



He wants her in his life, but she doesn't want the same things he does. Can he convince her to take a chance, or will he have to live without her?

NICK

MEN OF CLIFTON MONTANA BOOK 26

Bestselling Author

SUSAN FISHER-DAVIS

NICK

Susan Fisher-Davis

Men of Clifton, Montana
Book 26

Erotic Romance

Nick Men of Clifton, Montana Book 26

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First Print Book Publication: November 2022

Cover Artist: Untold Designs Romance and Fantasy Covers

Cover Model: Jordan Wheeler

Cover Photographer: Jane Ashley Converse Photography

Edited By: KDL Editing & Proofing

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PUBLISHER: Blue Whiskey Publishing

Webpage: <https://susanfisherdavisauthor.weebly.com>

Acknowledgments

To my husband, Rob—I love you!

To Jordan Wheeler for being Nick. You brought him to life.

You can find Jordan on Instagram at:

[@jordanwheelerfitness](#)

& his webpage:

<https://www.jordanwheelerfitness>

To Jane Ashley Converse for the photo. I'm so glad we finally got to work together! You are an amazing person.

You can find her on Instagram at:

[@jashleyconversephotography](#)

& Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/janeashleyconverse>

To the ladies in my Facebook group: Susan's Hot Cowboys—you make it fun. I know that anytime I need a pick-me-up, I just have to read the comments and it makes my day. You are the best!

As always to you, my readers.

I wouldn't be able to do this without you. I love every one of you

and I appreciate your support.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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Chapter One

As Paige started toward the door to lock up for the day, she sighed when it opened, and a customer entered. She put on her best smile and headed for the man.

“Hello, welcome to Paige’s. Can I help you find something?”

The man turned to look at her, and her breath lodged in her throat just looking at him. He was very tall. She ran her eyes down over him and wanted him on the spot, and that shocked her. She had never been so attracted to a man so fast. His black cowboy hat sat low on his forehead, shading his eyes. She could see scruff on the lower part of his face. A sheepskin coat covered broad shoulders, but it hung open, and she saw a black and red checkered flannel shirt covering his impressive chest and tucked into his jeans. Her eyes skimmed down to his belt buckle and lower. He wore well-worn cowboy boots. She bit back a groan because she’d never seen a man fill out a pair of jeans so well. It was downright sinful the way those jeans hugged him. *Damn, it was suddenly sweltering in here.*

“Uh, yes, ma’am. I need to pick up a red negligee,” he said in a deep voice.

“Red?” She mentally kicked herself for repeating it, but he had her tongue-tied.

“Yes, ma’am.” He glanced around the store, then back at her.

“All right. What size?” She hated he was buying sexy undergarments for someone.

“Hell, I don’t know. Could you give me a minute?”

Paige frowned but nodded. She watched as he pulled his cellphone from the inside pocket of his coat, scrolled through it then put the phone to his ear.

“Hey, what size?”

Paige found it hard to comprehend that the man didn't know the size he was looking for. She couldn't help but overhear his side of the conversation.

“I'm at the shop. You said you wanted a red one. Why didn't you tell me the size? Damn, sometimes I could just knock you on your ass.”

When Paige gasped, he looked at her, frowned, and continued talking.

“What if they don't have red in that size? What other color will work for you? Damn it. I don't have all day,” he snapped. “All right. I'll see you at the diner in a few minutes.” He hit *End* on his phone, stuck it back into his pocket, and looked at her again.

“Size eight. If you don't have red, blue will do.”

“I'm sure I have red,” she said and couldn't help but snap at the man.

How dare he talk to his wife or girlfriend in that manner? *Knock you on your ass?* What a jerk. She took a deep breath, walked to the display of negligees, and moved them along the rack, checking the sizes. She pulled a red one off and turned to show it to him.

“This is an eight. It's a beautiful garment,” she said, trying not to bite the man's head off.

“Okay, that's fine,” he said.

“There are others—”

“No, ma'am. That will be fine.”

“All right. Would you like it gift wrapped?”

“No, thank you.”

Paige's blood began to boil thinking this man would need more than a negligee to get back on her good graces if it were her. No doubt he did something he needed to make up for. *No shit, Paige. He's a bully.* With a heavy sigh, she led him to the cash register, rang up the purchase, and told him the total.

“That much? For that little scrap of material?” He shook his head, and she knew he didn’t expect an answer.

“I’m sure whomever you’re buying it for will love it, and you won’t have to *knock them on their ass*,” she growled.

His eyebrows rose, and she was sure he was trying his best not to grin.

“Oh, yes, ma’am. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.”

Paige placed the garment in the bag and snatched the credit card from his hand. As she swiped it, she looked at his name. Nicholas Richards. No matter how good-looking he was, he was a bully, and she detested bullies.

She handed him back his card and practically shoved the bag at him.

“Thank you for shopping at Paige’s. You have a... wonderful day.”

His lips rose in a smirk, and a dimple peeked in his cheek as he put his credit card back into his wallet. Then he touched the brim of his hat.

“Thank you. You do the same.” He took the bag, turned, and walked out of the store.

Paige followed him to the door, locked it, and peered out the window to see him striding across the street. Shaking her head, she turned the sign over to *Closed*, walked to the back of the store, entered her office, and worked on the payroll before leaving. Once done with that, she opened the safe and removed her purse.

After pulling on her coat, she headed back to the front, flipped out the lights, unlocked the door, walked outside, and locked it behind her. It began to flurry, making her smile. She was a big fan of cold weather, and snow was a bonus.

She had planned to go to the diner for dinner, but she didn’t want Nicholas Richards to think she was following him. He could be gone by now, though. It’s been over an hour.

“Do you know any of the women who work at Paige’s?” Nick asked his brother.

“No, I’ve never been in the store. Rory mentioned that she’d seen a red negligee she liked,” Wilder said.

“Well, hell, Wild. I don’t know if I got the right one, then. I didn’t want to go there in the first place, and now I might have gotten the wrong one.”

“I know it pissed you off going in there, but I had to stop at the office, and it doesn’t matter. She’ll look great in it either way.” Wilder grinned.

“No doubt there. You know, I am happy for you. Rory’s a great girl.”

“She’s hardly a girl, Nick. But I know what you mean.” Wilder shrugged. “I love her.”

“I know you do. She’s good for you.”

“So, why did you ask about the women at Paige’s?”

“Because the one who waited on me doesn’t like me,” he said, chuckling.

“Why? What did you do?”

“Why do you assume I did anything?”

“Because you’re a Richards, we tend to open our mouths and let the wrong words come out. What happened?”

As his brother listened, Nick told him what had happened in the shop. Once he finished, Wilder burst out laughing.

“You led her to believe you were talking to a woman. Damn, man. That’s cold.”

“Yeah, I know. I suppose I should apologize, but the look on her face when she said ‘knocking them on their ass’ was priceless. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her I was talking to my brother.”

“Is she pretty?” Wilder asked him.

“Hell yeah, she is.” Nick looked at Wilder. “Should I ask her out?”

“First, you need to apologize for letting her think what she did, then ask if she’s married, or involved with anyone. If she’s not, *then* you can ask her out.”

“Yeah, okay. I might do that.”

Nick chuckled, picked up his burger, and ate. The woman was beautiful with her long, dark, wavy hair. He wondered if it was as soft as it looked. Her brown eyes had shot daggers at him, he thought with a smile. Maybe he would go back to the shop and talk to her tomorrow.

Her shoes put her close to five-ten, so he’d put her about five-six without them. Nick stood six-five in his bare feet. He’d never preferred how short or tall a woman was. He loved them all. Not that he saw a bunch of them. He was always faithful to the woman he was seeing. He was definitely a one-woman man. How any man took on more than one at a time just boggled his mind. If that wasn’t asking for trouble, nothing was.

He didn’t even want to think about that skintight red skirt she’d had on or if she wore any of the sexy lingerie she sold.

Nick looked at Wilder when his cellphone buzzed, and he removed it from his pocket.

“It’s Dave,” Wilder said as he looked at the screen.

Nick nodded. Wilder was a livestock agent at the Montana Department of Livestock and he’d done it for years, and was damn good at it, but he was quitting to work on the dairy farm with Rory. Dave was Wilder’s boss.

“I’ll be right there.” Wilder ended the call and looked at Nick. “I have to go. There’s some trouble at a ranch, and I have to meet Reece there.”

“You be damn careful, little brother. You get shot again, and Rory will be the one knocking you on your ass.”

Wilder grinned. “No shit.” He slid from the booth, pulled on his coat, then placed his hat on his head. “Hang on to that present for me. I’ll get it tomorrow.”

“Will do. I’ll see you then. I’ll get dinner. Just go.”

Wilder's phone buzzed again. He pulled it from the pocket and looked at the screen.

"It's Reece. I'll see you tomorrow."

Nick nodded as Wilder made his way out of the diner.

Paige carefully made her way across Main Street to the diner. She took a deep breath and was about to open the door when a man came out as she reached for it, almost knocking her down.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. I wasn't paying attention," he said.

"It's fine." Paige smiled.

"I suppose walking and talking on a cellphone should be illegal." He grinned as he held the door for her, and she was in awe of how good-looking he was. Then she frowned as she thought he looked familiar, but she knew she didn't know him.

Paige laughed. "Maybe."

"You have a good evening." He touched the brim of his hat, nodded, and strode off once she grabbed the handle.

As she took a seat at the counter, she heard a man laughing and glanced over her shoulder to look in that direction. She clenched her jaw when she saw Nicholas Richards sitting in a booth facing her direction. He had removed his hat and hung it on the backside of the booth peg. His hair was thick and very dark. Not quite black, but damn near close. He was laughing, and it lit up his face. His teeth were white and perfect. Damn, the man was gorgeous, but she hated how he'd talked to the woman on the phone. He was now talking to Connie.

Paige had trouble taking her eyes off him, and when he glanced around the diner, his eyes came back to her, and he nodded. She gave him a tightlipped smile and turned back to the counter.

"Hi Paige, what can I get you?"

"Hi, Lanie. My usual is fine. How's Trent?"

“He’s great. Thanks for asking. I’ll get your order to Uncle Owen,” Lanie said as she poured a cup of coffee into a mug.

“Thanks.” Paige added cream and sugar, lifted the cup, blew on the hot brew, and took a sip.

It wasn’t long before Lanie set her burger and onion rings in front of her. She smiled her thanks, and Lanie walked off.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Lanie heading to the booth where Nicholas Richards sat and refilled his coffee. Paige could hear them talking.

“How’s Preston doing?” he asked Lanie.

“Deidra said he’s driving her nuts by not being able to do anything, but the surgery was a success. He’ll finally have relief from his bad back.”

“Yeah, the damn hardhead kept putting it off. He’s lucky he didn’t do permanent damage.”

“He is, but he hated taking time off from his ranch to have it done. Wave me down if you need anything.” Lanie smiled.

“Thank you, Lanie.” He looked Paige’s way again and saluted her with his cup.

Huffing, she picked up her burger and ate. Then she’d head home to take a long hot bath and forget about meeting Nicholas Richards.

After Nick finished his dinner, he signaled for the check, then placed a tip on the table. He slid from the booth, removed his hat from the peg, and walked to the cash register.

“We meet again,” he said to the woman who had waited on him in the lingerie shop as he put his hat on.

“Lucky me,” she murmured.

Nick chuckled. “I guess I didn’t make a good first impression, did I?”

“No, and you never get a second chance to make another first impression.”

“Damn, you’re tough on a man.” He set the red bag with *Paige’s* scrolled on it in white, on the counter, then handed Connie his credit card.

The woman spun around on the stool.

“*I’m* tough? The way you—” She stopped and turned back to the counter.

“The way I... what?”

“Nothing. Go away.”

He couldn’t help but grin. He leaned down close to her.

“People shouldn’t jump to conclusions when they listen in on conversations.”

The woman gasped as she turned on the stool to glare at him.

“I wasn’t listening!”

“Really? Then why do you have such a poor opinion of me?”

“I don’t have an opinion of you at all.”

Nick smirked. “If you say so. I was thinking of asking you out, but I feel you’d throw that coffee in my face.”

“You just bought a negligee for another woman and want to ask *me out*?”

He shrugged as he picked up the bag. “Sure. Why not?”

“No way in hell. Go away,” she repeated.

“Yes, ma’am. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Not if I see you first,” she muttered, making him laugh.

Nick looked at Connie, who was watching the conversation like a tennis match.

“Connie, thank you for dinner. I’ll see you soon.” He looked at the woman. “Ma’am. Have a good evening.”

“See ya, Nick,” Connie said as he strode out of the diner with a grin.

Paige took a deep breath to calm herself. The man had balls. How dare he ask her out when he was already with another woman? Some men had to be with as many as possible, and he seemed like one of them. Not only that, but he had been so rude to the woman on the phone. There was no way in hell that Paige would go out with him, and just where was the woman he was meeting here? Did she leave because he spoke to her rudely... again?

“Are you all right, Paige?” Connie asked her.

“I’m fine, thank you, Connie.” She smiled at her, but Connie didn’t seem convinced.

“Okay, hon. You just wave me down if you need anything.”

“I will, thank you.”

Paige ate her dinner, paid for her meal, and walked across the street to her shop, then around the back. It was bitterly cold, and with the wind blowing, it had to be well below freezing. Flurries hit her in the face as she tilted her head down and pulled the collar up on her coat. With the mild September they’d just had, it was no surprise that it was snowing in October.

The cold air filled her lungs as she took a deep breath. She did love the cold, but she wasn’t a fan of ice. She had to open her shop every day, and if the shop was closed because of the weather, she would lose money.

She looked up at the metal steps and knew she’d better get salt on them or fall and bust her ass. Taking her time, she climbed them, unlocked the door, and entered the warm apartment.

Her Maine Coon cat, Queenie, weaved through her legs, almost tripping her.

“Hi, baby. I’ll feed you. Let me take off my coat,” Paige said.

The cat sat and stared up at her, blinking large green eyes. Paige frowned as she remembered looking into Nicholas

Richards' eyes. They were a beautiful periwinkle blue and gorgeous in his tanned face.

"I know you're hungry, but I ran late today. This rude man came into my shop and yelled at a woman on the phone. You know I don't like bullies, liars, or rude people."

Paige removed her coat and beanie, then hung them up. She turned to look at Queenie; the cat hadn't moved from her spot.

"All right, all right, I'll get it." She got a can of cat food, opened it, and dumped it into the bowl. Queenie walked to the bowl with her tail held high, stuck her face into it, and ate, completely ignoring Paige.

"I see what's more important to you right now. I'll be in the tub." Paige looked at the cat, but she didn't raise her head.

Paige's muscles were tense, probably because of Nicholas Richards. *Mean ass*. She headed for the bathroom with a sigh and hoped she never saw him again.

The following Saturday, after closing the shop, she hurried upstairs to change. Tonight was the big party for Sunny and Pops Porter. They were celebrating their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary.

They were such a wonderful couple. Everyone in Clifton and the surrounding towns loved them. Some people were so lucky in love. She chuckled as she thought of how Sunny would say things to Pops to rile him up, then kiss his cheek or wink at him to make him laugh.

Shaking her head, she still didn't want to think about how she had been such a fool, and she wouldn't be again. Her ex-husband had destroyed her faith in trust. That was a time in her life better left alone.

Once she took a quick shower, she stood in front of the closet, trying to find something to wear. She knew it was casual, but she still wanted to look nice.

She pulled a red blouse off the rack and a pair of jeans. Since she planned on dancing, she picked up her cowboy boots. But underneath, she wore a red lace bra with matching

boy-cut panties. She loved wearing lingerie and always wore sexy undergarments. If only for herself.

She entered the bathroom, applied makeup, dried her hair, and put it in a ponytail.

She smiled into the mirror, left the bathroom and headed for the kitchen to get her purse. Queenie sat on the arm of the sofa, licking her paws.

“I know you’re mad I’m leaving you again, but I’ll be back. This woman is going out and kicking up her heels. You be good.” She patted the cat on the head and got a glare in return.

Paige chuckled as she picked up her purse, walked to the hall tree to get her coat on, then headed out the door. She couldn’t wait to have a fun night out.

Nick sat at a table with Wilder and his fiancée, Rory Heston.

“I figured it would be wall-to-wall people for this. Who doesn’t love Sunny and Pops?” Rory said as she lifted her glass to her lips.

As Nick glanced around, he nodded and smiled. Scarlett and Noah were great to put the event on here in Scarlett’s bar, Dewey’s. There were a lot of people here. He saw them talking with Dom and Laura Blackstone and shifted his eyes to the bar.

Nick continued to look around but swung his gaze back when he spotted *her*. The woman from Paige’s. The woman who didn’t like him. He chuckled.

“What’s funny?” Wilder asked him.

“Nothing. Did you want another drink?”

“Not right now—”

“Rory?”

“No, thanks, Nick.”

“Well, I do. I’ll be right back.” He got to his feet before either of them could say anything more.

He made his way through the crowd and finally got to the bar. Right next to her.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were following me,” he said.

When she looked at him and frowned, he had to bite back a grin.

“That will be a cold day in hell,” she threw back at him.

“You really don’t like me, do you?”

“Is it that obvious? And here I thought I hid it so well.”

He chuckled. “Can I buy you a drink?”

She turned on the stool and looked at him.

“It’s an open bar,” her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Oh, so it is. Well, maybe you’d let me take you somewhere where I *could* buy you a drink.”

“No, thank you. Are you here alone?”

“No, why?”

“Then please go back to whomever you’re with and leave me alone.”

“I will... for now. I’m sitting over where the redhead is alone, so come visit anytime.” He nodded in the table’s direction where Rory sat, and he watched as the woman looked in Rory’s direction and then back at him.

“You know, maybe I should ask her if she liked the negligee or if she got knocked on her ass?”

Nick tipped his head down to hide a grin, then looked at her.

“I don’t think—” He stopped. “You know, maybe you should.”

“You think I won’t?”

He shrugged. “Do what you think is best, but remember what I said. You shouldn’t eavesdrop on conversations.”

“You’re just trying to get me not to go over there.”

He stepped back and put his arm out for her.

“Have at it, darlin’.”

She hopped down from the stool, glared at him, then made her way to the table. Nick followed behind and had trouble keeping his eyes off her ass in those skintight jeans. When she stopped at the table, he saw Rory look up at her with a frown on her face. Then she glanced at Nick, and he winked at her.

“Hello, you don’t know me, but I waited on Mr. Richards the day he purchased your negligee, and I heard how he spoke to you on the phone.”

Rory glanced back at Nick, and he shook his head slightly. He grinned when Rory sat back in the chair, folded her arms, looked at the woman, and raised an eyebrow.

“And just how did he speak to me?”

“How—? Seriously? He said he could knock you on your ass sometimes.”

“Nick? What’s going on?” Wilder asked from beside him.

“Nothing. This is the woman who waited on me when I bought the negligee for Rory.”

He watched as Wilder looked at the woman, then back at him.

“I see.” Wilder grinned.

“You know, that reminds me. You haven’t paid me back yet,” Nick said, keeping his eyes on the woman.

“Shit. I forgot. I’ll bring it by tomorrow. It’s worth it,” Wilder said and winked at Rory.

“Excuse me?” the woman asked.

“Yeah, I told you about eavesdropping. I picked up that little scrap of material for my brother to give to his fiancée. It was him I was talking to on the phone.”

“It was me he wanted to knock on his ass.” Wilder grinned. “His favorite saying to me. I suppose being the big brother gives him certain privileges.”

Nick chuckled, and Wilder joined in.

“What in the world are you two talking about?” Rory sat forward.

“It seems that your future brother-in-law enjoys making me look like a fool.” The woman turned to face him. “If you had any chance of getting brownie points with me, you just blew it. You’re a real jackass,” she snapped, then turned and headed back for the bar.

“Damn it,” he muttered.

“I guess teaching her a lesson wasn’t such a good idea. You should have just told her instead of egging her on,” Wilder said as he took a seat.

“Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?” Rory said.

Nick pulled out a chair, took a seat, and swore as he listened to Wilder telling Rory what happened. By the look Nick received from his future sister-in-law, she agreed he was, indeed, a jackass.

Paige was so mad. She was sure she had steam coming out of her ears. He led her to believe he’d been talking to a woman. Then he tells her to ask the woman at the table about the phone call. *How dare he?* She wanted to punch him as hard as possible, knowing she’d feel damn good about it. And people wonder why she has trust issues with men. She clenched her fists as she climbed back up on the barstool and waved to get a bartender’s attention.

“What can I get you, Paige?” Scarlett Conway asked her.

“Callahan whiskey on the rocks, please.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you, Scarlett.”

A few minutes later, Scarlett set the drink in front of her, smiled, and moved on to the next customer.

Paige picked up the glass, took a sip, and did her best to calm down.

“I’m sorry.”

She glanced over to see Nicholas Richards taking a seat beside her.

“Go away, I think you’ve had enough fun at my expense.”

“I wasn’t having fun at your expense. You assumed I was talking to a woman. All you had to do was say something.”

Paige turned on the stool to look at him.

“And all you had to do was tell me it was your brother. You *knew* I thought you were talking to a woman. Go away,” she repeated.

“Come on. I said I was sorry. Look, I’ll do anything to make it up to you.”

“Anything?” When he nodded, she went on. “Then what I want is for you to leave me alone.”

“Nick? Do you need another beer?” Scarlett asked him.

“No, thank you, Scarlett.”

Paige turned to the bar, picked up her glass, and ignored him. She heard him sigh as he got up and walked away.

“Are you mad at Nick for something, Paige?”

Paige sucked in a deep breath, blew it out, and told Scarlett what had transpired between her and Nick Richards. When she finished, she looked at Scarlett and could tell she was trying not to grin.

“You think it’s funny? Well, I don’t, Scarlett. He embarrassed me.”

“You’re mad because he embarrassed you, but you jumped to conclusions, Paige. He just wanted to prove a point.” Scarlett touched her hand. “Nick is a wonderful man. He’d never intentionally hurt anyone, and he *did* apologize.”

Huffing a breath, Paige glanced around but didn't see Nick anywhere, then looked back at Scarlett.

"I guess I could accept his apology, but I will not go out with him."

"Well, that is a mistake. Nick is a good man, and he's also hot as hell," Scarlett whispered then chuckled.

Paige shrugged. "I hadn't noticed."

Scarlett burst out laughing. "Liar."

Paige laughed. "Busted."

"Seriously, it's not like he told everyone about it. Just Wilder and Rory."

"I just need to calm down. I was tempted to throw my drink in his face, but I'd hate to waste good whiskey."

Scarlett smiled, then turned when someone called out that they needed a refill.

"I'll be back around. Have a good time." Scarlett moved away.

Paige spun around on the stool. She looked toward the table where Nick had been sitting, but he wasn't there. Paige remembered Wilder was the man she almost ran into at the diner. He must have been who Nick was meeting there that day, not a woman. She wasn't vindictive, and she wasn't jealous of other women. She couldn't be in her line of work.

Even though he knew what she thought, she should accept his apology, but her temper rose when she thought about it again. Damn him for letting her believe he was talking to a woman.

"Never assume," she muttered.

Later, she couldn't find an empty stool when she returned to the bar after being in a line dance. She saw Liv Stone waving at her, so she headed to the table.

"Paige, sit with us," Liv said.

"I don't want to intrude."

“You’re not. Come on. I’ll introduce you to our husbands.”

“All right.” Paige pulled a chair out and took a seat.

“This is Wyatt, my husband. Then we have Jake, Becca’s husband, Gabe, Emma’s husband, and you know Trent and Lanie. Men, this is Paige Douglas. She owns the shop where we buy our lingerie,” Liv said.

“Well, I think all of us men would like to thank you, Paige,” Wyatt said, grinning.

Paige laughed. “You are very welcome.” She looked at each woman. “I just got a new shipment in.”

“I’m telling you right now, Red, you are to go shopping Monday,” Jake said, making them all laugh.

Paige had a great time and didn’t think about Nick Richards again as the party continued. Until she spotted him talking with Cash and Kenzie Porter. Cash was Sunny and Pops’ grandson, who left Kenzie years ago but made a name for himself, inventing top-rated software for businesses. Paige used it at her shop. He came back to visit his grandparents and ran into Kenzie. They still loved each other, so they worked it out and recently married. They were a wonderful couple and very much in love.

She stared at Nick and took in just how handsome he was. His dark hair needed a trim, but it suited him. She wondered what he did for a living and if he was involved with anyone. Would he be the type of man to ask a woman out if he was already with someone? Some people just didn’t care, but it wasn’t just men. Women did it too.

Paige had always been faithful to Bruce, but she filed for divorce after what he did to her. Grinding her teeth, she tried not to think of his betrayal. It had knocked her to the floor at the time, and she swore she’d never marry again.

An hour later, she knew she needed to stop drinking for the night. She didn’t like to drink and drive, even though it was just up the street, so she switched to soda.

Sitting at the table, she saw Pops and Sunny standing nearby. She got to her feet and hugged them.

“Happy anniversary, you two,” she said.

“Thanks, honey,” Sunny said with a smile.

“Yeah, thanks, honey,” Pops said.

“I thanked her for both of us, Erwin. There’s no need for you to repeat it.”

“I was being polite, Sunny,” Pops snapped.

“If you wanted to be polite, you should have said it first.”

“Sunny—”

“It doesn’t matter who said it first. We’re all happy for you,” Liv said.

Sunny smiled. “We’re happy too, aren’t we, Erwin?” She kissed his cheek, and a big grin lifted his lips.

“Yes, ma’am.” He kissed her cheek.

When everyone at the table laughed, Sunny winked at them and pulled Pops away.

Paige called it a night and headed home to get some needed sleep at eleven o’clock. Tomorrow was Sunday, and she wanted to go into the shop to unpack boxes. She was excited to see the new garments she had ordered.

After telling everyone goodnight, she went through the crowd, out the door, to her vehicle, and drove home, refusing to give Nick Richards another thought.

The following day, she unlocked the door, entered the shop, then locked it behind her. It was only seven, but she had a lot to do. She needed time to get the new orders out of the boxes and put them on display. Sunday was the only day she wasn’t open.

She entered the backroom and unpacked the large boxes. She oohed and awed over everything she removed from each box.

Holding up a lilac teddy, she knew she’d take one herself. It was stunning and very sexy. She loved it, even though it was barely there.

It took most of the day to unpack everything and get it on display, but the new items looked good, and she knew they'd sell. Before long, she cleaned up the empty boxes, took them back to the dumpster, then headed upstairs and relaxed for the rest of the day.

Monday morning, she entered the store, flipped the lights on, and turned the *Open* side around on the sign.

As she headed back for the counter, the door opened, and she turned to greet the customer with a smile on her face, which died when she saw Nick Richards enter. He held a bouquet of yellow roses in his hand.

"Good morning," he said as he made his way to where she stood.

"Well, it *was* a good morning," she said.

Nick grinned, and she was still in awe of how good-looking he was.

"Until I arrived, right?"

Paige shrugged.

"What do you want, Mr. Richards?"

"First off, I want you to call me Nick."

"And?"

"For you to accept my apology." He held the roses out to her.

She took the flowers, stuck her nose down into them, and inhaled. She raised her face and gazed at him.

"All right."

"All right, what? That you'll call me Nick, or you accept my apology?"

"Both. I don't like what you did, but I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Thank you for the flowers. Roses are my favorite."

"I should have said something when I realized you thought I was talking to a woman."

“Let’s just let it go.”

“All right. Are you married, or involved with anyone?”

“No.”

“Good. So... dinner?”

“No.”

“No? You just said you accepted my apology.”

“I did... *do*, but that doesn’t mean I’m going out with you.”

“Why not?”

Paige shrugged. “I don’t feel a connection with you.” *Liar!*

“Really?” He stepped closer and took a few strands of her hair between his fingers. “I sure as hell feel one with you,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry—” She abruptly stopped talking when he tucked her hair behind her ear. *Who knew how sexy that could be?*

“Don’t be sorry, just have dinner with me... please.”

“No, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I see.” He stepped back from her and turned to head for the door. “My brother told me his fiancée was the most hardheaded woman he’d ever met. Obviously, he doesn’t know how stubborn you are. I don’t give up easily, darlin’. I’ll see you soon.”

Paige stared at the door as it closed. She didn’t want to go out with him. But not for the reasons, he thought. She knew she’d fall for him, and after being ripped apart by one man, she kept her heart close and refused to give it to anyone again. No matter how hot and sexy the man was.

Chapter Two

Nick strode across the street to his truck, climbed in, and tore out of the spot to head home.

He tightened his hands around the steering wheel until they hurt. Damn it. Why wouldn't she go out with him? Was she still pissed about what happened? Sometimes, he wondered why in the hell he liked women so much. Talk about being hardheaded.

Hell, he still didn't know her name. She was beautiful, and he wanted to know her better, and he was very attracted to her, but she kept a distance. Was she that way with all men or just him?

Huffing out a frustrated breath, he drove home. There was work to do, and he'd wasted about an hour just coming into town, buying the roses, and stopping at the shop. He took a chance that she'd be there today.

"Damn, roses aren't cheap either," he muttered.

As he pulled into the driveway of his home, he smiled when he saw snow falling. He continued up the drive, stopped in front of the main barn, stepped out of the truck, and entered the building.

After letting his eyes adjust, he strode down the aisle to where the indoor corral sat. He could see his men standing at the rail, watching one of the ranch hands trying to break a young horse.

Nick chuckled when he saw the young cowboy flying off the horse, and all the men groaned when he hit the sawdust floor.

Stepping up to the fence, he placed his arms on the top rail and his foot on a bottom one.

“I’m glad I’m not doing that.”

Nick glanced over at his manager, Tommy, and nodded.

“You and me both. I have a few years on you, but you could probably still do it.”

“Hell, no. I can’t imagine hitting that floor.”

Tommy chuckled. “You aren’t even forty. I’m almost seventy. You’d do it if you had to.”

Nick slapped him on the shoulder. “Nope. I’d just go hire some younger men.”

“That’s one good thing about being older. We already did our crazy shit.”

Nick grinned. “You got that right. I’m glad I run a Christmas tree farm.”

“Yeah, we’ll be getting slammed soon,” Tommy said with a grin. “If you needed something in town, you should have sent one of the men.”

“It was something I needed to do myself.”

“Who did you have to apologize to now?”

Nick turned and leaned against the fence.

“What makes you think I had to apologize to someone?”

Tommy shrugged. “You manage to stick your foot in your mouth, especially around women.”

“Shit, Tommy.” He ran his hand around his nape.

“So, I’m right. Who?”

As Tommy listened to him, Nick explained about the woman. When he finished, he watched a grin lift Tommy’s lips, then he laughed.

“What do you know? A woman who won’t go out with you,” Tommy said and laughed more.

“I get turned down a lot, Tommy.”

“Bullshit. I remember when you had a different woman on your arm every night.”

“Hell, that was a long time ago. I’d actually like to settle down. I’m thirty-eight years old. Wilder’s going to get married before I do.”

“Wilder’s got himself a good woman. You need to find one.”

“Well, I like this woman, but she’s not interested.”

“Show her that Richards charm.” Tommy tilted his head. “Is she pretty?”

“Beautiful. Long, dark hair and brown eyes. She’s so damn —” He decided it was best to shut up.

“She’s... what?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Okay, you need to convince her to give you a chance if she’s on your mind this much. I’m heading over to the other barn and checking on those guys. The others are trimming trees.” Tommy slapped him on the shoulder and walked off.

