worry, we still have plenty of good ones.” Alyssa gestured for Sabrina to follow her down a different row of trees. “How big were you thinking? You guys usually need at least eight or nine feet, right?”

“Yeah, I can’t go home with anything smaller than that.”

Alyssa led her to a section of Fraser firs as the snow started to fall, their branches dusted with fresh snow just a few moments later. “What about this one?”

“It’s great.” Sabrina moved around it before standing back to get a proper look at it. “Yeah. That will look really good between the fireplace and the front window. You have a good eye, Al.”

“Well, I’ve only been helping you pick out trees for what - fifteen years now?” Alyssa pulled a ribbon from her pocket and tied it around one of the branches. “When do you want to pick it up?”

“This time next week? My dad will bring his truck.”

“Sure, I’ll have it ready for him.”

Sabrina stepped closer, pulling Alyssa into another long hug.

“I’ll text you when I’m back for Christmas,” Sabrina said as they pulled apart, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “We should grab coffee, catch up properly.”

“I’d like that.” Alyssa smiled, meaning it.

“Perfect.” Sabrina’s smile widened. “Take care of yourself, Al,” Sabrina said, giving Alyssa’s arm a gentle squeeze before turning to leave.

“You too.” Alyssa watched as Sabrina made her way back through the rows of trees until she disappeared from view.

Alyssa turned around, scanning the rows of trees in the dimming light. A flash of blonde hair caught her attention. Denise stood several trees away.

“Hey,” Alyssa called out softly. “I thought you might have gone back inside.”

“Just wanted to give you some privacy.” Denise kept her eyes on the tree, her fingers trailing through the needles.

The cold air nipped at Alyssa’s cheeks as she watched Denise examine the tree from different angles.

“This one’s nice.” Denise’s voice was quiet, almost hesitant. “What do you think?”

Alyssa moved beside her, studying the tree. It was smaller than most people picked for their living rooms, maybe six feet tall, but it was perfectly shaped with dense, healthy branches.

“It’s beautiful.” Alyssa reached out to touch a branch, snow dusting off the needles. “Perfect size for the farmhouse’s front window.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Denise pulled her beanie lower over her ears, her breath visible in the cold air. “Though I have no idea what I’m going to decorate it with.”

“There should be some old ornaments in the attic.” Alyssa paused, remembering the boxes she’d helped Wayne pack away years ago. “If you want them, I mean.”

Denise didn’t respond right away, and Alyssa felt the weight of something unspoken hanging between them. The easy rapport they’d built over Thanksgiving dinner had shifted, replaced by a strange tension that made the air feel thick despite the winter chill.

Alyssa pulled a ribbon from her pocket, breaking the silence with the soft rustle of fabric. “I’ll mark it for you.” She reached around the tree, careful not to brush against Denise as she tied the ribbon to a branch.

Snow continued to fall in lazy spirals around them, catching in Denise’s hair and on her shoulders. The gathering darkness made it harder to see her face clearly, but Alyssa could feel Denise watching her.

“I should head back inside,” Alyssa said, taking a step back from the tree. “I want to finish up decorating.” She gestured vaguely toward the building, though she wasn’t sure what else actually needed to be done until they cut the tree down. Denise had transformed the space beautifully on her own.

“Right,” Denise said, her voice oddly flat.

Alyssa opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it again. Whatever had created this awkwardness between them, she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Thanks again for all your help with the decorations,” Alyssa said, already turning to

go. “They really are perfect.”

“It’s no problem. I’m glad I could help.” Denise’s words came out flat though. “I’m going to get going.”

“Okay,” Alyssa said. “I’ll see you around.” She turned away before Denise could see the confusion on her face.

She made her way back to the building, her boots crunching through the fresh layer of snow. The warmth inside was a welcome relief from the biting cold, but it did little to ease the unease settling in her stomach.

As Alyssa shrugged off her coat, she couldn’t help but wonder if Denise was regretting her offer to help with the event. She sank into the plush red velvet of the Santa chair and leaned back, closing her eyes for a moment as she tried to push away the nagging doubts. She was probably reading too much into Denise’s behavior.

And wishing for something that would never happen.

But still, the sudden shift in Denise’s demeanor bothered her. Had she said or done something wrong? Alyssa replayed their interactions in her mind, but she couldn’t think of anything.

She sighed, opening her eyes to take in the twinkling lights and garlands surrounding her. The good thing was, she was going to be so busy here these next two weeks, that she shouldn’t have time to think about Denise Adams.

Denise crouched in front of the fireplace, getting the fire ready for later. She wanted to light it now. It was starting to get cold, but she also knew she needed to check on the gifts she'd ordered. She'd received an email about an hour ago with a photo of a stack of boxes, marked delivered, but they were outside the side entrance to the tree farm. If they weren't brought inside, they'd be ruined, and the event was just days away. But the idea of seeing Alyssa with her girlfriend again made her stomach churn.

Denise stood up, brushing wood chips from her hands. She'd been moving among the trees when she saw a woman come up to Alyssa with a grin on her face, wrapping her arms around her in a long hug. Denise tried to ignore them, but as she was looking for a tree, she saw the woman's hand often resting on Alyssa's arm, and the way they gravitated toward each other while picking out their own tree made it obvious that this wasn't just any customer. The casual intimacy stung more than it should have.

She shook away those memories from the other day. The boxes needed to be brought in. If they were left out overnight, the event this weekend would be a complete disaster.

As she took her coat down from the rack, knowing that she just had to go over to the tree farm, she couldn't understand why it bothered her so much to see Alyssa with someone. It wasn't like she had any claim on her. They were barely even friends, thrown together by circumstance and a shared inheritance. But the way Alyssa's face had lit up when that woman had arrived, the easy affection between them, it had stirred something deep inside Denise. Something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Jealousy.

Denise bit the inside of her cheek as she put her boots on. It was ridiculous. She knew that. Alyssa should be with someone like that woman, someone her own age, from around here.

Denise had been trying to forget about the way she was starting to feel the more time she spent with Alyssa, and she thought she'd been doing a decent job of it, but clearly not.

As much as she wanted to deny it, the truth was undeniable. Seeing Alyssa with that woman had hurt in a way Denise couldn't quite explain. Nothing was ever going to happen between her and Alyssa, but still, seeing those two together just cemented that idea.

With a sigh, Denise went outside and got into the driver's seat of her rental car.

The winter air bit at Denise's cheeks as she parked behind the tree farm. She pulled her coat tighter and made her way around the side of the building, glad to see that the boxes weren't there. She could have got back into her car and left, but she wanted to make sure that they were somewhere safe, so she did need to find Alyssa. She kept walking, passing the entrance to the rows of trees.

"Denise?"

The familiar voice stopped her in her tracks. Denise turned, her eyes widening at the sight before her. Quinn Fallon stood there, bundled up in winter gear, a black beanie pulled low over her blonde hair that spilled out beneath it. The same infectious smile Denise remembered from their time on set two years ago spread across Quinn's face as she waved and started walking over.



Denise's mind raced. What was Quinn doing here, of all places? The last she'd heard, Quinn had been filming in Vancouver. Behind Quinn, Denise spotted a woman around her own age that was just a few steps behind Quinn.

Quinn turned back to the older woman. "You didn't tell me this place was that well known."

Before Denise could process the situation, Quinn reached her and pulled her into a warm hug. The familiar scent of Quinn's perfume brought back memories of long days filming together, getting to know one another better between takes while playing sisters in a romantic comedy.

Quinn pulled back, keeping her hands on Denise's shoulders. "This is crazy! Babe, come here." She waved Rebecca over. "Denise, this is my partner Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Denise Adams."

