



He's familiar with the rules,
yet he willingly breaks them
for her. Will their paths remain
intertwined, or will she ultimately
walk away from him forever?

IAN

MEN OF CLIFTON MONTANA BOOK 35

Best Selling Author

SUSAN FISHER-DAVIS

IAN

Susan Fisher-Davis

Men of Clifton, Montana

Book 35

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and I appreciate your support.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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Chapter One

Eden Fairchild turned to her friend and colleague, sitting in the passenger seat. “How did you manage to talk me into this?”

“I heard from Monica that she had a great time. She said there were plenty of cowboys,” Cammie Hart replied with a mischievous smile.

“Cowboys? I have no interest in cowboys. Give me a man in a nice suit any day.”

“Not me. I prefer a man in tight jeans, boots, and a cowboy hat. And if he’s on horseback, even better.”

“Well, that’s because you’re from Wyoming.”

“True, but have you ever really looked at one?”

“No, and I don’t see the need to. They’re just not my type.”

“You’re missing out. They work harder than any other man in any profession. From sunrise to sunset and beyond, they never stop. And when they wear chaps... oh my.” Cammie grinned.

“To each their own. So why did you book us at a dude ranch? What is wrong with you?”

“It’s not a dude ranch. It’s a guest ranch.”

“What’s the difference?”

“At a dude ranch, you work with the cowboys. At a guest ranch, it’s optional. You can go on cattle drives, hayrides, cookouts, and camping trips.”

“Great,” Eden muttered sarcastically. “Where do we sleep?”

Cammie laughed. “There’s a main lodge, but I booked cabins for us to stay in. Two separate ones so we have our privacy.”

“Why would we need privacy? Planning on bringing a cowboy back to your cabin?” Eden teased with a smirk.

“Can’t. It’s a shame. The brochures explicitly state that there is to be no socializing between guests and staff.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about that.”

“You’ve always loved horseback riding.”

“It’s one of my favorite activities.”

“They also offer trail rides. It seems like something you’d enjoy.”

“I’ll think about it.” Eden shook her head. “I don’t understand why you booked us for an entire month. One week would have been more than enough.”

“Because you asked for a leave of absence to consider accepting the partnership.”

“Yes, but we could have stayed here for a week or two and then gone somewhere else.”

“If you’re just going to complain the whole time, you might as well stay in your cabin.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea.”

“Eden! What am I going to do with you? All you want to do is work. You need to relax and have some fun during this leave of absence.”

Eden let out a sigh. “I know. But work has been so hectic lately. I love my job, but some days I feel like I’m being run ragged.”

“And that’s exactly why we’re here for a month. Just sit back and enjoy it. At least try to have some fun.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best. It sounds like a good time, and I love riding, so I’ll check out the available activities.”

“Thank you. You’re my best friend and deserve a break from your hard work.”

Eden nodded in agreement, but she remained silent. She knew Cammie had her best interests in mind, as they had been friends for a decade. There were days when Eden didn’t know what she would do without Cammie; she was the only person

in her life. Her parents passed away years ago, and since she was eighteen, she had been on her own. Sixteen long years. She worked hard to put herself through law school and landed a job at a distinguished firm focused on wills, estates, and trusts. They offered her a partnership, but it was a major decision. That's why she took a leave of absence to consider the offer seriously.

"We must be getting close," Cammie said, breaking the silence.

The GPS directed them to turn left, and Eden followed its instructions until they reached a blacktop road. In the distance to their left, they could see a lodge with a full parking lot.

"Do we check in at the lodge?" Eden asked.

"No, at the registration cabin. The brochure says we have to stop there first." Cammie pointed to a sign on the right.

"Why can't we just check in at the lodge?"

"I'm not sure," Cammie shrugged.

Eden shook her head slightly and drove toward the small cabin. After parking the SUV, they quickly entered the building. A friendly young woman greeted them with a smile.

"Welcome to the Bur Oak Guest Ranch. My name is Josie. How can I assist you?"

"It's so hot out there," Cammie complained.

"It's unbearable," Eden agreed. "We have reservations, one for Hart and one for Fairchild."

Josie glanced at the computer screen, then smiled at them.

"Your cabins are ready," she said. "They're not close together, but we could ask another guest to switch if you'd like."

"Seriously? You'd do that?" Eden's surprise was evident in her tone.

"We want our guests to be comfortable," Josie smiled.

"Well, that's going above and beyond, but we're fine,"

Eden said, grateful for the offer.

“Okay, let me get your keys and directions to the cabins.”

“Why can’t we check in at the lodge?” Cammie asked.

“No one is allowed on the property unless they’re registered guests,” Josie explained. “The only exception is Saturday evenings when we hold a dance for departing guests on Sunday.”

“Oh, I forgot about the dance,” Cammie said. “That sounds like fun.”

As Eden walked to the window and admired the green fields outside, a tall man in a cowboy hat entered through the door. She couldn’t help but widen her eyes and clench her jaw in surprise. He glanced around the room before walking behind the counter and disappearing into the back.

“Do you need something, Ian?” Josie called out to him.

“Walt misplaced the keys to one of the UTVs,” he replied. “Jax said there should be a spare set in the safe.”

“I’ll help you in a minute,” Josie said. “Let me get these ladies their keys first.”

“I got it, Josie. Don’t worry about it.”

Eden looked at Cammie, who was smiling at her with raised eyebrows. She bit her lip to stifle her laughter; Cammie had clearly noticed how attractive the man was and wanted to share that observation with Eden. Grinning, Eden shrugged in response, and Cammie chuckled in amusement.

Eden approached the counter, stood beside Cammie to see her lean in, and whispered to Josie.

“Wow, he’s really handsome. Is he single?”

“Cammie,” Eden hissed, giving her friend a disapproving look.

Josie couldn’t contain her laughter. “Yes, he’s single. That’s Ian Brennan, the ranch manager.”

Cammie’s eyes lit up. “Does he participate in any of the

activities here?”

“Cammie, stop it,” Eden scolded.

“What? I’m just trying to have some fun on this vacation. And besides, I can still flirt, right Josie?” Cammie teased.

“Yes, ma’am,” Josie replied with a smile.

Eden shook her head in disbelief. “You’re impossible.”

As Josie handed them their cabin keys, she explained that they could choose between two identical cabins with one bedroom each. She also gave them brochures listing all the available activities and how to sign up for them. Josie reminded them that they were not obligated to participate in anything and could cook their own meals or eat at the lodge, including breakfast, lunch, and dinner buffets.

“That sounds amazing,” Eden replied with a smile. “Let’s go, I could use a nice hot bath—.”

As she was about to finish her sentence, Ian Brennan appeared behind the counter. Eden couldn’t help but notice his striking features; dark chocolate hair, piercing teal eyes, and a strong jaw adorned with stubble. She also couldn’t ignore the gray strands in his sideburns or how his t-shirt hugged his muscular chest and arms. She felt an undeniable attraction toward him.

Cammie’s voice snapped her back to reality.

“What were you saying?”

Eden stumbled over her words in a daze. “Oh, just something about relaxing for the rest of the day.” She thanked Josie and practically sprinted out the door before she did something impulsive like climbing Ian Brennan like a tree. Once safely in the car, she cranked up the air conditioning to cool down her flushed face.

She couldn’t believe she was attracted to a cowboy. Her usual type was men in suits and expensive shoes, not dusty boots. She scolded herself for even considering it; she knew she would probably never see him again.

The passenger door opened, startling her, and she saw

Cammie getting into the SUV. They sat there in silence until Cammie turned to face her.

“What happened back there? You took off like a bat out of hell.”

Eden tried to play it cool. “I’m just tired and looking forward to relaxing.”

Cammie raised an eyebrow at her response.

“Uh-huh. It had nothing to do with that hot cowboy, did it?”

“*Pfft*. Why would he even bother with me?”

“Because you were practically speechless when he looked at you. He is one fine-looking man. It’s a shame he can’t socialize. I would go after him in a heartbeat. Did you see his eyes? They’re stunning.”

“Well, maybe once the vacation is over, you can... you know, get to know him better,” suggested Eden, laughing.

“What a brilliant idea,” Cammie replied with a laugh.

Eden shook her head, knowing Cammie was just teasing, but she couldn’t deny that Ian Brennan was incredibly attractive.

The following day, Ian observed the barn’s entrance and clenched his jaw to prevent it from falling open when he saw the woman who had registered yesterday. Her platinum blonde hair and dark green eyes, resembling the color of moss, were quite attractive. A pert nose sat above her lush lips that he longed to nibble on. She stood at around five feet seven inches tall. His gaze traveled down her figure, noting the tight T-shirt hugging her chest, slim hips, and jeans that appeared to be painted on, and finally reaching her feet, where he noticed she was wearing... *sneakers*? No way. Shaking his head, he walked over to her and the other woman she was talking to.

“Ma’am, I hope you’re not planning on going on the trail ride,” he said once he reached them.

“Of course, I am.”

“Where are your boots?”

“I forgot to pack them. I’m sure these will do just fine—”

“No, ma’am, they will not suffice. Without proper footwear, you cannot go on the ride.”

“I’ve ridden in sneakers before,” she snapped.