Nick blew out an exasperated breath. He supposed he needed to, at least, try to convince the woman to give him another chance, but he had too much to do today. It would have to be some other time.

Paige sat at her desk in her office, rubbing her feet. They were killing her.

“Is it me, or are we swamped today?”

Paige glanced up to see her manager, Janice, standing in the doorway.

“Can’t be just you. I thought the same thing. God, why do I wear these shoes?”

Janice laughed as she entered the office and took a seat in the chair opposite Paige’s desk.

“Because you love them, along with your sexy underwear.”

“Don’t tell anyone my secret.”

“I wish I could wear sexy lingerie.”

“Why can’t you?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m thirty pounds overweight.”

“Janice, every woman is beautiful and sexy. You know we sell our products in every size. Christopher loves you, and I’m sure he’d love to see you flaunt those curves in a sexy negligee.”

“I hate I gained so much weight after the baby. I feel so... *blah*.”

“All the more reason to spice it up. Have your mom or mother-in-law keep the baby for a weekend, and you remind Christopher why he married you.”

“You know, our wedding anniversary is coming up next weekend. I think I’ll call Mom and ask her.”

“Good. You can have that Saturday off.”

“Thank you. Will you help me pick something out?”

“Of course. It’s what I do.” Paige slid her feet back into her stilettos, then stood. “Only two more hours, and I can get home and kick these shoes off until tomorrow.”

“The pain we women go through to look good,” Janice said with a laugh.

“True. We have a few minutes. Let’s pick out something for you.”

“All right. How about something in black since it’s slimming?”

“Janice, no matter what you wear, he will love it. I guarantee it.”

Paige moved around the desk and entered the shop, with Janice behind her. She glanced around and smiled at the customers. Her other employee, Juliette, smiled at her as she walked by.

“Janice, you know we sell the sexiest teddies.” Paige pulled one off the rack and held it up.

“That’s a little sheer,” Janice murmured.

“Christopher knows what’s under it. You’re just enticing him.” Paige hung it up and then looked at her. “Janice, that man loves you. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He doesn’t care about any extra weight you’ve put on. Besides, you had his baby. Those curves show that. Take control and let that man know you are still crazy about him. Don’t let any insecurities stop you.”

Janice huffed. “All right. I just don’t want to make a fool out of myself.”

“You won’t. I promise you, he will love it. Do you think they make lingerie for women? It’s made for men. We women love to be sexy, but we like to have someone to be sexy for. Wearing it is great for your ego, and he will love it. I promise you.” Paige squeezed Janice’s hand.

“You talked me into it. Let me look through them, and I’ll pick one.”

“Great. I’ll be at the counter when you’re ready.”

Paige went back to the counter and waited on a woman buying a negligee. She smiled at her as she placed it in the red bag and handed it to the woman.

“Thank you for shopping at Paige’s. Please come back.”

“I will. My husband loves your store, even though he’s never stepped foot in it.”

Paige laughed. “I hear that a lot. Have a wonderful evening.”

The woman held up the bag. “Oh, I plan to.”

Two hours later, Paige locked up after Juliette and Janice left. She was about to head back to her office when someone knocked on the door. She pulled the sheer curtain aside, saw Nick Richards standing there, and rolled her eyes. Huffing a breath, she turned the lock and pulled the door open.

“We’re closed.”

“I just need a minute,” he said, and a shiver ran through her at his deep tone.

She pulled the door open and allowed him to enter. Closing the door, she leaned against it, folded her arms, and stared at him. Damn, the man was too good-looking, and his aftershave smelled fantastic.

“What is it?”

“I told you I don’t give up easily. Let me take you to dinner. If you decide not to see me again after one dinner, I’ll leave you alone. I want to take you out, but if you tell me you don’t want to see me again, I leave you alone.”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it because of what happened?”

“Which part? Where you let me think you were talking to a woman or when you made me look like a fool in front of your family?”

“Ouch.” He winced and ran his hand around the back of his neck. “I suppose all the above. Come on, let me make it all up to you. We could go to the Hartland restaurant. I’m sure I can get us in.”

“You don’t even know what night if I said yes.”

“I know the owner, so I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

“I know him too.”

“Oh, good, so you can get us in if I can’t. How about Saturday?”

Paige shook her head. “I’m not looking for a broken heart.”

“Do you think I am-what *is* your name?”

Paige laughed. “Paige Douglas.”

“Paige? You own the shop?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Nick Richards.” He put his hand out to her, and she placed hers in it and looked at him when she felt a zap. By the look on his face, he felt it too. There was no way she’d let on

that she already knew his name. Then he cleared his throat and let go of her hand. "Paige, will you go to dinner with me on Saturday night?"

"I suppose I can."

"Great. What's your phone number and address? I can pick you up around six if that works for you."

"That's fine." She rattled off her phone number.

"Address?"

She smiled. "Upstairs. There are steps at the back."

"Oh, okay. Well, I'll get going. I'll see you then, Paige. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I still might throw a drink in your face."

His eyebrows rose. "You wanted to throw a drink in my face?"

"Oh, definitely."

Nick chuckled. "I'll do my best not to let that happen." He touched the brim of his hat. "I'll see you then. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. Be careful going home. The roads are getting bad."

"Yes, ma'am."

Paige watched him go out the door, then she locked it behind him. She leaned back against it and wondered what in the hell she was thinking. She should stay as far away from Nick Richards as she could.

Nick grinned as he headed for his truck. This trip to town turned out better than the last one.

Maybe she'd be able to get past what had happened. He sure hoped so because he'd never been so attracted to a woman as he was to Paige.

He dated, but he was still looking for that special woman, and he wouldn't mind if it turned out to be her.

As he pulled into the Feed Store lot, he swore when he couldn't find a parking place. He needed to pick up a few new saws.

Nick opened the farm to customers in September. It was fun watching someone pick out a tree, tag it, and then come back in November or December to cut it or have one of the men on the farm cut it for them.

People packed the farm daily once it opened. Some just waited until after Thanksgiving to show up, or others bought trees on lots in town or at his farm. He had a few fresh cut ones in one of the two large tents he put up. One had the cut trees, along with homemade wreathes, and the other one was where the trees were paid for, and free hot chocolate and coffee was available on cold days.

Nick only provided to two lots off the farm. Chuck Sampson's and the Feed Store.

He could understand how people didn't want to traipse all over the farm to find a tree, but nothing was better for him.

Once he finally found a place to park, he entered the store and headed for the tool section. He turned when he heard his name and grinned.

"Hey, Creed." He stuck his hand out to his friend.

"Nick, how are you?"

"I'm great. You?"

"I'm good. I just need to pick up some feed."

"I need to get some new saws."

"Yeah, those you have need replaced," Creed McBride said with a grin.

Nick chuckled. "I go through them pretty fast the closer it gets to the holidays."

"I bet. Hey, I'm sorry, but I have to get going. I'm sure I'll see you soon."

"Yes, take care."

Creed touched the brim of his hat, turned from him, then glanced over his shoulder.

“Save me a big ass tree.”

Nick laughed. “Of course.”

He made his way to the tool section and bought ten saws. The men would work on sharpening the others, but it was good to keep new ones on hand. It made using a sharper blade a lot easier when someone had to crawl under a tree to cut it.

Time would soon arrive for him to open the farm. The Christmas tree industry was more prominent than people realized. He sold thousands of trees, and though trying at times, he loved it. Some days, it drove him nuts having all those people on his land, but it was worth it. He hoped the week didn't drag since he was looking forward to dinner with Paige.

When Saturday evening finally arrived, he pulled around to the back of Paige's and parked his truck. He looked up the steps and was glad to see they were clear of snow and ice. All he needed was to fall on them and bust his ass.

Taking a deep breath, he picked up the flowers, opened the door, then climbed the steps. He knocked and waited.

When there was no answer, he knocked again and frowned. Had she forgotten?

“Nick.”

He turned to look down to the bottom of the steps to see Paige climbing them.

“Did you forget we had a date?”

“No. Time just got away from me. I had a new shipment come in and wanted to look at it. I just need to grab my purse and coat.” She stepped onto the stoop, unlocked the door, and waved for him to follow her.

Nick glanced around. “This is nice.”

The entire apartment was an open space. He had stepped into the kitchen, and only a bar separated it from the rest of the

apartment. To the left a bed sat catty-corner on a far wall.

“Thanks. I like it. At first, I wasn’t sure about the open space. I like separate rooms, but I got used to it.”

“I like it open like this. It’s a great place, Paige.”

“Thanks.”

He stared into her eyes, remembered the flowers he held in his hand, and handed them to her.

“I hope you like lilies.”

“I do. Thank you.” She took the flowers, got a vase down from a cabinet, filled it with water, and put the flowers in it. Then she set it on the bar.

“Are you ready? I’m starving.”

“Just let me get my purse and coat. Luckily, I dressed before going downstairs.”

“Why did you go downstairs without a coat?”

“I wasn’t going to be long, and I didn’t see any sense in putting my coat on just to go down to the shop.”

“I see. Well, you look nice, Paige.”

“Thank you.” She wore a red skirt with a white blouse and red stilettos on her feet.

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Those damn shoes. Stilettos are a man’s kryptonite.”

When she laughed, he wanted to drag her to her bed and have wild, passionate sex with her.

“And seeing a man in sweatpants is a woman’s.”

“Really? Well, I have a few of those I could wear for you.”

“You, Nick Richards, will be tough to deal with.”

“Oh, but think of the fun while you do, darlin’.”

They stared at each other until Nick felt something around his ankles and looked down to see a big cat.

“That’s Queenie. She rules.”

“A cat. Wonderful,” he murmured.

Paige burst out laughing. “Why is it that most men don’t like cats?”

“No clue. I’m a dog and horse man myself.”

“I like those too.”

“Do you ride?”

“Yes.”

“We could do that one day. You can come to my place, and we’ll take a horseback ride. I can show you my farm.”

“I’d like that. What kind of farm is it?” She took her coat off the hall tree, but Nick took it from her and held it as she put her arms in it.

“Christmas tree farm.”

She spun around to look at him.

“Seriously? Wait. Are you the Richards of Richards Christmas Tree Farm?”

“Yes, ma’am. Wilder and I own it, but I’ve always been the one to take care of it.”

“Why?”

“Wilder always wanted to be a livestock agent. He worked for the Montana Department of Livestock for twelve years, but he’s quitting and going to run Rory’s dairy farm with her once they get married.”

“Do you think he’ll be happy giving up a job he loved?”

Nick grinned. “He can’t wait. I think he has another week as an agent, but he’s really looking forward to working on the farm.”

“How does he know he’ll like it?” Paige frowned at him.

“He worked there undercover to find out who stole her Holsteins. That’s how they met and fell in love. I was a little skeptical about him doing it too, but after talking about it, I

could see how excited he was. I think he likes the idea of being close to Rory and not being out in the field. Rory's happy too, because when he was shot—”

“Shot? Oh, my God,” Paige exclaimed.

“Yes, but he's fine now,” Nick explained about Wilder being shot.

“I bet it scared her to death.”

“She was a wreck for sure, but it all worked out. We'd better get going so we can make our reservations.”

“Of course,” she said but didn't move as their eyes met.

Nick cleared his throat and glanced away from her because if he didn't, he'd do his best to talk her into getting between the sheets.

“Let's go,” he said.

“I'm ready if you are.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he murmured and couldn't stop himself from looking at her lips. When they lifted in a slow smile, he looked into her eyes and narrowed his. “Are you toying with me, Paige?”

“Would I do that?”

Nick shook his head. “I'm asking for trouble.”

When Paige laughed, he did too. He took her keys from her and nodded for her to go.

“Oh, but think of the fun while you do, darlin',” she threw his words back at him.

He took her hand in his, walked out onto the stoop, locked the door for her, and handed her the key.

“Trust me, I am, darlin'. I am.”

Once they reached the bottom of the steps, he led her to the passenger side of his truck. When she climbed inside, he closed her door, strode around the front, opened his door, and slid onto the seat.

After inserting the key, he looked at her to see her staring at him and shook his head.

“Stop it, or we’ll go right back upstairs.”

Paige snorted out a laugh. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Lies. All lies,” he muttered, making her laugh.

Nick started the truck and drove them to the restaurant.

“It’s crowded,” Paige said as she looked out of the windshield.

“I figured it would be, but we have a reservation. It’s just finding a place to park.”

“Right there.” Paige pointed to a spot where a car was backing out.

“Perfect timing,” Nick said as he waited for the car to leave and then drove into the spot.

“I’m glad you made reservations,” Paige said as she reached for the door handle.

“Me too. Hang tight. I’ll get the door.” Nick threw the door open, stepped out, walked around the front of the truck, and opened her door. He put his hand out for her, then helped her out.

“I love the food here.”

“This restaurant has the best steaks.”

“I’m not sure I could choose between this place or the Clifton Diner.”

“If you want home-cooked meals, I’d take the diner, but for a fancy dinner, I’d have to choose here.”

They entered the lobby to see a woman standing behind a podium.

“Hello. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, ma’am. Two for Richards, please,” Nick said.

The hostess picked up two menus and asked them to follow her, and she led them to a booth.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Paige?”

“Callahan Whiskey on the rocks, please.”

“I’ll have the same.”

“Excellent. I’ll get your drinks, and your server will be right with you.”

“Thank you,” Paige said.

As she removed her coat, Nick stepped behind her and helped her with it, then he placed it on the bench. She smiled as she slid onto the seat. She watched Nick remove his hat and coat, set them on the seat, slide onto the bench across from her, and pick up a menu.

“I don’t know why I’m looking at this. The T-Bone here is the best.”

“I’m going with the pork chops. I usually don’t eat pork chops, but these are so tender.” Paige set the menu down. “Yeah, that’s what I’m getting.”

“I’ll stick with my steak.” Nick winked at her, and she could feel the blush on her cheeks.

The hostess brought their drinks, then once they gave their orders to the server, Paige glanced around the restaurant.

“Grant has an amazing place here,” she said.

“Yeah. He’s a great guy. How do you know him?”

“I met Jessa first when she came into the store, then one day, she brought him with her. I about died when I saw him walk into my shop.”

Nick shook his head. “What’s he got that I don’t?”

“Well, let’s see. He’s a country music star.”

“That’s it? I could sing for you.”

Paige spurted out a laugh. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Have you heard something about my singing?”

“No.” She tilted her head. “Can you sing?”

“Not worth a damn.”

Paige laughed. “At least you’re honest.”

“So, he’s a country music star. What else?”

“He’s sexy.”

When Nick’s eyes narrowed, she laughed again.

“Are you saying I’m not?”

“I’m not saying either way. You’d use it against me.”

Nick chuckled. “Damn right, I would.”

“I can’t believe that Thanksgiving is next month.”

“Do you go anywhere?”

“I have dinner with my parents and my sisters and their husbands.”

“How many sisters?”

“Two. Both younger.”

“Do they have kids?”

“No. They were just recently married.”

“I see.”

“What about you? Do you do anything for Thanksgiving?”

“Wilder and I go to our parents’ place.”

“Is Wilder your only sibling?”

“Yes. This year, he’ll be taking Rory too. My parents already love her.”

“Why aren’t you married, Nick?”

“Why aren’t you?”

“I was for seven years. We’re divorced.”

“Will you tell me why?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time, darlin’.”

“Maybe when I know you better.” Paige toyed with her glass of whiskey.

“Well, I like the sound of that. I would like to see you again, Paige.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

“As I said before, I don’t give up easily.”

“So, why aren’t you married?”

Nick shrugged. “I guess because I haven’t found the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Are you looking?”

He stared at her. “Yes.”

Paige picked up her glass, took a sip, and set it back down. Once dinner arrived, they ate, and she realized how much fun they were having. He had a fantastic sense of humor, and throw in those good looks, he had it all. And she knew he’d break her heart.

It was hard to trust any man again after what Bruce had done. She was so scared to put her heart out there, so she decided to never get married again. That type of betrayal was hard to get over.

When it was time for them to leave, Nick paid the check, helped her with her coat, took her hand, and walked out.

Now her nerves were going into overdrive. Did she invite him into her apartment? She sure didn’t want him getting ideas, but she was very attracted to him and couldn’t remember the last time she had sex. It was with her ex-husband, and they’d been divorced for three years. Paige figured it was close to three years since she’d been intimate with a man. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been kissed, and she refused to date.

Nick Richards was the first man she’d been out with, and she knew it was a mistake.

“What’s going through your head, Paige?”

“I’m wondering why I’m going out with you.”

“What? Why?”

“I haven’t been on a date in years, Nick. I trust men as far as I can throw them.”

“Damn, he did a number on you, didn’t he?”

“You have no idea,” she murmured.

“Tell me.”

“Not yet.”

“Are you going to go out with me again?”

“Nick—”

“Come on, Paige. We had a nice dinner, and I’d really like to see you again.”

He drove into the lot of her shop, then around the back to the steps leading to her apartment. He put the gear into Park and looked over at her. “Not all men are like your ex, Paige.”

“I know that, but I can’t help how I feel, Nick.”

“Well, how do you know if you don’t date?”

Paige shook her head, and Nick huffed as she reached for the door handle.

“You don’t have to walk me up,” she said as she opened the door.

“I know, but I am.”

She knew he was angry, and he didn’t have a clue why. Bruce betrayed her, and not by just having an affair. That she might have gotten past, but not this. She would never get past this.

Nick stood at her door, put his hand out, and mentally sighed when she placed hers in his.

“I’m sorry, Nick. I just don’t want to get hurt again.”

“No one does, Paige, but that’s inevitable. We all get hurt. Come on, I’ll walk you up.”

She stepped down from the truck, and he led her up the steps, waited while she unlocked the door, and then turned to look at him.

“Sweet dreams, darlin’,” he said and turned to go down the steps.

“Nick...”

He stopped and looked up at her.

“Go inside, Paige. We’ll talk soon,” he said, then ran down the steps, climbed into his truck, and drove home.

He just didn’t understand what the problem was. He had no desire to hurt her. But he didn’t even know what he was up against. What had her ex done to her to make her swear off men?

Nick shook his head. He’d been through some crazy relationships, but not to where he swore off women. He loved them and wanted to settle down and have kids before he got too much older. Forty was closer than he liked, but he wanted someone to pass the farm down to. He knew Wilder would hand his part down to any children he had, but if Nick didn’t have any heirs, Wilder’s children would inherit it all.

Not that it bothered him, but the farm had been in the family for generations, and he’d hate to see his part die with him.

“Damn it, Paige.”

He really liked her. She was beautiful and sexy and had a great sense of humor, except when he’d embarrassed her.

“Not cool, Richards. Not cool at all, man.”

But she seemed to have gotten over it, or she wouldn’t have gone out with him. And why go out with him if she had no intention of being in a relationship? Isn’t that why people date? To see who they were intended to be with?

Nick had to admit that Paige could be that woman. What was the sense in seeing her, though, if nothing was going to come of it?

Blowing out a breath, he'd wait and see what happened. He sure as hell didn't want to get hurt, but he had no clue why she had such a mistrust of men. Did her husband have an affair? Some people have trouble getting past that, but others work around it to save their marriage.

He'd back off for a while until he knew what had happened. It was busy at the farm right now anyway, so he'd be too occupied to think about her. *Yeah, right.*

Chapter Three

Paige entered the shop early Monday morning to get started for the day. She smiled as she walked around the store. She had about an hour before she opened, so she ensured everything was as it should be.

Sometimes, customers would take things off the racks and not put them back, or God forbid, they took a folded item from a shelf, and once they looked at it, they'd just stuff it on the shelf.

When the door opened a little later, she smiled when she saw Janice and Juliette enter.

"Let me get my coat off, and I'll be ready," Janice said as she shrugged off her coat.

"No worries. I straightened up." Paige smiled.

"Did you have a good weekend?" Juliette asked her.

"Yes. I went on a date—" Paige laughed at the look on Janice's face.

"You? Had a date? Who with?"

"Nick Richards."

"Nick? The one who owns the tree farm?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Not personally. Christopher does, though." Janice shrugged. "I've met him. We get our tree there every year. He's nice. Not to mention very handsome. I didn't know you even knew him."

"I didn't." Paige explained about meeting Nick from the beginning. When she finished, Janice laughed.

"Well, you obviously forgave him. Are you going out again?"

Paige sighed. "I don't know. I am so skittish with relationships. After what Bruce did, I find it hard to trust anyone."

"Not all men are like him."

"I know. Nick said the same thing, but I trusted Bruce, and then to find out how he lied to me when we were married..." She shook her head. "I just don't know if I want to risk it again. You just don't know how it tore me up, Janice."

"I do," Juliette said as she walked to where they stood. "I remember when it happened, and it about destroyed you. I understand not wanting to have another relationship, but Paige, take a chance, and who better than Nick Richards? He's a great guy. Ask anyone."

"Yes, but so was Bruce, or so I thought. I know not all men would do what he did, but it's hard to trust again." Paige huffed. "I'm not sure I want to take that chance."

"But how else are you going to find your happiness?" Janice asked her.

"I am happy."

"Are you?" Juliette tilted her head.

"Yes. I have my shop."

"Your shop isn't going to keep you warm at night, Paige."

"You're right, but I don't need a man for that." She smiled. "I have Queenie."

The women laughed, but Paige knew they didn't understand how terrified she was of getting hurt again. She had almost given up on everything. She was happy that she hadn't, but it had been close. All she knew was that the man she loved, planned to spend her life with, had lied to her. *For years.*

Taking a deep breath, she got to work and refused to think about Bruce or Nick for the rest of the day.

Not thinking about Nick wasn't easy because of the way they'd parted on Saturday night. She knew she had upset him.

He had to understand how difficult it was for her to trust any man again.

She wanted to trust Nick, but what if he lied too? How would she ever get past a second betrayal? Maybe she wasn't meant to have a man in her life.

"Really, Paige?" she murmured.

Her problem was she did like Nick, but unless she could trust him, there was no sense in getting involved.

The following Saturday, they went to dinner in Hartland again. Every time Paige looked at Nick, he was staring at her. She wondered what was going through his mind.

When he smiled at her, she couldn't help but smile. He really was a nice man. Would it hurt to give it a try? She knew she never wanted to get married again, but being in a steady relationship, didn't seem so bad. Especially with Nick. *What's the difference, Paige?* As she cut into her steak, she sighed.

"What was that for?"

"Nothing." She looked at Nick across the table.

"If you think this isn't going to amount to anything, Paige, then let's just stop this now."

"Nick, I like you. I do, but I don't want to get married again."

Nick picked up his linen napkin, then tossed it onto the table, sat back, and folded his arms.

"So you keep saying." He glanced around the room then back to her. "I'm ready to leave when you are."

"I'm ready. Nick?"

"Yes?"

"I know I'm hurting you, but I argue with myself every day about you and honestly, I am not so fickle. Hell, if one of my friends acted the way I am about relationships, I'd tell them to snap out of it, and take a chance, but I'm scared, Nick. I'm terrified." She wrung her hands together.

Nick didn't say anything while he helped her with her coat. When he pulled her hair out of collar, she shivered at his touch. He waved their server over.

"Check please," Nick said.

Paige knew she'd ruined another date. *Stay away from him. It's for the best.* She just kept hurting him, and it was the last thing she wanted to do. Nick didn't deserve her running hot and cold. How could she even explain how she felt? She jerked when Nick took her hand and led her from the restaurant. She hadn't even noticed the server returning with his card or him signing the ticket. This thing with him was something she really needed to think about. She didn't want to be alone for the rest of her life, but she also didn't want to be hurt again either. Paige sighed, and knew she had a lot of thinking to do.

Once again, when Nick took her home, he walked her up the stairs, turned and jogged down them, leaving her standing on the stoop alone.

"I'm sorry, Nick," she whispered then entered her apartment.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, the farm got extremely busy. It seemed to many people that Thanksgiving signaled Christmas wasn't far behind. Nick loved it, though. He knew he'd be even busier the day after Thanksgiving.

As he wondered what Paige was doing, he walked to his truck, and his cellphone buzzed. Removing it from his coat, he saw Wilder's face.

"Hey, little brother. What's going on in your life?"

Wilder chuckled in his ear. "You probably don't know, but I'm getting married soon."

"No shit? Wow! My little brother is beating me to the altar."

"Hell, I had a feeling I would, anyway."

"Me too. What's up?"

“I’m bringing Rory to the farm to pick out a tree. She wants a tall one.”

“Great. Bring her out. I’m heading up there now. We have a lot of people here, so you’d better come quick, or they’ll all be gone.”

“We’re leaving now. See you soon.” Wilder disconnected.

Nick put his phone back into his pocket, then drove to the section of the farm that was open to customers. It was just starting to flurry, and to him, that made the day perfect.

As for what to do where Paige was concerned, he knew it was better to stay away from her. He sure didn’t need a broken heart either, but you had to go through some wrong ones before you found the right one.

An hour later, he helped Wilder load his tree, then glanced around to see Rory heading back down a row of them.

“Maybe we should wait,” Nick said as he nodded his head in Rory’s direction.

“She’d better not change her mind,” Wilder muttered.

Nick chuckled. “It’s a woman’s prerogative.”

“I’ll be right back.” Wilder jogged down the rows of trees until he disappeared.

Nick looked at the people and knew it would be a good year again. There had to be at least fifty people moving up and down the rows, searching for that perfect tree.

They cleared an area close to the trees for vehicles to park, and Nick’s men would carry the tree back, then they’d wrap and load it. Some customers didn’t want to cut their own, so the men were out there if someone wanted help.

He turned when he saw more vehicles coming up the road and parking. He was sure his mouth dropped open when he saw Paige get out of a Cadillac SRX with another woman.

Paige walked toward him, then stopped in front of him while Sydney walked to the tent with coffee and hot chocolate.

“I’ve come to get a tree,” Paige said when she reached him.

“Really? Why would you think this is the place?” He grinned.

“I’ve been here before.” She shrugged, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, Nick.”

“For?”

“How our date ended. I should have explained why I feel the way I do.”

“I’d like to know, Paige. I’m at a loss here for what I’m supposed to do. Do you want me to stay away from you or what?”

“I like you, Nick, and I’d like to keep seeing you, but I will guard my heart.”

“I don’t know what I’m dealing with if you won’t tell me.”

She huffed, and the frigid air formed a cloud in front of her.

“I know.”

“So?”

“I’d love to go out with you again, but I can’t make promises.”

“I’m not asking you to, and I’m not making any either. I just want to see if we have anything, and how can we do that if you won’t go out with me? You like me, and God knows I like you, but if you’re going into any kind of relationship with the thought that it won’t amount to anything, why bother? I date to meet someone I hope will be the right one.” Nick cupped her cheek in his gloved hand. “I know you thought you had, but he couldn’t have been if you’re apart now.”

Paige’s eyes met his, and he could see she was trying to decide about seeing him. He just prayed she would because he wanted to know her better, but he would step away if she asked him to.

“All right. We’ll go out and see what happens. We could discover we really don’t like each other.”

Nick snorted. “Yeah, okay.”

“You’re such a smartass, Richards, but you just remember, if it’s not going anywhere then we stop seeing each other and we go separate ways. We both have to accept that.”

“Damn, I’m getting shot down before I even get a chance.”

Paige laughed, and he chuckled.

“And I’ll accept it if *you* decide it won’t work. Now, I think I’ll look for a nice, big tree. I have tall ceilings.”

“Yes, ma’am. You let one of us know which one you want, and someone will cut it down for you and load it.” Nick smiled. “I’ve never seen you in slacks before.”

“I knew I was coming to look for a tree. I sure didn’t want to wear heels out here.”

“You look good either way.” Nick glanced over his shoulder to see the woman who had arrived with Paige, heading their way with two Styrofoam cups in her hands, and handed one to Paige.

“Thank you. Nick, this is my good friend, Sydney Wright. Sydney, this is Nick Richards.”

“Hi, Sydney. It’s nice to meet you,” he said as he put his hand out to her.

“You too, Nick.” Sydney shook his hand.

“Let’s go so we can get back. I’ll see you soon, Nick.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he watched Paige walk toward one of the trucks that drove people up to the trees, with her friend.

“Isn’t that the woman from Paige’s? You know, the one you embarrassed?” Rory asked as she reached him.

“Yeah, thanks for bringing that up,” Nick growled, making Rory laugh.

“She seems all right now, though. What did you do? Use that Richards charm on her?”

“Is that how Wilder won you over?”

“Of course.” She winked at him, then walked to the truck.

“She was just looking,” Wilder said as he strode past him. “Damn glad to hear it. I’m surprised she doesn’t want one in every room.”

Nick grinned. “Hey, we have plenty of customers who do that.”

“Yeah, not only customers. You have three in the house.”

Nick chuckled. “They make the house smell good.”

“That’s a good excuse. Hey, I’d better get going. I know she will want that tree up as soon as we get home.”

“How’s it going on the farm?”

“Good. I love it. If I don’t see you before Thanksgiving, I’ll see you at Mom’s for dinner.” Wilder saluted, climbed into his truck, and drove off.

Nick made his way through the crowd to see if he saw Paige, and he spotted her walking along the trees with one of his men following her. She’d stop at a tree, shake her head, and move along. He looked around but didn’t see Sydney. He supposed she was looking in another area.

There were some gorgeous trees to choose from, so he knew it was a tough decision. Hell, he had trouble picking his own.

With a sigh, he got back to work and helped the men. He stayed away from Paige. Unless she asked for his help, he wouldn’t follow her around.

A while later, he spotted her heading to her SUV. She opened the door, reached inside, then walked to the cash register with her purse. Nick saw one of his men baling up a tree and wondered if it was hers. He headed for her.

“Hey, did you find a tree?” he asked when he reached her.

“I did. It’s a ten-footer. It will look great in front of the window of the apartment. I also found a five-footer for the front window of the shop. I put an artificial—”

“Bite your tongue. You can’t use that word around here,” he whispered.

Paige laughed. "Okay, but I wanted to get a real one for the front window this year. They always smell so good, and it will make the shop smell nice."

"That place already smells nice."

She tilted her head. "You think so?"

"Hell, yeah. It must be from all the women stopping in there."

"I have Lavender scented candles too, but I put them away at Christmas."

"It's not the candles," Nick said with a grin.

"Ma'am? Do you want the trees on top of your vehicle?"

"How do you plan on getting them inside once you get home?" Nick cocked his head.

"I never thought about it. The guy at the art shop helped me last year, but he has a broken leg."

"I can come by later if you'd like."

"Thank you, Nick, but I hate to put you out."

"You're not, and besides, I offered. I can stop by around six."

"That would be great. I need to get back to the shop. I told the girls I was taking my lunch hour to get a tree, so I'd better get going." She looked at the man who had helped her. "I suppose both on top if you can."

"Yes, ma'am. Not a problem."

"Thank you. Nick, I'll see you later."

"All right, darlin'. I'll see you later." Nick touched the brim of his hat and watched her, and Sydney get into her vehicle and drive off. He hoped the day went by quickly.

Paige drove from the farm with a smile on her face. She'd had to gain the courage to go to the farm today. She wasn't sure of the reception she'd get from Nick. She hadn't heard from him all week. She wondered if it had gotten to where he

was done with her. She hoped not because she did like him but she also knew she was asking for trouble getting involved with him. He was probably so confused about her fear.

Of course, who could blame him? She was throwing mixed signals. She didn't want to get hurt and was afraid she would, but she also told him she liked him.