"I know," Rebecca said with a smile as she got closer. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too," Denise said.

"What are you doing here?" Quinn asked.

"I was just about to ask you the same question." Denise still couldn't believe this was happening. "It's a long story, but I actually grew up here. This is my family's tree farm."

"What?" Quinn turned to look at her girlfriend. "I had no idea. Rebecca just insisted that it was worth the two-hour drive to come here and pick out our tree."

"I've been coming here for years," Rebecca said. "And I'm sorry about your father. I didn't know until we stopped for some coffee in town, and I overheard someone say

how strange it would be this year without Wayne around.”

Denise nodded. “Thanks. Yeah.” She really didn’t want to start reminiscing. “Why don’t we go look for your tree?”

Denise led Quinn and Rebecca through the rows of evergreens, passing the ones with tags dangling from their branches. As she went to move into the next row, she collided with a solid form, her hands instinctively reaching out to steady the other person.

Her fingers curled around their waist, and she found herself staring into Alyssa’s eyes. For a moment, the world seemed to still, the cold forgotten as a charged energy crackled between them. Denise’s heart raced, her breath catching in her throat.

The world narrowed to just Alyssa’s eyes, flecks of gold catching the winter sunlight. Denise’s hands remained at Alyssa’s waist, steadying her, but she couldn’t bring herself to let go. Heat bloomed beneath her palms despite the layers between them. The cold air disappeared, replaced by a warmth that spread through her chest.

Alyssa’s lips parted slightly, her breath visible in small puffs between them. A few strands of her hair had escaped from beneath her wool hat, and Denise fought the urge to brush it away from her face.

“I...” Denise started to speak, but her voice came out rough. She cleared her throat, but still couldn’t find the words she wanted to say.

Alyssa’s hands had found their way to her forearms as she spoke, breaking the spell that Denise seemed to be under. “You’re helping customers pick their trees now?” Alyssa asked with a smirk.

Denise dropped her hands, stepping back as a flush crept up her neck. She opened her

mouth to respond, but before she could, Quinn and Rebecca appeared from behind a row of trees.

Alyssa's eyes widened, her jaw slackening as she took in the sight of the famous actress. "Oh my god, you're Quinn Fallon."

Quinn grinned, extending a gloved hand. "That's me. And you are?"

"Alyssa. Alyssa Greene." She shook Quinn's hand, her gaze darting between Quinn and Denise.

Denise jumped in, a little miffed that Alyssa was starstruck by Quinn and not her. "Quinn, Rebecca, this is Alyssa. She's been working here for years, alongside my father."

Rebecca smiled. "I think you helped me out a few years ago."

Alyssa's gaze finally left Quinn and focused on Rebecca. "Yes, that's right. Sorry. I'm not normally... Anyway, did you find a tree?"

Quinn nodded. "I think so." She glanced at Rebecca. "Unless, you'd prefer the other one? The taller one?"

"No, I think the one you found is perfect," Rebecca said.

Denise watched the exchange as Rebecca slid her arm around Quinn's waist, and once again that twinge of jealousy seemed to flair up out of nowhere. She remembered when Quinn came out, on a late night talk show of all places, and once again, Denise watched someone else put their fears to one side and be brave, braver than she'd ever be.

Alyssa's voice cut through her thoughts. "I'll get one of the guys to cut it down for you. I'll be back in a minute."

Denise caught up with Quinn, while Rebecca went inside with Alyssa.

"I still can't believe you're here," Quinn said with a warm smile. "Selling Christmas trees. Do you do this every year?"

"No." Denise shoved her hands in her pockets. "No, it's just a bit complicated now because I inherited this place. I have to decide what I want to do with it. I had thought I'd sell it. The land is perfect for a ski resort."

"Really? Rebecca kept going on about the tradition. How her parents had brought her here when she was a kid."

"No, I know," Denise said. "But my days in Hollywood are numbered. I just turned forty-five, so... I don't need to tell you what that means. I'm anxious to get back, to find my next role."

"I get that." Quinn looked around. "But maybe there's a compromise. You could hire a manager or something? I don't know."

"I'm going to take some time to think about it in the new year."

Denise's eyes locked on Alyssa's as she came back with two of the staff, ready to cut the tree down.

She had to go back. Staying here wasn't going to do her any good. Maybe Quinn had a point. Maybe she could leave Alyssa in charge. That way everyone would be happy. Denise could leave, and Alyssa could keep living and working here. Then she could even move into the farmhouse.

That was the most sensible thing to do.

Alyssa moved around the towering Christmas tree, carefully draping strings of twinkling lights over its fragrant branches. The tree farm had officially closed for the day, but she wanted to get a head start on decorating for tomorrow's Santa event. She hummed along to the festive music playing softly in the background, losing herself in the task at hand.

The sound of footsteps behind her made Alyssa turn, surprised to see Denise standing in the doorway. "Hi," Alyssa said as she took Denise in. Her hat was in her hand as she ran her fingers through her long blond hair, tousling it as she left the hat on a box inside the door. Alyssa had assumed that she'd gone home.

"Hi," Denise said before she closed the door behind her, blocking out the cold night air. She shrugged off her coat too, and Alyssa watched as Denise approached the tree, her gaze lingering on the twinkling lights. "Need a hand with those?" Denise asked, gesturing to the tangled strands in Alyssa's arms.

Alyssa hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Sure, thanks." She handed Denise a portion of the lights, and they began working together in silence, weaving the strands through the branches.

Alyssa bit her lip, heat creeping up her neck when she thought about what had happened outside. "Listen, about earlier. With Quinn Fallon... I'm sorry if I was acting weird. I just wasn't expecting to see her, you know, here. I've seen most of her movies."

Denise raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Oh, so you’re apologizing for being starstruck by Quinn, but not by me?” Her tone was light and teasing, but Alyssa could sense a hint of jealousy beneath the surface.

Alyssa felt her cheeks warm, and she focused intently on untangling a particularly stubborn knot in the lights. “Actually, I was starstruck when you first walked into the lawyer’s office,” she admitted. “But then I was too busy being angry at you.”

Denise didn’t say anything as she moved around the tree with the lights, and Alyssa couldn’t see her reaction. Then they’d reached the point where someone would have to get up on the ladder.

Denise handed Alyssa the lights in her hands and went over to the ladder in the corner of the room and brought it over, climbing the steps and holding out her hand for the lights.

Alyssa swallowed as she took a step back, intending to direct Denise with the lights. But she found herself momentarily distracted, her gaze fixing on the hint of skin revealed as Denise’s sweater rode up.

“Do you have a star?” Denise asked, and Alyssa quickly averted her eyes, a flush warming her cheeks.

“Hmm?”

“An angel? A topper of some kind?”

“Oh, um...” Alyssa turned to look at the boxes in the corner of the room. “Yeah. Hold on a sec.” She found the gold star in the second box she tried and went over to the ladder, standing on her toes to hand the star up to Denise.

“Thanks,” Denise said with a bit of a smile on her lips.

Alyssa stepped back, tilting her head to get a better view of the tree. The lights cast a warm glow across the room, but her attention kept drifting to Denise perched on the ladder. Those jeans fit her perfectly, hugging every curve.

“How is this looking?” Denise asked.

Alyssa’s eyes snapped up, meeting Denise’s questioning gaze. Her mouth went dry. The soft Christmas music playing in the background faded away, replaced by the sound of her own pulse in her ears. She blinked, trying to focus on the star rather than the way Denise’s sweater had ridden up even further.

“A little to the left maybe.” Alyssa’s voice came out rougher than intended. She cleared her throat. “I think it’s crooked.”