Ian placed his hands on his hips, narrowing his eyes as he looked at her.

“Not here, you won’t.”

“So, I won’t be able to go on any rides? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Unless you purchase appropriate footwear, then yes, that is what I’m saying.”

“I’d like to speak with your boss.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I am the boss.”

“Well, surely you have a boss. Who is it?”

“The owners, Devin and Jaxon Callahan.”

“Call one of them.”

Ian shook his head and pulled his phone out of his back pocket. He dialed Devin’s number and explained the situation before putting his phone away again.

“He’ll be here in a few minutes. While we wait, your friend can choose a horse.”

“Eden—”

“I’m fine, Cammie. I’ll join you soon after I speak to the person in charge.”

“There he is now.” Ian nodded toward the barn doors.

“Good.”

“Ian?”

“Devin, this is Ms.?”

“Fairchild. Eden Fairchild,” she replied, reaching out her

hand to shake Devin's.

"Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Fairchild. I'm Devin Callahan, co-owner of Bur Oak Ranch with my brother. What seems to be the issue?" He shook her hand.

"Mr. Brennan won't let me ride—"

"Because of her shoes," Ian interjected, wondering how she knew his name. He hadn't introduced himself yet. He watched Devin glance at her shoes, then at him, before shaking his head.

"I'm afraid Ian is correct, Ms. Fairchild. We cannot allow you to ride in those shoes."

"But—"

"No buts. We can't risk our ranch or guests' safety because you aren't wearing appropriate footwear. Riding boots are essential for protecting feet and preventing them from sliding through stirrups in case of a fall. Flat-bottomed shoes like sneakers are unsuitable for riding as they can easily slip through stirrups and cause accidents. We have to prioritize safety above all else at our ranch. I apologize."

"I'll purchase a pair tomorrow."

"That's fine, but you're not allowed to ride today. We have a swimming pool and tennis courts behind the lodge for your enjoyment and other activities. And, ma'am, please remember that Ian is in charge here; his word is final. No need to involve anyone else."

"Okay, I'll let my friend know." She turned to look at Ian. "You win this round."

"What round?" Devin asked.

"I have no idea. Maybe because we argued about her shoes, I'm just wondering how many more rounds we'll go through." Ian shook his head while Devin chuckled and walked away.

Eden told Cammie as she caught up to her, "I don't have the right shoes for the ride. I'll have to buy a pair."

“I don’t want to go without you,” Cammie responded.

“No, please go ahead. I’ll drive to town and get some boots while you enjoy the ride. Actually, with how hot it’s supposed to be today, I might just head to the pool instead. We don’t have to do everything together,” Eden reassured her.

“Okay, but we’ll still do some things together, right?” Cammie asked.

“Of course. Have fun.”

Cammie joined the rest of the group, waiting for the ride while Eden leaned against the barn wall. She was disappointed that she couldn’t join in on the fun, as she loved riding, but safety came first. Her attention drifted to Ian Brennan standing beside a stunning dappled gray quarter horse. The horse was massive and could easily support Brennan’s six-foot-five frame. As her eyes scanned down his body, Eden couldn’t help but admire his toned physique displayed by his tight-fitting T-shirt. But her gaze was drawn even lower to his belt buckle, and then... well, let’s just say those chaps left little to the imagination. Damn, he was attractive but not very kind toward her. He seemed perfectly content with the brunette who couldn’t keep her hands off him.

She observed him climb onto the saddle, resting his forearms on the horn as he watched the others mounting their horses. She couldn’t help but smile at Cammie getting into her saddle effortlessly while some struggled. The ranch hands were there to assist those having difficulty. Eden chuckled at the sound of laughter as people did their best to get onto their horses; it was not as easy as they thought, and the first time could be intimidating. She had fallen off a horse many times and knew it was never a pleasant experience.

With a sigh, she straightened up and watched as the riders formed a line and rode out of the barn doors. Ian glanced back at her but then turned around with a frown. She shrugged it off; it was clear that she and Ian Brennan would ignore each other.

As she made her way out of the barn, she noticed people everywhere. She decided to head toward the lodge; she hadn’t

eaten anything yet and was starting to feel hungry. Cammie had already grabbed some toast and coffee, but she had rushed out of her cabin so quickly that she didn't have time to grab anything.

She ascended the steps to the lodge and walked into a bustling lobby, where guests were lining up at a large counter. She paused for a moment to take in her surroundings before making her way toward the dining area. The tantalizing smells emanating from the buffet almost made her groan with hunger.

After filling her plate with a variety of dishes, she turned around to find a place to sit. A woman with striking strawberry blonde hair approached her.

“Good morning, I’m Willa Callahan. Welcome to the Bur Oak,” the woman greeted her warmly.

“Good morning, I’m Eden Fairchild. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. I hope you enjoy your stay with us.”

“I’m sure I will. It’s a beautiful place. I need to buy some boots; I left mine at home and can’t ride without them. Do you know where I can find a good pair?”

“Yes, there’s a Western Wear store in Clifton. I need to run some errands there in about an hour. Would you like to come with me?”

“I’d love that. I’m afraid I might get lost if I go alone,” Eden chuckled.

“Not a problem at all. Presley was supposed to join me, but she got busy.”

“Presley?”

“Oh, my apologies. You wouldn’t know who she is. She’s married to Jaxon Callahan, and I’m married to Devin.”

“I met Devin earlier. He’s the one who told me I couldn’t go riding.”

Willa furrowed her brow in confusion. “Devin said that? He hardly ever comes down to the barn.”

“I must have looked like a total fool when Mr. Brennan told

me I couldn't ride in my sneakers, and I demanded to speak with the owner," Eden admitted, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

Willa chuckled. "I bet Ian got a good laugh out of that."

Eden grinned and shook her head. "I think it's best if Mr. Brennan and I steer clear of each other."

"He's a good man. Fair, but he can be tough on the trail rides and camping trips."

"I actually signed up for the overnight trip tomorrow. I haven't been camping in ages."

"That'll be a fun one. You'll sleep in tents and come back to the ranch on Wednesday."

"I'm excited to try new things."

"What do you do for a living, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm a probate lawyer. I help settle estates."

"I see. Well, I hope you can relax while you're here."

"I'm definitely going to try."

"Finish your breakfast and meet me back here in an hour."

"Thank you, Mrs. Callahan."

"Oh, please, call me Willa. See you soon!"

Eden sat at a table and eagerly ate her food, moaning as the fluffy pancake practically melted in her mouth.

After finishing her meal, she returned to her cabin to grab her purse before returning to the lodge. She was looking forward to exploring Clifton with Willa.

Ian shook his head while observing the riders. They all sat so rigidly in their saddles that he knew they would suffer from it later. He nudged his horse, Breeze, to ride next to the brunette who had flirted with him earlier in the barn.

"You need to loosen up in the saddle," he advised her.

“I’ve never been on a horse before, and now I understand why,” she replied with a nervous laugh. She looked down at the ground and then back at Ian. “That’s a long way down, and I have a feeling the ground is much harder than it looks.”

“Indeed, it is,” Ian agreed.

“Have you ever fallen off?” she asked.

He grinned. “I’ve been bucked off a few times. It’s rare for someone to fall off without help from the horse bucking.”

“Well, I don’t want to be bucked off either.”

“Don’t worry, you’re riding a very gentle horse. Not much ruffles her feathers. Just stay in line, and you’ll do just fine.” He touched the brim of his hat and rode ahead to check on the other riders.

As they approached an embankment leading down to a creek, Ian raised his hand to signal the riders to stop. He nodded at Chip, who then explained how they would go down to the creek and come back up. The horses were led to the creek for a drink before turning around.

“Please lean back in your saddle when going down the embankment, or you may tumble over the horse’s head. And when coming back up, lean over the horse’s neck. We don’t want anyone falling off.”

“Has anyone ever fallen off?” one of the guests asked nervously.

“Yes, ma’am. That’s why we suggest leaning back and forward as instructed. It’ll keep you safe,” Chip reassured them before nodding at Ian.

Ian rode to the back of the line to watch all the guests. After crossing through the pasture, the horses stopped at a nearby creek to drink water, and some guests refilled their bottles. Once everyone was ready, they mounted their horses and rode back to the barn.

As soon as they arrived, Ian dismounted and prepared to help any guests who needed assistance getting off their horses. He didn’t mind helping, but sometimes, female guests asked

for more than a hand. One brunette, particularly, caught his attention with her request for extra help.

“Could you lend me a hand?” she asked him with a smile.

Ian sighed, knowing she had probably hoped he would offer his help. He tied his horse’s reins to a post and walked over to her. She sat on her saddle, still grinning at him. He could sense that she wanted to get closer to him, but he knew he had to remind her about the no fraternization policy between staff and guests. It seemed like every year, women wanted to get involved with the cowboys. But Ian never gave in; he enjoyed his job too much.

“Just take your foot out of the right stirrup, swing your leg over, and keep your foot in the left stirrup as you step down. I’ll be right here,” he instructed calmly.

She nodded and followed his instructions until it was time to dismount. She froze as she swung her leg over the saddle, unsure how to get down. Ian quickly stepped forward, placing his hands on her waist to help her down. She laughed and thanked him before wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He politely removed himself from her embrace and stepped away.