Paige never took herself for a fickle woman. She made decisions and stuck by them, but Nick Richards was something she'd never dealt with before. She knew he'd leave her alone if she told him she didn't want to see him. The thing was, she wanted to get to know him.

"Make up your mind, Paige," she chastised herself, and Sydney laughed.

"If you don't go after that man, I will," Sydney said.

Paige quickly glanced at her and back at the road.

"Is that right?"

"He's gorgeous and sexy. God, I love a tall man."

"Go for it."

When Sydney snorted, Paige laughed. She drove to Sydney's apartment to drop her off and headed for the shop.

A little while later, she parked beside the steps leading to her apartment and hurried around the front to the shop door. When she opened it, she smiled at seeing all the customers inside.

"Did you find a tree?" Janice asked her when she made it to the counter.

"I did. I got one for the front window too. I went with a real one for here. I'll ensure it has water, so you or Juliette don't need to worry about it."

"Did you see Nick?"

"Yes. He's going to come by to help me get the trees off my SUV."

"Oh, really?" Juliette asked as she passed by them.

“Yes, really. I’ve decided to take a chance.”

“Good for you. Nick’s a great guy.” Juliette smiled. “I’d go after him in a heartbeat if I wasn’t seeing Josh.”

Paige and Janice laughed. That was two women who wouldn’t mind dating Nick.

“You should invite him for dinner,” Janice suggested.

“I should. I mean, it’s going to be around six. I suppose I could make something.” Paige nibbled on her bottom lip.

“Call him to make sure he doesn’t eat something before getting here.”

“I’ll do that now. I’ll call him from my office. I won’t be long.”

The farm was busy today. Paige entered the hallway and headed for her office. Once inside, she walked behind her desk, took a seat, and called Nick. She just hoped she wasn’t bothering him.

“Richards,” he said in her ear when he answered.

“Nick? It’s Paige. Would you... uh, like to come for dinner this evening? You are coming all this way to help me with the trees.”

“I’d love to come for dinner, but you don’t have to do that. I offered to unload the trees.”

“I know, but I want to thank you.”

“Have dinner with me Saturday evening.”

“That’s not thanking you.”

“Sure it is.”

She blew out a breath. She was going to get in too deep with this man. She could see it coming.

“All right.”

“Great. I’ll see you later, Paige. Have a good day.” He disconnected.

Paige reentered the shop to see both women waiting on customers, so she headed for a woman who looked like she was having trouble deciding.

“Hi, can I help you find something?” Paige smiled.

“I can’t decide between the red or black,” the woman said, smiling.

“Is it for you?”

“Yes. My fiancé and I are going away this weekend, and I want to make it special.”

“Does he have a favorite color?”

The woman laughed. “Not that I know of. I’m sure anything I get he’ll like, but I’m just not sure.”

“All right. Well, take your time. Any of us can help you when you’re ready.”

“I appreciate it.”

Paige nodded, then moved through the shop, rearranging and hanging things up. Mentally shaking her head, it amazed her how many people never put things back where they got them, but that happened just about everywhere.

After Juliette and Janice left for the day, Paige locked the door behind her and walked around to the steps. She was happy to see the trees still on the vehicle. Not that they had a lot of crime in Clifton, but you never know.

As she walked up the steps, her stomach growled, and she glanced at her watch to see it was five-thirty. No wonder she was hungry. She had skipped lunch to go to the farm, and she was so happy that she had. At least she and Nick talked.

She just hoped she wasn’t in for a broken heart. Damn Bruce. She wasn’t a vindictive person, but she hoped he got what he deserved for lying to her.

“Jackass,” she muttered as she reached the stoop.

She unlocked the door, entered the apartment, and almost tripped over the cat.

“Damn, Queenie. Let me get in the door first.”

She removed her coat and hat, then headed for the kitchen so she could feed the cat. She looked down to see the cat intertwining between her legs.

“Oh, sure. You like me when you’re hungry, but other times, you ignore me. I should have gotten a dog.” Paige laughed when Queenie sat and licked her paws.

After feeding the cat, she looked through her cupboards for something to eat, but nothing appealed.

“How did you plan on feeding Nick?”

With a sigh, she walked to the sofa and plopped down onto it to wait for him to get here. She was nervous, and she didn’t know why.

The man was just too damn good-looking, and she knew if he put on the charm, she’d give in. She could admit she was so attracted to him. Those pale blue eyes were beautiful, and she’d bet her shop that he’d talked a lot of women out of their clothes with those eyes alone. God! She was heading for heartbreak. She just knew it.

At six, a knock sounded on the door. She pushed to her feet, took a deep breath, then opened the door to see him standing on the stoop. Snow covered the brim of his hat and the shoulders of his coat, but it hung open, and gloves covered his hands.

“Hello, Paige,” he said, and she had to suppress a shiver, thinking of him whispering in her ear.

“Hi—” Her voice caught, so she cleared her throat and tried again. “Hi, Nick. Come in out of the cold.”

“I’d rather get the trees first if you don’t mind. Once I get inside and warm up, I might not want to come back out.”

Paige smiled. “I don’t doubt that. Let me get my coat.”

“I’ll get the tree. Stay in where it’s warm. What do you want to do with the smaller one for now?”

“Well, I’d like it in the shop...”

“Okay. Well, I suppose you’ll have to come out anyway, won’t you?”

“Yes. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I offered, Paige. Get your coat, and I’ll head down to your SUV.” He headed back down the steps.

Once she put on her coat, she trotted down the steps and stopped by the vehicle.

“Let’s get the smaller one in first,” Nick said as he cut the rope holding the trees on the roof.

“Sure. I’ll go unlock the door-damn,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t have a stand for it.”

“If you can get one tomorrow, it will be all right. It was just cut, so it won’t die that fast.”

“I’ll run to the Feed Store tomorrow at lunch.”

Nick grunted as he pulled the tree off the SUV and then hoisted it onto his shoulder.

“Do you have somewhere you can put it for now?”

“Yeah, I can set it in my office.” She glanced around. “I didn’t think it was supposed to snow tonight.”

“Forecast changed. Up to seven inches.”

She’d like to have seven inches. She snorted out a laugh.

“What’s funny?”

Paige shook her head. No way would she tell him. Okay, so she missed sex, and her mind slipped into the gutter.

“I’ll get the door.” She scurried around to the front, unlocked the door, and flipped on the lights. She held the door for him.

Nick passed her, and she could smell the snow, cold, and aftershave coming from him. God! She was horny! She pushed the door closed and waved for him to follow her to the office.

“You can set it in the corner.”

“Sure.” Nick leaned the tree back against the corner.

“Thank you. Um, would you like to grab dinner at the diner?”

“I’d love it. I’m starving.”

“Me too. Since I skipped lunch, it’s catching up to me.”

“Great. Let me get the other tree upstairs, then we can go. You have a stand for that one, right?”

“Yes. I always have a real tree in my apartment.”

Nick stared at her, and she couldn’t tear her eyes from him. She gazed into his eyes when he stepped closer and cupped her cheeks in his gloved hands.

“I want to kiss you, Paige,” he murmured.

“Please.”

He grinned, lowered his lips to hers, and she swore lightning struck her. She moaned deep in her throat. His hands moved down around her back, pulling her tight against him. His tongue slowly slid into her mouth, and she moved hers against it. This time, it was him who moaned, then he slowly lifted his lips from hers.

“I knew it would be good.”

“Me too, but you scare me, Nicholas Richards.”

“I don’t want to do that, Paige. I’ll do my damndest to never hurt you... in any way.”

“I know, Nick, but...”

“I’m not him, Paige.” He stepped back from her. “I want to know what he did.”

“I want you to know too, so let’s have dinner, and I’ll tell you.”

She knew she couldn’t put it off any longer.

After Nick carried the larger tree up the steps and set it in the stand, he helped her tighten the screws around the tree, and pour water into it.

“I can’t wait to decorate it,” she said.

“It’s a beautiful tree.”

“All of your trees are, Nick.” She looked at him. “Let’s go get some food in us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They walked down the steps, and Nick took her hand in his, then crossed the street to the diner.

Once inside, they made their way to a booth, slid in, and didn’t speak. She knew he wanted to know about her divorce.

Huffing a breath, she looked across the table to see him staring at her.

“Bruce lied to me for years,” she said.

“Lied? About what?” Nick’s eyes narrowed.

“When we were dating, he told me immediately that he didn’t want kids. At first, it devastated me, but I loved him so much that I agreed. I think I had it in the back of my head that I could make him change his mind. He never did. At least not with me.”

“What do you mean?”

Paige looked him in the eye, took a deep breath, and blew it out.

“He’d been seeing another woman for the last three years of our marriage.”

Nick hissed in a breath. “I get the feeling that isn’t all of it.”

“It’s not. I feel like such a fool because I didn’t see it.”

“How did you find out?”

“The woman came into my shop. She told me she was tired of him lying to both of us. It shocked me. I knew she was being honest, but it was hard to get past. That wasn’t all of it. I might have been able to get past an affair... but when she told me they had two children together, I about died. I confronted him. At first, he said it wasn’t true, but I didn’t believe him.”

She shook her head. “I kept on him about it, and he finally admitted it.”

“Holy hell! I’m so sorry he did that to you, Paige.”

“I hate him for what he put me through, and I will never forgive him. I wanted children so bad but gave that idea up for him. Then I find out he has a *family*,” she practically spat the word out.

“You could have kids someday, Paige.”

“No, because I won’t ever get married again. I won’t go through that again.”

“Paige, you can’t blame all of us for what he did. That was just wrong on so many levels. As for kids, hell, I’d love to have a few one day.”

She shook her head. “I don’t trust anyone anymore.”

“You mean you don’t trust men.”

“He practically destroyed me. For three years, he lied. He knew I wanted kids. He’s the one who didn’t. At least, not with me,” she repeated in a whisper.

She wasn’t sure she could ever get the courage to tell Nick what all happened after Bruce did this to her.

Nick didn’t know what he could say. It still hurt her, and he knew it would be hard for her to get past it.

He reached across the table and placed his hand on hers, making her look at him. The pain he saw in her eyes almost brought him to his knees.

“It will change for you, Paige.”

She pulled her hand from under his.

“What will change?”

“You’ll want to get married again—”

“No. I will not, Nick. So, if you think that’s where this relationship will lead, you’d better think again. It won’t.”

He sat back, folded his arms, and narrowed his eyes.

“So, I’m wasting my time. Is that what you’re saying?”

“If you think this could lead to marriage, then yes, you’re wasting your time.”

“Well, that’s good to know.” Nick glanced around the diner. “I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.”

“Me too.” She slid from the booth and stood.

“Do you two want to order?” Connie asked them when she got to the table.

“I’m sorry, Connie, but no. We need to go.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too, Connie.” Nick stared at Paige.

“All right...” Connie sounded confused.

She wasn’t the only one, Nick thought. He was sure this could go somewhere with Paige, and now he finds out he’d done nothing but waste his time in pursuing her. He glanced at Connie, placed a ten-dollar bill on the table for her trouble, smiled, and followed Paige outside.

“You don’t have to walk me—”

“Well, I am.” He took her elbow in his hand, and they crossed the street.

At the steps to her apartment, she moved up a step and looked at him.

“I’m sorry, Nick. Maybe we can still—”

“Still what? Go out? Why? Damn it, Paige, I was hoping this would go somewhere. I’ve never felt like this with any woman, but if it’s not going anywhere, then there is no sense in seeing each other anymore. I know it wouldn’t be hard to fall for you, and you hit me with this.” He shook his head. “No. It’s best to just go our separate ways now. Goodbye, Paige.” He turned to leave.

“Nick,” she called out.

“What is it?” He turned to look at her. “Can you tell me you want this to go further? Can you?”

“I can’t get married again, Nick.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both. The thought of going through another failed marriage is enough to keep me from doing it again. I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am.” He touched the brim of his hat, walked to his truck, climbed in, and drove home.

When he reached his driveway, he drove to the house, parked, and stared out the windshield. Then he hit his fist against the steering wheel.

“Fuck,” he shouted.

Chapter Four

Paige entered her apartment, removed her hat, coat, and gloves then tossed them onto the back of the sofa. She locked the door and headed for her bathroom to shower. Then she was going to bed and forget about Nick Richards.

The following day, she opened the shop and put new garments out. She knew they'd do well in sales.

The pink negligee was very sexy, and she knew she would add it to her collection.

She hung it on the rack with a heavy sigh, stepped back, and shook her head.

“Why do you want it when you have no one to wear it for?”

“Talking to yourself?”

Paige placed her hand over her heart and turned to see Juliette standing behind her.

“I didn't hear you come in.”

“I noticed. Are you all right?” Juliette removed her coat and held it in front of her.

“I don't know, Juliette. Nick and I had a fight about this... relationship. I can't get past what Bruce did—”

“Paige, move on,” Juliette said. “What Bruce did was unforgivable, but not all men will do that.”

“I know, but—”

“Paige, do you seriously want to be alone? You're a wonderful person. You deserve someone good in your life. It might not be Nick, but shouldn't you give it a chance? We all get hurt. That's life, but you can't just give up. He could be the one for you.”

“I really made him angry last night. I like him, but he has heartbreaker written all over him.”

“Nick is not a love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of man. Any woman I’ve seen him with, he’s only with her, and he doesn’t fool around either. He can’t help it if it doesn’t work out. He’s a great guy. Like I said, if I wasn’t seeing Josh right now, I wouldn’t hesitate to let Nick know I’d be interested. I’ve talked with women he’s dated, and no one said he was a dick. Now, Bruce? He *is* a dick.”

“I know.” Paige sighed. “I like Nick, but he probably doesn’t want to see me again after last night. He said he’s wasting his time with me.”

“Of course, he thinks that. For God’s sake, Paige, why would he keep seeing you if you have no desire to settle down again?”

“I—” Paige stopped talking when the bell rang, signaling someone had entered the shop. Both she and Juliette looked at the door. Paige frowned when she saw the woman Nick had embarrassed her in front of walking around the store.

“Rory, how are you?” Juliette asked the woman.

“Hi, Juliette. I’m fine. You?”

“Great. Can we help you find something?”

“I’m just looking, but I love my negligee, so I might buy another one. Wilder sure liked it.” Rory grinned, then looked at Paige. “Hi.”

“Hello.” Paige put her hand out to her. “I’m Paige Douglas. Welcome to my shop.”

“I’m Rory Heston. It’s nice to meet you, Paige. This time in a better manner.” Rory grinned. “Nick knew I was mad at him, too, that night.”

“He deserved it.” Paige laughed.

“Yes, he did. Wilder adores him, so he can’t be all bad.”

“He seems like a nice man. Wilder, I mean.”

Rory laughed. “But not Nick?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it that way. Nick is great...”

“But?”

“Are you here on his behalf, Rory?”

“God, no. He’d kill me, and he’s going to be my brother-in-law. He’d make sure Wilder missed the wedding. I can’t get on his bad side.”

Paige laughed. “I don’t know him very well, but I think you’re right.”

“I’m going to have a look around. Wilder loved the red, but I might look for another one in black.”

“We have all colors, so take your time, and if you need any help, just let one of us know.” Paige smiled.

“I will. Thank you.” Rory smiled at her, then moved around the store.

Juliette and Janice helped people with their shopping. Paige headed back to get behind the counter to wait on other customers. When the bell rang again, she looked to the door to see Grant Hunter enter, and every woman in the place stopped what they were doing and stared at him. He grinned at Paige when he saw her.

“Hi, Paige.”

“Grant, how are you?”

“Great, thanks. You?”

“Wonderful. Can I help you find something?”

“Kay told me Jessa saw a teal teddy here that she liked. I thought I’d add that to her gifts for Christmas.”

“I know which one. Come with me.” She moved around the counter, headed for a lingerie display, took the teal one from the rack, and then held it up. She laughed when Grant groaned.

“This will certainly do,” he said with a grin.

“Do you want it wrapped?”

“Please, but let me look around a little more.” He smiled at her and strode through the store.

“God, he’s gorgeous,” Janice whispered when Paige made it back to the counter.

“Yes, he is, and he loves Jessa.”

“Lucky bitch,” Juliette muttered.

Paige burst out laughing. “You both have wonderful men.”

“We do, but we can look... and drool.” Juliette laughed.

“There are a lot of good-looking men in these parts.” Paige sighed.

“Yep, and Nick Richards is one of them. Go for it,” Juliette said as she nudged her.

Paige drew in a deep breath, blew it out, and nodded.

“I think I will, but not to the point of marriage. If he breaks my heart, I will cut his balls off.”

“I’ll help you,” Rory said as she reached the counter and placed a few garments on it.

“Deal.” Paige grinned. “I just have to convince him I’m going to try. I already told him that I can’t promise anything.”

“Nick knows where he stands then. He is a good man.” Rory handed her a credit card and waved at Grant.

Paige ran the card, printed the receipt, bagged up the items, and handed the bag and receipt to Rory.

“I know he is. I’m just a wuss. I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“Can’t avoid it.” Rory picked up the bag, smiled, then walked out.

“Everyone tells me that,” Paige murmured.

“Because it’s true.” Juliette stared at her.

“I know. I’ll call him later. We didn’t part on good terms.”

“You can make it up to him.”

“I’m going to try. I do like him, Juliette.”

“That’s a start. Oh, Grant’s coming back.”

Paige snorted. “Behave.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Juliette giggled.

“Grant, did you find something else?”

“I like this,” he said as he held up the pink negligee she loved.

“Great choice. Even though Jessa is a redhead, I think she’ll look great in it.”

Grant grinned. “Or out of it.”

The women laughed as Paige wrapped his purchases, processed his credit card, and handed him the bag.

“Have a happy Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas, Grant. Please tell Jessa the same.”

“I will, Paige. Thank you. Ladies, you have a great day and a Merry Christmas.” He touched the brim of his hat, then sauntered from the shop.

Paige glanced around and saw every woman in the place was staring in the door’s direction. She shook her head. Who could blame them? The man was gorgeous and sexy. *Just like Nick.*

She saw a customer talking with Janice about a teddy, so she thought now would be a good time to give Nick a call.

With a sigh, she headed back to her office. She just hoped they could get through a conversation without it ending in an argument.

Nick walked down a row of trees, following a family of five. Two little boys ran in and out of the trees, making Nick chuckle. He remembered how he and Wilder would do the same.

The mother of the boys was carrying a bundle wrapped in pink, so he assumed it was a little girl. The father kept telling the boys to stop and behave, but he might as well have been talking to a wall.

“They seem to be having fun,” Nick said.

“Boys will be boys.”

“Yeah, my brother and I would do the same thing.”

“I’m sorry to keep dragging you down the rows,” the woman said.

“No worries. It’s what we do—excuse me. I need to take this,” he said as he pulled his cellphone from his pocket. He almost didn’t answer when he saw Paige’s number. Now what? Is she calling just to clarify she wasn’t interested in a relationship? “That makes no sense, Richards.” He took a deep breath and hit *Answer*. “Paige?”

“Nick, are you busy?”

“I’m helping a customer right now. Can I call you back?”

“Sure.”

“Give me a little while, and I’ll get back to you.”

“Okay.” She disconnected.

Nick put the phone back into his pocket, apologized to the couple, and continued to follow them along the trees. He couldn’t help but wonder why Paige was calling him. He was sure after the last time they saw each other, it would be just that... the last time. Now she’s calling, and he had no idea why.

Later, after helping more customers with their trees, he told the men he’d be in his office and to let him know if they needed him.

He strode to his truck, climbed in, then headed for the house to call Paige. He wasn’t looking forward to what she had to say, but he told her he’d call her back, so he’d man up and do it.

After sitting behind his desk, he removed the cellphone from his pocket and pressed her number.

“Hello?”

“Paige? It’s Nick. Are you busy?”

“Not right this minute. Hold on, let me get to my office.”

He could hear her heels clicking on the floor as she made her way down a hallway, and he could just picture those long legs. He shifted in his seat. No woman ever had him this interested, and she didn't want anything to do with him.

“Okay,” she said, and he heard her close the door.

“What did you want?”

“I want to apologize to you... again.”

“No need. You said what you needed to, Paige. If you're not interested, that's how it goes. I'll move past it.”

“That's the thing. Nick, I *am* interested. I'm just not sure what will come of it. I am dead set against marriage, and that's what you're looking for. I like you. A lot, Nick, but I don't want to hurt you.”

“So, why bother calling then? I think last night said it all.”

“Can we—” She cleared her throat. “Can we see how it goes? I know you want to settle down—”

“But you don't.”

“It's not the settling down part. It's the marriage part.”

“Are you saying you'd settle down but not get married?”

“I'm saying I'd like to find out if it is what I want. Marriage is a no. Nick, many people live together for years and never marry.”

“What about kids? I want kids, Paige.”

“I do too.”

“Without a marriage?”

“I don't need that piece of paper or the rings that go with it, Nick.”

Nick blew out a breath. He had always wanted marriage, but if the woman he wanted didn't want the same thing, could he live that way? What the hell was he supposed to do? Should he be with her knowing she'd never marry him, or should he try it her way?

Who the hell was he trying to kid? He'd take Paige any way he could get her. If they fell in love, maybe, just maybe, she'd change her mind. If not, they'd make it work. He knew she was right. A good many people don't marry and still have a long, lasting relationship.

"You'd live with someone, but not marry them? If you stay with them a long time, you'd become a common law wife. How is that any different?"

"I wouldn't have to get a divorce, I'd just go."

"Well, that's comforting," he muttered.

"I'm just saying that I would try it that way. A divorce is not an option. Not again."

"All right, Paige. We'll try it your way." *Seriously?*

"Really? Oh, Nick, that's wonderful. I do want to see you."

"I want to see you too, so I'm willing to try it if it means being with you."

"Can you come to dinner on Friday night?"

"How about you come here? I'll make some steaks. We can eat around six."

"That sounds great."

"Good. Just come in the way you did to the trees but bear to the left when you come up the gate."

"All right. I'll see you Friday evening then."

"See you then." He disconnected and set the phone on the desk.

What the hell are you thinking, Richards?

"I'm thinking this is the woman I want in my life, and I'll do what it takes to make that happen."

Paige smiled as she set the phone down and couldn't wait to see Nick on Friday. He would try... for her.

When Friday rolled around, and after closing the shop, Paige made her way up the steps and entered her apartment. She hung her coat up, kicked off her shoes, fed the cat, and headed for the bathroom to grab a quick shower.

After her shower, she dressed in jeans, a sweater, and cowboy boots, then left the apartment to head for Nick's place. She was eager to see where he lived.

She remembered seeing the gate he was talking about but overlooked the road to the left. It would make sense that he didn't want people driving up to his home.

As she drove to his place, she hoped she'd spend the night with him. The thought of sex with him terrified her, but she wanted him.

"Please don't be a dud," she murmured. "That would be your luck, Paige."

She saw the road to the left of the gate and took it, then drove up to a beautiful white farmhouse. The porch looked as if it encircled the entire house. Rocking chairs sat along it. When she stopped by the steps at the side of the porch, she looked at the home and saw the door opening, then Nick stepped out. He walked to the steps, folded his arms, and leaned against a post. Her belly filled with butterflies just looking at the man.

Paige took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped out. She glanced around and saw the snow falling heavier.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi yourself. Come on in and get warmed up."

She started toward the steps but stopped and raised her nose in the air and sniffed.

"Fireplace?"

"Yes, ma'am. Come on, Paige, before I freeze some valuable parts off."

She snickered. "You men and your family jewels."

Nick chuckled. "You women have no idea."

Walking up the steps, she watched him push off from the post and stopped beside him.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured and leaned down to kiss her lips.

“Thank you, and you’re very handsome.”

Nick grinned, turned, opened the door, and nodded for her to enter. She did and immediately fell in love with the kitchen.

“This is gorgeous.” She glanced around and loved the red countertops, white cabinets, and the red and white tile floor.

“Thank you. I refurbished the entire house when I got it. It’s been in the family for generations. It’s been handed down because of the tree farm. My grandparents lived here before they died, and it was about to fall in. They built it in the late eighteen hundreds. My great-grandfather knew what he wanted to do with the land. It took him seven years to get the trees right. My dad told his father he didn’t want the farm, so his father changed his will to hand it down to me and Wilder. I worked here in the winter months since I was fifteen.” He shrugged. “I love it.”

“I do too.” She looked back at him and smiled. “Can I see the rest?”

“Yes, ma’am. Let me take your coat and hat. Dinner will be in a few minutes. I didn’t know how you like your steak.”

“Medium rare.”

“Good. Me too. Let me show you my home, then I’ll start dinner.”

She smiled when Nick took her hand and led her through a dining room, then into a large living room. A fire roared in the hearth, and she strode to it.

“You have a beautiful home, Nick.”

“Let me show you the rest.”

He led her to the front foyer. The front door was old and had a stained glass window. He then led her up the steps. A

landing was halfway up, the stairs turned to the left and a long hallway at the top.

“There are four bedrooms, five and a half baths, a den, and an office.”

“It’s a big house.”

“Yeah. It seems like they built them big back in those days. I love it, though.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

She followed him along the hall, and he’d stop at each door to let her glance inside. She looked at the last doorway he stopped at and gasped.

“Oh, my God. What a beautiful room.”

“My bedroom.” Nick inclined his head for her to enter.

She strode to the middle of the room and slowly turned to take it all in.

“How many fireplaces?”

“Eight. All the bedrooms have one, and the dining room, den, office, and living room.”

“I didn’t see the one in the dining room.” She frowned.

“It’s against the wall leading to the kitchen. When I first got the house, there was a two-sided fireplace in the kitchen and dining room, but it was a mess, so I closed it up.”

Paige looked at him. “I love your home, Nick.”

“Thanks. How about I get dinner started? Then we can relax and get to know each other.”

“Sounds good,” she said as she followed him back down the stairs and then to the kitchen. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Nope. Just have a seat, and I’ll get busy.”

“Make sure you do, Richards. I’m hungry.”

“I am too. I missed lunch today.”

“Why?”

“We were slammed. This time of the year, it gets crazy.”

“I’m sure. Oh, we put the tree up in the front window. It looks great.”

“We?”

“Yes. Me, Janice, and Juliette.”

“Does Sydney work there too?”

“No. She owns the local bookshop, The Wright Books.” She tilted her head. “Why?”

“I was just curious after meeting her.”

“Oh, okay. I thought maybe you were interested in her.”

“I see.”

“What is it, you see?”

“Nothing. Would it bother you if I asked her out?”

Paige stared at him, then shook her head. There was no way that pang in her heart was because he was interested in Sydney.

“No.”

“You don’t want me to ask her out,” he said with a smile.

“Why should I care if you ask her out?”

“Because you don’t want me to ask her out,” he murmured as he stepped closer.

“I don’t care who you ask out.”

He reached his hand out and touched her hair.

“Yes, you do, Paige.”

“Nick, go ahead if you want to ask Sydney out.” *Please don’t ask her out!*

“Tell me why you can’t, at least, admit there is something between us.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but I can feel you pulling away.”

Paige huffed. “I blame how I feel on my ex. My heart shattered, so excuse me if I’m scared to get involved with any man, especially you.”

“Why, especially me?”

She turned away, but he wrapped his fingers around her wrist.

“Paige?” When she didn’t look at him, he cupped her cheek in his hand and turned her face to him. “Tell me,” he whispered.

“Because I’m attracted to you, and that scares me. I do not want to be hurt again, Nick.” Paige stared at him.

Nick took a step closer.

“Paige, we have to go through the wrong ones before finding the right one.” He touched her hair again. “How do you know I’m not him if you won’t give me a chance?”

“Why would I want to take a chance of getting another broken heart?” She shook her head and stepped back from him.

“Take a chance... with me.”

“I’d like to—”

“Then do it. Please.” He blew out a breath. “Paige, I’m more attracted to you than I’ve ever been to any woman. You’re in my thoughts constantly. This isn’t something I’ve gone through before. I don’t want to just date you. I want to see if this is a long-term thing. It cuts me to the core whenever you tell me you don’t want to take a chance with me.”

Paige gazed up at him. “I’m sorry. It’s not you. It’s me. I’ll try Nick. I’ll try to move forward. I need time, but I also need you to be patient.”

“I’m a very patient man, darlin’. As long as you give us a chance, I’m happy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. I’m very sure.” He cupped her face in his hands. “Now, can I kiss you? I’ve been dying to taste those

lips again.”

“Yes, please.”

He slowly lowered his head and placed his lips over hers. She moaned, and he wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her close. As he deepened the kiss, a groan tore from him, and she slid her arms around his neck.

He lifted his lips from hers, kissed her forehead, and looked into her eyes.

“We’d better have dinner before I say the hell with it and carry you upstairs.”

Paige smiled. “If we must.” She laughed when he groaned again.

“Sit,” he growled out as he pointed at a chair.

“Yes, sir.” She saluted him, then took a seat at the table.

“I won’t ask Sydney out,” he said with a grin.

She tilted her head. “Were you thinking about it?”

Nick chuckled. “Nope. Just wanted to see your reaction.”

“You’re crazy, Nicholas Richards.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Paige laughed, and Nick loved the sound of it. He would try this her way. If it meant having her in his life, he’d do what he could to make that happen.

He removed the steaks from the oven, placed them on plates, then set the dishes on the table.

“Am I supposed to eat all of this?”

“Eat what you can. I only buy big steaks. I’m a big man,” he said with a wink.

“Oh, my God. All of you men think you’re *big*.”

“I can prove it.”

She smiled up at him. “Maybe later.” She laughed when he groaned.

“Damn tease,” he muttered, making her laugh harder.

After dinner, Nick cleared the table and placed everything he could into the dishwasher. He leaned back against the counter, folded his arms, and stared at her. He would do all he could to get her to stay, if only in separate rooms.

The odds were she *would* spend the night because of the snowstorm that was predicted, and he knew it would be a long, restless night.

“So, now, what do you want to do?” Nick asked.

“I should go.”

“You can stay here, Paige. I have plenty of room. I won’t bother you. You can lock the door. The snow is getting heavier, and I’d hate for you to drive in this.”

She walked to the kitchen door, opened it, and stepped onto the porch. Nick followed her.

“It’s sleeting,” she said.

“I hear it. It’s going to get worse.” He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck. “Stay.”

She huffed, then nodded her head.

“All right.”

“Come on, let’s get inside.”

They entered the house, and Nick closed the door.

“We could watch a movie,” he suggested.

“How about a game of cards?” Paige smiled.

“Cards? Sure. What should we play?”

With a sly smile, she looked into his eyes.

“Poker.”

“Let’s go one better. How about strip poker?”

“Are you serious?”

“Why not? Afraid?” Nick smirked.

Paige bit her lip to keep from grinning. She was a hell of a poker player, and he had no clue what he was in for.

“Five-card stud?”

“That’ll work.” Nick opened a drawer, pulled out a deck of cards, and tossed the box to her. “You deal.”

“Are we playing here at the table?”

“Let’s go to the living room and use the coffee table.”

“All right.” She followed him. They sat on the floor with the coffee table between them.

After opening the box, she shuffled the cards and dealt them out.

She picked up her cards and almost laughed. She needed one card for a full house.

When she looked at Nick, she couldn’t read his face. She frowned as she placed her cards face down on the table.

“How many?”

“Two,” he said as he discarded two cards.

“Dealer takes one,” she said and tried not to laugh at the look on his face.

After discarding it, she picked her cards up and almost shouted for joy at seeing the two threes and three fours. She looked at Nick to see him frowning.

“What do you have?” she asked.

“Three Kings,” he said as he laid them on the table.