“Now?” Denise looked down at her from the ladder, one eyebrow raised. A few strands of blonde hair fell across her face, momentarily distracting Alyssa. The soft glow of the Christmas lights highlighted the delicate curve of Denise’s cheekbone, and Alyssa swallowed hard, trying to maintain her composure. The room seemed to grow quieter, the Christmas music fading further into the background as she focused on Denise’s questioning gaze. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself before responding.

“Yeah. That looks good.”

The ladder creaked as Denise descended. Alyssa moved closer to the tree, picking up an ornate glass ball ornament from one of the boxes on the ground to hide the heat rising in her cheeks. She heard Denise’s footsteps behind her.

“You know your girlfriend wouldn’t be impressed if she saw you checking me out



like that.” Denise’s voice carried a playful smirk.

The ornament slipped from Alyssa’s fingers, but she caught it before it could shatter. Her heart thundered in her chest. “What?”

Denise met her gaze, those ice-blue eyes piercing right through her. “You looked me up and down. More than once. I mean, unless you have a free pass, if that’s even still a thing. Although, you’d probably pick someone like Quinn.”

“Why?” Alyssa’s voice came out smaller than intended.

Denise shrugged, the movement elegant and controlled. “Well, she’s out. She’s your age.”

“Yes, but I know you’re gay so it doesn’t really matter whether you’re out or not,” Alyssa said as she hung up the ornament.

“I just meant when you were picking your free pass,” Denise explained.

“I don’t have a free pass,” Alyssa said, still reeling from being caught looking and that they were having this conversation at all.

“Well,” Denise turned away, “Then this is a pointless conversation.”

Alyssa’s heart pounded in her chest as she reached out, her fingers wrapping around Denise’s wrist. The touch was electric, sending a jolt through her.

“I don’t need a free pass because I’m not seeing anyone,” she said, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions inside her.

Denise turned back, her eyes meeting Alyssa’s. There was a moment of silence, a

charged pause where the world seemed to hold its breath. Alyssa's gaze flickered down to Denise's lips, lingering there for a heartbeat too long. Before she could stop herself, she was leaning in, closing the distance between them. Her lips brushed against Denise's, slowly, tentatively.

Denise's lips were soft against hers, and for a moment, Alyssa's heart stopped as she waited for Denise's reaction. Then Denise's hand came up to cup her cheek, and she kissed Alyssa back, her lips moving with a slow, deliberate tenderness that made Alyssa's pulse quicken and her breath catch in her throat.

Her mind flashed back to that moment earlier among the trees. She'd rounded a corner too quickly and crashed right into Denise. When Denise's hands had caught her waist, steadying her, the way Denise had looked at her then – There had been heat in that gaze, and that's what had given her the confidence to kiss Denise.

Now, as Denise's thumb traced along her jaw, Alyssa knew she hadn't imagined it. The same electricity that had sparked between them outside crackled now, intensified by the warmth of Denise's mouth moving against hers. Alyssa's hand found Denise's waist, fingers curling into the soft material of her sweater as she drew her closer.

The kiss deepened naturally, and Alyssa's pulse quickened as Denise's tongue traced her bottom lip. She parted her lips with a soft sigh, letting herself get lost in the sensation.

Denise broke the kiss a few moments later, her hands gently resting on Alyssa's shoulders. "I saw you with that woman." Denise's eyes searched hers. "You looked like a couple."

Alyssa slowly shook her head, her eyes never leaving Denise's. "She's a friend and my high school girlfriend if you must know."

Denise studied her, her expression unreadable. “You’re single,” she said, more a statement than a question.

Alyssa nodded. “Yes.”

Denise leaned in, her lips meeting Alyssa’s in a kiss that was anything but tentative. It was a kiss filled with longing and desire, a kiss that promised more.

Denise’s hand slid underneath Alyssa’s sweater, and Alyssa sighed into the kiss, her body responding to the unexpected touch. Denise’s fingers traced the curve of her waist, sending a tingling sensation rippling over her skin. And then the kiss deepened, their tongues dancing together in a sensual duet that left Alyssa breathless.

When Denise pulled away again, Alyssa’s heart pounded in her chest.

Denise looked at her with a mixture of desire and uncertainty in her eyes. “I don’t know what’s happening between us,” she said softly. “All I know is that I want you.”

Alyssa’s heart fluttered at Denise’s words. She traced her fingers along Denise’s jawline, savoring the softness of her skin. “You know, I never understood the appeal of enemies-to-lovers stories.” A small laugh escaped her lips. “All those romance novels where people who hate each other end up falling for each other? I always thought it was kind of ridiculous.” She pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of Denise’s mouth. “But now? Standing here with you? I get it.”

Denise’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Are you saying I’m your enemy?”

“Well, you did threaten to contest the will.” Alyssa’s fingers slid to the back of Denise’s neck, moving underneath her silky smooth hair. “And you insinuated that I was a gold digger.”

“I was wrong.” Denise’s thumb brushed across Alyssa’s bottom lip. “About so many things.”

Alyssa’s heart raced as she looked into Denise’s eyes, seeing the desire that mirrored her own. The words tumbled out before she could second-guess herself. “Come back to the cabin with me.”

Denise’s gaze intensified, her eyes darkening with want. Alyssa had never been one to move this quickly, but there was something different about being with Denise. It was electric, a connection that sparked and sizzled between them.

Denise’s lips curved into a small smile. “Okay.”

That single word sent a thrill through Alyssa. She reached for Denise’s hand, their fingers intertwining as she led her towards the door. With her free hand, Alyssa switched off the lights, plunging the room into darkness save for the soft glow of the Christmas tree.

They stepped outside, the cold night air surrounding them. Alyssa locked the door, her hand trembling slightly with anticipation. When she turned back to Denise, she found her standing close, the fog of their breath mingling in the space between them.

Denise’s hand came up to cup Alyssa’s cheek, her thumb brushing over her skin in a gentle caress. Alyssa leaned into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. When she opened them again, Denise was leaning in, her lips brushing against Alyssa’s in a soft, teasing kiss that left her wanting more.

“Let’s go,” Denise whispered against her lips.

Denise entered Alyssa's cabin, the warmth of their kiss lingering on her lips. Alyssa flicked on two lamps, the soft glow casting warm light around the cozy space. Alyssa shrugged off her coat, hanging it on a hook by the door, and Denise followed suit, her fingers brushing through her hair. Her eyes were drawn to Alyssa as she crouched in front of the fireplace.

The scratch of the match broke the silence, and orange light bloomed in the darkness, the flames casting a warm, dancing light across her face.

"Wine?" Alyssa straightened up, brushing her hands on her jeans.

Denise stepped closer, her eyes drawn to Alyssa's simple black sweater and the way her jeans hugged her hips. There was an ease about her, a comfort in her own skin that Denise found increasingly captivating. She reached out, her fingers lightly brushing Alyssa's arm.

"I'm okay," she said, her voice softer than she intended. She paused, her heart pounding in her chest as she met Alyssa's gaze. "I just want you."

The space between them vanished as Alyssa leaned in, her eyes fluttering closed. Denise felt Alyssa's warm breath against her skin just before their lips met in a passionate kiss. Denise's heart thundered in her chest as she surrendered to the moment, her hands finding their way to Alyssa's waist, pulling her closer. The kiss deepened, filled with a mix of longing and tenderness that left Denise breathless and wanting more.

Denise lost herself in the kiss. It was a battle of give and take, each vying for control, the tension between them sparking into a flame that threatened to consume them both. Denise's hands found their way to Alyssa's waist, pulling her closer, the heat between them growing with each passing second.