“Thank you, Ian.”

“It’s my job, ma’am.” He nodded before walking back to his horse.

“You are all free to go now. We have various activities available for you, or you can simply relax after your ride. Each cabin has a jar of salve for your muscles, and please use it. Your body will thank you,” Chip announced to the group.

Ian patiently waited for the guests to leave the barn, but the brunette stayed by his side.

“I hope I’ll see you again later, Ian.”

“Yes, ma’am. Have a pleasant day.” He quickly turned his horse and made his way out of the barn. It was nothing new for women to hit on him while at the ranch, but he knew there were rules in place, and he always followed them.

“Ian?”

He turned to see Jaxon Callahan approaching him.

“Hey, Jax. What’s going on?”

“Not much. Did something happen this morning?”

“Not really. One guest thought they could ride in sneakers.”

“Seriously? It’s in the brochures about the proper gear.” Jaxon frowned, his voice laced with frustration.

“Oh, yeah. She knew that but thought she could ride anyway since she forgot her boots.” Ian shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips. “I told her she couldn’t, but she wouldn’t take my word for it and demanded I call one of you, so I called Devin. He straightened her out.”

Jaxon chuckled, slapping Ian on the shoulder. “Some just never read the brochures. Okay. I was curious about it. As long as she doesn’t cause any problems, it’ll be fine.” Jaxon sighed.

“I don’t think she will. She was pushing it, is all.” Ian shrugged nonchalantly.

“Hell, what female doesn’t push a man?” Jaxon laughed, shaking his head.

Ian joined in the laughter. “True.”

“I’ll see you later. Do you want to take the camping group tomorrow, or do you want Devin or me to take it?” Jaxon asked.

“I can do it. I like going on camping trips,” Ian said.

“Okay. No problem. Have a good rest of the day, Ian. See you.” With a wave goodbye, Jaxon walked off.

After putting Breeze in his stall and giving him a pat on the neck, Ian strolled toward the office to check the list for tomorrow’s trip. It was an overnight camping excursion, and he always looked forward to it. He removed the clipboard from its hook and scanned over the names of participants. He raised an eyebrow when he saw Eden Fairchild’s name on the list. Shaking his head, he hung the clipboard back up, hoping she had followed through on her promise to get a pair of boots

before tomorrow. Otherwise, she would not join the group, which was perfectly fine with him. The less time he had to spend around her, the better.

Walking beside Willa on the busy sidewalk, Eden couldn't help but smile at the charming town. "Do all these people live here?" she asked.

"No, some are staying at the Bur Oak or Clifton Bed and Breakfast, and others are locals from either here, Spring City, or Hartland."

"It's such a picturesque little town. I bet it's even more beautiful during Christmas."

"Oh, it definitely is. I was thrilled when I experienced my first winter here with snow."

"Where are you originally from?"

"California. I came here a few years ago with my boss and fell in love with Devin."

"I can see why." Eden laughed as Willa grinned.

"That man drives me crazy. He always has and always will. But I love him and this place so much. And even though I'm nine years older, he didn't care about that. I did at first, but now I never want to leave and return to California."

"That's great if you enjoy small-town life. Personally, I prefer the hustle and bustle of the city. My best friend convinced me to come on this trip. Not sure what she was thinking, but I'm sure we'll have a good time."

"Oh, you can count on it. I lived in Hollywood for years and was a city girl for a long time. But after being here, I couldn't imagine leaving."

As they strolled along together, Eden couldn't resist peering into every shop they passed by. Eventually, Willa led her into a Western Wear store, where Eden made a beeline for the boot section. She dreaded buying new boots because some of them were uncomfortable. Standing in front of rows of different boots, she had no clue which ones to choose.

“If you want a good pair of boots, you should get a pair of Beckett boots. They’re made in Hartland, and they’re great boots. They’re made so well that they never hurt your feet.”

Eden looked at Willa’s feet to see well-worn cowboy boots.

“Is that what yours are?”

“Yes. Devin bought these for me right after we got married. I love them. They’re so comfortable and were from the start.”

“Okay. I like yours.”

“Mine are what’s called distressed boots. There are all sorts of boots. It depends on what you’re looking for. If you want a durable pair which will be good for just about anything, then you want a western boot. They’re made for long periods of wear. Just don’t get a pointed toe or you’ll regret it.”

“I’m not a fan of those, but then, I don’t know anything about cowboy boots.”

“Then trust me. These are the best.” Willa held a box of Beckett boots.

“Okay, let me find my size.”

As Eden looked for her size, her eyes widened when she saw the cost of the boots. Who knew a cowboy boot would cost so much? She really liked the ones Willa wore but after finding them in her size, she balked at the cost.

“I know they’re expensive, but they will last a long time. Devin’s are ten years old. He gets them re-soled all the time. The man can afford a new pair but refuses to part with his old ones. I think Jaxon is the same way.”

“I bet most cowboys are,” she mused, wondering if Ian Brennan owned a pair of worn boots. Shaking the thought from her head, she reminded herself not to think about him. They were like water and oil, never meant to mix.

“Do you need a hat too?”

“I didn’t bring one. Was it mentioned in the brochure?”

“We suggest it, but it’s not required. Trust me, though, that relentless sun will make you wish you had one.”

“All right. I’ll get one then.”

Willa smiled and grabbed a white straw hat off a nearby hook, handing it to Eden.

“Try this one on.”

Eden grinned as she placed the hat on her head and looked in the mirror.

“I like it.”

“It looks great on you.”

“I’ll take these boots and the hat.”

They walked to the register and waited while the items were rung up. Eden winced internally as she handed over her credit card, knowing her bank account was taking a hit. After putting her new purchases in a bag, the cashier handed her back her card and the bag.

“Thank you for shopping at Western Wear. Come back soon.”

Eden thanked her and followed Willa out of the store.

Eden chuckled. “I’m not sure if I can afford to come back here. My bank account will definitely take a hit.”

Willa joined in her laughter. “Good western wear isn’t cheap, but it’s worth it. If you’re going to be wearing it all day in every kind of weather, you need quality materials.”

“I understand that. Do you work on the ranch, Willa?”

“I take care of the schedule and activities for our guests.”

“I haven’t looked through the brochures yet, but I’m curious to see what’s offered.”

“We have hour-long trail rides every morning, along with other activities like hiking, fishing, hayrides, bonfires, camping trips, and even an overnight cattle drive. And if you just want to relax, there’s a pool at the Bur Oak Lodge.”

“That does sound like a great way to unwind,” Eden said with a smile.

“There’s also Dewey’s, a cowboy bar in Clifton that gets

packed on weekends.”

“Can we go there?”

“Of course. You’re not a prisoner at the ranch; you can do whatever you want.” Willa smiled.

“I might have to check it out. Cammie would love it too; she’s from Wyoming originally.”

“She’d fit right in around here. Oh, and make sure to bring her into town and stop by the Clifton Diner. They have the best burgers around.”

After their shopping trip, they returned to the Bur Oak and went their separate ways. Eden was grateful for Willa showing her around town. She asked Willa to drop her off at the lodge so she could find Cammie. Eden had plans to relax by the pool, but first, she needed to figure out where it was.

As she walked into the lodge, Eden spotted a woman in a black uniform with a name tag and headed over to her.

“Hi,” Eden greeted.

“Hello, I’m Robin. How may I assist you?” the woman replied.

“Can you tell me where the pool is?”

“It’s behind the lodge,” Robin pointed toward the back of the building.

“Do I have to walk through here to get to it?” Eden was not keen on parading through a restaurant in her bathing suit.

“No, ma’am. A gate at the back of the lodge leads directly to the pool.”

“Thank goodness. I didn’t want to make a spectacle of myself.”

Robin chuckled. “I wouldn’t either.”

“Thanks for your help, Robin. I’m going to change into my suit and take a dip in the pool.”

“Have a lovely day, ma’am.”

“Oh please, call me Eden. You too.”

As she returned to her cabin, Eden smiled at people she passed by and nodded in greeting. Once she arrived, she looked over to Cammie's cabin and decided to visit her friend. She knocked on the door and waited.

"Hey, where did you disappear off to?" Cammie asked as she opened the door.

"Willa Callahan took me into town to buy some boots," Eden explained, holding up her bag. "And I splurged on a hat too." She placed it on her head and grinned.

Cammie let out a laugh. "That outfit suits you perfectly."

"Do you want to grab dinner at the lodge later?"

"I'd love to, but I need to nap first. After showering and applying muscle salve, my body needs to rest before hopping on a horse again. It's been a while since I've ridden one."

"Riding really works your muscles."

"I know. Did you sign up for the camping trip tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's just an overnight trip."

"I'm going to pass this time. I need a break after today's activities."

"Okay. They provide sleeping bags and tents."

"I know, and I'm sure it will be fun, but I'm feeling lazy today. Maybe next week."

"Sure thing. I'll see you when I get back then. I have to leave early in the morning."

"Ugh, good luck with that."

"See you later for dinner. Enjoy your nap."

"I will, thanks. Bye." Cammie closed the door behind her.