“Full house. Take the shirt off, Richards.”

“You can’t decide what I take off. I have boots on. I can remove one.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Tell me you wouldn’t take your shoe off if you lost.” Nick’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

Paige huffed. “All right. Take a damn boot off then, but socks do not count.”

“Okay. I’ll take off a sock and a boot. How’s that?”

“Fine. Your deal.” She picked up the cards, then slid them across the table to him.

She watched him shuffle the cards and frowned. He seemed to have a knack for shuffling. Then she watched him smirk as he dealt the cards.

She picked up her cards, looked at them, then at Nick. He was staring at her.

“How many?”

“Two,” she said and discarded two.

“Dealer takes three.”

Paige looked back at her cards and tried not to smile. If this kept up, she’d have him naked in no time.

“What do you have?”

“Four of a kind,” she said as she placed the cards on the table, then smiled.

“Damn it,” he muttered as he laid his cards down to show three of a kind.

“Off with that other boot, Richards.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” he snapped.

“Me?”

“Who the hell else would I be talking to?” He pulled off his boot and sock, then his eyes narrowed as he looked at her. “Maybe it’s just beginner’s luck. Deal the damn cards.” He slid them over to her.

Paige laughed. “I’ll have you naked in no time.”

“Is that what you’re planning? Hell, we don’t have to play cards for you to do that.”

“Oh, no. This is way more fun.”

“Damn, you’re evil.”

She grinned. “When it comes to men, I have to be.”

His eyes didn’t leave hers as he picked up his cards. Paige picked hers up and looked at him across the table.

“Are you sure you want to keep going?” She smirked.

“Yep. You can’t win them all.”

She looked at her cards, then at him.

“How many?”

“One.”

“Getting cocky, are we?”

Nick chuckled, and she loved it anytime he did. His grin was beautiful.

“Me? Cocky?”

“Who the hell else would I be talking to,” she said, throwing his words back at him.

“Uh, oh. Three? I think it’s my turn to have you take something off.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“We’ll see, Richards. We’ll see.”

“All right. What do you have?”

“Three aces,” Paige said as she placed the cards down.

“Damn. Three aces.” He grinned at her. “Four Queens.”

“Damn it,” Paige muttered as she pulled off her boot and sock.

Paige won the next hand, and when Nick removed his shirt, she about fell over. *Oh, my*. His pecs were hard and solid, and his six-pack stomach had her salivating. She loved the smattering of hair down his chest and belly.

Soon, he was down to his boxer briefs, and Paige only had her boots and socks missing.

He leaned back against the couch, folded his arms, and grinned.

“Are you sure you want to keep going?”

“What’s wrong? Afraid you’ll be naked soon?”

“It’s this damn floor. It’s wood and cold. Things could stick to it.”

Paige burst out laughing. “True. Are you giving up?”

“Hell, no. Deal the cards, darlin’.”

Two hands later, Paige glared at him.

“Did you play me?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve won two in a row now.”

“Maybe it was luck.”

“You let me think you didn’t know how to play.”

“I did no such thing, Paige. I never said I couldn’t play. I know how... very well. Off with something.”

She stood up, unsnapped her jeans, lowered the zipper, then shimmied out of them. She sat back down and narrowed her eyes.

“I swear, Nick Richards, you’ll regret it if you did this on purpose.”

“Threats now? Did I threaten you when I lost?”

“No, because you were *playing me*,” she snapped.

“Paige, I didn’t realize you were a sore loser.”

She raised her middle finger, and he laughed.

“Deal, Richards. I only have to win the next hand.”

“And I only have to win the next two. Should we continue, or are you too scared?”

“I don’t back down from challenges. Deal,” she repeated.

Nick grinned as he dealt the cards and almost burst out laughing at what was in his hand. He just needed one card, and if he got it, he'd win no matter what she had. Unless she had the same, which was highly unlikely.

“How many?”

“Two.”

He placed two cards down on the table in front of her.

“Dealer takes one,” he said, praying it was what he needed.

He bit his lip to keep from grinning when he picked up the card but kept his cool and looked at her.

“You can quit anytime, Paige.”

“Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?”

“Why would I like it? If you lose, either your bra or panties go. Why wouldn't I want that to happen?” He winked at her and got a glare in return.

“If you lose, I win. You'll be naked.”

“Are you hoping for that?”

Paige snorted out a laugh. “If it means I won, then yes.”

Nick shook his head. “What do you have?”

“Straight flush,” she said with a grin as she placed the cards on the table.

“Damn—”

“Take them off, Richards.”

“You didn't let me finish. I was going to say, damn, that's a good hand, but not good enough.”

“What?”

He spread his cards on the table but kept his eyes on her. When her eyes widened, she looked at him.

“A *Royal* flush? How? That's rare. You *did* play me!”

“Take something off, Paige,” he murmured.

“No.”

“Wait. You would have had me take my underwear off. Are you a sore loser, Paige?”

“You cheated. You let me think you didn’t know how to play.”

“I did no such thing. You’re the one who agreed to strip poker. Now, strip.”

He stared into her eyes, daring her. Her eyes narrowed, then she got to her feet and slowly, oh, so slowly, removed her panties, and his dick liked what it saw.

“Shit, maybe this wasn’t a good idea,” he murmured.

She took a pillow from the sofa, sat on it, picked up the cards, and placed them in front of him.

“We’re going to see just how good you are. Do not hold back. Play to win, Richards. Deal.”

Nick picked up the cards, shuffled them, dealt them, and smirked.

“I always play to win, darlin’. All right, Paige. Let’s see how good you really are. We’re both down to one garment now. This is for the win.”

“You’re such a dick, Richards.”

“Did you say I have such a dick? You haven’t even seen it... yet.”

“You’d better hope if I do, I don’t laugh.”

“Hell, that’s cold, Paige.” He grinned. “Trust me, though. You wouldn’t laugh.”

“Whatever. Deal the damn cards.”

He dealt the cards and hoped she lost. When she took her panties off, he almost pulled her onto the table. Then he’d do his best to convince her to have sex.

She picked up her cards, but he couldn’t read her face. She was an excellent player, but he’d bet his farm he was better.

He picked up his cards and hid a grin. He was about to get her naked.

“How many?”

She looked at him, and a slow smile lifted her lips.

“None.”

“None?”

“None.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “Dealer takes two.”

He tossed the two cards down, then took two from the pile. Taking a deep breath, he looked at them. Full house, King high. He had the win if she didn't have four of a kind or a straight or a royal flush.

“Well? What do you have, Paige?”

She smirked as she placed the cards on the table.

“Four of a kind.”

Nick put his head in his hand and groaned.

“Full house.”

Paige laughed. “You lose. Take them off, Richards.”

He leaned across the table.

“You seem awfully eager to get me naked, Paige.”

“Quit stalling. You lost.” She folded her arms and stared at him.

Nick took a deep breath, stood, hooked his thumbs into the waistband, and started to shove them down.

“Stop!”

“What? Why? You won. I have to take these off.” He chuckled when she covered her eyes with her hands.

“Don't you dare, Nicholas Richards. Let's just say you lost and get dressed.”

“Spoilsport.” He pulled his underwear up, sat, and laughed.

“You would have done it,” she said as she placed her hands on the table.

“Of course. I’d want that bra to go if you had lost Paige.”

“I’m sure you would have.” She reached for her panties and picked them up, but when she stood to put them on, Nick was sure his dick would be permanently hard because he’d never get that image out of his head.

“Did you have to do that?” he growled out.

“What? Put my panties on? Was I supposed to sit here without them?”

“Well, now, there’s a question.”

Nick shook his head, picked up his clothes, and dressed, and she did the same.

“It was fun, though,” she said with a grin. “I’m tired. Maybe I should go to bed. I’ve been up since five.”

“I’ve been up since four. I’m tired too. If the weather clears at all tomorrow, I’ll be busy.”

“I bet it’s fun watching the people look for trees.”

“It is. Especially if they have kids.”

Paige got to her feet. “Will you show me where I can sleep?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll give you a T-shirt to sleep in. Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

Chapter Five

Nick led her up the stairs and stopped at a door. He opened it and motioned for her to enter. She did, and he watched her glance around.

“All of the rooms are beautiful, Nick.”

“Thanks. I’ll get you a shirt. I’ll be right back.” He stared at her for a few seconds. Then walked out of the room and to his room down the hall.

After he entered, he strode to the dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a white T-shirt. Then he took a deep breath and walked back to her room. At the door, he tapped on it and saw her sitting on the bed.

“Here you go,” he said as he tossed the shirt to her.

“Do you mind if I take a bath? It helps me sleep.”

“Paige, you are more than welcome to do anything you want. Make yourself at home. If you need anything, just let me know. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Nick. Thank you.”

“No problem.” After nodding, he closed the door behind him and went to his room. He had a feeling his dick would be hard all night just knowing she was down the hall... in his T-shirt and nothing else. He groaned as he entered his room, closed the door, made his way to the bed as he pulled his shirt off. Long damn night for sure.

Paige woke up and quickly glanced around, forgetting where she was. Then it came to her. She was at Nick’s house.

She put her hands over her face and groaned. He was right down the hall. Did he sleep naked? God! She had a feeling he

did. Sitting up, she scooted against the headboard and stared into the darkness.

Looking toward the window, she could see a light, so she got out of bed and walked to it to look out. The light was above the barn doors, and she could see the snow floating through the beams. It was still falling heavily and didn't look like it would let up soon. She might not make it to town tomorrow to open. She'd see how it was in the morning. With a deep sigh, she turned to head back to the bed and looked at the door.

Nick had one hell of a body. She had been so tempted to let him take his boxer briefs off. She was so horny. It had been so long since she'd had sex, and Nick was *right there*.

She had never been shy about sex. She never had a problem letting Bruce know she wanted him. But in all the years they'd been married, she never wanted him like she wanted Nick and that confused her.

Taking a deep breath, she made her way to the door, slowly opened it, and glanced down the hall. The house was quiet and dark, but she knew which room was his.

She stepped into the hallway, put her hand on the wall, and walked along the hall to his door. Would he turn her away? She shook her head. No, he wouldn't. She knew he wanted her, and she had to be honest that she wanted him. Desperately.

She stopped at his door and stared at it. She reached out, wrapped her hand around the knob, turned it, and slowly pushed the door open. She could make him out on the bed. The sheet was down around his waist. That chest and six-pack stomach made her mouth water.

She never took her eyes off him as she made her way to the bed. She removed the T-shirt she was wearing, lifted the sheet and slid in beside him then moved closer to him.

Paige leaned close to his face and lightly kissed his whiskered jaw. When he didn't stir, she moved her lips along his jaw to his ear, ran her tongue around the shell, and then

sucked the lobe between her lips. He groaned but didn't wake yet. She planned to change that.

As she sucked on his ear lobe, she moved her hand down his chest.

“Am I dreaming?” he murmured.

“Not unless I am too. I want you, Nick,” she whispered in his ear and looked down along the sheet to see it making a tent. She laughed low in her throat. “It seems something is awake.”

Nick turned to look at her. “Are you sure?”

“About what? That something is awake?”

“No. About this happening between us.”

“I'm in this bed, aren't I?”

He cupped her face in his hands, lifted his head, pressed his lips to hers, took them in a deep kiss, and rolled her onto her back. He leaned over her, and his tongue moved into her mouth, making her moan.

She sifted her fingers through his thick hair and tried to pull him closer, then moved one hand down his chest, then down where she wrapped her hand around his hard cock. She pulled back and stared into his face.

“What?”

“I'm impressed.”

“Not laughing, huh?”

Paige blew out a breath. “Not at all.”

Nick moved over her, spread her legs, then settled between them.

“Condom?” she whispered.

“Yes, ma'am.” He reached into the bedside table, removed a condom, and handed it to her. “You can do the honors, but give me a minute. I've dreamed of this since I set eyes on you.”

His lips moved down her chest to her breast, where he swirled his tongue around her nipple, making it stiffen, and rubbed the pad of his thumb against the other. Then he switched.

As Nick moved down her belly, she held her breath. She shifted her legs in impatience. Bruce never took time like this.

“Patience, darlin’. Patience,” he said against her belly, then moved lower.

When his tongue moved between her curls, she fisted her hands in the sheets. A strong feeling rushed over her as he sucked on her clitoris, and she cried out his name when she came. She sucked in deep breaths.

“That was amazing,” she said between breaths.

“Just getting started, baby.” He moved back up her body, placed his lips against hers. “Condom. Please.”

“Yes,” she murmured, as she slid her hands between them and rolled the condom down over him. Then he inched into her, letting her adjust to him.

“Wrap those legs around me, Paige, and hold on. We’re going to go for another one.”

She groaned as she put her legs around him, did as he said, and held on. He took her to the edge several times but didn’t let her fall until she pulled his hair, making him chuckle against her lips.

“You’re not very patient.”

“Fuck patience. Take me over, please.”

“Yes, ma’am. My pleasure.” He moved harder and faster against her. Once again, she tumbled over, and he followed her, groaning against the crook of her neck.

Nick raised his head to look into her beautiful face to see it flushed, and she took deep breaths again. He knew how she felt. He lightly kissed her lips and rolled onto his back beside

her. He placed his arm over his eyes and tried to catch his breath, then glanced at her to see her looking at him.

“That was...” She waved her hand.

“Damn right it was. I’m glad you visited me.”

“I’m so glad I did too.”

Nick pulled her close to him. She placed her head on his chest and her arm across his waist. He wrapped his arms around her and held her until he heard her breathing deepen and knew she’d fallen asleep.

What now? He knew sex would be amazing with her, but was he heading for a broken heart? Mentally shrugging, he knew it was possible, but he would take that chance with her. He was this close to falling in love with her, and he prayed she would stay with him to see if they had something between them.

He slid from the bed to head for the bathroom to dispose of the condom. After washing his hands, he returned to the bed and slid in beside her, and held her all night.

The following day, he stood in the kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hand when she entered. She looked at him, and he watched a blush move through her cheeks. He winked, and she laughed.

“Good morning,” she said as she walked to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and kissed his jaw.

“Good morning, darlin’. I had one hell of a dream last night.”

Paige laughed. “Me too. I’d like to have it again.”

“Hell, I’m all for that, but it will have to wait. I have to get up to the trees. We open soon, and I have to get three trees cut for the towns.”

“Towns?”

“Yep. I donate trees for Clifton, Spring City, and Hartland for the center of the towns.”

“You donate them?”

“I do. I keep close to a hundred trees around sixty feet for that.”

“I always thought the one in Clifton was gorgeous, but I had no idea where it came from. I go to the lighting every year.”

“Well, maybe we can go together this year. It’s the Saturday after Thanksgiving. I can pick you up.”

“I’d love it.” She moved away from him, looked out the door, then turned to look at him with widened eyes. “I’ll never get out of here.”

“I don’t see a problem with that.” Nick grinned.

“I have to go home sometime, Nick.”

“If you say so. I think we got about eight inches last night.”

Paige snorted. “So did I.”

Nick burst out laughing. “Was it good for you?”

“Amazing is what it was.” She moved back to the coffeemaker and made herself a cup of coffee. “I think I should try to get home, though. I’d like to open the shop if I can. If there’s no ice, I’ll be fine. My Caddy is all-wheel drive.”

“If you think you should go, I won’t stop you, but I want you to promise that you’ll be damn careful.”

She stood on her toes and kissed his lips.

“I promise. If it’s all right with you, I’ll grab a shower and then head home.”

“It’s fine, Paige. Can I see you later?”

“Yes. I’m closed on Sundays, so I won’t have to worry about leaving early.”

“I’m open, but you could stay and help with the sales.”

Paige gasped. “I would love it.” She kissed him again. “I have to get moving.”

“Me too.” He turned, set his cup in the sink, and walked to the pegs where his coat and hat hung. After putting them on,

he strode back to her, wrapped his hand around her nape, kissed her lips, and then walked out the back door.

He stood on the porch as he pulled his gloves on, jogged down the steps, trudged through the snow, and entered the barn. He climbed into his truck, started it, and drove up to the trees. It was almost eight, and he opened the farm at nine.

As he drove up the road, he couldn't keep the smile off his face. Last night had been amazing, and he was looking forward to many more nights with her.

Paige took her time driving to town. She sure didn't need to have an accident, and the roads were snow-covered, so she went slowly.

Once she made it to her apartment, she blew out a relieved breath. After throwing the door open, she made her way up the steps, opened the door to her apartment, and got a dirty look from Queenie.

"I'm sorry, but I got stranded. You were fine. Plenty of food and water for one night, so don't give me that look."

The cat blinked her enormous eyes at her, turned, and walked away with her tail held high, making Paige laugh.

"Hey, it was worth it," she called out, then shook her head. What an understatement.

An hour later, she entered the shop, turned the *Closed* sign over to *Open*, and flipped on the lights. Not much kept the people in the little towns down, and certainly not snow. Unless it snowed so much that no one could get out, the shops opened.

She glanced over her shoulder when the door opened to see Janice enter.

"Good morning. I was hoping you were going to open," she said as she removed her coat and headed for the office to hang it up and put her purse in the safe. When she came back out, she stopped, stared at Paige, and then tilted her head.

"What?"

“You look... different,” Janice said, as she folded her arms and stared at Paige.

“Different? How?”

Janice shrugged. “I don’t know. Happy. Yeah, you look happy. Did you get laid?”

Paige laughed. “Would sex make me happy?”

“You tell me.” Janice continued to stare at her.

“Uh...” The door opening saved Paige from answering when a customer entered.

“Hi, welcome to Paige’s,” Janice said as she kept her eyes on Paige.

Paige narrowed her eyes at her, but Janice turned her back to her to face the customer.

“Hello. I’m just going to look around first. I’m not sure what I’m looking for,” the woman said.

“Take your time. Is it a special occasion or for Christmas?” Janice asked.

“My husband’s birthday.”

“Great. Look around and if you need anything, just ask one of us,” Paige told her.

“Thank you.”

Paige and Janice watched the woman walk around the store. The door opened again, and Paige smiled when she saw her friends Liv, Becca, and Emma Stone enter. They waved and made their way through the store.

“Those three are the best,” Janice said.

“Yes. I love them.” Paige looked at Janice. “I’ll be in my office. I need to go over the next shipment.”

“That’s fine. Do you know if Juliette is coming in?”

“I haven’t heard from her, but if she doesn’t make it, it’s not a problem. We know the roads are bad.”

“And just how do *you* know the roads are bad?” Janice tilted her head.

Paige opened her mouth and then snapped it shut.

“I was just guessing since some of the sidewalks have snow on them...”

Janice burst out laughing. “Yeah, okay.”

“All right. I spent the night with Nick. Happy now?”

“Are you?”

Paige shook her head, then grinned.

“Deliriously.”

Janice squealed and hugged her.

“I take it; it was good.”

“Good? Understatement. *Big* understatement.”

“Do you have this in a seven?”

Paige turned to look at the woman.

“I’m sure I do. Let me look. Is this the color you want?”

“This blue matches my husband’s eyes.” The woman smiled.

“I’m Paige,” she said, holding her hand out to the woman.

“Vivian Beckett. It’s nice to meet you, Paige. I love your shop.”

“Beckett? Are you related to the Becketts in Hartland?” Janice asked her.

“Yes. I’m married to Grayson.”

“Oh, Grayson. He’s the sheriff, right?” Paige asked.

“Yes. His brothers are Brayden, Ash, Gage, and JD,” Vivian said with a smile.

“I’ve never met them, but I have met Cassie, Hailey, Annie, and Melissa,” Paige said.

“My wonderful sisters-in-law.”

“Let me look in the back and see if I have this color in your size. I’ll be right back.” Janice smiled and then headed for the storage room.

“Vivian, I thought that was you,” Becca Stone said as she walked toward them.

“Becca! How nice to see you! Emma, and Liv, you too.”

Paige watched them all hug. The small towns seemed to know each other, if only by name.

“What are you doing out in this weather?” Paige asked.

“The plows are out now, and we planned this weeks ago,” Becca told her.

“Maybe it won’t be a boring day after all. I was sure no one would be out.”

“It’s not bad enough to keep everyone in. We’re going to head for the diner for breakfast after we finish here.” Liv smiled at her.

Once Janice came back out from the back with the blue negligee in the right size, Paige excused herself and headed to her office.

As she sat at her desk, she thought about Nick. What a fantastic night it had been! The man was no slacker in bed. She was lucky she’d ever had one orgasm with Bruce, but with Nick, she’d had two. One after another. Oh, yeah. She wanted that man in bed as much as she could get him there.

She stared at the phone, picked it up, and called his cell. It rang several times, and she was about to hang up when he picked up.

“Richards,” he said.

“Hi.”

“Hey. I didn’t know who it was. You must not be calling from your cell.”

“No, I’m in my office and couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“Well, that certainly sounds promising. How’s your day, darlin’?”

She almost sighed. Cowboys and those ‘darlin’s’ got her every time.

“So far, so good. I’m glad I opened. We’ve been busy.”

“Christmas is coming. Maybe I need to shop there for this woman I just started seeing.”

Paige laughed. “She probably has everything in this shop.”

“Shit, Paige. Now I won’t get that image out of my head because I know what’s under it.”

“Nicholas Richards, you’d better be alone.”

Nick chuckled in her ear. “I am, but I’m going to the trees with a couple here in a few minutes. I needed some hot chocolate.”

“Too bad I’m not there. I could warm you up better than hot cocoa.”

“Damn it, Paige. I don’t need to walk around with a damn hard-on.”

Paige sputtered out a laugh. “All right. I’ll behave... for now.”

“Yeah, you can be bad later.”

“So, besides working, what are you doing the rest of the weekend?”

“If I have my way... you.”

She burst out laughing. “Right after we close, I’ll be on the way.”

“Can’t wait. I’m sorry, baby, but I have to get going. I’ll see you later. Bring some of that sexy lingerie with you.” He disconnected.

Paige grinned as she hung up the phone. The day could not go fast enough.

Nick smiled as he put the phone back into the inside pocket of his coat. The damn wind was picking up, and more snow was coming over the mountains.

He headed for the couple standing under the big white tent, sipping hot chocolate. The farm provided it for days just like this.

“If you’re ready, we can go,” he said.

“I’m ready. Freezing my ass off, but she wants a fresh cut tree,” the man said as he nodded toward his wife.

“And we know to do what they want, right?” Nick grinned.

“If I want a peaceful life, yes.” The man chuckled.

“Okay, you two, suck it up, and let’s find a tree,” the woman said as she walked to a truck.

No one was allowed to drive their own vehicles to the trees. Nick didn’t want someone parking where they shouldn’t, so either Nick or one of his workers would drive the customers to the trees. Nick never minded doing it. He totally enjoyed helping people find their perfect tree.

He glanced at the man, shrugged, and walked to the truck, with the man following him.

Later, he watched the couple drive off with a large tree on top of their car. Shaking his head, he knew that most people just didn’t realize how big the tree they bought was until they got it home. Anything bigger, and they wouldn’t be able to see to drive.

Glancing around, he nodded when he saw how much more crowded it had gotten. Thanksgiving was next week, and many people showed up to get a tree for the holiday. Once Thanksgiving arrived, Christmas seemed to be here in no time.

Speaking of Thanksgiving, he wondered if Paige would go to his parents’ house if he asked her. She said she usually spent it with her family, but if the weather was terrible, did she make the trip to... hell, he didn’t even know where her parents lived.

He pulled his cellphone from his coat, found her number, and pushed *Send*.

“Hello?”

“Hey, darlin’, are you busy?”

“Not at the moment. What’s up?”

“I could be...”

Her laughter came across the line, making him grin.

“Nick,” she scolded.

“All right. Are you still going to your parents’ place for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m not sure. I heard we’re supposed to have bad weather.”

“Where do they live, anyway?”

“Whitefish.”

“Well, if you can’t go, how about dinner with my family and me? I know my parents would love it.”

“Um, are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ll call my mom to make sure, but she loves cooking and goes all out. I’m sure she’d love to have you there.”

“You check with her, and if I can’t make it to Whitefish, I’ll spend Thanksgiving with you and your family, but please make sure it’s all right first.”

“I’ll call her now and call you back. We’re slammed here today, so it might be later before I get back to you.”

“That’s fine—oh, more people just came in. I’ll talk to you soon, Nick. Bye.” She disconnected.

Taking a deep breath, he called his mother.

“Nicholas, what a pleasant surprise. I figured you’d be too busy to call.”

“Hi, Mom. I am busy, but I wanted to know if it’s all right with you if I bring someone to dinner on Thanksgiving?”
Silence met him. “Mom?”

“Of course. I’m just surprised that you want to bring someone.”

“We just started seeing each other. I like her a lot, Mom, but she might go home to visit her parents in Whitefish. It depends on the weather, and if she doesn’t go—”

“Nick?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“You’re rambling, hon. If she can’t make it home, she is more than welcome here.”

Nick huffed. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll let you know the closer we get to the holiday. Hey, I’m sorry, but I have to run. I love you, Mom, and tell Dad I love him.”

“We love you too. Have a wonderful day, and stay warm.”

“Plenty of hot cocoa,” he said with a chuckle.

“Talk soon.” His mother disconnected.

As he stuck the phone back into his coat, he noticed that the snow was getting heavier, but it didn’t seem to slow anyone down. Vehicles took up space everywhere. Sales were going to be great this year.

After a long day, Nick made his way to his truck and drove to his house. He closed the gate, locked it, then headed home. He hadn’t had a chance to call Paige back about dinner at his parents’ house, so he’d just tell her when she got here this evening.

It had been a good day, and he knew tomorrow would be too. The snow had tapered off, and he wanted to grab a shower before Paige arrived. He was looking forward to seeing her again.

At six-thirty, he sat in the living room, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair, wondering where she was. She was supposed to be here at six, and she hadn’t called. He picked up his cellphone, scrolled through the numbers until he found hers, and pushed *Send*.

“Nick, I’m almost there. There was an accident, and I was stuck in traffic.”

“You couldn’t call? I’ve been worried.”

“I didn’t think I’d be this late.”

“But when you realized it, you should have called me, Paige.”

He heard her sigh come over the line.

“I know, Nick, and I’m sorry. I just figured I’d get there in a few minutes.”

Nick blew out a breath. “All right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped all over you, but I was worried.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” she whispered.

“Damn. Well, that makes me feel better.”

“I’m almost there, and I’m starving. What’s for dinner?”

“Fried Halibut, corn, salad, and apple pie for dessert.”

“Now my stomach’s growling. Let me go so I can concentrate. It’s snowing again.”

“Okay, baby. Be careful. I’ll see you in a little while.”

Nick placed his phone on the arm of the chair. He shouldn’t have snapped at her, but the roads could get worse, and he didn’t want something to happen to her. He’d apologize again once she arrived.

Paige pulled beside the porch, shut her vehicle off, and stepped out. She heard the door open and looked to the porch to see Nick standing there. He folded his arms and leaned against a post.

Paige shoved the door closed, turned to look at him, and tilted her head.

“You’re going to get cold.”

“You can warm me,” he said with a grin.

“I’d love to do that, but we’re eating... first.”

“Hell then, woman, get in here so we can have dinner... first.”

Paige laughed as she climbed the steps, then stopped beside him. He leaned down and gently kissed her lips.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you.”

“I should have called. I’m just not used to explaining myself to anyone anymore.”

“I get that. Come on.” He took her hand and led her into the kitchen.

She removed her coat, hat, and gloves, placed them on the bench inside the door, and then looked at him.

“It is so cold out. I hope you have a fire going.”

“Yes, ma’am. Have a seat while I get dinner. We can eat in the living room.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go warm up.” She quickly kissed his lips, then headed for the living room.

She entered the room and gasped when she saw the enormous Christmas tree in front of the window.

“Your tree is gorgeous,” she called out to him.

“Thanks. I have two others up too,” he yelled.

“Where are the others?”

“One is in the den, and the other is in my office.”

She sat on the sofa, watched a hockey game on the TV, and toed off her boots. When Nick entered the room, she looked up at him, and her heart skipped a beat. *No! Damn it. No!*

“What’s that look for?” he asked as he handed her a plate.

“Nothing.” She took the plate from him, sat back, picked up the fork from the plate, and began eating. She moaned at the flavor of the fish. “This is so good. You’ll make someone a good wife one day.”

“Funny. My mom sometimes brings me frozen meals, but I don’t expect her to do that. I’m thirty-eight years old.”

“And let’s not forget, also a man.” Paige took a bite of the fish, trying not to smile.

“Oh, so since I’m a man, I’m helpless?”

She shrugged. “If the boot fits, cowboy.”

Nick shook his head. “All men are not helpless in the kitchen. There are some wonderful male chefs.”

“True, but we’re talking about you.”

“Wait. What the hell does that mean?”

Paige laughed. “I’m teasing you. This is fantastic.”

“Thank you. It was learn to cook, starve, or have my mother prepare all my meals, and I can tell you right now that even though she’ll make something occasionally for me, she’d be the first to tell me to do it on my own.”

“I think I like your mom.”

“Oh, that reminds me. She said she would love to have you join us for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I appreciate that. I was planning to hit the diner if I didn’t get to my parents’ house.”

“I don’t know how Connie does it. She goes all out.”

“Christmas Eve too.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there on Christmas Eve. It’s always full.”

“The woman can cook.”

“Okay, right there.” Nick pointed at her. “Owen does the cooking at the diner.”

Paige looked at him to see a smug look on his face.

“Touché.”

After dinner, he handed her a cup of coffee, then sat beside her on the sofa.

“I’ll never get to sleep drinking coffee this late,” she said as she raised the cup to take a sip.

“Maybe I want you awake,” he murmured as his hand ran over her hair. “You’re staying tonight, right?”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to helping you tomorrow.”

“Good. Do you ride?”

“Are we talking horses or...”

“Horses. I know you ride the other way.” He grinned.

She laughed. “Yes, I can ride. Horses and the other way.”

Nick groaned, making her laugh harder.

“Then we’ll go for a ride tomorrow once the farm closes. I usually close around three, so we’ll still have some light.”

“Sounds good to me, cowboy. In fact, let’s go to bed.”

Nick got to his feet and held his hand out to her. She placed hers in his, and he led her upstairs to his room.

Once inside, she stared at him to see him looking right back at her. With a smile, she slowly unbuttoned her blouse, peeled it off her shoulders, and let it fall to the floor, not once taking her eyes from his.

She unsnapped her jeans, lowered the zipper, and shoved them down, then kicked them across the room. She stood against the door in nothing but purple panties and a matching bra. She tilted her head.

“Are you going to just stand there and stare at me?”

“My dick’s so hard, I don’t think I can walk.”

Paige burst out laughing. “I can help with that.”

He pulled his T-shirt off, dropped it to the floor, and strolled to her while unsnapping his jeans. He stopped in front of her and stared into her eyes. Then he reached for his wallet, got a condom out, and handed it to her. He toed off his boots, pushed his jeans down, and stepped out of them.

As she kept her eyes on him, she unclasped her bra, removed it, then pushed her panties down.

“I want you, Nick.”

“God, darlin’, if it’s half as much as I want you—”

“More. Now, come here.”

Nick grinned as he moved his hand between her legs and ran his fingers along her slit.

“You’re wet, baby, and I need you more than my next breath.” He lifted her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He moaned when she moved her hand down to his cock and wrapped her fingers around it.

Paige put her lips next to his ear. “I want you to fuck me hard against this door, Nick.”

“Christ, Paige, you’re killing me.”