Alyssa guided them back towards the couch, her hands firm and insistent on Denise's shoulders. Denise felt the couch against the back of her legs and then she was falling, Alyssa pushing her down onto the cushions. Before she could react, Alyssa was climbing onto her lap, her knees pressing into the couch on either side of Denise's thighs.

Denise's breath stalled as Alyssa leaned in, her hands framing Denise's face. Their eyes met, the hazel-green of Alyssa's irises darkened with desire. Alyssa's thumb brushed against her cheek, a soft, gentle touch that sent a shiver through her.

"You're so beautiful," Alyssa murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. Denise felt a warmth spread through her at the words, a feeling she hadn't experienced in a long time. She reached up, her fingers tangling in Alyssa's long, dark hair, pulling her closer. Their lips met again, the kiss deeper this time, filled with a hunger that left Denise breathless.

Their bodies pressed together, the friction between them sending waves of pleasure through Denise. Her hands roamed over Alyssa's back, before sliding underneath her sweater, her fingers tracing along her hip and then her stomach, the muscles tensing under her touch.

Alyssa's hips ground against hers, the movement sending a spark through Denise, making her gasp into the kiss. Denise's hands slid lower, filling her palms with the firmness of Alyssa's ass. Alyssa moaned, the sound vibrating through Denise as they deepened the kiss.

Alyssa broke the kiss for just a second, her hands tugging at Denise's sweater, lifting it over her head, her lips barely leaving Denise's. The sweater was flung away, and Denise shuddered as Alyssa's warm hand slid from her shoulder down over her chest, her hand cupping her breast through her bra as they kissed.

Denise's grip tightened on her ass, and Alyssa arched into the touch, pressing herself closer, her hips rocking against Denise's in a slow, sensual rhythm that left them both breathless.

They kissed deeply, their tongues tangling, tasting and exploring. Denise's hands squeezed Alyssa's ass, pulling her impossibly closer, their bodies fitting together perfectly.

Alyssa pulled away, her eyes dark with desire, her lips swollen from their kisses. Denise couldn't help but lean in, capturing Alyssa's lips once more in a hungry kiss. Their passion escalated, their kisses becoming more urgent, their hands exploring with increasing intensity.

Denise lifted Alyssa's sweater, her fingers grazing warm skin as she pulled it over her head. Alyssa's hair cascaded down, framing her flushed face.

"The jeans have to go," Alyssa murmured as she stood up, her voice barely above a whisper. Her hands reached for Denise's waistband, fingers deftly unbuttoning her jeans.

Denise felt a shiver run through her as Alyssa tugged her jeans down, her touch gentle yet insistent. She lifted her hips, allowing Alyssa to pull them off completely. Her heart pounded in her chest as she met Alyssa's gaze, the room filled with a charged silence. "Yours too," she said, her voice steady despite the butterflies in her stomach.

Alyssa stood, unbuttoning her own and lowering the zipper. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes locked onto Denise's. Then she slowly pushed them down before stepping out of them gracefully. The soft glow of the fireplace cast shadows across her body, highlighting her curves in a way that made Denise's breath catch.

When Alyssa climbed back onto the couch, straddling Denise, the air between them crackled with tension. Denise's hands found their way to Alyssa's hips, her thumbs tracing the line of her waistband. Alyssa's skin was warm and soft. Denise looked up at her as she reached up, her fingers tangling in Alyssa's hair, pulling her down into a heated kiss. Their lips met, the kiss slow and deep, filled with a tenderness that made Denise's heart stutter.

Alyssa's hands roamed Denise's body, her fingers tracing the line of her collarbone, the curve of her shoulder. Denise shuddered, her skin tingling under Alyssa's touch. She could feel the heat between them, the tension building with each passing second.

Alyssa's hands roamed lower, her fingers gliding over her stomach and into her underwear as they continued to kiss. Denise arched off the couch, a moan escaping her lips as Alyssa's fingers danced over her, igniting a fire that spread through her veins. Their kisses grew hungrier, their bodies moving in perfect sync as if they'd done this many times before.

Denise moaned as Alyssa's fingers teased her, sending waves of pleasure through her. She could feel the heat building, her body responding to Alyssa's touch in a way it hadn't in years. She was losing control, her senses overwhelmed by the sensation of Alyssa's fingers dancing over her.

"Alyssa..." Denise gasped, breaking the kiss, her voice barely above a whisper. She felt Alyssa's smile against her neck, the soft press of her lips sending a shiver down her spine.



Alyssa's hand withdrew, leaving Denise aching. She opened her mouth to protest, but Alyssa's fingers were already slipping behind Denise, finding the clasp of her bra. With a flick, the bra was unhooked, the straps sliding down her shoulders. Denise shuddered as Alyssa's hands slid around to cup her breasts, her thumbs brushing over her nipples, drawing out a moan from deep within her.

Alyssa's lips kissed a trail along her jaw while her hands teased her.

"This won't take long," Denise admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's been a while since I..."

Alyssa dipped her head lower, her lips wrapping around Denise's nipple, her tongue teasing the sensitive bud, and Denise's sentence was cut short by another moan as she threaded her fingers through Alyssa's hair, holding her closer. A soft gasp escaped her lips as Alyssa's hand slid into her underwear, her fingers brushing against her clit.

The sensation was overwhelming, a rush of pleasure that left Denise breathless. She arched her back, pressing herself closer to Alyssa, her body craving more. Alyssa's mouth moved to her other breast, her tongue circling her nipple, drawing out another whimper.

Denise's heart pounded in her chest, her body aching with a need she hadn't felt in years. She clung to Alyssa, her fingers tangling in her hair, her breath coming in quick, shallow gasps. All she could focus on was the sensation of Alyssa's mouth on her breast, and her hand between her legs.

Alyssa's fingers moved with a slow, deliberate rhythm, each stroke sending waves of pleasure coursing through Denise. She could feel the heat building, the tension coiling in her stomach. She was close, so close. Her hips rocked against Alyssa's hand, her body seeking release.

Denise's eyes fluttered closed, her breath ragged as Alyssa's fingers teased her, pushing her closer to the edge.

Denise gasped as Alyssa's fingers slid inside her in a smooth stroke. She slammed her eyes shut, her head falling back against the couch.

Her hips bucked against Alyssa's hand, her body seeking more. Alyssa's tongue continued to tease her nipple, drawing out a low moan. The dual sensations were overwhelming, a rush of heat and desire that left her breathless.

"Oh, don't stop," Denise panted.

Her breath came in quick, shallow gasps, her heart pounding in her chest. She was losing control, her body responding to Alyssa's touch in a way it hadn't in years. She slid her hand underneath Alyssa's hair, gently cupping her neck and bringing her lips up to her own in a fiery kiss.

She clung to Alyssa, her fingers lost in her hair, her body pressing closer, seeking more of the intoxicating sensation, chasing the release that hovered just out of reach.

Alyssa's fingers curled inside her, and Denise gasped, breaking the kiss. Her body tensed as she hovered on the precipice, her gaze locked onto Alyssa's.

Denise's body tensed as the pleasure coiled tighter within her, Alyssa's fingers moving in sync with the rhythm of her hips. She whimpered, her eyes never leaving Alyssa's. "That feels so good," Denise moaned, her fingers tangled in Alyssa's hair.

"That's it," Alyssa murmured, her voice thick with desire. "Come for me."

Denise's breath caught as her body responded to Alyssa's words. She rocked her hips, giving into the release that had suddenly come over her.

A guttural moan escaped her lips, her back arching as she came. Her eyes fluttered closed, the pleasure washing over her in waves.