Eden returned to her cabin, changed into her black one-piece swimsuit, and wore a short terry-cloth robe. Grabbing a couple of towels and slipping on her flip-flops, she went to the pool to cool off from the hot weather.

She strolled behind the back of the lodge and came upon the pool. It was massive, with numerous people relaxing on

lounge chairs. She spotted a couple of empty ones and made her way toward them. As she reached one, she spread her towel and hung up her robe before walking to the pool's edge and diving in. The water felt invigorating against her skin as she swam a few laps before emerging from the water. She climbed the steps, picked up a towel to dry off, and then settled onto the lounge chair.

After settling in, she applied sunscreen, put on her sunglasses, and closed her eyes. She knew she would have to return to the water soon; the sun was scorching, and sweat was forming between her breasts.

“Excuse me, is this chair taken?”

Eden shaded her eyes with her hand and smiled.

“Not that I know of. Please, go ahead.”

“Thank you kindly. I’m Penny Clooney. No relation to George,” she said playfully.

“What a shame. I would have loved an invite to dinner.”

Penny chuckled. “I get that a lot. And you are?”

“Eden Fairchild. I’m here with a friend who’s resting after going on a morning trail ride.”

“I did that last week, too, and I thought my legs would never recover. Who knew horseback riding could be so demanding?”

“If you’ve never done it before, it definitely can be.”

“Our guide kept telling me to relax, but I was so scared being on that horse. Of course, if that guide wanted to help me relax, I was all for it. I’ve never seen so many good-looking cowboys. Have you?”

“Uh, no, but I don’t really look at them. Cowboys aren’t my type. I’m just here to relax.” Eden wasn’t going to let anyone know she was here to make a difficult decision.

“Me too. I just went through a divorce a year ago, so I’m not looking for a relationship, but it doesn’t hurt to look. Right?” Penny smiled.

“I suppose,” Eden said. There were no cowboys she was interested in looking at it. Not even Ian Brennan. No matter how good-looking he was.

The last thing she needed was a man and especially a man who worked outdoors. Give her an attorney, doctor, or other white-collar man. No blue collar for her. She had a plan to marry well, have a career, and make partner in the law firm. That was all she wanted.

The only problem she had with the firm was a fellow lawyer. Ron Lewis was a jerk. He was always kissing the boss’s ass. She knew he wanted a partnership, too, but she hoped he wasn’t offered it. The office would never be the same.

Chapter Two

Tuesday morning, Ian entered the barn carrying a cup of coffee. He saw several guests talking, but he didn't see Eden Fairchild. Maybe she changed her mind. The guests were never made to do anything. If they changed their mind about doing something, it was fine.

“Good morning,” Chip said to him when he reached them.

“Morning. Is everyone here?”

Chip looked at the clipboard in his hand and shook his head.

“A few haven't shown, but we have ten minutes yet.”

Ian nodded then mentally groaned when he saw the brunette staring at him. Shit. She needed to get it through her head that he wasn't interested.

As he turned away from her, he saw a few more people entering the barn, and Eden Fairchild was among them. He looked at her feet and smirked when he saw cowboy boots. At least she did what she said and bought a pair. Her blonde hair was in a ponytail. She was talking with another woman as they made their way to the group.

“Good morning, everyone. I'm Ian Brennan. Chip and I will be taking you to the camping site. It's a little over an hour to get there, and it will be cooler there at night since we'll be close to the mountains. There are tents and blankets in your bedroll. If you have any questions, ask away. If you decide you want to come back early, that will not be happening. If you have any doubts about going, now is the time to make your decision. No one will bring you back, and you will not be allowed to return on your own. Unless you get sick, you will stay on the trip. This is an overnight camping trip. We'll camp tonight and return tomorrow.”

“Are there bears up there?” a guest asked him.

“Yes, ma'am, but they won't bother us. Along with me and Chip, three other men will be with us. We all have weapons, so

if there are any problems with animals, we'll deal with it. Any questions?" When no one said anything, Ian nodded. "Okay, pick your horse, and mount up, then someone will adjust the stirrups for you."

He watched them get their horses and mount up. Most of them had no problem, but he watched to make sure. He sighed and slightly shook his head when the brunette smiled at him as she stood beside the horse she'd picked.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

"Please. I'm sure I'll get the hang of it, but it's only my second time on a horse."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please, call me Bonnie."

"I'll try to remember." Ian helped her into the saddle and adjusted the stirrups.

After finishing with her, he helped some other guests, then noticed that no one was helping Eden Fairchild. Shit. With a heavy sigh, he made his way toward her.

"Ms. Fairchild, I'm glad to see you have the right footwear," he said as he adjusted the stirrups for her.

"Please, call me Eden, Mr. Brennan."

"Yes, ma'am, and you can call me Ian." He stared up at her. "How did you know my name yesterday?"

"Your name?"

"Yes. When you told Devin that I wouldn't let you ride, you said my name, and I hadn't introduced myself yet."

"Oh, Josie told us the day we checked in. My friend, Cammie, asked about—"

"About?"

"Who you were. That's all."

"Ah, I see."

"Does that horse belong to you?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“He’s gorgeous. What’s his name?”

“Silver Breeze but I call him Breeze.”

“Beautiful animal.”

“Thank you.” He walked away from her and mounted his horse. “If everyone is ready, we’ll head out.”

Ian rode at the back of the line keeping an eye on everyone. It looked like everything was going smoothly as they arrived at the site. When Chip held his hand up, everyone stopped, and Ian watched him turn in the saddle to address the guests.

“We’re here. There are posts to tie the horses to under those trees,” Chip said as he pointed to a group of trees. Once you remove the saddles, you can erect your tent wherever you’d like, as long as they’re close to the firepit. Trust me, you’ll get chilly at night.”

“It’s August, for God’s sake,” a man said.

“Yes, but we are at a much higher elevation, so it does get chilly. We keep the fire going all night,” Chip said.

“What about going to the bathroom?” a woman asked.

Ian chuckled. He knew that was coming. It never failed.

“You’ll go in the woods,” Ian said, and everyone turned to look at him. “There are no porta-potties out here.” He grinned when they laughed.

“Wonderful,” the woman said, making everyone laugh.

Ian saw Eden laughing and couldn’t get over how beautiful she truly was. She wore a red T-shirt, tight jeans, and a white straw cowboy hat. It suited her. He knew her boots were new, but he also saw that they were Beckett boots, and he knew she’d spent a good bit of money on them. They were not cheap, but you get what you pay for. Her feet would thank her.

He watched her dismount, and his eyes went to her ass as she swung her leg over the saddle. The jeans stretched tight over it. Damn.

“You do not need this,” he muttered.

Eden led her horse to the posts, removed the saddle, set it on the ground, away from the horse, and untied the bedroll. She then walked toward the firepit and watched as everyone picked a spot. She sighed, and moved around the pit until she found a suitable spot then went about erecting the tent. She was on her knees trying to figure it out when a male voice spoke from behind her.

“Do you need some help?”

Eden glanced over her shoulder to see one of the guests standing behind her. She smiled.

“Not yet. I’m going to try to do this. But don’t be surprised if I shout for you,” she said.

“Well, just yell out Rusty, and I’ll be here.”

She stood. “Thank you, Rusty. I’m Eden Fairchild. It’s nice to meet you.” They shook hands, and he seemed to hang on to hers a little longer than necessary. He was a good-looking man, but he was a little too touchy feely for her.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Eden. How long are you here for?”

“A month. You?”

“I leave this coming Sunday. That’s my week. It’s been a blast.”

“We arrived Sunday.”

“We?”

“Yes, my best friend, Cammie and I.”

“I see. I came alone. I needed time away from the office.”

“What do you do?”

“Stockbroker. How about you?”

“Probate lawyer.”

Rusty laughed. “What are two white-collar workers doing

out here?”

Eden grinned. “I know. Cammie talked me into it.”

“Yeah, a friend of mine suggested it. It’s been an experience for sure. Well, I’ll let you get back to it. Just holler if you need me.”

“Thank you. Have fun.” Eden smiled and watched him walk away.

His tent was across the pit from hers. Not that she thought he’d be a bother, she just wanted to know where he was. He was a little too flirty. It wasn’t anything he said, it was in the way he looked at her. Men constantly came on to her, and she knew when they were interested, but she wasn’t here to find a man.

She hadn’t dated anyone for almost a year. She wanted to get married, and she needed to do something soon or she never would. Not that she had anyone in mind. She was just set on getting married. She didn’t even care if she was in love at first. She was sure whoever she married; they’d fall in love eventually. She wanted someone in the same profession, and they could work their way up the corporate ladder together.

Cammie argued with her all the time about not marrying for love. She thought it was ridiculous that Eden wanted to get married just for marriage’s sake.

As she struggled with the tent, she glanced around to see others having trouble too, but she was going to do her damndest to put this thing together. She saw Ian helping the brunette. The same one who can’t seem to leave him alone. Did she not read the brochure about no fraternizing?

“Some women will go after anything with a penis.”

“I’m sorry?”

Eden jerked and looked to see a woman staring at her and laughed.

“Talking to myself.”

The woman laughed. “I do that way too much. I’m Stella.”

“Eden.” The women shook hands.