Once she sheathed him with the condom, he inched into her and stilled when he was as far in as he could go.

“You feel so fucking good,” he whispered against her lips, then took them in a deep, hard kiss as he moved against her.

She tightened her legs around him and nipped at his earlobe with her teeth.

“Harder, Nick. Faster,” she whispered, and he complied.

Nick knew he’d never get enough of her, and he had to make her see that. He wanted her in his life. In any way, he could get her. It was like coming home to be inside her.

He knew she was close when she started breathing heavier, so he put his finger against her clitoris to push her over. As she tore her lips from his, he could feel her clenching around his cock.

He placed his face against the crook of her neck and groaned as he came. They both took deep breaths as he put his forehead against hers.

“It’s so good with you,” he said.

“It is good,” she said between taking breaths.

Nick lightly kissed her lips. “Want to take a shower?”

“I’d rather take a bath, but if you want to shower, we can.”

“Darlin’, if you want a bath, we’ll do that. Hold on.” He cupped her ass in his hands and carried her to the bathroom.

Later, Nick woke up. He glanced over at Paige to see her sleeping. He sat up, pulled on his sweatpants and T-shirt, then his boots. He walked outside, took a seat on the top step of the porch. Leaning back on his elbows, he stared at the star-filled sky. It was bitterly cold, and the snow had stopped. He was happy to just sit here and enjoy the night. He loved winter.

He sat up, rested his wrists on his knees, and looked across the yard to the barns. This thing with Paige terrified him. They hadn’t been together long, but he knew he was falling for her.

It just wasn’t going the way he planned with her. They’d never discussed their feelings for each other, and he didn’t know how to tell her how he felt. Would she run? Would she want to stop seeing him? What the hell was he supposed to do?

“Shit,” he murmured as he got to his feet, walked down the steps, along the shoveled path, and entered the barn.

The horses neighed and put their noses against the bars of the gates. He strode down the aisle and out the other end.

Nick placed his hands on his hips and hung his head. Why did love have to twist a man up inside? His gut ached all the time, and it was because of Paige.

Raising his head, he tilted it back and stared at the night sky. Billions of stars twinkled, but his thoughts were on Paige and what to do about her.

Heading back into the barn, he strolled down the aisle, out the other end and up the steps to enter the house. He wanted to get back in bed and hold her while she slept beside him.

What the hell was he going to do? He was damned if he did and damned if he didn’t, but he knew a day would come soon that he’d have to put his heart out there. He just hoped she didn’t break it.

Chapter Six

A few nights later, Nick jerked awake and glanced around. He wasn't sure what had woken him. He got out of bed, pulled on his jeans, and headed for the kitchen. Opening the back door, he stepped onto the porch and listened. Then he thought he heard a chainsaw and knew he had to call Sam.

He entered the house, found his cellphone, and called Sam's cell. He hated calling this late, but he needed him here if someone was taking a tree.

"Garrett," Sam said when he answered.

"Sam, it's Nick. I think someone is on my farm."

"Did you see anyone?"

"No, but I thought I heard a chainsaw. Someone might be stealing a tree. I can go look."

"Wait for me. I'm on my way."

"Stop and get me."

"I will." Sam disconnected.

A few minutes passed when Nick heard a vehicle out front and opened the back door to see Sam in his Sheriff's SUV. Nick stepped back inside, got his coat and hat, then jogged down the steps and got into the truck.

"Is the gate locked?" Sam asked him.

"Always. I make sure myself that it's locked."

"All right. I think we'll drive up as far as we can without letting anyone see us, then walk."

"Sounds good."

As they drove along, Nick was getting more pissed by the minute. No one had a right to steal from anyone, and some

people just thought they could cut a tree down for the holidays anywhere they could find one.

Sam stopped at the gate, and Nick got out to unlock it. Then he heard the chainsaw. He hurried back to the truck and got in.

“I hear a chainsaw. Son of a bitch,” he muttered.

“We’ll get them.” Sam drove a little further with the lights out and then parked.

Nick opened his door to step out.

“You should stay here, Nick.”

“Hell, no. This is my farm, Sam. I won’t get in the way.” He watched Sam huff, and then he nodded.

“Let’s go. Don’t get cocky.”

“Would I do that?”

Sam stared at him. “Like I said, don’t get cocky.”

They went through the woods to come out to the trees and stopped to listen.

“I hear them talking,” Sam whispered. “Stay behind me.”

“Yep.”

When they reached where the tree was being cut down, Nick almost ran over to the three men cutting it. They were laughing and having a good time while stealing his tree.

Sam jerked his head for Nick to follow him, and they quietly made their way to the men and stood behind them. With the deep snow, they weren’t heard. When Nick opened his mouth, Sam put his hand up, so he snapped it shut. This was Sam’s job. He knew what he was doing, so Nick folded his arms and waited.

Once the tree fell over, Sam cleared his throat, making the men turn to look at them. If Nick wasn’t so pissed, he’d laugh at the look on their faces.

“You do know you’re stealing, right?” Sam said as he pulled his weapon from the holster at his side. “Sheriff Sam Garrett. Do you have permission to be here?”

“Uh, yeah,” one of the young men said.

“Really? Well, I apologize then.” Sam holstered his gun and pulled a tablet from his pocket. “Could I get the name of the person who gave you permission?”

“His name?”

“Yes, his name.”

“Nick... shit, I don’t remember his last name. He said we could take a tree.”

“Is that right? So, you decided that the middle of the night would be the right time to do that?”

“We work during the day.”

Nick snorted, and Sam shook his head.

“You spoke to Nick personally?” Sam glanced at Nick, then back at the men.

“Uh, yeah. I did.”

“I see. Then why don’t you recognize him?”

“What?” the man looked confused.

“This is Nick. He owns the tree farm.” Sam nodded at Nick as he removed his weapon again.

“Shit.” They looked like they were about to bolt.

“Don’t even think about it.” Sam held his gun on them. “I need your ID, and you’re all getting a ticket. I will issue a warrant if you don’t show up for court.”

The men grumbled as they took their wallets out and handed Sam their license. Nick stared at them, but they wouldn’t look at him.

After Sam wrote the tickets, he handed them to the men.

“You can go now. Just remember what I said about not showing up.”

“Can we take the tree?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Sam snapped. “No. You cannot take the tree. Get off this property, and don’t step foot

on it again.” When they stood there staring at him, he shook his head. “Go!”

Nick chuckled when they ran off and disappeared into the woods.

“I appreciate it, Sam.” Nick walked to the tree. “One of my best ones too.”

“I’ll take it. How much?”

“Just take it, Sam. Consider it a Christmas gift for helping me with this.”

“It’s my job, Nick. Tessa’s been after me to get one soon, and I just haven’t had a chance.”

“Well, let’s get this to the truck, and you can make her happy.” Nick grinned.

Sam chuckled. “I like making her happy, but I can’t accept it as a gift, Nick, so tell me what I owe you.”

“Sure, I get that. Uh, twenty dollars.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “There’s not a tree on this farm that costs twenty dollars.”

“Discount for being already cut,” Nick said and tried not to grin.

Sam shook his head while he removed his wallet from his back pocket, pulled out a twenty, and handed it to Nick.

“I appreciate your business,” Nick said.

“Yeah, whatever. I know you’re jerking my chain, but it’s too damn cold to stand out here and argue with you. Help me get this to the SUV, and I can get home to my wife and daughter.”

Nick chuckled. “Sure thing. Hey, thanks for coming out, Sam.”

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you have any other problems. Thanks for the tree.”

Once they returned to the SUV and loaded the tree, Sam climbed in it, and then, after dropping Nick off, he drove

away. Nick watched until his taillights disappeared, then he entered the warm house.

The next night, Nick sat in his recliner, watching TV but couldn't concentrate, so he picked up his cellphone and called Paige.

"I want you," he whispered into the phone when she answered.

"Is that right?"

"Yep. I want you every day."

"You do?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. You don't know how it's almost impossible to be comfortable when you're hard."

"Well, no. I wouldn't know about that." She laughed.

"I could show you," he murmured.

"One question."

"Ask away."

"Do I know you?"

"Why do you hurt me?"

She burst out laughing. "I'll see you later, Nick. I have to work on inventory. I'm sorry—"

"No need to be, Paige. I know you have to work all hours. Hell, I do too. There will be times I won't get in until late."

"That is not an option, Nicholas Richards."

Nick chuckled in her ear. "If that were only true. Will you come out this weekend?"

"How about you come here for dinner Saturday night?"

"I'd love to. Should I bring anything?"

"Just you, cowboy. I'm sorry, but I have to run. The inventory isn't going to do it itself."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll call you tomorrow if that's all right."

"Of course it is. Goodnight, Nick."

“Goodnight, baby.” He smiled as he hit *End*.

Saturday evening, Nick climbed the metal stairs above the shop. He took a deep breath, blew it out, and knocked. It opened, and Paige stood there, smiling at him.

“Hi. Come in,” she said as she swung the door open wider.

Nick entered the apartment, turned to look at her, and handed her a pink bag.

“Oh! Something from Sweet Nothings. I love that bakery. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I figured it could be your dessert.” Nick removed his hat and coat, then hung them on the hall tree.

“What about your dessert?”

He grinned. “That’s you.”

Paige laughed. “Fine by me.”

“Something smells good. Other than you.”

“I made a pot roast. It’s been in the crock pot all day. I hope you like it.”

“I love pot roast.” He stepped closer to her. “I want to kiss you, Paige.”

“Then what are you waiting for, Richards?”

“No idea,” he said as he lowered his lips to hers.

Later, after dinner, as they lay in bed together, Nick kissed her temple as he held her.

“Would you like to go to my brother’s wedding as my guest?”

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yes, I can bring a guest. I’m his best man, so you’ll have to drive there. I have to be there early.” Nick grinned. “I have to make sure he doesn’t chicken out.”

Paige laughed. “I don’t think that will happen. He loves Rory.”

“Yeah, he does, and she loves him, though I can’t understand why.”

Paige swatted her hand at him. “Of course you do.”

Nick chuckled. “I do. They’re a great couple, and I’ve never seen Wild so happy.”

“That’s all that matters.”

He took her hand in his and kissed the back of it.

“So, will you go as my guest? Once all the toasts and things are out of the way, we can sit together.”

“I’d love to go.”

“Great. It’s a week from the Saturday after Thanksgiving at eleven in the Clifton Church on Main Street.”

“I hope I can get inside.” Paige nibbled on her bottom lip. “I know how the weddings are in town. You stand in the street if you don’t have an invitation.”

“I’ll let the groomsman know to let you in.”

“All right. I’d love to go.”

“Wear something sexy underneath.”

“I always do, Nick.”

“God, you’re killing me because I know that’s the truth.” He rolled to his side to face her. “Did I tell you someone tried to steal one of my trees?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I heard the chainsaw and called Sam. He came right over.” Nick told her the rest of the story.

“At least the tree didn’t go to waste.”

“That’s true. Sam wouldn’t take it for free, though. He said he couldn’t accept it since they could consider it a gift.”

“I can understand that. Would you like a glass of wine?”

“No, thanks. I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

“I have Callahan Whiskey.”

“That will work.”

“On the rocks or neat?”

“Neat, please.”

“I’ll be right back,” Paige said as she got out of bed, walked to where her robe lay on a chair and pulled it on.

“I’ll be right here,” Nick said.

Paige turned to face him as she tied the belt around the robe.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She smiled as she left the room.

Nick leaned back against the headboard. She was so damn sexy. He wasn’t sure he’d get enough of her, which worried him since he didn’t know her feelings, but he knew he wanted to be with her a lot more. Not just for sex, either.

He watched her enter the room and swore when his damn dick twitched. He wanted her again. Already.

She stopped beside the bed, handed him his glass, and smiled at him. Then she walked around the bed, set her wineglass on the nightstand, looked at him, and removed her robe. *Yep, ready to go again.*

“You are so fucking sexy, Paige,” he murmured.

She laughed as she got in beside him and reached for her wine.

“So, how did you come to own the lingerie shop?”

“I was on a little trip to Kalispell from Whitefish and saw the roadside sign for Clifton. I had never heard of the little town, so I stopped. While driving down Main Street, I saw the shop and went in to buy a sexy teddy for my twenty-first birthday. I wanted to treat myself. I love lingerie—”

“You can certainly wear it,” Nick said.

“Well, thank you. The woman inside told me she was going to liquidate everything since she was selling it. It just popped into my head that I wanted to buy it. Sales are always good. I love having the shop, and I fell in love with Clifton.”

“And how many of those sexy things do you have?”

“I have over thirty teddies, bras, and panties.” She leaned close to him. “I have a black corset with matching black panties and a garter belt.”

“Hell. I need to see you in that.”

Paige lightly kissed his lips. “Deal.”

Nick set his glass on the nightstand, took her glass from her, set it beside his, cupped her face in his hands, and deepened the kiss while pulling her down as he slid from the headboard.

“I want you again,” he said when he raised his lips from hers.

“I want you too,” she whispered.

He rolled her onto her back, leaned over, and pressed his lips to hers. When her arms encircled his neck, he knew he was getting in deep because he didn't want her to let go of him.

He moved away from her and took his glass from the nightstand. He moved the bottom of the glass over her belly. Then he tilted the glass, so a bit of whiskey poured onto her. He leaned down and licked it from her. He heard her gasp, and her fingers clutched his hair.

Raising his head, he looked at her, and their eyes met. He lowered his head while holding her eyes, dipped his finger into the glass, then ran it around her nipple. He lowered his head, placed his lips over her nipple, and sucked the whiskey off.

“Nick.”

“I want to lick this off you everywhere.” He moved the glass down to above her curls, tilted it, and spilled some from the glass.

After setting the glass back on the table, he moved down to between her legs, ran his tongue over the whiskey, and then down along her slit.

“Nick, I need a bath...”

“No, you don’t. I love how you taste... anytime.”

Paige sucked in a breath as he continued to move his tongue over her. He didn’t stop until she cried out as her orgasm hit her hard. She lay there trying to catch her breath when Nick settled between her legs, reached for the condom on the nightstand, and sheathed himself. He inched into her slowly, then took her hard.

Once again, that feeling rushed over her as she wrapped her legs tight around his waist. He groaned against her lips when he came, and she fell over with him. She loved being with him, but her feelings for him scared her to death.

All she could do was see where this would go. She wouldn’t marry him. She just couldn’t. *Yeah, you said you didn’t want to fall in love, either.* She groaned and covered her face with her hands.

“What’s wrong?”

She peeked between her fingers to see that handsome face staring at her.

“Nothing.”

“Paige—”

“Please, Nick. Let it go for now.”

He sighed, rolled off her, then got out of the bed to head for the bathroom. She didn’t want to hurt him, but he wanted to settle down. He wanted kids. God! She did too, but no man was worth going through that pain again. Not only was a broken heart so hard to mend, but she had also sunk lower than she ever thought she would. Maybe she needed to tell Nick all of it, so he’d understand her hesitation in remarrying, but if she did, would he look at her with pity? She heard him reenter the room, but he didn’t get back in bed.

“Are you leaving?” she asked.

“Yeah. I have to get up early. We’re open seven days a week.” He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled his boots on, then

stood. “You could come out tomorrow if you’d like to help again.”

“I had fun the last time. I’d love to.”

“Good. Whenever you get your pretty little ass out of bed tomorrow morning, I’ll be waiting.” He leaned down, kissed her lips, and then left the room.

On Sunday, Paige drove to the farm and up to where the tents were. She smiled when she saw all the cars and people milling about. Nick had a goldmine here.

She parked, pulled her gloves and beanie on, stepped from her vehicle, and headed for the tent. It was bitterly cold and snowing, but she loved every minute.

As she entered the tent, she smiled at the woman behind a table where the cash register sat. Paige didn’t know her, but she made her way to her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hello,” the woman said. “Do you need some help?”

“Oh, no. I told Nick I would help today. I’m Paige Douglas,” she said as she put her hand out to the woman.

“Oh! Well, it’s nice to meet you, Paige. I’m Rona Richards, Nick’s mother.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Richards.”

“Call me Rona. Get some hot chocolate. It’s so cold today.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.” Paige turned away and then back. “You don’t mind if I sit with you, do you?”

“Not at all.” Rona smiled.

Paige smiled, then made her way to the hot chocolate. She reached for a Styrofoam cup, put it under the spout on the industrial pot, and pulled the handle.

“Hey.”

She turned to see Nick striding toward her. He kissed her lips when he reached her.

“Hi. I met your mom.”

“Oh, good. She and Dad decided to help today.”

Paige glanced around. “Your dad is here too?”

“Yes, ma’am. He took some people up to the trees. Wilder and Rory are here too.”

“I can’t believe how busy it is.”

“Well, Thanksgiving is this week. We’re swamped this week, and then it gets worse.” Nick grinned.

“How could it get worse?”

“Black Friday is crazy. This is nothing.”

Paige laughed. “If you say so.”

“I have to get some people up to the trees, so I’ll see you later, darlin’.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Glad to hear it.” He kissed her again, touched the brim of his hat, and strode over to a couple standing by a car.

Paige sighed as she watched him lead them to his pickup truck and drive off. She then made her way back to the table where his mother sat and took a seat beside her.

“I hope that hot cocoa warms you up, Paige.”

“I do too. I didn’t realize it was this cold.”

“Well, Stephen, my husband, thinks I’m crazy, but I love the cold. I think Nick gets that from me.”

“He seems to love this.” Paige sipped her cocoa.

“Wilder is the opposite. He loves summer. Our boys are day and night.”

“But you raised good men.”

Rona grinned. “I like to think so. How did you and Nick meet?”

Paige hesitated, then told the truth. When she finished the story, Rona burst out laughing.

“Leave it to Nick.”

“I could have throat punched him when I found out he was picking it up for Wilder.”

“He would have deserved it. I’m glad you forgave him, though, and I hope you make it to dinner Thursday.”

“I probably will. I doubt I’d make it to Whitefish with the weather it’s calling for.”

“Well, we are more than happy to have you. I always make too much food, anyway.”

Paige grinned. She couldn’t wait to have dinner with them. She wasn’t thrilled about trying to drive to see her parents, and they understood.

Later, Paige rode with Nick up to the trees with a couple in the backseat. The woman held a toddler on her lap, and the little girl was beautiful. It brought back memories of what Bruce had done, and she tried to curb her anger at him, but she had wanted children so badly, and he killed that.

Nick stopped the truck, and they all climbed out, then made their way to the trees. Paige watched the woman set the little girl on her feet, and she took off running. The woman sighed and ran after her.

“Someone is a little anxious,” Nick said.

“Yes,” Paige murmured.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes...” she shook her head. “She’s such a beautiful little girl.”

“Yeah, she is.” He put his hand out to her, and she placed hers in it, then he led her behind the couple and the little girl. “Come on, darlin’, let’s see what they find.”

Paige watched the little girl play in the snow and couldn’t help but laugh. She’d pick up some snow, try to make a ball, then throw it at her daddy. She’d giggle and run after she’d hit him.

“This is why I end up picking out a tree,” the woman said with a shake of her head. “They play more than looking for one.”

“She seems to love the snow.”

“She does, and so does her daddy.” The woman looked at Paige. “Do you two have children?”

The question startled Paige.

“Oh, we aren’t married, and no, neither of us have children.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Never assume, huh? I just thought you were married because you look so in love—Carly! Be careful,” the woman shouted as the little girl fell, but when her daddy picked her up, she laughed.

“Um, I’ll be right back,” Paige murmured, then headed back to the truck. She opened the door, climbed onto the seat, and tried to stop the tears, but they rolled down her cheeks. She jerked when the door opened.

“Is everything all right, Paige?”

She looked over to see Nick standing beside her.

“I’m... yes, I’m all right.”

“You don’t look it, darlin’. What’s wrong?”

Paige shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Paige—”

“Not now, Nick, please.” She swung her legs to the open door, making him move back, and she stepped out, then made her way to the row of trees where the couple were.

Nick had no idea what was wrong, but he wanted to know. He hated seeing her upset, and she was fine just a little while ago. No man would ever understand a woman, but he wanted to know what had happened between getting in the truck to come up here and now.

He shoved the door closed and followed her. When he stepped beside her, she watched the little girl, and he knew what was bothering her.

Her husband had been a real dick to do that to her, and Nick wished he could change her mind about getting married because he'd love to have kids with her. Huffing, he took her hand in his and led her to the trees.

"I'm sorry," she said, then laughed. "I seem to say that a lot to you."

"It's fine. I know why you're upset."

She tugged on his hand, making him stop and look at her.

"Why?"

Nick nodded at the little girl running around.

"Her."

He watched her blink her eyes, then she nodded.

"I wanted children so much."

"Paige, if we end up together, I'll give you children. I want them too. With or without the rings and piece of paper."

"But that is not what you want, Nick. You want to get married."

He huffed. "I did... well, I still do, but if we fall in love and you don't want it, I'll take you any way I can get you. I'm willing to see where this goes, but you have to be too."

Paige stared at him, and he prayed she didn't tell him she didn't want to see where this was going, but he sighed with relief when she nodded.

"I am. I'm just nervous about it. A broken heart is so hard to get over, especially when that person betrays you."

"I know. If he was standing in front of me right now, I'd knock him on his ass."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. He hurt you, and he did it horribly."

Paige nodded. “Yes, he did, but I think you’ll help me with that.”

“Damn right, I will. Come on, let’s help them find a tree.”

“I have a feeling they’ll be getting a big one.”

Nick looked at the little girl standing in front of a gigantic tree.

“I doubt they have fifteen-foot ceilings, but who am I to tell them no?”

Later, after getting one of the men to help the couple cut a tree, Nick dragged it to the truck and put it in the bed. Everyone climbed into the truck, and he drove back to the tent to get the tree wrapped and place it on their vehicle.

Thanksgiving afternoon, Nick drove into Clifton to pick up Paige. He was happy she was having dinner with his family. He smiled when he thought about his parents telling him they liked Paige. Hell, he more than liked her. He was on the verge of falling in love with her, which terrified him.

After he parked beside the steps leading to her apartment, he climbed them and knocked on the door. It opened, and Paige smiled at him.

“Come in, and I’ll get my coat.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s cold enough to freeze a brass monkey’s balls.”

Paige burst out laughing. “Only you, Nick Richards. Only you.”

“What?” he asked innocently, but he couldn’t stop the chuckle.

She shook her head and removed her coat from the hall tree. Nick stepped behind her, and took it from her to hold it for her. She slid her arms in, turned, and looked at him. He couldn’t stop from kissing her for all the money in the world.

“Are you hungry?” he asked when he raised his lips from hers.

“Are we talking food?”

Nick groaned. “And you think I’m bad. Yes, I was talking about food... this time. I can’t wait to get to the house and smell that turkey cooking.”

“I love Thanksgiving, but Christmas is my favorite.”

“Mine too. If you’re ready, we can go. Oh, can you come home with me?”

“I can’t. I have to be here early to open for Black Friday. I open an hour earlier.”

“Okay. I know I’ll be busy too, but we can get together Saturday night, right?”

“Definitely.”

“Great, let’s go, darlin’.”

“Let me get the wine. Your mother told me not to bring anything, but I wanted to.”

“She goes all out, but I know she’ll appreciate the wine.” Nick looked at the cat weaving between his legs. “No, you are not going.”

“You don’t want Queenie to go?”

“No. Where did you come up with that name, anyway? Although it fits a cat.”

Paige laughed. “That was her name when I adopted her. Let’s go.” She looked at the cat. “I’ll be back later.”

Nick chuckled when the cat stared at Paige, blinked her enormous eyes, then left the room with her tail held high.

“I’m on her shit list now,” Paige said with a laugh.

“Better her than me.”

They headed out, and after she locked the door, Nick held her hand as they made their way down the steps to his truck. He opened the door for her, then leaned in to kiss her.

“I think we’ll have a nice day. I know I’ll eat too much, but I love it.” Nick shoved the door closed, walked around to the driver’s side, climbed in, smiled at Paige, and then drove to his parent’s place.

Chapter Seven

When Nick drove to the ranch-style home, Paige sat up and glanced around.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“My parents bought this house years ago. They had a bison ranch before that. Someone stole a bunch of the bison, and Dad got so angry that he sold the ranch. He said he couldn’t see raising them for someone to steal. I think that’s why Wilder wanted to be an MDOL agent.”

“Why didn’t your parents run the tree farm?”

“They didn’t want it. Dad’s great-grandparents first owned it, and it’s been handed down. But when they left it to Dad, he just signed it over to Wilder and me.”

“Was he disappointed that Wilder didn’t run it with you?”

“Not at all. Wilder runs it sometimes, but he liked his job at the MDOL too much to quit until he met Rory. He loves working the dairy farm with her.”

“That’s good that he loves working there. Call me crazy, but I smell the turkey.”

Nick put his window down and sniffed the air.

“You’re not crazy. Come on, darlin’, let’s go inside. It looks like we’re the last to arrive.”

“I hate being late.”

“We’re not late, so don’t worry.”

Paige sighed, then looked at the porch to see the back door open, and Stephen stepped onto the porch.

“Hey, Dad,” Nick said as he stepped from the truck.

“Hi, you two. Come on, it’s too damn cold out here.” Stephen reentered the house.

Once they entered the house and removed their coats and hats, Paige glanced around the homey kitchen. The smell coming from the oven were mouthwatering.

“Hello, Paige,” Rona said as she entered the kitchen.

“Hi, Rona. Thank you so much for having me. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Sure. Could you make the salad?”

“I can. Am I making a big one or individual ones?”

“One big one. Everything is in the fridge.” Rona looked at Nick. “Go sit in the living room, and we’ll call you when everything is ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Wilder and your dad are watching football.”

“Where’s Rory?” Nick asked.

“I believe in the bathroom, washing her hands so she can help me out here too.”

“All right.” Nick left the room.

Paige yanked on the fridge door, removed the salad stuff, and set it all on the counter.

“Hi, Paige,” Rory said.

“Hey, Rory. It’s nice to see you again.”

“You too. Nick told Wilder he invited you to the wedding.”

“He did, but if it’s a problem—”

“Oh, no. It’s not a problem at all. I’m more than happy that he did.” Rory looked at Rona. “What do you want me to do now?”

“Could you mash the potatoes? Everything is ready except for them.”

“On it.”

The women worked together, talking and laughing, and Paige had a wonderful time.

As she sliced a tomato, Nick returned to the kitchen, opened the fridge door, and got three bottles of beer. Then he winked at her. She wasn't paying attention and hissed in a breath when the knife she was holding sliced her finger.

"Damn it, I cut my finger," Paige said, as she held her finger up to show him the blood, then quickly grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around the cut.

"Is it bad?" Rona asked her.

"No, just a minor cut." She looked at Nick to see him pale and swaying back and forth. "Nick?"

"I'm okay," he murmured as he tried to pull a chair out from the table.

"You don't look it." She got the chair and motioned for him to sit down.

Nick collapsed onto the chair, folded his arms on his thighs, and put his head on them. She could hear him taking deep breaths. She placed her hand over her mouth, but a laugh bubbled out. He slowly raised his head and glared at her.

"Something funny?"

"Are you woozy from the blood?" When he didn't answer, she kneeled in front of him. "Nick?"

"Yes. Yes, damn it. I hate the sight of blood."

"You have a Christmas tree farm. I'm sure people get nicked using those saws."

She couldn't believe it when he turned even more pale, then put his head on his arms again. She knew it wasn't funny, but for a big man like Nick to get lightheaded at the sight of blood had her biting her lip to keep from laughing. Clearing her throat, she straightened up, walked to the sink to rinse the blood off again since it was soaking the paper towel. She ran water on the cut, then put the paper towel around it again.

"Nick? What's wrong?" Wilder asked as he entered the kitchen.

“I cut my finger,” Paige said and grinned when Wilder bit his lip to hold back a grin.

“I hope you’re both having fun at my expense,” Nick murmured.

“Uh, oh. What’s wrong?” Stephen asked when he entered the kitchen, and Paige snickered when she heard Nick grumbling.

“Paige cut her finger,” Wilder said, and Paige could hear the laughter in his voice.

“Do you have Band-Aids?” she asked.

“In the bathroom in the hall,” Stephen said.

“I’ll get it,” Rona said, then headed for the bathroom.

Paige watched as Wilder folded his arms, leaned back against the counter, and tried his best not to laugh. She put her hand over her mouth, but the laughter bubbled out. Nick raised his head to glare at her. She cleared her throat and turned away from him.

“I can’t believe a little blood makes you swoon,” Rory said.

“No one asked you,” Nick snapped, and everyone laughed.

“He’s been like this since he was a little boy,” Rona said when she reentered the kitchen with a Band-aid and handed it to Paige.

“I used to love to show him any cuts I had,” Wilder said.

“You know, if we weren’t at our parent’s place, I’d tell you what I think right now.” Nick glared at his brother.

Paige thought it was adorable that a big man like Nick would let a little blood bother him. We all have phobias, she thought as she wrapped the Band-aid around her finger. It had finally stopped bleeding, but she wanted to cover the cut so Nick wouldn’t see it.

“It’s covered now, so you can look,” Paige said.

Nick’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” he practically growled.

“It just surprises me that a big man like you would be afraid of a little blood. I mean, those saws are so sharp...” Paige bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“Well, if you pay attention, Nick has the men working for him cut the trees while he looks everywhere else.” Wilder chuckled.

“Keep it up, and you won’t make it to your wedding,” Nick snapped.

“Okay, we have to let up. Wilder must make the wedding, so we’ll quit, for now, Nick,” Rory said.

“Enough, everyone. It’s time to get dinner on the table. Nick, can you carry the turkey to the table?” Rona asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Nick took a deep breath, pushed to his feet, looked at Wilder, raised his middle finger at him, making Wilder, Rory, and Paige laugh.

“Let me get the salad together, and I’ll bring it to the table,” Paige returned to the cutting board and finished the salad, then carried the big bowl to the table.

Nick carried the turkey into the room, set it on the table, and then looked at Paige.

“We can sit here, Paige.”

“I’m sorry I laughed, Nick. We all have things that make us cringe.”

“It’s all right.” He shrugged.

“I hope so.”

He kissed her forehead. “It’s fine.”

Paige nodded and took the seat Nick held out for her, then he sat down in the one beside her. She watched as Rory, Wilder, Rona, and Stephen carried food in, then took their seats.

Stephen stood, picked up a large carving knife and fork, then carved the turkey. He placed slices of it on each plate, then everyone got the rest of their food. Paige was having a wonderful time. She liked Nick's family.

She glanced at him to see him talking with his dad, and she knew she was falling for him. It scared her to death because she knew he wanted so much from her that she couldn't give. As much as she'd love to be with him, she understood he wanted marriage.

"He agreed to try it," she muttered.

"What?" Nick asked her.

"Nothing." She shook her head and looked into those beautiful blue eyes. "I'm having a good time."

A grin lit up his face. "I'm glad."

As they sat there talking about the wedding, Paige remembered how excited she'd been the weeks before her wedding, and look how that turned out. But, as she looked at Wilder and Rory, she knew they'd be happy until their last breaths. Paige knew Wilder would never hurt Rory the way Bruce had hurt her. She glanced at Nick to see him laughing at something his dad was saying, and she felt that he'd never hurt her in that way either, but there was more to it than not getting married. Nick didn't know all of what she'd been through. It wasn't going to be easy to tell Nick, but she couldn't hide something like that forever from him. She knew she had to tell him everything.

Would Nick be happy just living together and having children without a wedding ring or that piece of paper?