Her body trembled, her hips still moving as she rode out the waves of her orgasm.

“Oh Alyssa,” Denise groaned, her face buried in Alyssa’s neck as she clung to her. “Fuck.”

She felt Alyssa’s hand on her cheek, holding her close as the last tremors of her orgasm washed over her. A soft sigh escaped her lips, her body feeling weightless as she rested against Alyssa.

She felt Alyssa’s lips press a soft kiss to her shoulder, her breath warm against Denise’s skin as she slowly withdrew her fingers.

Denise leaned back against the couch, her eyes fluttering open as she looked up at her. “I have no words,” she said with a lopsided smile.

Alyssa smiled as she leaned in to kiss Denise lightly. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Hmm. You should,” Denise said between kisses. “Now, where is your bedroom.”

Alyssa’s lips curved into a smile as she stood up. “This way.”

Denise took Alyssa’s hand, allowing herself to be led through the cozy cabin. The fire had nearly gone out, but Denise didn’t think they’d need the heat somehow.

Alyssa opened the bedroom door and found the switch for the lamp on the dresser. As she turned, Denise was there, stepping forward to capture her lips in a deliciously slow kiss. Her hands rested on Alyssa's waist, one circling to the small of her back, pulling her closer. The touch of Denise's skin against hers, the feeling of Denise's bare breasts pressed against her own, sent a ripple of desire through Alyssa.

Their bodies pressed together, fitting perfectly as if they were made for each other. Alyssa's fingers lost in Denise's hair, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss. Denise let out a soft moan, her hands moving to cup Alyssa's face, her thumbs tracing the line of her jaw.

Alyssa melted into Denise's touch. She hadn't let her daydreams go this far, but Alyssa never could have anticipated how well they fit together.

Denise's skilled hands moved over her, igniting every nerve ending. Her hands slid up her back, and she undid Alyssa's bra, letting the straps fall from her shoulders. The bra slid down her arms, pooling at her elbows before dropping to the floor. Alyssa inhaled a shaky breath as she stepped into Denise's space again, their bare breasts touching as Alyssa leaned in to find her lips again, her hands gliding up the back of Denise's thighs until her hands were full of Denise's ass.

Denise groaned into her mouth as Alyssa's hands squeezed. Alyssa slid her thigh between Denise's, encouraging her to grind her hips against Alyssa. The sensations were overwhelming, and Denise's kiss turned desperate as she pressed them tighter together.

Denise broke the kiss, a smile playing on her lips as she guided Alyssa back toward the bed. Their eyes locked, as she pushed Alyssa gently onto the bed, and Denise followed, her body covering Alyssa's, her lips hovering just above hers. Denise trailed her fingers over the curve of her breast and down across her stomach, and Alyssa struggled to keep her breathing even.

"You're stunning," Denise whispered, her fingers tracing lazy patterns over her skin. Alyssa's breath quickened as she felt the gentle touch skim over her hip, dip below the waistband of her underwear, and then drift back up, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

Alyssa whimpered, her hips lifting off the bed.

Denise pressed her palm against her lower abdomen again, sliding her hand into her underwear, going lower this time.

"You're so wet," Denise murmured, her lips moving against Alyssa's ear, sending a rush of desire through her as Denise's fingers found the evidence of just how turned on Alyssa was right now.

Her touch was slow, deliberate, circling and stroking with just the right amount of pressure. Alyssa's hips bucked, her body craving more contact. Denise's other hand pressed gently against her hip, holding her in place.

Denise was driving her to the edge, but never quite pushing her over. It was exquisite torture, and Alyssa never wanted it to end.

Her fingers danced away from Alyssa's center, leaving her gasping for more. Alyssa's eyes fluttered open, meeting Denise's gaze, heavy with desire. Denise sat up, her fingers hooking into the waistband of Alyssa's underwear. With a slow, deliberate motion, she slid them down. Denise tossed the underwear aside, her eyes

never leaving Alyssa's body.

Denise then shifted, her hands moving to her own hips. She hooked her thumbs into the lace of her panties and began to slide them down. Alyssa let her gaze wander of Denise's gorgeous body.

Denise climbed back on top of her, and Alyssa groaned as she felt Denise's fingers slide up her thigh, parting her lips. Denise circled her clit, and Alyssa moaned, her body responding instantly. She threaded her fingers through Denise's hair, tugging gently, guiding Denise's lips down to hers. Their mouths met in a hungry kiss, and Alyssa didn't think she'd ever been this turned on this quickly.

Denise's touch was electric, and her own hands couldn't stay still. She explored every inch of Denise's body, mapping her curves and the softness of her skin. Denise trailed kisses down her neck, and Alyssa arched her back, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

Alyssa was about to ask Denise to stop torturing her like this when she felt Denise's fingers move lower, and then she pushed two maybe three fingers inside, leaving Alyssa grinding back hard against her, her whole body on fire now.

Denise's lips found the sensitive spot just below her ear, and she suckled gently, her fingers finding the perfect rhythm.

Alyssa's breath quickened. Denise's name escaped her lips in a whispered moan as she felt that low heat of pleasure building. Denise's fingers moved faster, her thumb adding pressure, and Alyssa's body stiffened just a few seconds later.

With a low moan, she tensed, her body arching off the bed as a wave of pleasure crashed over her. Denise's name was torn from her lips as she rode out the intense climax, her fingers tightening in Denise's hair.

Denise murmured softly, her lips moving against her skin, gentle words of encouragement that sent shivers through her. Alyssa's body was still trembling, her breath coming in gasps, as she slowly floated back down to earth.

She opened her eyes, meeting Denise's gaze, and saw the desire burning in the depths of her stunning blue eyes. Without a word, Denise carefully withdrew her fingers and began to kiss her way down Alyssa's body, slow and deliberate, until she settled between her thighs.

The touch of Denise's tongue sent another shockwave of pleasure through her, and Alyssa's fingers tightened in her hair. The sensations were overwhelming, and she could already feel the stirrings of another climax chasing the first.

As if reading her mind, Denise took her clit into her mouth, alternating the pressure and the intensity until Alyssa's moans filled the room, her body moving with the waves of pleasure.

A warm, tingling afterglow spread through her limbs, and she felt herself relaxing in a way she hadn't in a long time. Maybe ever. And as Alyssa came down from her high, she became aware of Denise's fingers gently stroking her stomach, sending little shivers through her.

She felt Denise shift, and then soft lips pressed against her shoulder, followed by a gentle kiss on her collarbone. Denise's breath tickled her skin, and Alyssa rolled onto her side, reaching out to tangle her legs with Denise's. She drew languid circles on Denise's back with her fingertips as she held her gaze.

Denise's lips found hers again, and they kissed slowly, deeply, as if they had all the time in the world. Alyssa let her hands roam, exploring every curve of Denise's body, committing it to memory. She couldn't get enough of the feel of her, the taste of her, the way her body moved with hers.

Her hand drifted down to cup Denise's breast, and she moaned into the kiss. Denise's fingers tightened in her hair, guiding her closer. Their kisses grew more urgent, their bodies moving together again.

Alyssa rolled on top of Denise, their legs still entwined, and looked down at the stunning woman beneath her. Alyssa's heart raced at the sight of Denise wanting her, her eyes full of desire.

The power she felt in that moment was intoxicating. It should have scared her how much Alyssa had wanted this, how much she wanted more than this one night, but she couldn't think about that now.

Right now, the only thing she wanted to think about was making Denise moan her name again, to see that look of desire in her eyes.