“Are you here alone, Eden?”

“No. I’m here with a friend, but she didn’t come on this camping trip. You?”

“I’m here with my husband.” She glanced around. “He’s over there helping that woman with her tent. Mr. Help Everyone, is his name.”

Eden chuckled. “Well, it’s nice that he does. I could probably use him in a few minutes. This tent is kicking my ass.”

“Let’s see if we can get this together,” Stella said as she picked up a pole and the two got busy and the tent was up in no time.

“Thank you, Stella.”

“You’re very welcome. I need to unroll our sleeping bags, so I’m sure I’ll see you later.”

“I’m sure.” Eden watched her crawl into her tent then she did the same to unroll the sleeping bag, then she crawled back out into the sunshine.

She smiled as she glanced around, but the smile died when she saw Ian still talking with the brunette. Shaking her head, she knew it was none of her business, but if there was no socializing, why was he around her all the time? It didn’t matter. If he wanted to screw the brunette, it was none of her concern.

She strolled to the log beside the pit, sat, and tilted her face up to the sun. The warm rays felt wonderful on her skin.

“Are you all set up?”

Eden opened her eyes to see Ian standing in front of her. His damn crotch was eye-level, and she had trouble keeping her eyes off it. Especially since he wore chaps. She could definitely see why Cammie loved them. She slowly raised her eyes to his.

“Yes. It took two of us, but we did it.”

“Good. We’ll have lunch in a while.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m starving and it wasn’t that long ago since breakfast.”

He sat on the log next to her and she did everything she could not to inhale his aftershave. He smelled so good.

“It’s the fresh air. Chip will make some burgers and hot dogs then everyone can just relax.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Meaning working here?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been here ten years. I started here when the ranch opened. I started as the foreman, but I’ve been manager for nine years.”

“What did you do before that?”

“I was a foreman at a cattle ranch.”

“Why did you leave?”

“The bank foreclosed. I worked there from the time I was eighteen.”

“Do you like it here? I mean, it’s so different than what you did before, right?”

“Yes. We deal with cattle here, but nowhere near as many as a cattle ranch.”

“Do you live on the Bur Oak?”

“No, ma’am. I live in Clifton.”

“Willa Callahan took me into Clifton yesterday. It’s a beautiful little town.”

“Yes, it is. I was born and raised there.”

Eden nodded, then clenched her jaw when she saw the brunette heading toward them, then she sat on the other side of Ian. Eden bit her lip to keep from laughing when she heard him sigh.

“I wondered where you’d gone, Ian.”

“I can’t go too far, ma’am.”

“Bonnie.”

“Bonnie.”

When Eden snorted, he glanced at her with a frown, then she got to her feet.

“I’ll leave you two to talk. I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Don’t go far, Ms. Fairchild. There are wild animals here.”

Eden looked at Bonnie then him and raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, there are, and some are closer than you think.”

Ian watched her walk off toward the creek. He jerked when Bonnie touched his arm, and he looked at her.

“Can you walk me to the creek?”

“I’m sure you can walk there alone. I have other people to check on.”

“I’m only here two weeks, Ian. Could we get together for dinner one evening?”

“No, ma’am. I’m sorry, but if you read the brochure, you’ll know we can’t get involved with guests.”

“Who would know?” she asked him with a smile.

Ian got to his feet and looked at her. “I would. Enjoy your day.”

With a deep sigh, he walked around the campsite making sure everyone was good. He needed to get it through her head that he wasn’t interested in her. It wasn’t just the no fraternizing rule, he just didn’t feel a connection with her. Even if he did, there was no way he could act on it, and she needed to see that. Maybe she got the hint this time.

That evening, everyone sat around the firepit as one of the men played a guitar and sang. Some of the guests joined in with him.

Ian saw Eden sitting across from him, the firelight played

across her face, as she held a marshmallow over the fire on a stick. She really was a beautiful woman, but he also knew she was a city girl, and that was proven when everyone was asked where they were from.

“Chicago. I work as a probate lawyer in a very prestigious firm,” Eden said, and Ian could hear the pride in her voice.

Yep, city girl, and way out of his league. Not that it mattered but he wondered why someone like her would be at a guest ranch. It didn’t seem to fit her at all.

“What brought you to the Bur Oak?” Chip asked her.

Eden smiled. “My friend, Cammie, talked me into this. She said I needed to relax.”

“And do you?”

“I do. There is a lot going on at the office. I’ve been offered a partnership.” Eden shrugged. “I came here to make my decision and relax.”

“I’m sure being here will help.” Chip smiled. “How long will you be with us?”

“A month.”

“Plenty of time to relax.”

Eden nodded as she looked at Ian. He glanced away from her. In all his years working here, no woman caught his attention like she did, but it didn’t matter. She’d be leaving and he’d never see her again. Even if he could get involved, he wouldn’t for that reason alone.

Later, after everyone ate marshmallows and s’mores, Chip announced that everyone needed to get to bed. Ian watched as Eden crawled into her tent. Everyone was in their tent, except for Bonnie. She smiled at him. What did it take to get her to back off?

“You should get some sleep. We’ll be leaving early,” he said.

She frowned, sighed, then made her way to her tent. Ian looked at Chip to see him grinning.

“She can’t take a hint,” Ian said.

“I noticed. You might have to be cruel to be kind.” Chip smiled.

“Looks like it.” Ian stood. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He walked to his sleeping bag, which was close to the firepit. He never slept in a tent; he liked looking at the stars as he drifted off.

The next day, they headed back to the ranch. The trip went well, and everyone seemed to have fun. He was certain he’d made an enemy of the brunette. She glared at him anytime he looked her way. Well, too damn bad. He’d just have to keep an eye on her. She’s not the first woman to get pissed at him for some reason and he knew she wouldn’t be the last.

As they rode back, Ian kept an eye on the riders. None seemed worse for wear, and he was sure they enjoyed themselves. It was hotter than hell today. He removed a handkerchief from his pocket, lifted his hat, wiped the sweat from his brow, and resettled the hat. He was about to put his sunglasses on when he heard someone’s horse let out a high-pitched squeal, and everyone tried to stay calm.

He saw Eden’s horse rear up as she tried to control the horse as it tried to buck her off. Ian spurred his horse and ran toward her, but her horse panicked and ran off. He could see she was doing her best to rein in the horse, but she wasn’t having any luck. Something spooked the horse since that horse never let anything get to him.

Ian spurred his horse again, and it took off.

“Hold on,” he shouted.

He rode alongside her and could see the fear on her face. He got closer, wrapped his arm around her waist, and pulled her onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck tightly and he could feel her shaking.

“Are you okay?” he asked, as he slowed his horse.

She nodded. “Just shaken. Thank you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Let me set you down, and I’ll get your

horse.”

“I think a horsefly bit him.”

Ian nodded, as he held her arm, and lowered her to her feet, then he spurred his horse and ran after hers. He caught him and led him back.

“What happened, Joker? Something bite you, boy?” Ian returned to where he’d left Eden, to see everyone surrounding her to make sure she was all right. Everyone except Bonnie. She was too busy glaring at him. Damn, if looks could kill, he’d fall from the saddle.

“Is he okay?” Eden asked.

“He seems to be. Those fly bites can hurt.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t want a fly that size biting me.”

“You can get back on him now. He’ll be fine. You did well at holding on.”

“But I still needed to be rescued.”

Ian grinned. “Round two also goes to me.”

He chuckled when he heard her gasp as he rode to the end of the line.

Eden stared after him and couldn’t help but laugh. “So that’s how this was going to go, huh? Well, you’re on Ian Brennan.”

She was glad he’d rescued her though. He just pulled her off the horse as if she weighed nothing. She groaned as she remembered how she’d wrapped her arms around his neck to hang on. She’d been terrified, but she knew to hang on or she’d hit the ground and that didn’t appeal in the least.

Once they arrived back at the barn, everyone handed their horse off to a ranch hand and left the barn. Eden held back and looked around for Ian. When she found him, she made her way to him.

“Ian?”

“Yes, ma’am?” When he looked at her with those amazing eyes, her heart slammed into her ribs.

“Uh, I want to thank you again for saving me. I think my life passed before my eyes.”

When he grinned, she was in awe of just how handsome he really was. Though she wasn’t interested in his type, this man had such a pull that she had to remind herself about no involvement. Some men just oozed sex appeal, and Ian Brennan was one of them. She wondered if he was married or involved with anyone.

Shaking her head, she knew it didn’t matter. She’d play by the rules, and she knew he did. That was evident in the way he acted around the brunette.

“It can be scary. I’m glad you weren’t hurt.”

“Me too. I’ll let you get back to work. Thanks again.”

“Yes, ma’am. Have a nice rest of the day.” He touched the brim of his hat and she almost sighed.

Eden nodded, walked from the barn, and strolled to her cabin. After a night of sleeping on the ground, she was so ready to sleep in a bed. As she entered her cabin, she stopped to look at Cammie’s but didn’t see her. Eden wondered if she was at the pool or some other activity.