People did it all the time. Some people could be together for a long time and never marry. They could have kids together and never let it bother them. Could Nick do it? *God!* She was going to drive herself insane.

"Are you all right?" Nick asked as he leaned close to Paige.

"Yes."

“Okay. You just seemed lost in thought.”

“Maybe I was for a minute.” She looked at his mother. “This is wonderful, Rona.”

“Thank you, Paige. I’ll probably send you home with some.” Rona laughed.

“I’ll take it.”

“Just make sure you remember that Nick and I get some, Mom,” Wilder said, then shoveled a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“Have you ever known your mother not to send you home with leftovers?” Stephen asked Wilder.

“No, sir.” Wilder grinned. “Then more at Christmas.”

“Do you make a turkey or ham at Christmas, Rona?” Paige asked.

“I make both. Nick is not a fan of ham, so he wants turkey.”

“You don’t like ham?”

“Nope. I don’t even eat bacon.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with you,” Rory said.

“Keep it up, missie, and come your wedding day, you’ll be at the altar alone,” Nick said, making everyone laugh.

Dinner continued, and Paige was having a great time. She liked Nick’s parents, and both Wilder and Rory were a lot of fun. Paige could see how much in love they were, and she envied them. *You could have this with Nick!* Mentally shaking her head, she knew that although they agreed to do this her way, she couldn’t get married again, and it broke her heart to know she was hurting Nick. He was a good man, and she was close to falling in love. She wanted him. She just didn’t want to be married to him. Or anyone, for that matter.

The following day, she was being run ragged. She hated Black Friday. The sales were great, but sometimes, it just got so hectic that she wanted to close the door and lock it.

“I know the sales are great, but it’s just packed in here today,” Janice said.

“I know. I can’t complain, though,” Paige whispered.

“There are a lot of men in here today,” Juliette said.

“I love watching them look at things and then act like they’re afraid to touch it.” Paige laughed.

“I bet they have no trouble touching it when it’s on their woman,” Janice said with a giggle.

Paige nodded, then headed to a man to help him since he looked totally out of place and about to panic.

“Hello, welcome to Paige’s. Can I help you find something?”

He turned to look at her, and she was in awe of how good-looking he was.

“I look lost, don’t I?” he asked with a grin.

Paige smiled. “Just a little. What are you looking for?”

“Hell, I don’t know. My wife’s boss told me she saw a negligee of some sort in here, and it was blue. That’s about all I know.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down very much. Can you call her boss and ask her?”

“Yeah, let me do that.” He pulled his cellphone from inside his coat, scrolled through the numbers, then hit *Send*. “Sloane, it’s Nevada. Do you have a minute where Courtney can’t hear you?”

Nevada. A sexy name for a sexy man, she thought, as she moved away from him to give him a little privacy. When the door opened, she mentally groaned but smiled when she saw Nick enter. He glanced around, and when he saw her, he headed for her.

“Hi. I thought I was busy.” Nick looked around the shop.

“We’re way more busy than normal, that’s for sure. What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping to take you to lunch, but I have a feeling you’re going to turn me down.”

“I wish I could. I’m starving, but I don’t want to leave and let Janice and Juliette alone with this crowd.”

“How about I go to the diner and get lunch for all of you?”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. I offered. You girls have to be hungry.”

“We’re starving,” Juliette said as she passed by them.

“All right, that sounds good. Thank you, Nick.” Paige smiled.

“It’s fine—hey, Nevada, how are you?” Nick said as he put his hand out to the man.

“I’m good, Nick. How’s the farm doing?”

“Great. Have you and Courtney gotten a tree yet?”

“We’re coming up Sunday. I hope you still have some left,” Nevada said with a chuckle.

“Plenty. Get with me when you get there.”

“Will do.” Nevada looked at Paige. “Sloane said it’s a blue nightgown with lace around the collar.” He shrugged.

“I know which one it is. Come with me.” Paige turned to lead him to the nightgown, then turned back to Nick. “We appreciate lunch.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be right back after I get your orders. Let me check with Janice and Juliette to see what they want, then I’ll be on my way. Do you want your usual?”

“Yes, please.” They stared into each other’s eyes until Nevada cleared his throat.

“Uh, okay. I won’t be long, darlin’. Nevada, I’ll see you Sunday.” Nick touched the brim of his hat, then Paige watched him saunter to where Juliette and Janice stood. She saw him nod, then he walked out the door.

“Let me show you that nightgown.” Paige led Nevada to the clothing section.

After he paid for the nightgown and a black teddy, he gave the women a nod, then walked out. Paige noticed that just about every woman in the store watched him.

“Damn, Nevada Shelton is hot,” Janice whispered.

“You know him?”

“Not well, but I know his wife, Courtney. She’s a good friend of mine. She works at Sweet Nothings.”

“I love that place. When he said Sloane, I never put it together. I don’t think I know Courtney, but I know she’s one lucky woman.”

“Oh, and you’re not?” Juliette muttered.

Paige grinned. “Yes, I am.”

It was almost an hour before Nick returned with their food, and Paige had to laugh at the look on his face as he carried the bag of food to the counter. Since she wasn’t waiting on anyone, she headed for him.

“I thought you got lost,” she said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen the diner that crowded. People were standing waiting for seats.”

“I don’t know how we will have time to eat. What do we owe you?” Paige glanced around at the people wandering around the store.

“Not a thing. Go eat in your office. I’ll let Juliette and Janice know where you are, then they can eat. Connie wrapped everything in foil, so it should stay warm.”

“I appreciate it. Do you want to join me?”

“I wish I could, darlin’, but I need to get back to the farm. Tommy, my manager, called and said we’re swamped, so I’d better go. Will you come out tomorrow night?”

“Yes, and I’d love to help on Sunday.”

Nick grinned. “Sounds good to me. I’ll see you later.” He quickly kissed her lips, then headed for Janice.

Paige watched him talk with her, nod, and walk out. It was so nice of him to get them lunch. She shook her head. Of course, it was nice of him. Nick was a terrific man, and she couldn't wait to be with him again this weekend.

Later, she sat in her apartment, rubbing her sore feet. Her heels about killed her feet. Tomorrow, she planned on wearing flats.

"What we women do to look good," she murmured.

Her cellphone buzzed, and she picked it up to see Nick's face. With a smile, she hit *Answer* and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" she said in a sultry voice.

"What are you wearing?"

Paige bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"Nothing but a smile," she said and laughed when he groaned.

"Damn, woman. Don't say things like that. I'm too far away to do anything about it."

"There's always this weekend."

"I'll do my best to wait, but it's hard to do, Paige."

"It's... *hard*? Maybe I should come out there tonight." She snorted when he groaned again.

"You're an evil, evil woman. I should check your head for sixes."

Paige laughed. "Check my head for sixes? I'm not that bad."

"And just so you know, it's always hard when I think about you, and that's all the damn time. It gets damned uncomfortable."

"You can wait until tomorrow night, can't you?"

"I'll give it a good try. I'll see you then, sweetheart. I'll be waiting."

"See you soon, Nick." She hit *End* and couldn't keep the smile off her face.

Saturday afternoon was as bad as Friday had been. Nick shook his head as he looked around at all the people. He'd had the road to the trees plowed because there weren't enough pickup trucks to take everyone up there.

Most of his workers followed the customers so they could cut the tree for them, bring it back, and have it wrapped.

Every year, Nick swore more people showed up than the previous year. He loved it, though.

He entered the tent, strode to the hot chocolate pot, and poured himself a cup. Just as he was about to take a sip, he saw Paige's vehicle pulling up, and his heart gave a leap at seeing her.

With the cup in his gloved hand, he headed for her. When she spotted him, she smiled. Damn, he had it bad for this woman.

"Hey, why aren't you working?"

"Janice and Juliette are handling it. They said they'd call me if it got too busy, but I have a feeling they won't. Is it me, or is it really crowded?" she asked him as she glanced around.

"It's crowded, for sure. I still have a truckload of trees to get to Chuck's lot, but I haven't had the time."

"Do you take them?"

"Yes, ma'am. The crew loaded them onto the flatbed, but I just haven't gotten a break to deliver them."

"You need to get them to Chuck, Nick. I'm sure he's getting low. I saw a good many people on his lot when I drove by."

"Hell. I'd better go then. Do you want to go with me?"

"I'd love to."

"Good. Come on, sweetheart. We can get them to Chuck and get back here and work."

Paige saluted him. "Yes, sir."

Nick narrowed his eyes. “Don’t be a smartass, or I’ll drop your ass off somewhere between here and town.”

When she laughed, he chuckled.

“I hope that big truck has heat.”

“It does, and even if it didn’t, I’d warm you up.”

“While you’re driving?” she asked with a raised brow.

“Oh, no. I’d pull over to do that.” He winked.

She shook her head as he took her hand, led her to an enormous truck with trees on it, and helped her up into the cab. Then he strode to the driver’s side, climbed in, and drove them to town.

He could smell her perfume, which tempted him to do just what he said and pull off the road. He glanced over at her, then back at the road.

“How’s the shop doing?”

“Wonderful. I’m glad to get out of there for today, though. I have to sometimes, or I’d go crazy. I know I should be there, but we all need a break.”

Nick nodded. As he glanced over to her, he knew he had to admit he was in love with her but had no clue how she felt. He was just happy that she wanted to spend her time off with him. He’d be with her every day if she wanted.

It was enough that she agreed to see if they had something between them, and he hoped like hell that she felt the same way he did. She was difficult to read. There were times he was sure she felt the same, but there were also times when she’d distance herself from him, and that’s when he worried.

Nick knew she wanted kids, and he’d love to be the one she had them with, but he just wasn’t sure if it would come to that.

As he’d told her, he’d do it her way. He was that damn desperate to be with her.

He drove into town and onto Chuck’s lot, and he was happy to see it crowded, but he could also see that Chuck was very low on trees.

Once he parked the truck, he looked over at Paige.

“I need to find Chuck and have him get his helpers to unload these. I’ll be right back.” He stepped down from the truck.

“How about we grab lunch while they unload them, or do you help?”

“I don’t. It’s Chuck’s lot, so he has his helpers unload it. I’ll let him know.”

“All right.”

Nick stared at her, and their eyes met and held. Then a slow, sexy grin lifted her lips, and he frowned at her.

“Why are you smiling at me like that?”

“My apartment is just across from the diner,” she said.

He huffed. “Yeah, let’s skip lunch then.”

“I do need to check on Queenie.”

Nick snorted. “Sure you do. I’ll be right back.”

He shoved the door closed and headed for Chuck when he saw him.

Paige watched Nick stride across the lot and couldn’t keep her eyes off him. The man was simply scrumptious. She didn’t realize she was so horny until she saw him today. The man was amazing in bed, and what better way to spend a lunch hour?

She wiggled in the seat, just thinking about getting him to her apartment. There were so many feelings battling inside her about him. She was terrified about how he made her feel.

Paige knew he wanted to get married, but she just couldn’t do it. She was a damn wuss when it came to marriage. Some people got married at the drop of a hat... several times, but she was too damn scared to go through another divorce.

“What are you frowning about?” Nick asked when he opened the door to the truck.

Paige jerked because she hadn't even seen him coming back.

"I don't want to go through another divorce," she blurted out.

"Paige, you don't go into a marriage thinking it will end in divorce," Nick snapped.

Blowing out a sigh, she looked at him.

"I know that, but unless you've gone through it, you don't know how it feels."

"I can understand that. I know divorce must be painful, but it's not a given that it will happen. Not every marriage ends in divorce."

"No, not all of them, but the percentage that do is enough to scare anyone off. Close to half of marriages end in divorce, Nick."

"You're being ridiculous," he growled out.

"Oh, now, I'm ridiculous? You try going through what I did and maybe see how you feel about a lying, cheating spouse."

"Excuse me. I think I will help unload the trees, then we'll head back." He slammed the truck door closed.

Paige folded her arms and watched as he strode around the front of the truck to where Chuck stood. She saw Chuck frown at him and knew he had to be wondering why, suddenly, Nick was going to help unload the trees.

She wished she had just stayed at work. The weekend was ruined because she sure as shit wasn't going to stay with Nick tonight. Not after he called her ridiculous. Damn. Men were such pains in the ass.

A while later, they drove back to the farm without speaking. She knew he was angry, and he had to know she was.

When he parked, she threw the door open, stepped down, and headed straight for her SUV. She unlocked it, got in, and backed out of the spot. As she put the gear into Drive, she saw

him striding toward his pickup truck. He never looked back as he climbed into it and drove off.

“Damn hardhead,” she muttered as she drove back to town and parked beside the steps to her apartment.

Taking a deep breath, she walked around the front and entered the store and saw nothing but chaos in front of her. She quickly made her way to the office to store her purse in the safe, and remove her coat, then walked back to the counter to help.

“What are you doing here?” Juliette asked her.

“I’m not staying with Nick tonight, so I thought I’d come back to help, and it looks like you need it.”

“Uh, oh. What happened?” Janice asked her.

“Nothing. Let’s get these people taken care of. I want to get through today and just relax.”

“But—” Janice stopped when Paige frowned. “Okay. I’ll, uh, go help someone.”

“Janice?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry. It’s a long story, and I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“I understand.” Janice walked off to wait on a customer.

Paige hated being a bitch, especially to her friends, but Nick was the last thing she wanted to discuss right now with anyone.

All she wanted was for this day to end, so she could go home and sulk. She was still angry that he’d told her she was ridiculous. He had no clue what she’d gone through with Bruce. He had hurt her tremendously, and even though everyone went through a broken heart in their life, Paige knew it would hurt her even more if Nick broke hers, and she could not go down that path again. It wasn’t just the divorce.

Her ex-husband had shattered her heart. Sure, Nick knew what he’d done, but he didn’t know what she had gone

through in the days following Bruce's betrayal.

Not only had Bruce hurt her and humiliate her, she went through a rough time because of what he'd done. It was one lie after another, and Paige wondered if there had been other women he'd been with during their marriage. She had been so in love with him and he almost destroyed her.

Occasionally, she'd get that pain in her heart reminding her he had children with another woman when he didn't want them with her.

Did the woman get pregnant by mistake? It was something she'd never understand. But they had two together, so it didn't matter if it was a mistake. He still had kids with another woman.

As the afternoon wore on, she was more than ready to turn the sign to *Closed* and go home. She wished she could be with Nick, but they were both too angry. She hoped he called, but she knew he wouldn't. She supposed she'd be going to the tree lighting festival alone.

Chapter Eight

Nick sat in the recliner, staring at the flames in the hearth. What a weekend this turned out to be.

He wished Paige was here, but he knew she was pissed. He was too, but he missed her.

“You shouldn’t have said she was being ridiculous, you idiot,” he muttered.

He wasn’t sure what else he could do. For her to not want to commit to him just tore him up, but he was so in love with her that he agreed to her terms. What would she think if he told her he was in love with her?

What bothered him was how long she would stay with him if she couldn’t commit to a relationship. He wanted her with him.

Wilder’s wedding was Saturday, and although Nick had invited her, he knew she wouldn’t be going unless he made this right.

“Shit.” He ran his hand around his nape and felt the muscles tighten up.

Getting to his feet, he headed for the kitchen, pulled his coat and hat on, then headed out the door. When he saw the snow falling, he stopped in his tracks. He took a deep breath and strode to his truck. He had to speak with Paige. To apologize if nothing else.

As he drove into town, he saw the snow covering the road and wondered if he’d lost his sanity.

When he reached the stairs to Paige’s apartment, he breathed a sigh of relief. He looked at her door and hoped she didn’t slam it in his face.

He opened the door, climbed the steps, and knocked after taking a deep breath. When it opened, he didn't know what to say.

“Paige—”

“What are you doing here, Nick?”

“I had to talk to you.”

“A phone call would have worked.”

Nick smirked. “Somehow, I think you'd hang up on me.”

He saw her look down the steps, then back at him.

“You're out in this weather because you wanted to talk to me? And you call me ridiculous,” she said.

“I said you were *being* ridiculous, not that *you* were ridiculous.”

“Oh, well, that makes it so much better,” she said sarcastically.

“Look, Paige, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. Can I come in? It's freezing.”

She took a deep breath, blew it out, and then opened the door wider for him to enter. He sighed at the warmer air inside. He turned to look at her, and it made his gut ache, thinking she'd tell him she was done before they even got started.

“I'm sorry,” he said again.

“Nick, I know you think I'm being ridiculous, but you don't know how much that hurt me. I'm skittish.”

“Skittish? What a fucking understatement, Paige. Look, I said I'd do this your way, but every time I think we're getting closer, you push me away.”

“I don't mean to do that. I'm scared, Nick.”

“I know you are, but who the hell isn't in a relationship?” He stepped closer to her and sighed when she didn't step away. “Paige, I'm crazy about you. I wouldn't be willing to try this with you if I weren't.”

“I want that too, but you must let me get through this.”

“Anything you want.” He tucked her hair behind her ear, then cupped her face in his gloved hands. “I’ll do anything to keep you in my life.”

She looked at him, and he saw tears in her eyes, so he pulled her into his arms.

“Do you know why it scares me so much?”

“No, why?”

“It would hurt me much more if you broke my heart.”

“I promise to never hurt you intentionally, Paige. Just give me... *us*, a chance.”

“I said I would. Until you told me I was ridiculous.”

“You’re not ridiculous. You were *acting* ridiculous,” he said, then grimaced when she glared at him. “Sorry.”

“I do like you, Nicholas Richards, but if you hurt me, you will lose your precious family jewels.”

Nick gave a mock shudder, then laughed when Paige did.

“You know, it’s snowing, and I’m not sure I can make it back home.”

“I have a sofa you can sleep on.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered.

Paige burst out laughing. “I’m kidding. Do you seriously think I’d make you sleep on that couch?”

“I was hoping not.”

“I’ll sleep there. You can take the bed.” She laughed when he pulled her close, buried his nose against her neck, then raised his head and gazed into her eyes.

“I’ll take the bed, but with you in it.”

“Sounds good to me. In fact, I was just going to take a nice hot bath and then head to the tree lighting.”

“I could use a bath, and we’ll go together. As we planned.”

“Come on, before you say something else to piss me off.” She took his hand and led him to the bathroom.

“God knows that’ll happen again. I’m not perfect, Paige, and sometimes, I say something before thinking.”

“You? Hard to believe.” She giggled when he picked her up and carried her to the bathroom.

Later, Paige had her head back against the tub with her eyes closed. She raised her head to see Nick doing the same. She sat up and slid closer to him. He opened his eyes and stared at her.

“You are so damn beautiful,” he murmured.

“Right back at you.”

Nick chuckled. “Men aren’t beautiful.”

“I beg to differ. Women call men beautiful all the time. That or gorgeous, and do you know that is exactly what I thought about you the first time you came into the shop? You know, when you let me think you were talking to a woman.”

“Hell, am I ever going to live that down?”

“Nope. I remember thinking you were sexy, but I didn’t think it anymore when you said you could knock them on their ass.”

Nick burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t think anything about it when I said it. I say it to Wilder all the time.” He shrugged. “It never occurred to me you thought I was talking to a woman until you snapped at me.”

“I thought you were a bully.”

“I’m no bully, Paige. You just overheard something and jumped to conclusions.”

“And you knew it,” she snapped.

Nick nodded. “Yep, I did.”

She splashed water at his face, then laughed when he quickly sat up and pulled her onto his lap. He cupped her face

in his hands, pressed his lips to hers, then slowly raised them.

“You take my breath away, Paige. I want you in my life.”

“Be sure about that, Nick.”

“I’m absolutely positive. I’m in love with you.”

Paige gasped. “What?”

“I’m in love with you,” he whispered against her lips.

“Nick,” she murmured.

“You don’t have to say anything, Paige. I just wanted you to know.”

“I’m close, Nick, but my fears hold me back.”

“I know, baby. It’s not a problem. You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

“You are such a special man, Nick. Let’s get out of here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She slid off his lap and stood. She looked at him to see him watching the water glide down her body, then he got to his feet and reached for a towel. He stepped from the tub, dried off, and hung the towel on the rack.

She turned to face him when he reached for another one and stepped from the tub.

“Hell,” he muttered.

Paige smiled. “Dry me off, Nick.”

“You’re killing me.” He rubbed the towel down over her shoulders, to her breasts, and down her belly.

When he moved it down her legs and back up to the juncture of her thighs, she was sure she would combust. She looked down into his face to see him staring at her, then he leaned forward and slid his tongue along her slit while holding her eyes. Paige moaned as he sucked on her clitoris.

Nick stood, picked her up, carried her to the bed, placed her in the center, and then came down beside her.

She raked her fingers through his thick hair, trying to pull him closer. The man could kiss. There was no doubt about that.

His lips slid down her chin to her chest and to her nipple. He sucked it into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it, making it stiffen.

“Your breasts are perfect. All of you is. I’m so fucking hard for you, Paige. I need you so much.”

“Nick, I need you too. Please.”

“Always,” he said as he reached for his jeans on the floor, removed his wallet, and took a condom out.

Paige took it from him, then tossed it across the room.

“What did you do that for?”

“I don’t want to use condoms anymore. I’m on birth control, and I know you’re safe, but if you want me to get it, I will.”

“Hell, no. I don’t want to use them either.” He sucked in a breath when her fingers wrapped around him, and she slowly stroked him.

“You’re doing that on purpose,” he practically growled.

“Would I do that?”

“Hell, yes.”

She laughed when he chuckled. Then he pressed his lips to hers again as he inched into her.

Paige pushed against his shoulders, and he gazed into her eyes.

“Tell me what you want, Paige. I’ll do anything for you.”

“Take me from behind, Nick.” She watched him close his eyes for a few seconds, open them, and nod.

When he moved back from her, she rolled to her stomach, then raised up on her hands and knees. She gasped when he moved his finger along her slit.

He put his lips close to her ear and whispered. “You’re so wet, darlin’.”

“Please, Nick.”

“I plan on it,” he said as he inched inside her, then took her hard. His hands gripped her hips as he slammed into her over and over.

Paige gasped as her orgasm hit her hard, and she cried out just as she heard Nick groan, and he throbbed inside her as he came.

He collapsed on top of her back, knocking her to her stomach.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you, Paige.” He rolled off her and onto his back.

She rolled over to her back, then cupped his lightly whiskered cheek in her hand.

“I feel the same way, Nick.” She chuckled. “I think I need a shower.”

“You go right ahead. I’ll be here.”

“You have to get up, so why not get in the shower with me? We have to get going, anyway.”

“Damn it,” he swore as he got out of bed, then put his hand out to her.

Paige smiled, took his hand, and followed him to the bathroom.

The following day, Nick woke up and knew he had to get his ass in gear. He should have been at the farm by now. He reached for his clothes and pulled them on.

“What are you doing?” Paige asked from beside him in a sleep-filled voice.

“I have to get going. It’s late.” He tugged his boots on, stood, and turned to look at her. “Will you come out?”

“Yes, but first, I’m going back to sleep. You kept me up all night.”

“Excuse me? I kept you up? I think you have that backwards.” He grinned when a smile lifted her lips.

“Yes, and if you weren’t in such a hurry to leave me, I’d get you up again.”

“Damn it, Paige.” He hesitated, then shook his head. “No. I have to go. Come out when you feel like it. We’ll be busy for sure.”

“I’ll get there in a little while.”

“Good thing you don’t work there because you’d get that pretty ass of yours fired.”

Paige laughed. “I doubt that. The boss has the hots for me. He’d let me slide.”

Nick chuckled, leaned over her, and kissed her lips.

“Yeah, he would. I’ll see you later, darlin’. Be careful. I’m not sure how the roads are.”

“Call me when you get home. Please.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see you later.” He strode across the room, pulled on his hat and coat, then, after one last glance in the bed’s direction, he took a deep breath and walked out.

The snow was still falling, covering the roads, so he drove along slowly. The truck fishtailed a few times, but he had to get home. Although, he doubted many people would be out in this.

When he got to his driveway, he sighed. He knew his men would be there, but he needed to get the hot chocolate made, because it was bitterly cold, and the snow was blowing sideways. He had thirty minutes before the farm opened, so he needed to get busy.

He drove up to a tent and saw the workers under it. He parked the truck, then strode to them.

“Shit, it’s cold,” he said.

“Damn right,” Tommy said.

“I need to get the hot chocolate made in case customers show up.”

“In case? Hell, Nick, they’ll be here. Remember last year when we had a foot of snow, and it was getting worse, but it was one of our best days?”

“I remember. I just don’t want anyone getting hurt trying to get here.” He knew he had to call Paige, so he removed his cellphone from his coat, walked toward his truck, and called her.

“Hi,” she said, and he swore his dick went rock hard.

“Hey. I don’t think you should try to come out here. The roads are terrible, and I don’t want you to travel in this.”

“Damn it. Okay. I don’t enjoy driving in snow, and especially if it covers the roads.”

“They are covered, and it’s still snowing, or haven’t you gotten your ass out of bed to look?”

When she laughed, it made him grin.

“Actually, I’m still in bed,” she said in a low voice.

“Son of a bitch. If I had known it was this bad, I would have stayed with you and closed the farm today.”

“You know you can’t do that. People want their trees, Nick.”

“I know, but I’d rather be with you.”

“Maybe if it clears up, I’ll be out later. They might plow the roads.”

“Okay, but only if it clears up. I hope I see you later, baby. Talk soon.” Nick disconnected and turned to see Tommy standing behind him with a grin on his face. “What?”

“What, he says.” Tommy shook his head.

“Okay, you caught me. Now keep it to yourself, or I’ll fire you.”

“You’ll fire me? I wouldn’t need to work if I had a dime for every time you said that.”

“Get to work,” Nick growled but laughed when Tommy chuckled.

As the day wore on, the snow began to let up, and more people showed up. He hoped Paige made it. From what he gathered, the roads were clear.

He grinned when he saw Wilder’s truck pull up, and he and Rory hopped out and headed for him.

“Need some help?” Wilder asked him.

“Sure. It was slow this morning, but it’s picked up a lot.”

“I need hot cocoa,” Rory said and entered the tent.

“I’ll take some customers up.” Wilder glanced around. “Paige isn’t here?”

“Not-yeah, she is.” Nick nodded his head toward the Cadillac, pulling up to the tent. “I was hoping she’d make it.”

“I’m glad to see you are so interested in someone, Nick.”

“I’m in love with her. Her ex did a number on her, and she doesn’t want to get married.”

“Ever?”

“That’s what she says. It’s a long story. We’ll talk about it later.” Nick grinned when Paige stepped from her vehicle and walked to him.

“Hi, Nick. Wilder. Is Rory with you?”

“I’m here. I had to get warmed up. How are you, Paige?” Rory said and sipped hot chocolate.

“I’m great.” She looked at Nick. “Where do you want me?”

Nick narrowed his eyes to see a sly smile lifting her lips as he looked at her. *Yep, she was killing him.*

“For now, you can take care of the sales.”

“For now?”

“Yes, for now,” he snapped, making her laugh, then shook his head.

“Women,” Wilder muttered.

“No shit.”

“Hey, Nick.”

Nick turned to see Riley and Kate Madison walking toward him with their children.

“Riley, how are you?” Nick shook his hand, then hugged Katie. “Katie, you’re as beautiful as ever.”

“Thank you, Nick. We want to get a big tree,” Katie said with a smile.

“I have plenty of those.” Nick squatted down in front of the kids. “How are you doing, Sadie? Jordon? Are you ready for Santa?”

He chuckled when Sadie started jumping up and down and clapping her mittens-covered hands. Nick straightened up and looked at Paige.

“Paige, do you know Katie and Riley Madison?”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.” Paige smiled.

“Well, Katie is Sam’s sister, and Riley is her husband. These are their children, Sadie and Jordon. Everyone, this is Paige Douglas.”

Paige shook their hands, looked at the children, and smiled.

“It’s nice to meet all of you.”

“You too, Paige. Excuse us,” Katie said as she took the children’s hands. “Let’s go find a gigantic tree.”

“I’ll be up in a few minutes,” Nick told them, then looked at Paige. “Are you warm enough?”

“For now. I have a cowboy who will warm me later.”

“Yes. Yes, you do, darlin’.”

“I’ll take care of the sales,” Rory said.

“Do you want to go up with me?” Nick asked Paige.

“I’d love to.”

Nick grinned, then they climbed into his truck and rode up to the trees. Once parked, they stepped out of the vehicle and walked along the trees. He chuckled when he saw Sadie running around them while Riley held Jordon.

When Sadie spotted them, Paige watched as she ran to Nick with her little arms up. He picked her up and tossed her into the air, making her squeal.

“What is it with men that they have to throw kids in the air?” Katie said when she reached Paige. “Sam does it all the time with her.”

“I don’t think there’s an answer for that.” Paige chuckled.

“Do you have kids, Paige?”

“Uh, no. I hope to one day, though.”

“Nick would make a wonderful father,” Katie said, then walked to where Riley stood in front of a huge Frasier fir.

Paige watched as Nick carried Sadie around the trees, and she knew Katie was right. Nick would make an excellent father. Could they do this? Could they be together and have children without a marriage license?

She was willing to do it, but would it get to where Nick grew tired of it and demanded that she marry him?

What would she do? If she still said no, would he leave her? She was going to drive herself insane over it, but she had to see where it was going, but the thought of being in that place again, almost made her hyperventilate.

Nick loved her, and she should be happy about it, but she had to tell him everything and she had to do it soon. She was so close to being in love with him and telling him all of it made her gut ache. She watched Nick point things out to Sadie, and she got tears in her eyes. He *would* make a wonderful father. He seemed to love carrying the little girl around. She saw him put Sadie down, then shake his head when the little girl ran off through the trees again.

Paige laughed when he ran after Sadie, caught her, and, once again, tossed her into the air. Sadie squealed, but from pure joy, not terror.

She could just see him playing with their children and teaching them how to run the tree farm. Paige was sure he wanted to hand down his part to any children he had. She frowned as she wondered how that would work, with Wilder owning half of it. Shrugging, she figured they had it all planned out.

Nick deserved a family, and she'd be happy to have one with him. She just wouldn't marry him.

"Damn, it's cold," Katie said from beside her.

"At least the wind died down. I'm surprised at the people here."

"Snow doesn't keep people away from anything in Clifton, Spring City, or Hartland."

"I think you're right. I'm always busy, no matter what the weather is."

"What do you do, Paige?"

"I own a lingerie shop."

"Oh, my God! Paige's!"

"Yep, that's me. Have you been in there?"

"No, but I've always wanted to stop in. My sister-in-law loves the place."

"Sam's wife?"

"Yes, Tess. She said she got the sexiest black negligee from there."

Paige laughed. "I know which one it is, and it is really sexy."

"She told me Sam loved it, but I had to stop her from saying more. He's my big brother, and I don't need to hear about that." Katie laughed.

"I'm sure you don't."

“I’d better get over there. I’ll stop in one day, Paige.”

“I’d love that, Katie. See you soon.”

“Yes, you will. I might stop and get me something sexy for Riley for Christmas.”

“I think men love those kinds of gifts.”

“Just something to toss on the floor,” Katie said with a laugh.

“Or in case of fire.”

Katie and Paige laughed but sobered when Nick and Riley headed for them. Both men frowned, but Katie and Paige tried to look as innocent as they could.

“I’m not even going to ask,” Riley said.

“It’s probably best.” Katie grinned at him.

“What tree did you find, Kaitlyn?” Riley shifted Jordon in his arms.

“Come with me. It’s huge.”