Denise stretched her arms out to the side, gradually waking up. Just about every muscle ached as she reached out, her hand seeking the warmth of Alyssa's body beside her. Instead, her fingers brushed against cool sheets, and her eyes fluttered open.

She was alone in Alyssa's bed.

Denise noticed a piece of paper on the nightstand. She sat up, the covers falling away, and reached for the note.

Sorry for leaving without waking you, but I had to open this morning, and I needed to finish decorating the tree we abandoned last night before the kids arrive later.

See you later x

Denise read the note twice, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth when she thought about how last night had even happened. Denise had caught Alyssa blatantly checking her out when she was up on the ladder, and even though she knew she shouldn't, she'd teased Alyssa about it.

But that's when everything had changed, because it turned out that Denise had it all wrong. Alyssa didn't have a girlfriend.

And before Denise could even process that news fully, Alyssa was kissing her.

Denise closed her eyes, a soft smile playing on her lips as she thought about everything that had happened after that. She never could have imagined how good they'd be together.

She could still feel the warmth of Alyssa's body pressed against hers, the gentle rise and fall of her breath as they drifted off to sleep in the early hours of the morning.

It had been amazing—not just the sex, but the intimacy, the connection. She hadn't felt this way in a very long time, and now, Denise had something to think about.

Because how could she leave this time next month?

Well, maybe last night had been a one-time thing, but... Denise sighed as she got up and gathered her clothes, padding into the living room to get her bra, sweater, and jeans.

From her perspective, it should be a one-night thing. Denise couldn't even believe she was thinking about staying. "Over one night?" she murmured to herself as she went back into the bedroom to get changed.

She shook her head, once again blaming her loneliness for her feelings.

Denise got dressed quickly and left the cabin. Thankfully, they'd both driven back here last night otherwise Denise would be doing a walk of shame back up to the tree farm to get her rental car.

She got in her car and made the short drive back to the farmhouse for a shower and some breakfast. She could think about her future later, because right now, she needed to help Alyssa finish decorating and make sure everything was in order before all the kids arrived in the evening.

Alyssa's muscles ached as she trudged through the snow toward the building where the event would start in two hours time. The cold December air stung her cheeks, but she barely noticed. Her mind kept drifting back to last night - the warmth of Denise's skin, the softness of her lips, the way she'd-

Alyssa couldn't stop herself from smiling. She'd been so busy today that she'd hardly had any time to think about last night. She'd spent the day helping customers secure their trees, directing traffic, and making sure everything ran smoothly. Her lack of sleep was catching up with her now though, and she wished she could sneak off and go for a nap somewhere, but there just wasn't time.

Alyssa opened the door and stopped in the doorway.

"We need to make sure there's enough room for the line to wrap around," Denise said, helping Greg, one of the college students she'd hired last month, put up the roped barriers.

Alyssa's heart skipped. Denise's hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and she was wearing a white hoody with well-worn jeans. She looked so at home giving directions, like she belonged here.

Greg nodded and moved the barriers. "This look okay?"

"Perfect." Denise turned as Alyssa came into the room. Their eyes met, and a flush crept up her neck. "Hey. I hope you don't mind that I'm here."

“I’m going to take my break, if that’s okay,” Greg said to Alyssa.

“Sure,” Alyssa said, sliding her hands into the pockets of her jeans as Greg left because she didn’t trust herself not to pull Denise into her arms then and there. She looked so effortlessly gorgeous. “No,” she said to Denise with a smile. “Why would I mind?”

“We never really talked about what my role here would be so…” Denise pressed her lips together. “I didn’t want to overstep, but at the same time, this is one of the busiest days of the year around here so…”

“I appreciate the help.” Alyssa thought about all the other things that they never really talked about. They’d fallen into bed last night without ever saying whether it was just a casual thing that they’d both given into in the heat of the moment or if there was the possibility of it being something more.

Although Alyssa nearly laughed out loud at that thought. Denise was still entirely out of her league, even after last night.

“You okay?” Denise asked, tilting her head slightly as she studied her.

“Tired.” Alyssa said as she held her gaze. “In the best possible way,” she added. “I’m definitely not complaining.”

Denise smiled. “I know. I can imagine. What time did you leave?”

“Before seven.”

Denise grimaced. “Four hours sleep?”

Alyssa could feel her cheeks heating up, a memory of Denise grinding against her

thigh, their bodies pressed together as they'd kissed, both of them coming within seconds of one another. "Something like that."

Denise glanced behind her and then stepped into her space. "Can I kiss you?" she whispered.

Alyssa's breath caught in her throat. The question hung between them as her gaze dropped to Denise's lips, remembering how they'd felt against her skin last night.

"Yes," she breathed.

Denise cupped her face and pressed their lips together. The kiss was soft, tender - so different from their heated exchanges the night before. Alyssa's hands found Denise's waist, pulling her closer as warmth spread through her chest.

Denise pulled back from the kiss, but kept her hand on Alyssa's face, her thumb brushing against Alyssa's cheek.

"Come up to the farmhouse later?" Denise asked. "After the event, I mean. We could have dinner, celebrate it going well." Her lips quirked into a smile. "Hopefully going well."

"I'd like that." Alyssa's fingers curled into the fabric of Denise's hoody.

Denise leaned against the doorframe at the back of the room, her eyes scanning the bustling scene before her. The twinkling lights cast a warm glow over the children's faces as they eagerly awaited their turn with Santa. She watched from a distance, not wanting to be seen, her heart swelling with a mix of nostalgia and warmth. She could almost see her father in the Santa suit, his laughter echoing through the room, his eyes twinkling with the same joy she saw in the children's faces now.

The room was a whirlwind of activity, and the air was filled with the sweet scent of pine and freshly baked cookies, the soft hum of holiday music blending with the children's laughter. Denise couldn't help but smile, her chest tightening with a sense of pride and longing. This was her father's legacy, his love for the community and the magic of Christmas shining through every detail.

She watched as Alyssa moved effortlessly through the crowd, keeping the event running smoothly.

It still struck her just how much things could change in a month. When Denise first arrived back in Stony Creek, she could barely even think about her father without feeling angry, but now she found her childhood memories prevailing over the ones of her last few days here before she left for California. She'd had an amazing childhood here, and he had been a great father up until he hadn't.

But the more time she spent with Alyssa and the more she learned about how kind he'd been to her in the last thirteen years, Denise was slowly coming to terms with the idea that her father had made a mistake, and apparently, it was one that he'd

wanted to fix.

Denise swallowed. Her throat started to feel a little tight as she watched the man playing Santa hand out another present to a blond-haired girl who couldn't have been more than six, and she found herself blinking back tears, thinking about what might have been if she'd answered that call.

Denise pushed away from the doorframe. Everything was running smoothly there, and she wanted to get home to start getting dinner ready for when Alyssa arrived.

The aroma of roasting chicken and herbs filled the farmhouse when Denise heard a car outside. Denise wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and headed for the door. Through the window, she caught sight of Alyssa's truck - and there, strapped in the back, was a Christmas tree.

"Did you think I'd forgotten?" Alyssa's cheeks were pink from the cold, her eyes bright.

"No," Denise said, reaching for her boots by the door. "I just can't believe that I'm going to have a tree. I haven't had one since I left here."

"At all?" Alyssa's hands stilled on the rope securing the tree.

"No." The word came out softer than Denise intended.

Each Christmas in L.A., she'd thrown herself into work or traveled somewhere warm, anywhere to escape the memories that came with this time of year.

They worked together to untie the tree, Denise following Alyssa's lead. Together, they carried it through the door, navigating carefully through the doorway.

“The stand should be in the hallway closet,” Alyssa said, holding the tree steady while Denise went down the hall. She found it on the bottom shelf.