With a sigh, she closed the door, and sat on the sofa. She was too tired to do anything but be lazy. She could do that at the pool. Getting up, she made her way to the bedroom, changed into her swimsuit, pulled a short robe on, then headed for the pool. It was a little after noon, and the sun was merciless. She could feel the sweat between her breasts and on her back as she walked to the pool. She smiled at the people she passed.

Once she reached the pool, she found a chaise lounge, placed her towel on it, removed the robe, then walked to the pool, and dove in. There weren’t a lot of people around it today. There must be some other activities going on somewhere.

After drying off, she applied sunscreen, put her sunglasses

on, and closed her eyes. This felt amazing. To just do nothing and not worry about court dates. She opened her eyes when a shadow moved over her to see the brunette who'd been after Ian taking the lounge chair beside her. Eden wondered what she was up to because she knew the woman had an agenda. She removed her sunglasses.

"I'm Bonnie," she said.

"Eden."

"You had a little scare on the camping trip, didn't you?"

"Yes. A horsefly bit my horse."

"I wonder why they didn't bother anyone else's horse."

Eden glanced at her to see the woman staring at her.

"I'm not sure what you're suggesting."

"Really? You've ridden before, that's obvious, so I'm sure it wouldn't be a big deal to make your horse rear up and have the handsome cowboy save you."

Eden chuckled. "You sound jealous."

Bonnie sat up and glared at her. "I have my eyes set on Ian, and I don't need you getting in the way."

"First off, read the damn brochure. You're not allowed to get involved with any of the staff or other guests. Second, I am not into the... *handsome cowboy*, as you put it. I happen to be into white-collar men, but if you think Ian will get involved with you, you'd better think again. He's been here ten years, and I'm sure he wouldn't be, if he got involved with guests. Quit acting so damn desperate and leave the man alone."

Bonnie gasped, stood, grabbed her towel, and stared at her.

"Rules are made to be broken. I'm not giving up on him, and you'd do best to remember that."

"Why in the hell should I remember that? I told you; I'm not interested. If you want to go for it, then do it, but when he shoots you down, don't come crying to me."

"I won't be crying to anyone. A man can take only so

much.”

Eden laughed. “I bet that man has more willpower than you give him credit for. Good luck with that, though. Now, go away. You’re blocking the sun.” She put her sunglasses back on.

She closed her eyes and refused to open them until she heard Bonnie move away. Some women, like men, couldn’t seem to take no for an answer. Poor Ian. He was in for it with that woman.

As Ian walked from the barn, he swore as the heat of the day slammed into him. He’d love to go home and take a cold shower. This had to be one of the hottest days on record for August.

He glanced in the direction of the pool and would love to jump into it, but he had one at home. No staff were allowed to swim in the guest’s pool, which was fine by him. He’d rather just float in his own pool. No one to bother him and if he wanted to get in it naked, he could. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Later, when he finished his chores for the day, he climbed into his truck, drove out to the road, and headed home. He lived in Clifton, close to the Spring City limits. He wasn’t far from the ranch. He’d been offered the manager’s cabin, but he liked having his own home. He wanted privacy when he was away from the ranch.

He drove to his house, parked beside the porch, stepped out, then entered the kitchen. The cooler air felt great, and he sighed as he removed his hat, hung it on a peg, then pulled out a chair, sat, and took off his boots.

Pushing to his feet, he picked up his boots, and set them inside the mudroom. He stripped off his clothes, then walked to the bathroom to shower. He’d been hoping to take a swim, but he was so tired. He just wanted to shower, eat, hit the sheets, and get up and do it all again.

Thursday they were moving the cattle to another pasture

and guests signed up for that. It involved an overnight camping trip. He wondered when he'd see Eden Fairchild again but shook his head. He could not get involved with her. Besides, he didn't even know if she was involved with someone or not and he never stepped on another man's toes. He sure as hell wouldn't want another man after his woman, so he left women in relationships alone.

It had been so long since he'd been in a relationship, that he was sure he forgot how to act in one. He hadn't reached the age of forty-two without a few heartbreaks along the way. He'd broken a few hearts too. That was something he wasn't proud of, but it happens in life. It was never intentional. The relationship just didn't work. He liked to think that any woman he'd been involved with thought of him in a good way, as he did them. He'd love to find that one special woman, settle down, and have some kids, but so far, he wasn't having much luck in that department.

He entered the bathroom, reached into the shower stall, turned on the water, and then stepped inside. He picked up the soap and scrubbed his body clean and watched the day's dirt and grime swirl around the drain and disappear.

God! He was tired, but he had to eat before going to bed or he'd be hungry later. It was never good to go to bed hungry.

After forcing himself to eat a sandwich, he cleaned up the kitchen, and headed to bed. He had to be up at five.

It was pouring down rain Thursday morning, and Eden was supposed to go on the cattle drive/camping trip. She didn't know if they still went or not. She wasn't looking forward to getting soaked, but she had signed up and wanted to go.

She picked up her cellphone and called Cammie.

"Do you think the cattle drive is still on?" she asked when Cammie answered.

"The brochure says, all activities take place, rain or shine, so it sounds like it will be happening."

"Are you still going to go?"

“I want to. Let me call the lodge and ask them to make sure. I’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

“Okay. I’m going to grab a cup of coffee. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Eden made her cup of coffee, sat at the counter, and waited for Cammie’s call. It didn’t take long.

“Hey.”

“The person I spoke to said, the drive was still on, and rain ponchos would be provided. If we decide not to go, that’s fine.”

“I want to go. I’m just not looking forward to the rain.”

“It will be muddy for sure. What do you want to do?” Cammie asked her.

Eden thought about it. “I want to experience it.”

“Okay. I’ll be at your cabin in twenty minutes.”

“See you then.” Eden disconnected but was startled when someone knocked on her door. She made her way to it and looked out the window beside the door to see Ian on the porch. Rain dripped from his hat. She quickly opened the door. “Ian?”

“We’re checking to see if the guests who signed up for the cattle drive are still going, and if so, I have ponchos and muck boots to hand out.”

“Muck boots?”

He held up a pair of rubber boots. “They’ll keep your feet dry. We have all sizes. These are a six.”

“That’s the correct size, and yes, I’m going and so is Cammie.”

“Okay, here’s a poncho and boots for you. I think Chip is going to check on Cammie. We’re also letting everyone know that it will not be a camping trip because of the rain. It’s been raining for hours, so it’s going to be muddy. We’ll see you at the barn in half an hour.” He handed her everything.

“All right. Thank you.”

They stared at each other until he glanced away from her. He touched the brim of his hat, walked off the porch, and headed to another cabin. She closed the door, leaned against it, and sighed. The man was just too damn sexy.

Later, she and Cammie entered the barn to see a group of guests waiting. Eden was surprised that so many showed up with the weather being as it was. Everyone wore a poncho and muck boots.

She looked around and saw Ian on his horse. He wore a poncho, but his cowboy hat covered his head instead of the hood. He also wore muck boots. His eyes met hers, and he nodded. She nodded back and walked to one of the horses.

She mounted a horse held by one of the ranch hands and waited as he adjusted the stirrups. She smiled as she watched Cammie talking to the ranch hand helping her. The woman was a total flirt, but it was all harmless.

When a loud clap of thunder shook the barn, everyone gasped, but the horses didn't even budge. Eden was happy about that because who wanted to be dumped in the mud if a horse got spooked? She was lucky that she'd been able to stay in the saddle until Ian rescued her on the camping trip.

She looked at him to see him talking with Chip, then he glanced up and his eyes met hers again. This time she looked away. There was no way she was that damn attracted to him. He wasn't her type at all. *Who are you trying to convince?*

“Me. I have to convince me,” she muttered.

“If everyone's ready, we'll head out. We'll get the cattle moving. It will be slow going because of the rain, but we're not taking them far. We'll be back before you know it,” Ian said to the group.

“Follow me. Ian will bring up the rear,” Chip said as he rode to the doors.

“Single file. Your horse knows to follow the leader.” Ian looked at the guests.

Eden nudged her horse and fell in line. She didn't know how she ended up at the back, but she was last with Ian behind her. Cammie was close to the front. Wouldn't Bonnie love seeing Eden in the back with Ian? She snorted at the thought.

She stopped her horse at the door and stared out at the pouring rain.

"You won't melt," Ian said from behind her.

Gasping, she turned in the saddle and glared at him.

"Neither will you," she snapped.

He chuckled. "I never thought I would. Let's go, Ms. Fairchild. You're falling behind."

"Whatever, Mr. Brennan," she muttered as she rode out into the rain.

What the hell was his problem with her? On the camping trip they had a nice conversation, but now, he was acting as if they never spoke, or he hadn't rescued her. *Men*.

Chapter Three

Ian grinned as he followed her out into the rain. He liked aggravating her. She gave as good as she got... for a city girl. The rain pelted the top and brim of his hat. He noticed that Eden wore her hat too. Most of the guests just pulled the hood up on the poncho but it wasn't much coverage for their faces. The wind was blowing the rain, and although it was warm out, the rain made it seem cooler.

When they got to the cattle, Chip and a few of the ranch hands rounded them up, and then got them moving. A few Blue Heelers ran after the cattle, nipping at their heels to keep them going.