Nick leaned close to Paige. “That’s what she said.”

Paige snorted out a laugh as she elbowed him. “God, you’re awful.”

Nick chuckled. “I know, but you love it. I’ll be right back. I need to get someone to cut it for them.”

“Oh, you’re not going to do it?” Paige asked innocently.

“No,” Nick snapped. “I’ll never live it down if I pass out in the snow from seeing a little blood.”

Paige howled with laughter, then screamed when he stalked toward her. She gazed up into his face and tried not to laugh. She turned to run, but Nick caught her and tackled her down into the snow.

“Take it back,” he said.

“There’s nothing to take back. I only asked about you not cutting the tree,” she said, then giggled.

“We’ll settle this later.” Nick got to his feet, put his hand out to her, and she took it. He pulled her to her feet, kissed her lips, and then headed to where Riley and Katie stood in front of a tall tree.

Later, Paige sat at the table with the cash register and helped people pay for their trees. The cost was staggering, but she knew how beautiful they were and so worth it.

She was shivering, so she got up, went to the hot chocolate, and poured a cup. As she took a sip, she almost spit it out when she saw Bruce and his... *family* getting out of an SUV.

“Damn it,” she muttered and prayed they didn’t see her.

“Is everything okay?” Rory asked her.

“Yes. No. That’s my ex-husband.”

“Do you need to take a break? Maybe drive up to the trees and look for Nick.”

“No, I’m fine. He means nothing to me. I’m just surprised to see him here.”

“Is that his family now?”

“Yes. A family he didn’t want with me,” Paige murmured.

“Seriously? What a dick.”

Paige laughed. “So true.”

Both women walked back to the table, sat, and waited on customers. She didn’t look Bruce’s way again. Maybe he wouldn’t see her.

“Hello, Paige,” Bruce said.

Well, hell.

Paige glanced at him and away.

“Bruce.”

“I didn’t know you worked here. Is the shop not doing well that you had to take a second job?”

She looked at him to see him with a smirk on his face.

“The shop is doing great. I’m just helping here.”

“I see.”

“Did you need some help?” Rory asked him.

“Uh, no. I was just saying hello to Paige.”

“Okay, could you move along so we can take care of the paying customers?”

Paige snorted, then coughed to cover it up. The look on Bruce’s face was priceless, and Paige could literally kiss Rory.

“Is everything all right here?” Nick asked as he strode to the table.

“Yes, this gentleman was just saying hi to Paige. Now he’s going to go look at trees. Isn’t that right, Mr...?”

“Douglas,” Bruce said.

Paige heard Nick hiss in a breath and looked at him to see him glaring at Bruce.

“We’re fine, Nick. Bruce and his little family are here to buy a tree.” Paige smiled.

“Okay. Are you driving up, or do you need someone to take you and cut your tree for you?”

Paige knew Nick was baiting Bruce.

“I can cut it myself.” Bruce’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Nick.

“That’s fine. I’m Nick Richards. I own the tree farm, along with my brother. If you need any help, someone is always around.”

“Come on then, Elsa. Let’s get a tree so we can get out of this cold.” Bruce turned away, then glanced back at Paige. “You look good, Paige.”

Paige slammed her hands down on the table, got to her feet, walked around the table, and narrowed her eyes. He had pushed her enough.

“Fuck you. I don’t have the right to tell you to leave this property, but please do once you find a tree.”

“Since when did you talk like that?”

“Since you had a family with another woman.” She stepped closer to him. “Now, get the hell away from me, and never speak to me again.” She looked at Elsa. “And you, do you think he’s going to be faithful to you? Think again. He cheated *with* you. He’ll cheat *on* you.”

“Paige, come on, darlin’, sit down,” Nick said as he took her arm in his hand.

“Oh, I see why you’re helping now. You and the tree owner, huh?” Bruce chuckled.

“You know, she might not have the right to ask you to leave, but as the owner, I do, and I also can refuse service to anyone, so get the fuck off my property,” Nick snapped.

“You’re sending a paying customer away?”

“You haven’t paid for anything, so leave.”

Paige watched as Nick and Bruce glared at each other. She let out a relieved breath when Bruce turned away and returned to his vehicle, with his family following.

She plopped onto the chair and tried to calm herself, but her hands were shaking.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Nick. He was trying to aggravate me. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? For what? I’m the one who made him leave.”

“Yes, but I caused a scene.”

“No one is paying attention, sweetheart.”

Paige glanced around and saw that he was right. No one was even looking in their direction. She looked at Nick and smiled.

“I’m glad you made him leave.”

“He’s a jerk. If he wants one of my trees so bad, he can buy a cut one from Chuck.”

Paige chuckled. “I hope Chuck is out of them.”

Nick laughed and hugged her. She wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I could give Chuck a call... just sayin’.”

“Oh, my God. You would too. No, just let him get a tree for the kids.”

“I can’t believe he had the balls to even speak to you,” Rory said as she rubbed her back.

“He thinks I’m still in love with him. Idiot.”

“He’ll get his one day. Karma, baby. Karma.” Rory grinned.

“God, I hope so,” Paige said.

Later that evening, Paige sat in her apartment with Queenie on her lap, stroking her fur.

“Can you believe Bruce came to the farm today? I mean, why? He always had a fake tree, unless Elsa wanted a live one for their children.”

Paige noticed it didn’t hurt like it used to. She was finally over his betrayal and ready to be with Nick. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and huffed.

“Damn you, Bruce Douglas. I hope you get yours one day. Maybe Elsa will smarten up and get rid of your ass. God knows you’d never want custody of the kids.”

When her cellphone buzzed, she reached for it to see Nick’s number. Smiling, she hit *Answer* and put it to her ear.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi, sweetheart. Are you doing all right?”

“I’m fine, Nick. He caught me off guard today, but it didn’t bother me like it used to.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. Will you come out here next Friday night?”

“Oh, that’s right. Wilder and Rory are getting married Saturday. I have to let Juliette and Janice know I won’t be in that day.”

“You’ll stay with me that night, right?”

“If you want me to.”

“What do you want, Paige?”

“To be with you.”

“That was the right answer. I’ll talk to you later in the week. I need to grab a shower and hit the sheets. You should have stayed.”

“I have to work tomorrow, Nick. It’s Monday, and with Christmas getting closer, we’re busy. I know you’ll be busy too.”

“Yes, but I am never too busy for you. Hey, I’d better go before I convince myself to drive there to see you.”

“You’d be more than welcome, cowboy.”

“Damn. Yeah, I’m going. Bye, Paige.”

Paige laughed when he disconnected. He was such a good man, and throw in those looks and sense of humor, he was hard to resist.

“So, why do you? You know you’re in love with him. Just be with him. Take a chance.” She shook her head. “I’m taking a chance.”

She knew it disappointed Nick that she wouldn’t make a stronger commitment, but she was doing what she could. He was right that people didn’t go into a marriage expecting it would end in divorce, but Nick knew how she felt and wanted them to be together, and she had to admit, she wanted that too.

Chapter Nine

“Paige, are you leaving soon? It’s calling for more snow, and I want you here before it gets worse.” Nick raked his fingers through his hair.

“I just have to pack my clothes for the wedding, then I’ll be out.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come and get you?”

“I need my car, Nick.”

“I know, but it’s dark, and with it so cold, the roads could freeze. I’d feel better if you let me come and get you.”

“I know how to drive in snow, Nick.”

“Okay, what if I come in there and you follow me home?”

“I’d follow you anywhere, Nicholas Richards, but that’s not necessary.”

“Although I love hearing that, Paige, I hate the idea of you driving out here.”

“Nick, I’ll be careful. Just give me a few minutes to get everything.”

“All right. We can take a hot bath when you get here.”

“Sounds good. Is Wilder staying with you?”

“No, he stayed at Mom and Dad’s place.”

“Oh, okay. Let me get off this phone, and I’ll be there before you know it.”

“I hope so, baby. I’ll be waiting.”

A while later, Nick heard a vehicle and looked out the window to see snow falling through the lights above the barns. He sure hoped it didn’t get too bad for Wilder’s wedding.

Opening the door, he stepped onto the porch and watched Paige get out of her vehicle. She smiled at him, opened the

back door, and removed a garment bag, and he knew it had to be the dress she was wearing tomorrow.

When she headed for the steps, he stepped down a step and took the bag from her. Once inside, she removed her coat and hat, then Nick took her hand and led her to the bathroom, where they took a bath then headed for bed.

The following morning, Nick stood in the bathroom, shaving, when the door opened, and Paige entered. She hopped up onto the counter and smiled at him.

“Can I watch you shave?”

“If you want.” He shrugged.

“Is something wrong?”

“I’m worried that it will be hard to get to the church with the snow. Wilder loves Rory so much, and it will kill them if they can’t get married because of this weather.”

“Is it still snowing?”

“Yes, we got quite a bit last night.” Nick shook his head. “I hope the roads are all right. I need to call Wilder once I get dressed.”

“I hope they can get married.”

“Me too. I’ve never seen Wilder so happy, and this day has to happen.”

“It will, Nick. We’ll do what we must to get them to the church.”

“Thanks, baby.” He continued to shave, wiped off the excess shaving cream, kissed her lips, and strode from the room.

After dressing, Nick headed for the kitchen to call his brother.

“How are the roads?” Wilder asked him when he answered.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll get you there, Wild.”

“I’ll walk if I have to. Dad took his truck out to check, so I’ll see what he says when he gets back. If the roads are bad, I

don't want to call and distract him.”

“Okay, call me back when he gets home.”

“I will. I talked to Rory, and she said you'd better get me there, or she'd make your life a living hell.”

Nick could hear the laughter in Wilder's voice.

“Hell, I don't need that. Just call me back. We'll get you there.”

“Got a dogsled?” Wilder chuckled.

“There are always horses.”

Wilder laughed. “If we have to, we will.”

“Call me when Dad gets back.”

“Will do. I'll see you later, Nick.”

“Yeah, you will, little brother.” He disconnected.

“Did you find out anything?” Paige asked as she entered the kitchen.

“Wilder is calling me back. Dad took his truck out to check the roads, so we'll know how they are once he gets home.”

“You look very handsome in your tux, Nick.”

“Thank you, ma'am. I'm sure you'll be beautiful no matter what you wear.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really. I just need a cup of coffee, but make yourself something.”

“I'll just have coffee too.” She walked to the coffeemaker, made a cup of coffee, and then handed it to Nick.

“Thanks, darlin'.” He took the cup from her and sipped the coffee.

“You're welcome. I'm going to grab a shower after I finish this cup. The wedding is in a few hours.”

Nick kissed her forehead. “Wear something sexy underneath.”

“I always do, and it’s for you.”

Nick grinned. “That’s what makes it so sexy.”

After talking with Wilder again, he felt better knowing the roads were clear. He shook his head thinking about Wilder getting married. His little brother was beating him to the altar.

Nick frowned. As long as he was with Paige, he’d never make it to an altar. Shaking his head, he knew he’d do what she wanted, but he’d love to marry her and make a life together.

“Paige, I have to get going,” Nick called through the bathroom door.

“Okay, I’ll see you there. Be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nick walked to the kitchen, pulled on his coat and hat, then headed out the door. He closed it behind him, strode to his truck, started it, and drove to his parent’s house to pick up Wilder.

Once there, he parked in the driveway, then entered the house.

“Hi, Mom,” he said when his mother entered the living room.

“Nick, you look so handsome.” She smiled at him.

“Well, thank you, ma’am, and you look beautiful as always.” Nick kissed her cheek.

“Nick,” Stephen said when he entered the room.

“Hey, Dad. Where’s Wilder?”

“In his room. I think his nerves are kicking in.” Stephen grinned.

“Great. I’ll go get him. We need to head to the church.”

Nick walked down the hallway and knocked on Wilder’s door.

“Come in. It’s open.”

He opened the door to see Wilder sitting on the bed with his arms resting on his thighs, his hands clasped, while he stared at the floor.

“Are you all right?” Nick asked as he closed the door.

Wilder looked at him. “I’m nervous. I want this, but...” he shook his head.

“You’re supposed to be nervous. It’s your wedding day. You’re marrying a wonderful woman, Wild.”

“I know, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I just wish I didn’t have to go through a ceremony.”

“Come on, Wilder. This is Rory’s day. You’re just there to do your part. This is all for her.”

“You’re right, and I’ll give her anything she wants.” Wilder stared at him. “You need to get married, Nick.”

Nick glanced away. “That won’t be happening, especially not with Paige.”

“You can’t change her mind?”

“No, I told you it’s a long story. I’ll tell you some other time. Not today, though. Get your jacket on, and let’s go. I’m sure Nevada and Reece are there.”

After Paige parked her vehicle, she walked along the sidewalk to the church but stopped in her tracks when she saw all the people standing outside. Only those with invitations were inside.

She removed her cellphone from her purse and sent Nick a text. She hoped he wasn’t too busy to see it.

Less than a minute later, his text returned, telling her that Nevada would meet her at the doors and let her in.

She smiled, put her phone away, and walked through the crowd. She climbed the concrete steps to the church. She saw the door open, and Nevada stepped out and looked over the crowd. Paige raised her hand, and she saw him nod.

She got to the doors and smiled at him.

“You look very handsome,” she said.

“I hate these damn suits,” he muttered, making her laugh.

“It’s just for a few hours. You had to wear one at your wedding, didn’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Come on, I’ll show you to your seat.”

A while later, she watched Wilder, Nick, Nevada, and Reece enter the church and stand at the altar. Nick looked so handsome in his tux with a red vest, and the men wore black cowboy hats.

When the music started for the bride and her attendants, Paige watched Rory glide down the aisle in a gorgeous off-white gown. Her attendants wore red dresses that matched the groomsmen’s vests.

She thought it had been a beautiful wedding as she sat at a table at the reception in the Clifton town hall.

The wedding party arrived an hour ago, and they made toasts. Of course, Nick had to terrorize his brother, she thought with a grin.

“Hey, darlin’.”

She looked up to see Nick beside the table.

“Hi.”

“Come and sit with me, Paige.” He put his hand out to her.

“Are you sure it’s all right?”

“Yep. Nevada and Reece aren’t at the main table anymore. They’re with their wives and family. Come on.”

“All right.” Paige got to her feet, took his hand, and he led her to the table. Then he held a chair for her, and she sat.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“Thank you.” She had chosen a purple dress that hugged her body and ended just above her knees. On her feet were matching stilettos.

“Those shoes are going to keep me hard.”

Paige sputtered out a laugh. “Is there a closet somewhere?”

“Stop.” He leaned close to her. “Are you wearing something sexy underneath?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because this dress is so tight.”

“What are you saying?”

Paige crooked her finger at him, and he leaned closer.

“I’m saying there is nothing between me and this dress.”

“Holy shit. You *are* trying to kill me.”

“I don’t want to do that. If I wear something under it, you can see the lines—”

“Stop. Just stop.”

Paige laughed. “You’re so handsome, Nick.”

“Aw, thank you, ma’am. Let me get you something to drink. What would you like?”

“Callahan on the rocks, please.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Paige nodded and watched as he made his way to the bar, but people kept stopping him. She frowned when a beautiful woman with an array of red curls stopped him, and he hugged her. Paige couldn’t believe the sting of jealousy she felt. She was never jealous of other women. Unless they were trying to take her man, and he *was* her man. She clenched her fists when the woman laughed and touched his arm.

She was about to get up when a handsome man slipped his arm around the woman’s waist and shook Nick’s hand.

“That would have gone over well, Paige,” she muttered.

“Paige?”

Paige turned to see Rona taking a seat beside her.

“Hello, Rona. You look beautiful.”

“So do you. I’m so glad you made it.”

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. I know I shouldn’t say anything, but I hope to see you and Nick doing this.”

Paige took a deep breath and smiled but didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut. I’m pushing. It’s just that Nick so wants to settle down and have kids. I’ll shut up now. I see my husband, and he seems to be looking for me. Enjoy the reception.” Rona got up, squeezed Paige’s shoulder, then headed for Stephen.

Paige wanted to crawl under the table. Did everyone think she and Nick would end up married? Rona’s words echoed through her head. *Nick so wants to settle down and have kids.*

She pushed to her feet and made her way to the restroom. Once inside, she entered a stall and cried. She tried to be quiet when the door opened, and someone entered. She took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped out of the stall to see Kay O’Malley at the sink. Their eyes met in the mirror.

“Hi, Paige,” Kay said, smiling.

“Hi, Kay.” Paige washed her hands.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

The door opened again, and Jessa entered.

“Hey, you two. I wondered where you’d gone, Kay. How are you, Paige?”

Paige saw Kay shake her head slightly, and Jessa frowned.

“I’m fine, Jessa.” Paige cleared her throat when her voice caught.

“You don’t sound fine. It goes no further than here.”

She stared at Jessa, and before she knew it, she was spilling her guts to her about Bruce, Nick, and the whole marriage

thing. When she finished, she waited for them to say something, but neither did, which made her frown.

“I think you’re making excuses,” Jessa said.

“Excuses? Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re afraid you’ll never be happy again. You are, Paige. I know you haven’t been seeing Nick very long, but you seem so much more... content since you have been. He’s a wonderful man.”

“I can’t get married—”

“Bullshit,” Jessa snapped. “We all take chances. Do you know how much it hurt me to think Grant was involved with Kay? So much that I had to leave here to get away from him. I wanted nothing to do with him. Thank God he traveled to Nashville to tell me the truth. Paige, no one goes through life without being hurt.”

“It would kill me if Nick hurt me.”

“And if he did, you’d move on. It’s what we have to do. If he hurts you, then he isn’t the one for you. I’ve been in love with Landry since I was fifteen, and I was terrified of him hurting me, but I stuck with it. I know it would have killed me for him not to return that love, but I would have gotten through it. We women are a lot tougher than we’re given credit for,” Kay said.

“I understand what you’re both saying, but the hurt Bruce did to me can’t be easily forgotten. It’s been three years, and I still want to throat punch him when I see him. Though, not as bad.”

“See? You’re on the mend. Men suck, and there are no two ways about it. I love Grant very much, but trust me, he can really push my buttons.” Jessa grinned. “The good ones too.”

“Oh, my God! There she goes again. I cannot listen to this,” Kay said as she pulled the handle on the door and walked out.

Paige and Jessa looked at each other and laughed.

“Seriously, Paige, just take it one day at a time, but don’t let your ex dictate who you fall in love with and marry. In fact, if

it were me, I'd marry another man and have a ton of his kids. That would show your ex that you're past that hurt." Jessa headed for the door. "Just think about it. I'd better get back there, so Grant doesn't think I ran off."

"He knows better."

"He should. I'll talk to you soon. Have a good time." Jessa walked out.

Paige stared at her reflection in the mirror. They didn't get it. Some people could get past affairs and have stronger marriages, and she might have been able to do that, if that had been all he'd done. No one, except Sydney, Janice, and Juliette knew. *You don't go into a marriage thinking it will end in divorce.* Nick's words echoed in her head, but he didn't understand. No one did.

"So, tell him. Make him understand," she said to the image in the mirror.

Taking a deep breath, she walked out of the bathroom and returned to the table.

When Nick returned to the table with her drink, he set it down, then took a seat.

"Who's the redhead you were talking with?" Paige asked as she picked up her drink.

"Priscilla Callahan. Her husband, Roark, is a good friend of mine."

"Callahan? As in the whiskey? I know the Callahans live in Spring City, but I don't know them."

"Yes, one and the same. They're good people."

"She's beautiful."

"Yeah, she is. She adores Roark, and he feels the same about her."

Paige decided to just enjoy the rest of the day with Nick and forget about her feelings toward marriage.

On Monday, she opened the shop and knew she had only had a few minutes of peace before the crowd arrived. She

loved the holidays, but they wore her down.

When the bell announced someone, she looked to the door and frowned when she saw Bruce enter. *Great.*

“What are you doing here?” Paige tilted her head and realized he didn’t make her as angry anymore. But she did still feel some anger for him because of the position he put her in. She would think anyone would feel that way if they went through what she had.

“I wanted to talk to you.” He leaned against the counter and stared at her.

“About?” She refused to let him make her angry.

“It’s about Elsa and me.”

“What? Did you get another woman pregnant?”

“No,” he snapped, then took a deep breath. “We’re getting married.”

“Congratulations.” Paige picked up some garments, walked around the counter, and hung them up.

“Paige. I thought you’d want to know.”

“You really shouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“*Think.* Why would I even care?”

“I was hoping you would.”

“Are you out of your mind? Why would I? You killed any feelings I had for you a long time ago. You did nothing but lie to me for years. You pushed me to the edge!”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Oh, please. You give yourself too much credit. I don’t hate you. I don’t love you. In fact, I have no feelings for you whatsoever, so unless you’re here to buy something, please leave.”

Bruce wrapped his fingers around her wrist.

“I’d leave her and the kids for you.”

“You just told me you were getting married!” Paige laughed. “You will never change.”

“I would, for you. Seeing you with that Christmas tree farmer made me realize how much I still love you.”

She was about to answer when the bell chimed, and Nick entered. She knew by the look on his face that he wasn't happy about Bruce being here.

“You want to tell me why you have a hold of her?” Nick folded his arms and leaned against a glass case.

Paige jerked her wrist from Bruce and looked at Nick.

“He was just leaving.”

“Paige—”

“Now, Bruce,” she snapped.

“You heard her. Now, Bruce or I'll escort you out.”

“This is what you want? A damn cowboy? A Christmas tree farm owner?”

“Better than a liar and a cheater,” Nick growled out.

“What happened between Paige and me has nothing to do with you.”

“Really?” Nick looked at Paige. “Is he right?”

“No, he's not. Get out, Bruce, and never come in again, or I'll tell Elsa what you said.”

“I don't know what that was, but I'd do it, anyway. She needs to see what she's involved with.” Nick's eyes narrowed as he looked at Bruce.

When Bruce took a step toward Nick, he didn't budge, so Bruce stopped, looked at Paige, then headed out the door.

Once he left, Paige pulled a stool out from behind a counter, sat down, and clasped her hands together.

“Are you okay? You're shaking, Paige.” Nick slipped his hand under her hair and lightly squeezed her neck.

“I’m fine. He says he’d leave her for me.” Paige looked at Nick. “He’s only saying that because he knows I’m with you.”

“What a prize he is. You’re better off without him. I know he hurt you, but I think it was a blessing in disguise.”

Paige stared at Nick. He was right. Bruce had hurt her, and it was a blessing if she were being honest with herself. She might not have found out for more than three years if Elsa hadn’t come into the shop to tell her.

“You’re right. It was.”

She hopped off the stool and slipped her arms around Nick’s waist. She sighed when his arms encircled her, and he kissed her forehead.

“What are you doing here?”

“I had to pick up some things at the Feed Store, then I had breakfast at the diner. I saw your lights on when I came out.” He shrugged. “I wanted to see you.”

“I’m so glad you did. I didn’t know what to think when he came in.”

“Well, hopefully, that was the last time, or I’ll have to talk with him.”

“I don’t think he’d like that,” Paige said.

“Good. Well, I’d better get going. We’re already busy this morning. Don’t forget that Wilder and Rory are coming for dinner tonight.”

“It’s too bad they have to wait for a honeymoon.”

“Trust me, they had one over the weekend.” Nick grinned.

Paige chuckled. “No doubt there. I’ll be out after I close.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He kissed her lips, then strode from the shop just as Janice and Juliette entered. He touched the brim of his hat as he held the door for them, then disappeared.

That evening, Nick, Paige, Wilder, and Rory finished cleaning up after dinner.

“Go ahead to the living room. I’ll get the coffee,” Nick said.

“Nick?” Wilder said.

“I’ll bring the coffee in, Wild. Go sit in the living room.”

“I want to talk to you.”

Nick frowned. “About what?”

“The farm.”

“This farm or the dairy farm?”

“This one.” Wilder walked to the table, pulled a chair out, and took a seat. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and Rory and I discussed this—”

“Discussed what?” Nick didn’t have a good feeling about this. Did Wilder and Rory want to combine the farms and live here? Shit! He loved his brother but didn’t need him and his wife moving in when he wanted Paige here. He mentally shook his head. There was no way they’d live here, so he was curious as to what Wilder wanted to discuss.

“We discussed what to do about this farm. We even asked Mom and Dad for their opinions, and they agreed with Rory and me.” Wilder took a deep breath. “We want to give you the option of buying me out.”

Nick could have been knocked over with a feather. That certainly wasn’t what he’d expected.

“What?”

“Nick, this is your farm. My name might be on the deed, but it’s yours. You love this place. Don’t get me wrong, I love it too, but not to the extent you do. Rory and I have enough on our plates with the dairy farm. We love it as much as you love this one. So, we’re giving you the option of owning it all.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Nick said.

“We know, but we want to raise our children on the dairy farm, teach them how it works, and then hand it down to them. Just like you should do with this one. It’s your tree farm, Nick,” Wilder repeated.

“Wilder?” Rory entered the kitchen, with Paige following her.

Wilder got to his feet, walked to Rory, and took her hand in his.

“I was talking with Nick about buying us out.”

Paige gasped. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“We’re positive. What do we need two farms for?” Rory smiled.

Nick shook his head. “I’m shocked. I’d love it, but I don’t want you to regret it later, Wilder.”

“I won’t. We’ve been talking about this for a while, and I know you’ll take care of this place. Nick, you love this farm, and you deserve it.”

“I’ve never felt it was just mine, Wilder.”

“Hell, I know that. That’s what makes this so easy. You can think about it if you need the time, but I’m standing firm on this. You run this farm, so it should be yours.”

“I’d love to have it, Wilder, but—”

“Stop with the buts, Nick. You know this is what you want.” Rory glared at him.

“I guess,” he murmured, looked at Paige, and frowned. “Damn, did you just give me the *mom* look?”

Paige and Rory laughed.

“I think she did, Nick.” Wilder grinned.

“Are women born with that, or is it something you have perfected over the years?”

“We don’t stand in front of a mirror and practice it, Nick,” Rory said.

“So you’re born with it. You women give that look, and any smart man knows to shut up or stop what they’re doing.”

“Remember when Mom would turn and give us that look if we were misbehaving?” Wilder shook his head. “We would

stop whatever we were doing because we knew what that look meant. All kids do.”

Nick chuckled. “Hell, I’ve seen her give that look to Dad now.”

“It’s not just the males who get it. We get it from our moms, too,” Paige said.

“Yeah, but I bet we get it worse than you.”

“Because you deserve it most of the time,” Rory told them.

“Yeah, well, there is that. Seriously, Nick. Do it,” Wilder said.

“If you’re sure you won’t change your mind later.”

“I won’t. We have a dairy farm. I’d never have time to be here, not even on the weekends.”

“Come on, Nick.” Rory smiled at him.

Nick nodded. “All right. I’ll go to the bank tomorrow and get the money for you.”

Nick stuck his hand out to his brother, but Wilder pulled him into a hug.

“Thanks, Wilder. You know I’ll take care of it.”

“Hell, Nick, you have since day one. I’m just sorry I didn’t do more here with you.”

“I understood why you couldn’t, and I understand even more now.” Nick winked at Rory and chuckled when she winked back.

After Wilder and Rory left, Paige and Nick decided to try strip poker again, but this time was a lot more fun, in Nick’s opinion. Paige sat across from him on the floor, naked except for one sock, and he still wore his boxer briefs.

He watched Paige stretch her legs out in front of her, and as she stared into his eyes, she spread her legs, glanced at his underwear, then lifted her eyes and looked into his.

“Did you buy those boxer briefs in a size too small? They look kind of... stretched out.”

Nick looked at her and chuckled.

“You should know, you’re the one making them look... stretched out, and if you were sitting across from you, you’d know why they look that way.”

Paige laughed. “It’s my fault, huh?”

“No one else’s, darlin’.”

“You know, we didn’t finish the last game we played, and now we’re both down to one item,” Paige said as she dealt the cards.

“I have a feeling we won’t finish this one, either.”

Paige grinned, then winked at him as she threw the cards onto the floor.

“Fine by me.”

Nick smirked, reached for her, and pulled her across the pile of cards on the floor. He lay on his back with her on top of him.

“Kiss me,” he whispered.

Paige pressed her lips to his, and he cupped her face in his hands, then he flipped her to her back, making her laugh.

“Are we going to have sex on this floor?”

“Isn’t it supposed to be romantic to have sex in front of a fireplace?”

“Definitely.”

“I think I have playing cards stuck to my ass.”

Paige burst out laughing. “Let me check that for you.”

Her hands moved down his back to his ass.

“I don’t feel any.”

“I’m sure there’s some back there. Check again.”

Paige giggled. “You just want me to touch your ass.”

“Damn right, then I’ll check yours.”

“I didn’t lay on the cards, and you didn’t either. You’re just making excuses, Nick.”

“Would I do that?”

“You have a great ass, Nicholas Richards. But there are no cards.” Paige moved her hands along his ass and stared into his eyes.

“Darlin’, you say the sweetest things.” He kissed her lips again and moved his finger along her slit. “You’re wet, Paige. For me.”

“Yes,” she moaned against his mouth. “Nick, please.”

“I always do, sweetheart,” he whispered as he slid into her.

When her legs wrapped around his waist, he almost lost it. There was no place he’d rather be than inside Paige.

Later, as they lay on the floor, Nick kissed her forehead, got to his feet, walked to the sofa, took the afghan off the back, then lay back down beside her, pulling the blanket over them.

He sighed when Paige placed her head on his chest and her arm across his waist.

“Are you happy about the farm?”

“Yes. It’s just that I feel I’m taking Wilder’s inheritance from him.”

“Oh, you’re not, Nick. This was his decision.”

“I know. I suppose since it’s been that way for years, it’s hard to think differently.”

“Nicholas Stephen Richards, it’s what Wilder wants.”

“You’re middle naming me now?”

“I am. We should celebrate. Go to dinner with Rory and Wilder one evening.”

“I’d rather just celebrate with you, but I’ll ask Wilder about it.”

“We can have our own celebration,” Paige murmured.

“That would be great.”

“Anything, in particular, you’d want to do?”

“Yeah, get a lap dance.”

When Paige burst out laughing, Nick chuckled and hugged her to him.

“Well, I’ll look into that for you.” She yawned.

“Let’s get some sleep, sweetheart. It’s going to be busy tomorrow.” He helped her up, led her to the bedroom, placed her under the blankets, and then crawled in beside her.

When he heard Paige’s deep breathing, he knew she’d fallen asleep. As he held her, he knew he could stay like this forever.

Chapter Ten

A few nights later, Paige waited for Nick to arrive so they could have dinner together at the diner. She was a little anxious because of what she had planned, but she knew, being a man, he'd like it. She had never been shy about sex or being sexy.

When a knock sounded on the door, she about jumped out of her skin. *A little anxious? Try a lot of anxious!* She got to her feet, made her way to the door, and looked out the peephole to see Nick standing there. She opened the door and smiled.

"Hi," she said as she waved him in.

He frowned as he stepped across the threshold.

"Why are you wearing a trench coat?"

She smiled as she helped him remove his coat then hung it up. When he reached up to take off his hat, she took it from him and placed it on her head.

"Come with me," she said as she led him to the center of the room and had him sit in one of the two ladder-back chairs sitting in the center of the room.

"What's going on, Paige?"

"I'm giving you what you wanted."

"What I wanted? But what does that have to do with your coat?"

"You'll see. You just sit there, Nick."

She watched him take a deep breath and stared at her. Then she stood in front of him, and her heart skipped a beat when he looked at her with those gorgeous blue eyes.