Denise’s fingers worked the screws of the tree stand, memories of childhood Christmases flooding back. The scent of fresh pine filled her nostrils, and for the first time in decades, it didn’t bring pain with it.

“Sorry,” Alyssa said, stepping back from the now-secure tree. “I hope I didn’t overstep by suggesting you have one.”

Denise shook her head, crossing the small space between them. Her hand found Alyssa’s cheek, thumb brushing over the soft skin there. She leaned in, pressing her lips against Alyssa’s in a gentle kiss.

“Don’t apologize.” Denise’s voice came out barely above a whisper. Her fingers traced down Alyssa’s arm, finding her hand and squeezing it.

“Thank you for everything you did to make today the success that it was,” Alyssa said. “The decorating, the gifts... It was all perfect.”

“I’m glad I could help.” The warmth in Alyssa’s hazel-green depths drew her in, and before she knew it, they were kissing again, slow and tender.

When they parted, Denise’s fingers lingered on Alyssa’s waist.

“Dinner should be ready in about an hour,” Denise said, reluctantly stepping back.

Alyssa inhaled deeply, her eyes closing for a moment. “It smells amazing.” Her gaze shifted to the bare tree standing in front of the window. “How about we decorate while we wait?”



“Sure,” Denise said with a smile, still not really believing that this felt natural, that for the first time in she hated to think how many years she was almost looking forward to Christmas and doing these kinds of things.

Denise watched Alyssa fluff the branches of the trees, knowing that it had everything to do with her.

Alyssa hung a snowman ornament on a branch about halfway up the tree, stepping back to see how many more gaps she had to fill. The fresh pine scent mingled with aromas of dinner wafting from the kitchen where Denise poured two glasses of red wine. Their eyes met across the room.

“Are you okay?” Denise’s brow furrowed with concern.

“Yeah.” Alyssa picked up another ornament from the box at her feet and found a spot for it. “I was just thinking about how hard this time of year must be for you.”

Denise carried over their glass “It is.” She paused as she handed Alyssa her glass. “Or it used to be. I handle it better now.”

Alyssa searched Denise’s face, unable to imagine what it must have been like to lose her mother so young and right before Christmas. “Would you like to come with me to the candlelight service tomorrow evening?” Alyssa asked.

“The what?”

“It’s in town, in the park.” Alyssa took a sip of wine. “Everyone brings a lantern in memory of someone they loved. I used to go with your father. He always went with a lantern for your mother.” Her voice softened. “I went with one for my best friend from high school. She died in a car accident just after we graduated.” Alyssa’s lips curved into a gentle smile. “It sounds sad, but it’s actually a really nice evening.”

“I’m sorry about your friend.”

“Thanks,” Alyssa said softly. She took another sip of wine. “Would you like to come with me?”

“I would.”

Denise stepped out of the car, her breath misting in the chilly night air. She reached back in to retrieve the lantern she'd brought for her mother, cradling it gently in her hands. Alyssa appeared at her side, holding two lanterns of her own - one for her friend and another for Denise's father.

As they made their way into the park, Denise's eyes widened at the sight before her. The entire area was illuminated by the soft, flickering glow of countless lanterns. They were everywhere - dotting the ground, hanging from the bare branches of the trees, casting a warm, golden light that seemed to dance and sway with each gentle breeze.

It was magical, like something out of a dream. Yet there was a profound sense of peace that seemed to settle over the park, a hushed reverence. Despite the crowd of people gathered, the only sounds were the occasional whisper or muffled footstep.

Denise felt a lump form in her throat as she gazed at the scene, overcome by a swell of emotion. She glanced over at Alyssa, who met her eyes with a soft, understanding look.

Together, they made their way deeper into the park, finding a spot to place their lanterns among the others. As Denise knelt to set hers down, she felt a tiny wave of grief wash over her, an ache that probably would never go away. She straightened up, blinking back tears, and felt Alyssa's hand slip into hers, their fingers intertwining.

They stood there for a long moment, side by side, gazing out at the sea of glowing

lanterns. Each one represented a loved one lost, a cherished memory.

The sea of lanterns blurred as tears welled in Denise's eyes. Three weeks ago, she'd arrived with a single purpose - sell everything and leave. The memories here had been too painful, too raw. But now...

The warmth of Alyssa's hand in hers anchored her to this moment, to this place. Alyssa's thumb traced lazy circles over her skin, and something inside Denise's chest unfurled, spreading warmth through her body despite the December chill.

She was falling for Alyssa, but the realization didn't shock her. It felt like acknowledging something she'd known for days. What shocked her was how right it felt.

The question surfaced in her mind: Why leave?

The winter wind whipped through the empty rows of stumps where Christmas trees had stood only weeks before. Alyssa's boots crunched through the fresh snow as she made her final rounds of the season. Her clipboard held the last inventory count - three hundred and twelve trees sold, slightly better than last year despite everything.

Her muscles ached from the physical toll of the season. The constant lifting, hauling, and wrapping of trees had left her body desperate for rest. But it wasn't just physical exhaustion weighing her down.

She'd spent several nights at the farmhouse with Denise over the past week. It almost didn't feel real how easily they'd fit into each other's lives, especially considering how things had started so badly between them.

But as amazing as the last few weeks had been, they'd yet to talk about what it was that they were doing although maybe that was because there was nothing to talk about. The season was over. They'd have to figure out their business arrangements going forward, but either way, Denise had made it clear that she would be leaving in January, and January was fast approaching. The idea of saying goodbye to Denise made Alyssa feel sick.

Just a few more weeks and Denise would return to her life in Los Angeles, leaving Alyssa with nothing but memories and half-ownership of a farm they'd need to figure out how to manage long-distance.

Alyssa trudged back to her truck, her breath forming clouds in the frigid air. She and

Denise had planned to celebrate the successful season with dinner tonight, but her heart felt heavy at the thought. The bubble they'd been living in was about to burst.

She climbed into the driver's seat, resting her head on the cold steering wheel for a minute.

Alyssa had googled Denise's name last night, something she'd avoided doing since they'd grown closer. The search results painted a picture of a life so far removed from running a Christmas tree farm that it might as well have been on another planet. Designer gowns, Hollywood parties, million-dollar contracts. How could Alyssa possibly fit into that world? She could barely navigate the local county fair without feeling overwhelmed. And what were the chances that Denise even wanted that?

Alyssa started the truck, the engine rumbling to life. She needed to get home and change before dinner, but the excitement she'd felt earlier about celebrating had dimmed considerably. Reality was setting in, and reality meant Denise would be leaving very soon.

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting a warm glow across Alyssa's face. Denise studied the way the shadows played across her features, searching for any hint of what might be troubling her.

The seafood pasta had turned out better than she'd expected - the sauce rich and creamy, the shrimp perfectly cooked. She'd even managed to track down a bottle of that crisp Chablis that paired so wonderfully with seafood.

But something felt off.

Throughout dinner, Alyssa's smiles hadn't quite reached her eyes. Even now, curled up on the couch beside her, Alyssa seemed distant despite her insistence that she was just tired.

Denise took a slow sip of wine, gathering her courage. "Would you like to spend Christmas with me?"

The silence stretched between them, broken only by the snap and pop of burning wood. Each passing second made Denise's chest tighten further.

"Really?" Alyssa asked.

Denise nodded.

"These past few weeks..." Alyssa sat up, turning to face her. "They've been like



something out of a dream. But I can't keep pretending this isn't going to end." She looked away for a second. "Because it is. Really soon."

Denise stared at her. "Why?"

"Why? Because your life is in Los Angeles."