Ian kept an eye on the guests. This was new to them, and they were only along for the ride. If one of the cattle bolted, the guests were to stop their horse while one of the ranch hands, Chip, or he, went after it. The Bur Oak didn't want anyone to get hurt, so guests were not allowed to participate in rounding up the cattle. Cattle were unpredictable, so no chances were taken.

After an hour, they reached the pasture where they were leaving the cattle, Chip held his hand up to stop everyone. He turned in his saddle and addressed the group.

"We will stop for lunch and then head back."

"Sandwiches are going to be a little soggy, don't you think?" a man asked.

Ian chuckled as he looked at Chip to see him rolling his eyes.

"There's a pavilion over by the trees," Chip said as he pointed at the picnic tables under a roof.

Ian saw Eden turn to look at him and smiled.

"Smart."

"We try to think of everything. Thunderstorms can pop up any time."

She nodded, nudged her horse, and rode toward the pavilion. Ian followed her and made sure everyone else made it there.

“What about the horses?” another woman asked.

“Just tie them at the rails,” Chip said as he nodded toward the rails.

“They’ll get wet,” she said.

Ian grinned. “They’re already wet. A little rain never hurt them.”

“Nothing like sitting in a wet saddle on the way back,” Eden said.

Ian looked at her. “God knows, a city girl wouldn’t want to sit on a wet saddle. Maybe we should dry it for you.”

Eden’s lips flattened as she looked at him, then she glanced around, and when no one was looking, she gave him the finger, making him laugh. He shook his head.

As everyone sat under the pavilion eating, the storm raged on. Eden sat next to her friend, talking and laughing. Lightning lit up the sky followed closely by a loud clap of thunder, making everyone jump.

“Damn, that was close,” a man said.

“We’ll stay here for a while to see if it lets up,” Ian said.

“We could be here all night,” someone else said.

Ian shook his head. It always amazed him how people wanted to join in the activities or work on the ranch, until they were actually doing it. It was harder than people realized. Ian finished his sandwich, crumpled up the paper, and put it in a trash bag. He sat at a table to wait for the rain to let up a little.

Once it did, he told everyone to mount up and they could head back. Everyone seemed more than ready to go as they quickly made their way to their horses and mounted up. Chip signaled for them to form a line and he started to lead them back to the ranch.

Eden sat on her horse, but Ian saw her peer out into the rain

then looked back at the group riding away. Her eyes met his and she waved him over.

Ian sighed, rode his horse to her and stopped beside her.

“Something wrong?”

“Is that calf stuck in the mud?” She pointed to a calf in the mud.

“Damn. Yeah, looks like it.” He looked at the group to see them leaving them behind. “I’ll get him. Go with the group.”

“Don’t you need some help?”

Ian shrugged. “I’ll do what I can. I’ll use my rope.”

“I can help if you want.”

“You?”

“Yes, a city girl will help if you need it.”

He stared at her and saw the determination on her face. *This ought to be good.* He nodded.

“If you think you’re up for it.”

“Is that a challenge, Mr. Brennan?”

“Take it however you want, Ms. Fairchild.”

“Well, I take it as a challenge and I never back down from one. What do I need to do?”

“I’m going to have to rope the calf and try to pull him out. If he’s really stuck, you’re going to have to get in the mud and push him.” Ian bit his lip to keep from grinning.

“Get in the mud? Push him?”

“I thought you didn’t back down from a challenge?”

“I don’t.”

“I can call one of the ranch hands back.” He removed the walkie talkie from his pocket.

“I’ll do it,” she snapped.

He watched her take a deep breath, dismount, and drop the reins onto the ground. The guests were told the horses

wouldn't go anywhere if the reins were on the ground. She tried to step over mudpuddles, but that was a lost cause since it was still raining.

He took his rope from the saddle, rode close to the calf, circled the rope over his head, tossed it, and looped it around the calf's neck then he wrapped the other end around the saddle horn.

"Ready?"

"I suppose."

"Once he starts to come out of the mud, put your hands on his rump, and push."

She took a deep breath and nodded.

Ian had his horse back up and once the calf moved a little, he nodded to Eden to begin pushing. The mud was over her ankles, but she didn't seem to mind. She put her hands on the calf and pushed as Ian pulled. The calf must not have been as stuck as they thought because it came right out of the mud, which made Eden fall face first into it. Ian did his best not to laugh, but when she raised her head and glared at him, with her face covered in mud, he lost it.

"I hate you," she shouted. "You did that on purpose."

"How would I know the calf would come out on its own?"

"I don't know, but you're enjoying this."

"Round three to me."

"Oooh." Eden stood, scooped up a handful of mud, and threw it at him, hitting him in the face.

Ian removed a handkerchief from his pocket, took his hat off, and wiped the mud from his face. He narrowed his eyes at her and saw her trying not to laugh.

"Oh, you think that's funny?" He dismounted and walked toward her, but he laughed again when she tried to step back, and her foot was stuck in the mud. He watched her struggle to free it, but all she did was pull her foot from the boot. She lost her balance, and her sock-covered foot sank into the mud, then

she fell onto her butt. She got up and glared at him. Her entire body was covered in mud. Ian shook his head. "You have nowhere to go," he murmured as he moved closer.

"Now, Ian, I only did it because you laughed at me," Eden said, with laughter in her voice. She held her hands out in front of her to keep him away from her. He leaned down, scooped up a handful of mud, then advanced on her.

"Payback," he said.

"That's not fair. I already have mud on me."

"Then a little more won't matter, will it?"

She quickly glanced around, and Ian knew she planned to run, but he was ahead of her. He reached out, grabbed her arm, and tugged her close. He held his hand with the mud in it over her face.

"You owe me an apology," he said.

"You'll be hellbent on getting it," she said, laughing.

"Okay. I can do without the apology." He put his hand near her face.

Her eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare. I'll tell your boss."

"I'm the boss, remember?"

She continued to laugh when Ian wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against his body. He couldn't stop himself from glancing at her lips and back into her eyes.

"Ian?"

"No fraternizing, remember?"

"Is that what we're doing? I thought it was just a mud fight."

"Oh, yeah. You're right." He smashed the mud onto her face, making her scream, and try to get away from him.

She hooked her leg around his, and took them both to the ground, where she landed on top of him. He rolled her onto her back and moved over her, then began to move off her, when her arms wrapped around his neck, he looked into her

eyes.

“Will you kiss me, please?” she whispered.

“That’s fraternizing,” he murmured as he wiped the mud from her face and lowered his lips to hers. When she moaned, he deepened the kiss, and slid his tongue into her mouth. *Shit! Not a good idea.* He pulled away from her, got to his feet, and put his hand out to help her up. She let him pull her to her feet.

“We both need a shower before the mud dries. Then I can relax for the evening.”

“Yes, it’s best we go.” He helped her onto her horse, vaulted into his saddle, and they headed back. No more words were spoken between them.

“You fucking idiot,” he murmured. Shaking his head, he knew he shouldn’t have kissed her, but he couldn’t resist those lush lips and they tasted wonderful. He’d love to taste more of her, but he knew he couldn’t.

When they entered the barn, no one was around and for that, he was thankful. He didn’t need to explain why they were covered in mud. Once they dismounted, he took her horse, and walked both his and hers down the aisle.

“Do I need to do anything?” she asked him.

Besides get the hell away from him? No!

“Uh, no, I got this. Go get your shower and enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“All right.”

He glanced over his shoulder to see her staring at him, then she turned and walked out of the barn. Damn, what an idiot he was. Her lips were so soft, and he’d better remember that because he could never kiss her again. She was leaving. Back to the big city, and her job.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he muttered.

Eden walked to her cabin. It was still raining but the mud was getting a little sticky. She touched her lips. Damn, the man

could kiss.

“What the hell were you thinking? Why did you ask him to kiss you?” She moaned as she thought about it.

She entered her cabin, strolled to the bathroom, stripped off her filthy clothes, and stepped into the shower stall. The hot water felt wonderful since she was a little chilled from riding in the rain. Rolling in the mud hadn’t helped either. She’d been happy to discover the cabins had stackable washer and dryers.

After her shower, she sat on the sofa watching TV when her cellphone buzzed. She picked it up to see Cammie’s face.

“Hey, Cam,” she said.

“What happened to you?”

“I saw a calf stuck in the mud, and helped Ian get him out of it.”

“I’m sorry. You did what?”

Eden explained about the calf and falling in the mud, but she left the kiss out. Cammie would go crazy if she told her.

“I can’t believe you did that.”

“It was nothing. Ian roped the calf and pulled it while I pushed. The calf came out of the mud, and I went face first into it.”

Cammie laughed. “Oh, to have seen that.”

Eden chuckled. “It’s something I’ll never forget.”

“Do you want to go to the dance Saturday night?”

“Definitely. I’m going to get some rest. Oh, Willa told me there’s a cowboy bar in Clifton called Dewey’s. Maybe we could go tomorrow night.”

“Cowboy bar? Oh, I am up for that.”

“Great. She also said we need to check out the local diner. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’m tired too, so relaxing the rest of the evening sounds good. See you tomorrow.” Cammie disconnected.

Eden set her phone on the sofa and jerked when it buzzed again. She picked it up to see Ron Lewis' face and groaned. What the hell? Why was he calling her?