"Since you said you wanted to celebrate owning the farm
—"

“I said I wanted to celebrate with you.”

“Yes, so I’ll give you a night to remember.”

“Oh, hell. Paige—”

She laughed, leaned down, and put her lips close to his ear.

“I’m going to give you that lap dance.”

“What?”

“I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Don’t pussy out on me, Nick. You just sit here and relax.” She picked up a remote, hit play, and walked to stand in front of the other chair, which sat with its back to Nick. When *You Can Leave Your Hat On*, by Joe Cocker, started playing. She stared at Nick and did as the song said.

As she swayed to the music, she untied the belt on her coat and removed it. Then kicked off her shoes. She slowly removed her dress and let it fall to the floor. Walking to the chair, she stepped onto it, stood up, and swayed to the music, wearing nothing but a black corset top, panties, garter belt, black stockings with the seam up the back, and Nick’s cowboy hat.

Paige moved her hips in rhythm with the music, then stepped down and straddled the chair while staring at him. She saw him swallow hard and knew he saw the crotchless panties she wore. She got up, strode around the chair, and stood before him. She put her foot between his thighs and rubbed his cock through his jeans.

Nick’s eyes closed, and he seemed to hold his breath, but when she straddled his lap, his eyes flew open and stared into hers. She leaned forward, took his bottom lip between her teeth, and nibbled on it. His hands went to her waist.

“Crotchless panties? You’re driving me insane,” he said in a rough voice.

“As long as we go together, I’m fine with that.” She put her lips next to his ear again. “I’m so wet for you. I’ve been

thinking about this all day, Nick. I want you to fuck me. *Hard.*”

“Paige,” he murmured. “I want you too. I’m so fucking hard. I’m not sure the zipper will go down.”

“Let’s just see.” Nothing turned her on more than turning this man on. She got off his lap, motioned for him to stand, unbuttoned his jeans, then tugged the zipper down. When she reached inside to wrap her fingers around him, he groaned.

She shoved his jeans and boxer briefs down, then dropped to her knees and took his cock into her mouth.

When she looked up to see him watching her, she almost had an orgasm. The look in his eyes was so hot. His pupils dilated as he moved his hips in rhythm with her mouth, and his fingers raked through her hair.

“Paige... baby, I can’t take much more of this.”

“Just a little more,” she said when she removed her mouth, then put it down over him again.

Nick’s hands grabbed her biceps, and he lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

“Grab my jeans.”

She reached behind him, slipped her fingers through the belt loops, and pulled them up.

“I need you now,” he said in breath next to her ear.

“Yes,” she breathed.

He carried her to the bed, set her on her feet, and stepped back from her.

“Don’t take off a thing. Except, maybe the hat.”

Paige smiled as she stood in front of him. She removed the hat and tossed it to the chair beside the bed.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he said as he gazed into her eyes.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“You’re going somewhere now?” His voice was full of disbelief.

“Just a second.” She ran across the room, found her shoes, then returned to the bed. Nick hadn’t moved.

She slowly put her shoes on and crooked her finger at him. He grinned, picked her up, and placed her in the center of the bed. Then she watched him undress in record time.

He walked to the end of the bed and kissed her legs, switching back and forth, until he reached the juncture of her thighs. Then he pulled her slit apart with his thumbs, placed his mouth over her clitoris, and sucked.

She took deep breaths when her belly fluttered, knowing she was going over. He could always get her there fast. She cried out his name when she came.

Nick moved over her, took her lips in a deep kiss, then inched into her. When her legs wrapped around his waist, he about lost it. He was so close to coming, but he wanted her there again before joining her.

He could feel her inner muscles clenching around his cock, and she screamed in his mouth as she came. He lifted his lips from hers and stared into her eyes as he joined her. She was so beautiful, and he was so in love with her. There was no way he’d let her go. He knew that with all his heart.

Her fingers sifted through his hair as he tried to catch his breath.

“I hope you enjoyed the show, Nick,” she said.

“You have no idea how much. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Where did you ever get an idea like that?”

“I was listening to my mom’s Joe Cocker CD, and that song came on, and I remembered how you said you wanted a lap dance. I thought it was a sexy song.”

“No shit. I sure enjoyed it. I’m surprised I didn’t come in my jeans.”

When Paige burst out laughing, he chuckled.

“You’re not going home tonight, Nick.”

“I have no problem with that.”

“Maybe you can dance for me sometime,” Paige said.

Nick burst out laughing. “That won’t be happenin’.”

“Damn,” she said, making him laugh more.

“I’m hungry now,” he said.

“Me too. Let’s take a quick shower, then head for the diner.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After they showered and dressed, they put their coats on and walked across the street to the diner.

“I think the snow is keeping everyone away,” Paige said as they made their way to a booth. They were the only people in there.

“No doubt there.” Nick removed his hat, hung it on the peg, and slid into the booth.

Paige picked up a menu and then sat it behind the napkin holder.

“I know what I want. I don’t know why I’m even looking.”

“Hey, you two,” Connie said while standing beside the booth.

“Hi, Connie,” Nick said. “Not very busy, huh?”

“We’re closing early. The snow is getting heavier, and we’d like to get home.”

“We can leave Connie. I didn’t know you were closing,” Paige said.

“We rarely do, but it’s supposed to get bad. Let me get your orders to Owen.” Connie smiled.

“We’ll take them to go, Connie. That way, you can get out of here.” Nick smiled.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“We know, but that way, you can leave without waiting for us,” Paige said.

“It would be nice to get out of here. I’m sure the roads will get worse.”

“Then we’ll take them to go.” Nick smiled at Connie.

“All right. I’ll be right back with your dinners, then Owen and I are closing.”

Paige watched Connie pin the order to the metal wheel, then walked to the door to turn the sign over to *Closed*.

“Paige, do you want to head to my place?”

“No. You’re staying with me tonight, Nick. If the roads are better tomorrow, you can go home. I know you have to open the farm.”

“I do, but I’ll call Tommy, and he can open for me. I’ll get there when I get there.”

“I just want you to be careful.”

“Always, baby. Always.”

Later, Paige reached out for Nick, but the bed was empty. She sat up.

“Nick?”

“I’m here. I have to get going, sweetheart. It’s going to be a busy day. Christmas is in three weeks; the closer it gets, the busier we are.”

“Okay. I suppose I should get moving too. We’re slammed every day too.” She tossed the blankets off and got out of bed. “When do you close for the season?”

“Christmas Eve.”

“Wow. Some people wait that long?”

“Yes. One year, I closed a week earlier and caught all kinds of hell from people.” Nick grinned as he sat on the bed and pulled on a boot. “Do you close for the holiday?”

“Yes. We close the week of Christmas and open after the first of January.” Paige tilted her head. “Maybe I could help you that week.”

“Help me what? Have sex? I’m all for that.” He laughed when she threw a pillow at him, but he caught it and tossed it back. “Seriously, I’d love the help. Mom, Dad, and Wilder help that week too. I suppose Rory will, too, this year.”

“I’d love to. I really enjoy it.”

“Good.” He strolled to her, kissed her lips, and put his hat on. “I’ll see you later, sweetheart. Have a good day.”

“I will. You too.” She smiled as he touched the brim of his hat and walked across the room. She watched him walk out the door, and close it behind him.

With a smile on her face, she headed for the shower. It was just too bad that Nick wasn’t joining her.

This day would never end, was Paige’s thought as the door opened and closed constantly. She was happy about it, but there were days she just wanted to stay in her office and let Juliette and Janice take care of everything. But it was her shop, so she had to do her part.

Standing behind the counter, she sighed when the bell chimed again.

“I’m about to unhook that damn bell,” Janice said.

Paige chuckled. “You and me, both.”

“How are things with you and Nick?”

“Wonderful.”

“That’s great to hear. So, are you over this, I’ll never get married again, shit?”

“No. I won’t get married again, but Nick is willing to be with me without marriage.” When Janice didn’t say anything,

Paige looked at her to see her staring with her mouth open.
“What?”

“What? Are you serious? He is crazy about you, Paige, and you feel the same way about him from what I can see.”

“Marriage isn’t for me.”

“You are full of shit. Paige, just because Bruce hurt you does not mean Nick will. Trust him. If you can’t trust him, you can’t love him.”

“I didn’t say I loved him,” Paige snapped.

Janice shook her head and laughed.

“But you do.” Janice put her hand up when Paige opened her mouth. “You see him all the time. You have sex with him, and I’m telling you now that if that’s all you’re seeing him for, then get the hell away from him before *you* hurt *him*.”

“I never want to hurt him.”

“Paige, you are hurting him because you won’t commit. Do you even see how he looks at you?”

“Janice—”

“She’s right, Paige,” Juliette said when she moved next to them. “He is absolutely head over heels for you, and you’re going to hurt him. He does not deserve that. If you can’t commit, the best thing is to break it off.”

“I can’t do that. I love being with him. I want to stay with him, but...”

“What difference does it make if you have that piece of paper telling the world you’re married?”

“Exactly,” Paige exclaimed while pointing her finger at Juliette.

“Do you think it would hurt less if you two parted? Marriage license or not.”

Paige nibbled on her bottom lip and shook her head.

“It would be the same.”

“Exactly,” Juliette said, throwing her words back at her.

Paige quickly blinked her eyes to keep the tears at bay.

“He told me he was in love with me,” she whispered.

“Then you have to do something because you’re going to hurt him either way. I can almost guarantee that even though he’s willing to be with you, he will eventually want to get married. He’s a good man.”

“I know he is. I have to think about what to do.”

“If you break up with him, it will destroy him. He’s been with you through this, knowing you don’t want to get married. That’s love. He’s willing to do whatever it takes to keep you in his life. Paige, please, just think about it.”

“I will. The last thing I want to do is hurt him.”

“Then you’d better do something fast.”

“I haven’t told him all of it, yet.”

“You haven’t?” Janice asked her in a surprised voice.

“No. It’s so hard to talk about and a lot of people get nervous when they hear that.”

“Nick won’t. Tell him, Paige. If it doesn’t bother him, you’ll know how much he cares.”

Paige nodded, then went about putting the new garments out. She knew she needed to decide about Nick. She wanted him in her life, and even though he’d agreed to try this her way, how long would he put up with not getting married?

Deciding to get to work, she hoped she could keep Nick out of her thoughts. At least for a while.

Nick’s balls were freezing. There was no two ways about it. The damn snow wouldn’t let up, but it didn’t seem to keep people away. He grinned when he saw some kids running around, having a snowball fight.

He glanced around with pride. This was his now. All his. He just hoped Wilder was really okay with it.

“Hey, Nick.”

He looked around to see Preston and Deidra Mitchell walking toward him.

“Hey, Preston. Hello, Deidra.”

“We want to get a tree, and of course, she picked the coldest damn day of the year,” Preston said, then chuckled when Deidra punched his arm.

“You can just stay in the truck, Preston Mitchell. I’ll find one on my own,” Deidra said, placing her hands on her hips.

Nick laughed when Preston pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her knit cap covered head.

“I know better than to do that. I’d never hear the end of it.”

“I think you’re right. Do you two need someone to take you up to the trees?”

“No, thanks. I’ll drive up.” Preston looked around. “It’s packed, isn’t it?”

“It will get worse the closer we get to Christmas.”

Deidra shook her head. “Unreal. Well, come on, baby, let’s find a tree.”

Nick and Preston looked at each other and grinned.

“How can I turn that down?” Preston chuckled.

“I don’t think you can. I hope you find a nice one.”

“Hell, Nick, that’s all you sell. We’ll see you in a while.” Preston nodded, headed for his truck, and drove to the trees.

When Nick finally got a break, he called Paige.

“Hey, you,” she said when she answered.

“Hey, darlin’. Can you come out tonight?”

“Of course. Once we get the last customer out of here, I’ll be there.”

“Good. I need a hot shower and someone to wash my back.”

“So, you only want me to wash your back.”

“Oh, you know better than that. I’ll need my front washed too.” He grinned when she laughed.

“Only if you return the favor.”

“Hell, I live for that. I just wanted to make sure you were coming out. I need to get going, baby. We’re slammed.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later. It will probably be around six-thirty.”

“I’ll be waiting.” He disconnected.

Later, they lay in bed together. Paige had her head on his chest and her arm across his waist.

“I love being with you, Nick,” she murmured.

“Paige, tell me you love *me*, not just being with me.” Nick shifted back from her, cupped her face in his hands, and stared into her eyes.

“Nick—”

“No. I don’t want to hear that you’re scared of getting another broken heart. I don’t want one either, but the only way you’re going to break mine is if you say you don’t love me. And I will not break yours because I *do* love you.”

“Nick, I am still so scared. I want to trust you.”

“You can. I love you, Paige Douglas. I want to be close to you.”

“I want to be close to you too,” she whispered.

“You know what, though?” When she shook her head, he continued. “No matter how close we get, it will never be close enough.”

A tear slid down her cheek, and he wiped it away with the pad of his thumb. When she gazed at him, he knew and grinned.

“What’s that smirk for, Richards?”

“You love me,” he said.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to, sweetheart. I can see it in your eyes.”
He shrugged. “You love me.”

“I still won’t get married.”

Nick huffed. “I know. I’m willing to do it your way.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in love with you, and when you love someone, you do what you must. I want to be with you in any way I can.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. In fact, I’d love it if you’d move in with me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Move in with me. Let’s do this.”

“I don’t know...”

“Okay, think about it then. I want you close to me. I will not hurt you like he did, Paige. If you want to have kids, we will. Make sure I’m listed as the father, and they get my last name. That’s all I ask.”

“That’s all, huh?”

“And that you tell me you love me.” He grinned.

Paige laughed. “Well, if I do that, you’ll never let me live it down.”

“Damn right, I won’t. Come on, Paige. I love you, and whether you say it or not, you love me.”

She tilted her head. “If you know so much, why should I say it?”

“It would be nice to hear.”

“I see.”

Nick growled low in his throat. “Say it.”

Paige stared at him, and a slow, sexy smile lifted her lips.

“You are killing me,” he murmured.

She kissed his cheek, then his lips.

“If you hurt me, I’ll cut your balls off.”

“*Ouch*. Damn, woman.”

She kissed his chin. “You just remember that.”

“Noted.”

“Good.” She nodded.

“So?”

“So, what?”

Nick could tell she was doing her best not to laugh. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“You know damn well what.”

Paige laughed and tightened her arms around him.

“You make me laugh, you make me cry, and sometimes you make me *so* mad. You make me crazy, but I do love you, Nicholas Richards, and yes, I’ll move in with you.” She smiled.

Nick pulled her on top of him and pressed his lips to hers.

“You have got to be the most stubborn woman I know,” he said when he lifted his lips.

“Really? I thought that was Rory?”

“No, that’s the stubbornest woman Wilder knows.”

“Maybe we should all get together one night again. I like Rory.”

“We’ll go to dinner together one evening. Let’s go to your place and pack.”

“Nick, I can’t do it in one day.”

“Yeah, I get it. So, when?”

“Sunday, after you close?”

“Sounds good. Wilder and Rory could help.”

“If you think they’d want to, I’d love the help.”

“I know they’d help. I love the idea that you’ll be here for Christmas.”

“It will be nice waking up with you on Christmas day.”

“It will be nice waking up with you every day.” Nick kissed her forehead.

He couldn’t be happier. Well, if she married him, he’d be more content, but he’d take her any way he could.

The week of Christmas, Paige helped at the farm every day. She couldn’t get over the people coming to get a tree this late.

As she sat at the table, she smiled when she saw Wilder, Rory, Rona, and Stephen enter the tent. Stephen headed for the hot chocolate, and Rona sat down beside her.

“I think it’s colder today than it has been,” Rona said.

“Feels like it. How are you doing, Rona? Are you and Stephen ready for Christmas?”

“I think so. You’re coming for dinner, right?”

“I don’t know yet. My parents want me to go there.”

“I see. Well, I certainly hope the weather is good enough to travel.”

“It’s not supposed to be. The weather calls for more snow, but they’ll understand if I can’t make it.”

“Paige, I want to apologize for jumping the gun about you and Nick. I didn’t realize you didn’t want to get married, and I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“You know?”

“Nick told us. I stuck my foot in my mouth with him too. I was telling him I was looking forward to your wedding.” Rona took a deep breath. “He set me straight, so I hope you accept my apology.”

“It’s fine. You had no way of knowing, Rona.”

“He told us about your ex, and I’m surprised you haven’t sworn off men altogether, but a good man makes you forget the bad ones.”

Paige didn't know what to say to that, so she was thankful when a customer stepped up to the table to pay for their tree.

"Do you like living together?"

Paige smiled. "We do. He's not too keen on Queenie, though." At Rona's frown, Paige laughed. "Queenie is my cat."

Rona burst out laughing. "If he let you have that cat in his house, he's more in love than I thought."

Paige laughed, then told her about the night she woke up and Nick wasn't in bed, so she searched for him and found him in the recliner with the cat on his lap, and Rona laughed.

They worked until everyone was cared for, then closed for the day. Paige knew it would still be busy up to Christmas Eve, but she was having so much fun helping.

Rona suggested going into town to eat at the diner, and everyone was more than willing. After they all climbed into their vehicles, they drove into town, pulled into the lot, and entered the diner to see it packed.

"We'd like a table," Rona told Connie when she got her attention.

"It will be a few minutes. I'm so sorry," Connie said.

"No hurry. We'll sit at the counter until one becomes available," Stephen said.

When a table became available, they all moved to it and took their seats. Once they ordered, the conversation flowed along with a lot of laughter. Paige couldn't keep her eyes off Nick. He was such a wonderful man. He was kind, generous, sexy, gorgeous, and had a fantastic sense of humor.

"Is everyone finished their shopping?" Rona asked.

"I'm finally done," Rory said.

"I'm not," Wilder muttered.

"What else do you have to get?" Nick asked him.

“A few things. This one is tough to buy for,” he pointed at Rory.

“I am not. I’ll love anything you get me.”

“I hope so. Maybe I should stop in at Paige’s.” Wilder winked.

“I just got a new shipment in,” Paige said, making Wilder groan.

“Are you finished, Nick?” Stephen asked him.

“Not yet. I have a couple more things to get. I might buy a Joe Cocker CD.” He winked at Paige, and she burst out laughing.

“What the hell does that even mean?” Wilder asked.

“Some things you just don’t need to know, little brother.”

“If you say so.” Wilder shrugged. “I just think you should share.”

“You know, sometimes I could just knock you on your ass,” Nick snapped, and everyone laughed.

Paige watched this wonderful family interact, and she loved it. Not that her family wasn’t great, they were, but Nick’s family had taken her in as one of their own, and she loved them all. Especially Nick.

Mentally shaking her head, she wondered why he even bothered with her. Sure, he said he loved her, but how long would it last if she didn’t give him what he wanted? He was giving her what she wanted, but she wasn’t returning the favor.

If it were the other way around, would she stay with a man who had no desire to marry her? She wasn’t sure many women would, but she expected it of Nick. God! She was hurting him, and it wasn’t fair to him.

She couldn’t do this. There was no way this would end well. She knew that as well as she knew her own name. Dinner sank into her stomach like a rock, and she wanted to go home.

Later, as they drove home, she could feel Nick glancing over at her, but she wouldn’t look at him. She kept her eyes on

the windshield.

“Is everything all right, Paige?”

“Sure.”

“You’ve been quiet since dinner.”

“I’m just tired. I want to take a nice hot bath and relax.”

“That sounds good. Would you like some company?”

“Would you mind if I took a bath alone?”

“Of course not.”

Paige knew he was wondering what was going on, but how could she tell him of her decision? It was hard for her to accept it. She’d decided, though, and she had to stick by it. But she was going to wait until Christmas. No matter how hard that was going to be.

The closer it got to Christmas day, the more nervous she became, but this was what she had to do. She knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

Christmas morning, Paige opened her eyes to see the clock showing it was eight. She smiled when Nick nuzzled her hair with his nose.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” he whispered.

“Merry Christmas to you,” she said as she rolled onto her back to look at him.

“Let’s go down to see if Santa left you anything.”

Paige smiled. “I saw a lot of presents.”

“Maybe they’re all mine.”

“You probably got coal in your stocking.”

“Why would you say that? I’ve been a good boy all year.” Paige raised an eyebrow, making Nick laugh. “Okay, most of the time.”

“It’s all right. I like you bad.”

Nick kissed her lips. “I like being bad with you. Now, come on. Let’s go.”

Paige nodded, got out of bed, pulled her robe on, then left the room. As she walked down the stairs, her nerves were going into overdrive.

“You have to do this,” she muttered as she entered the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

“You took off like a bat out of hell, but yet, you’re making coffee. I thought you’d be tearing the wrapping paper off your presents.” Nick wrapped his arms around her from behind, and kissed her neck.

“Coffee first.” She took her cup from under the spout, added sugar and cream, and took a sip.

“I need some too. You kept me up late.”

Paige wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I like keeping you up.”

Nick groaned. “Let’s go back to bed.”

“Maybe later.” She headed for the living room then took a seat on the sofa to wait for him. *She could do this. No other choice.*

“Paige, are you okay?” Nick asked as he sat down beside her.

“Yes—”

“Really? I don’t think you are, and I don’t know why.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“If you say so, darlin’. Open your presents.”

Paige set her cup on the coffee table, and walked to the tree, and sat on the floor. She glanced over her shoulder at Nick, then patted the floor beside her. She watched him sigh, but he got up, walked to her, and sat down beside her.

Every present she opened, the more nervous she became. He bought her so many presents, but the best one was the necklace with their initials intertwined with a diamond in the center of them. She rubbed her finger over it, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Paige?”

“I’m fine. Open your presents, Nick. I hope you like everything.”

“Of course, I will because you gave them to me.”

God! He was such a wonderful man.

“You say the sweetest things, Nick. Please, open them.”

He hesitated, but started opening them. She had gotten him a lot of presents too, and he told her he liked everything.

“Thank you, Paige. Everything is great.” Nick smiled at her, but a frown marred his brow when she didn’t smile back. “Somethings wrong, Paige. Tell me.”

“I’m happy you like them. Nick, I—” She shook her head.

“What is it?”

“I don’t deserve you, Nicholas Richards.”

“Sure you do,” he said, making her laugh.

When he cupped her cheek in his hand, she knew it was now or never.

“I do love you, Nick.”

“But? Paige, are you regretting this?”

“That’s not it.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s so hard to do this,” she murmured.

“Do what? Paige, are you breaking it off with me on Christmas?”

Startled, Paige looked at him to see worry in his eyes.

“I’m just not doing this very well.”

“Doing what?”

She got to her feet and Nick did too.

“I’ll be right back,” she said then walked out of the room.

Nick watched her walk into the kitchen, and had no idea what was going on, but he was scared to death. She said she wasn't breaking it off with him, but something was bothering her.

He folded his arms and stared at the tree, and glanced around the floor. Wrapping paper was strewn across the floor, but he felt no joy this Christmas morning because he was sure she was trying to figure out a way to leave him, but she said she wasn't breaking up with him. *What the ever-loving fuck? Women!*

He turned when she entered the room, and then sat down and motioned for him to sit. He sat down beside her and touched her hair.

“Paige?”

“I have another present for you.”

“You've given me enough.”

“This is the most important.” She took a deep breath and stared into his eyes. “I have something to tell you, and I'm a little nervous about what you'll think.”

“Think? About what?”

“I didn't tell you everything about Bruce and me.” She took Nick's hand. “I can't tell you how much I thought I was in love with him.”

“Paige—”

“Please, Nick. Let me finish.”

Nick nodded and he wondered if he was going to get physically ill because his stomach was in knots.

“When Bruce finally admitted to me about Elsa, I wanted to die. I was so hurt. It just destroyed me. I thought he loved me, but he couldn't have, or he wouldn't have done what he did.”

Nick watched a tear roll down her cheek, but he didn't say anything. He waited.

“I-I tried to take my own life, Nick.”

“What?”

Paige looked at him with tears in her eyes and nodded.

“I was devastated by his betrayal and having a family with Elsa but not wanting one with me. I took a bottle of sleeping pills and would have died if Sydney hadn’t found me. I told Janice and Juliette to run the shop how they saw fit. I didn’t go in. Janice called Sydney and she went to my apartment. I’m glad she has a key, but she told me she would have called Sam if she couldn’t get in. The depression was horrible, and I never want to go through that again. I can’t, Nick, but after being with you, even for a short time, I also know, you won’t hurt me in that way. It was hard on me about Bruce. I loved him but he destroyed me. I felt there was no choice for me.” She shrugged. “I wondered what I had done wrong—”

“Paige, sweetheart, you did nothing wrong. He did. Not you. I’m sorry that you felt it was the only way to get past it, but I am so glad you didn’t succeed because I wouldn’t have you in my life. I understand your fear now.”

“I didn’t know how you would see me.”

“I see you as a beautiful woman who deserves a man who will love her for the rest of his life.” He cupped her face in his hands. “That man is me. I love you, Paige, and I promise you, I would never judge you for thinking you had no other way. I would never want to make you that miserable. We were meant to be together, baby. Can’t you see that?”

“I do see it,” she said as she handed him a small, wrapped gift. “Here, I hope you like it.”

Nick took the gift and stared at it then he looked at her. When she nodded, he tore the paper off, and looked at the little box in his hand.

“Please, open it,” Paige said.

He opened the lid, then looked at Paige.

“What is this?”

“A wedding band. I’m asking you to marry me.”

“*What?*”

“I want to marry you, if you’ll have me.”

“Paige, you don’t have to do this.”

“I know I don’t, and that’s why I can. I want to marry you, have children with you, and pass this farm down to them. I love you, Nick. I want this.”

“Are you sure? I know how you feel about marriage.”

“I am absolutely positive. You changed my mind, Nick. You’re what I want. For the rest of my life. Will you marry me, Nicholas Stephen Richards?”

Nick blinked at the tears in his eyes, then he set the box down, reached for Paige, and pulled her onto his lap, and kissed her. He raised his lips and gazed into her eyes.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, and I will never let you go, Paige. I’ll never hurt you enough to make you want to leave me. I love you with all my heart and soul, baby. Forever.”

When she grinned at him, he knew this *was* what she wanted.

“I love you too.”

“So, when do you want to do this?”

“May. I’ve always wanted to be a May bride.”

“May it is.” Nick kissed her lips again. “I’d rather go to the courthouse next week, but I’ll do whatever you want.”

“We could do that.”

Nick chuckled. “No. We’re going to do this in front of everyone.”

“Sounds good. Now, how about we get some breakfast then go to your parents’ house. I’m sure they’ll all be happy about this.”

“I’m sure Wilder is going to tease the hell out of me because you proposed, but I’ll just knock him on his ass.”

Paige burst out laughing as Nick pulled her tight against him, and put his face in the crook of her neck.

This had to be the best Christmas he'd ever had, and he wanted to make the rest of them better than the last. He had the woman he loved, and she wanted to marry him. He wasn't sure this Christmas could be topped, but he'd work on that.

He got to his feet, put his hand out to her, helped her up, and then carried her upstairs. He knew they were going to be a little late getting to his parents' house, but it was worth it.

Epilogue

A year later

“Merry Christmas,” Nick said as he tugged Paige back against him in the bed.

“Merry Christmas to you,” Paige said as she rolled over to look at him.

“Let’s see what Santa brought you.” Nick tossed the blanket off and got out of the bed. He strolled naked to where his sweatpants were and pulled them on, then he watched as Paige got out of the bed, naked, and strolled to him.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed his lightly whiskered cheek.

“I hope you like what Santa brought you.”

“I have you. That’s more than enough.”

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you mean?” Nick frowned.

“Let’s go downstairs, and we’ll open our presents.”

“There is a lot down there,” Nick said with a grin.

“You’re going to spoil me, Nick.”

“Yes, I am.”

After they dressed, he took her hand, led her downstairs, and to the living room. Paige smiled at him, then took a seat in front of the tree. She patted the spot beside her, and Nick sat next to her.

He handed her the presents and watched her rip the packages open. She oohed and awed over all of them then she handed him his. He opened them, and loved everything she bought him, but he told her the truth when he told her she was more than enough.

Once they opened all the presents and cleaned up all the wrapping paper, they made coffee and sat on the sofa. Snow fell outside the window behind the tree, and it was another perfect Christmas.

“I’m so happy that Mom and Dad made it. They love your parents.”

“They’ve turned into good friends. I’m glad Mom invited them to stay at their house.”

“Only because you can’t behave yourself, Nicholas Stephen Richards.”

“There you go, middle naming me, again.”

Paige laughed, leaned over, and hugged him.

“I’ll get dressed and load the presents in the car,” Nick said.

“In a minute.” Paige took his hand.

“What’s going on?”

“I have another present for you,” she said with a smile.

“You’ve given me enough, Paige. What else do I need?”

“A baby.”

“A ba-What?”

“I’m pregnant.” She held the pregnancy stick out to him.

Nick clenched his jaw to keep it from dropping open.

“Pregnant?”

“Yes. I’m just a month, but I wanted to wait to tell you on this day because I asked you to marry me on Christmas.”

Nick quickly blinked his eyes, but a tear rolled down his cheek.

“I didn’t think this day could get better. Darlin’, I love you so much, and this is just the icing on the cake.”

“I don’t want to know what it is. We will love it no matter what.”

“You got that right, sweetheart.”

“You’re happy right?”

“Ecstatic. I couldn’t be happier. Let’s do this every Christmas.”

Paige burst out laughing, but nodded.

“A yearly thing. I’m so happy, Nick. You are the best thing in my life, along with the children we’ll have.”

“I love you, Paige. More than you could ever know.”

“I do know, Nick. I know because I feel the same way.”

Nick kissed her lips, then her forehead.

“Let’s get going so we can give our parents a nice Christmas gift too.”

“I know they’ll be happy.”

“Wilder won’t be. He might have beat me to the altar, but I beat him with this.”

Paige giggled. “Maybe he’d like to knock *you* on *your* ass.”

Nick burst out laughing. “He can try.”

“Will you be with me in the delivery room?”

Nick could feel the blood drain from his face. *Delivery room?* He cleared his throat.

“I’ll try... for you.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I won’t pressure you.”

“Thanks. Although, the thought terrifies me, I think I’ll give it a try. No promises.”

“That’s fine, Nick. I’m heading upstairs to get dressed.” She stood and started out of the room, but turned and looked back at him. “Or not.”

He got up from the floor, making Paige squeal with laughter as he ran after her, chasing her up the stairs.

They were late getting to his parents’ house... again, but after the good news, no one really cared.

Who knew when he walked into that lingerie shop, he'd meet the woman he'd fall in love with and marry? He needed to thank Wilder for asking him to pick up that negligee.

*****The End*****

About the Author

Susan was born and raised in Cumberland, MD. She moved to Tennessee in 1996 with her husband, and they now live in a small town outside of Nashville, along with their four dogs. She is a huge Nashville Predators hockey fan. She also enjoys fishing, taking drives down back roads, and visiting Gatlinburg, TN, her family in Pittsburgh, PA, and her hometown. Although Susan's books are a series, each book can be read as a standalone book. Each book will end with a HEA and a new story beginning in the next one. She would love to hear from her readers and promises to try to respond to all.

You can visit her website, Facebook page, Instagram, and email by the links below.

www.susanfisherdavisauthor.weebly.com

[Susan Fisher-Davis, Romance Author](#) | [Facebook](#)

[Susanfisherdavis_author](#)

Email: susan@susanfisherdavisauthor.com