"What if it wasn't?" Denise studied Alyssa, her heart pounding against her ribs. The fire crackled beside them, filling the silence.

Alyssa's eyes widened. "What do you mean? Your job, your life... it's all there."

Denise took a deep breath, her gaze steady on Alyssa. "What if I wanted to stay here? In Stony Creek."

Alyssa's lips parted in surprise. She looked away, her brow furrowing as she processed the words. Denise could see the gears turning in her mind, the questions rising. When Alyssa met her eyes again, there was a vulnerability there that made Denise's chest ache.

"You'd want to stay here?" Alyssa asked, her voice soft. "With me?"

Denise felt a lump form in her throat. She nodded, unable to find the words to express the swirl of emotions inside her. She reached out, her hand covering Alyssa's.

Alyssa looked down at their hands, her fingers curling around Denise's. "I thought... I thought you couldn't wait to leave," she said, her voice barely audible.

Denise squeezed her hand, her thumb gently rubbing circles on Alyssa's skin. "I thought so too," she admitted. "But right now, it's the last thing I want."

Denise's heart hammered in her chest. The admission hung in the air between them.

Alyssa shifted closer, her knee brushing against Denise's thigh. "What about your career?"

"It's not important. Not anymore. I've achieved everything I wanted to and more. But I've spent twenty-five years running." Denise traced her thumb along Alyssa's knuckles. "Running from this place, from everything it reminded me of. But being here with you..." She swallowed hard. "For the first time in my life, I don't want to run."

"Denise..." Alyssa's voice cracked.

"I know it sounds crazy. Maybe it is." Denise lifted her free hand to Alyssa's cheek. "But I've never felt more like myself than I do right now, sitting here with you."

The fire popped, sending sparks dancing up the chimney. Alyssa leaned into her touch, her eyes glistening in the firelight. Denise could feel her own walls crumbling, years of carefully maintained distance falling away under the weight of Alyssa's gaze.

"What about the tree farm?" Alyssa asked softly.

"I don't want to sell it." The words tumbled out before Denise could stop them, surprising even herself with their truth. "Not anymore."

Alyssa's eyes searched hers. "You're serious?"

Denise nodded, her hand still cupping Alyssa's cheek. "I am."

"Come here," Alyssa breathed, tugging Denise toward her.

Their lips met in a slow, tender kiss that stole the breath from Denise's lungs. Alyssa's fingers threaded through her hair, drawing her closer, deepening the kiss with a gentle urgency.

The kiss stretched on, Alyssa's thumb stroking along her jaw, a tender gesture that made Denise's skin tingle.

The warmth of Alyssa's lips lingered as they broke apart. Denise's eyes settled on the Christmas tree they'd decorated together, its white lights twinkling in front of the window.

For the first time, Denise could see it all clearly - not as a burden to escape, but as a future to embrace.

With Alyssa, this house could be more than just the place she grew up.

It could be their home.

Alyssa sunk further into Denise's embrace on the couch, savoring the warmth radiating through her back. The Christmas tree lights cast a soft, magical glow across the living room, their gentle twinkle reflecting off the antique ornaments they'd hung together. The scent of pine mingled with chocolate from their abandoned mugs on the coffee table.

Her fingers traced lazy patterns along Denise's arm wrapped around her waist. The television hummed in the background, but Alyssa's attention drifted to how perfectly their bodies fit together, how natural it felt to share this quiet moment.

Almost two months ago, she'd stood in this same room facing down a cold, distant Hollywood actress who'd wanted nothing more than to sell her childhood home. The memory of that first confrontation felt like a lifetime ago. Now, that same woman pressed a tender kiss to her temple, her touch so gentle it made Alyssa's heart ache.

Through the window, snow fell silently over the tree farm - their tree farm. The same land that had once threatened to tear them apart had now brought them together.

Alyssa smiled at the thought of future Christmases, of building new traditions while honoring old ones.

Denise shifted behind her. "Want me to put on a movie?"

Alyssa twisted to look up at her. "That depends. What kind of movie did you have in mind?"

“I was thinking about a classic.”

Alyssa tilted her head to catch Denise’s eyes. “What’s your definition of a classic? Because if it’s one of your own movies...”

“Ouch.” Denise’s chest vibrated with laughter against Alyssa’s back. “I’m not that old. Plus, I would never make you watch one of my movies.”

“I’m just kidding. And I’ve already seen all of your movies.” Alyssa tried to hide her smirk. “So, what classic did you have in mind?”

Denise thought about it for a second. “How about White Christmas?”

Alyssa’s smile widened. “Sure.”

“I’ve got it,” Denise murmured, reaching over to snag the remote from the coffee table. With a few clicks, the familiar strains of the opening credits filled the room. Alyssa settled back against Denise, feeling a contentment she hadn’t realized she craved until this moment.

As Bing Crosby’s voice crooned through the farmhouse, Alyssa felt a sense of nostalgia wash over her. The movie reminded her of the first Christmas she’d spent with Wayne, after she’d told him that she couldn’t go home for Christmas and he insisted that she come here. She glanced up at Denise, who seemed just as absorbed in the film.

“Did you watch this growing up?” Alyssa asked softly, although she thought she knew the answer.

Denise nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on the screen. “Every year. My dad loved it.” Her voice softened. “We’d sit by the fire and watch it together.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as the movie played on. The snow continued to fall outside. Inside, they were wrapped in warmth and each other's presence, their future no longer uncertain but filled with promise.

Alyssa closed her eyes for a moment. The weight of the past weeks lifted off her shoulders, replaced by a lightness she hadn't felt in years.

Denise's hand found hers under the blanket, their fingers intertwining naturally. Alyssa squeezed gently, feeling Denise respond in kind.

This farmhouse had always felt like home, ever since that first Christmas when Wayne had welcomed her. Back then, she had nowhere else to go, and he'd given her not just shelter, but a job and support when she'd needed it most.

Now, wrapped in his daughter's arms, watching the same movie Wayne had loved so much, the sense of belonging filled her completely.

The familiar scenes played across the television screen, but Alyssa's thoughts drifted to Wayne. Her fingers tightened around Denise's hand as a wave of gratitude washed over her. That first Christmas, standing in his office with trembling hands, she'd confessed that she couldn't go home - that her parents wanted nothing to do with their gay daughter.

Wayne's response had changed her life, but the irony wasn't lost on her.

This was the same man who'd pushed his own daughter away for the same reason. But he'd learned from his mistake, grown into someone who could offer the acceptance to her that he'd failed to give his own daughter.

Alyssa wished he was here now, and that he could see how happy they both were, but that never would have happened.

His will was what had brought them together.

This moment existed because he wasn't here. The thought brought tears to her eyes. She wished he could see how happy Denise was, how his daughter had finally found her way back home.

All those hours she'd spent worrying about losing the farm seemed like a distant memory now. Instead of an ending, Wayne's passing had brought her an unexpected beginning.

His final gift wasn't just the tree farm or the house - it was this chance at happiness with Denise.

Her gaze wandered to the window where snowflakes danced in the glow of the porch light. Come spring, they'd plant new saplings together. In summer, they'd trim and shape the growing trees. Fall would bring the preparations for another Christmas season. And next winter, they'd create new memories in this farmhouse that held so much history for them both.

The tree farm would continue to be what Wayne had always meant it to be - a place where Christmas magic lived year-round, where families came to find their perfect tree, and where children's eyes lit up with wonder.

Only now, she wouldn't be carrying on that legacy alone.

Alyssa smiled, feeling the gentle pressure of Denise's arms around her.

Here, in this moment, everything felt right.

This was home.