“Ron? Is something wrong?”

“No. How's the trip going?”

“It's been fun. We went on a camping trip and today we did a cattle drive.”

“A... cattle drive? This does not sound like you at all.”

“It's not but I am having so much fun. I'm going to hate to leave.”

“Well, you have time to make your decision.”

“I'm sure I will. I think I'll miss it here, but I plan to make a return trip.”

“Why?”

“Because it's fun.”

“Okay. I somehow doubt that I'd find it fun, but whatever.”

Eden tightened her jaw. The man was a jerk. He was up to no good. Otherwise, he wouldn't be calling her.

“This place is wonderful. There's a dance Saturday night. It's given every Saturday night for the guests leaving on Sunday. I can't wait.” *She could be nice.*

“You sound so different, Eden. This is not what I thought you'd like.”

“Honestly, I didn't either, but it's great.”

“You sure don't sound like the high-classed lawyer anymore.”

“I like having fun, Ron.”

“I suppose.”

“I'm going to go. I want to relax and just listen to the rain on the metal roof. It's so calming.”

“If you say so. I'll talk to you soon.”

“Yeah, okay. Bye.”

She disconnected and stared at the phone. What was that all about? Shaking her head, she wasn't sure about him. He was the office kiss-ass. Everyone knew it. The only reason he would be calling is to see if she'd made her decision about the partnership yet.

No one liked a brown-noser, but no matter how much Ron did, no one said anything. Couldn't their boss see how he was? It didn't matter. She knew he wanted a partnership too, but if she took it, no one else would be offered the opportunity for at least another year. Ron knew if she didn't take it, he could.

As she sat on the sofa, she picked up the remote, aimed it at the TV and found a movie to watch. She pulled the blanket off the back of the sofa, slid down onto the cushions, and snuggled under it. The rain made it seem cooler than it was, and she was content to stay right here for the remainder of the day. She smiled as she listened to the rain hitting the roof.

Ian stood in the doorway of the barn and stared out at the rain. He'd taken a shower in the bunkhouse and changed into clean clothes. He grinned thinking of Eden falling into the mud. It seemed she could take being made fun of. The smile left his face as he remembered kissing her. *Idiot!* In the ten years he'd been here, he never got involved with a female guest. He wasn't sure what would happen if he did, but he didn't want to chance it. He was too damn old to start over at another ranch.

That thought didn't appeal in the least. Hell, forty-two wasn't old, but the thought of having to find another job was something he didn't want to think about.

“How did the cattle drive go?”

Ian glanced over his shoulder to see Jaxon. “It was good. A calf got stuck in the mud, but what else is new?”

Jaxon chuckled. “Right? I think the calves try to get stuck.”

Ian nodded. “It never fails, does it?”

“Did you have to get him out?”

“Yes. A guest helped me. Chip had already started leading the group back, so she stayed to help me.”

“*She?*” Jaxon arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah, a damn city girl stayed to help.” Ian shook his head.

“Hey, don’t knock those city girls. Devin and I both married one.”

“You two lucked out. Most wouldn’t fit in, but Willa and Presley do. They love it here.”

“I believe I can speak for me and Devin when I say we’re happy about that.”

Ian chuckled. “Yeah, I bet.”

“Speaking of which, I’m heading home to my wife. Are you going to the dance Saturday night?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll think about it.”

“Okay. You know you’re under no obligation.”

“I know. I’ll see how the day goes. I have a lot to do at home.”

“Okay. I hope to see you here.” Jaxon slapped him on the shoulder, then headed out to the other end of the barn where he’d parked his truck.

Ian knew it was time he headed home too. Not much went on around the ranch on Fridays. It was what was called a free day. The guests could do whatever they wanted, including nothing. He had Saturdays off, and he was looking forward to it. He did have some things to do around the house and he needed to make a trip to town to pick up a few things.

As he drove home, he had to have the wipers on high. The rain was so heavy that he had trouble seeing anything in front of him. He sighed when he reached his driveway. He drove his truck into the garage, then pushed the remote to lower the door. He exited the truck and entered the house through the mudroom.

After hanging up his hat, he removed his boots, and strode to the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes. He stripped off his jeans, boxer briefs, T-shirt, and socks, then pulled on a pair of sweatpants and another shirt. He padded barefoot to the kitchen and retrieved a beer from the fridge. He didn't drink much, but sometimes, he liked a beer in the evenings.

Hell, if he didn't stop thinking about Eden Fairchild, he'd get drunk so he could try to forget her. That woman was way out of his league. City girl through and through and he was a cowboy and a cowboy he'd always be. It was too bad because he wouldn't mind getting to know her, but he also knew he couldn't.

Why was she even staying at place like this? This wasn't her lifestyle. He was sure she rarely wore a pair of jeans and she probably dressed to kill at the office. He could picture her in tight skirts, fancy blouses, and stilettos on her feet. *Damn. Don't think about that.*

He had to stay away from her, and he had three more weeks to get through. Why was she staying so long? Was the decision so difficult that she had to take a leave? Maybe she wouldn't go on camping trips or cattle drives anymore. He sure hoped not. It was hell on him seeing her and knowing he could never have her.

He should never have kissed her, but when she asked him to kiss her and he looked into her beautiful green eyes, he couldn't help himself.

After sitting on the sofa, he picked up the remote, aimed it at the TV, and found a movie to watch. He doubted that he'd go to the dance tomorrow night. He had a feeling Eden would be there and he just needed to stay away. She'd leave when her stay was up and maybe his dick would stop thinking about her.

Lightning lit up the sky outside the windows, and thunder rumbled above the roof. It was a good night to stay inside. He hoped the rain would be gone by tomorrow. No activities except the morning trail ride and camping trip were scheduled. Ian worked around the barn, which was fine by him. He didn't

have to see Eden.

Friday was hot and humid. The rain had stopped Thursday night, and the sun beat down. As he drove home after work, he decided to head to Dewey's tonight.

Later, as he sat on a bar stool, he picked up his beer, took a swig, and almost spit it out when he saw Eden and her friend on the dance floor. How did she know about Dewey's? Was nothing sacred? He turned on the stool, placed his elbows on the bar behind him, and watched her. She seemed to be having fun. He sat up when he saw a cowboy talking with her as he danced beside her. She laughed and shook her head. Ian hoped she would turn him down, no matter what he asked.

When she turned in the line, her eyes met his, and she hesitated in her step, but then got back into the rhythm of the dance. He didn't take his eyes off her as she moved around the floor.

The song ended and he watched her walk off the floor, and head for the bar. He saw her take a deep breath, then made her way through the crowd, and stopped beside him.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked.

"It's a great bar."

"How did you know about it?"

"Willa. When she brought me to town to buy my boots, she told me about this place. I knew Cammie would love it since she was born and raised in Wyoming."

Ian nodded. "It's a good place to have a beer and listen to some good music."

"Yes. Do you mind if I sit here?" She nodded to the empty stool beside him.

"Go right ahead."

Eden climbed onto the stool, and tried to get a bartender's attention but she wasn't having much luck. He took pity on her, and waved at Scarlett, the owner of the bar. She smiled at him and walked to him.

“What can I get you, Ian?”

“Scarlett, Ms. Fairchild would like a drink.”

“Sure.” Scarlett smiled at Eden. “What would you like?”

“Could I get a White Russian, please?”

“I’ll be right back with that. Ian, you good?”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“Do you come here a lot?” Eden asked him.

“Not really. It was so hot today, I just wanted to have a cold beer then head home.”

Eden smiled when Scarlett set her drink on the bar. She stood to remove her wallet from her back pocket.

“I’ll get that, Scarlett.” Ian pulled money from his wallet, handed it to her, and waved away the change.

It was killing him sitting here beside Eden. He could smell her light perfume and he wanted to bury his face in her neck and inhale. A slow song played, and Ian watched a cowboy ask her to dance, but she turned him down. Hell, she’d probably turn him down. He chugged the rest of his beer, set the empty bottle on the bar, and waved the bartender over. Laura Blackstone smiled at him as she headed for him.

“Another one, Ian?”

“No, thanks, Laura. I’m done. Just the tab, please.”

“Are you leaving?” Eden asked him.

“In a little while. I’m going to sit on the bench outside for a few minutes, take in the night air.” He stared into her eyes.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“God, you are so damn difficult,” she muttered.

Ian chuckled. “*I’m difficult?* Hell, woman, you’re difficult personified.”

“Whatever,” she snapped, and he laughed.

“I’ll see you, Monday, Ms. Fairchild. Enjoy your evening.” He slid off the stool and walked out the door and strode across the lot toward his truck.

“Ian?”

He turned to see her following him and he frowned.

“Go back inside, Eden.”

“Ian—” she gasped when he grasped her arms and pushed her back against his truck.

“What? What is it you want, Eden?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

He leaned down and hovered his lips above hers.

“Don’t you?” He didn’t give her time to answer as he placed his lips over hers, and kissed her hard, and deeply. He raised his lips, stared into her eyes, then stepped back. She gazed into his eyes, then turned, and walked across the parking lot. *Shit.*

Early the next morning, Ian drove into Clifton, and pulled into the Feed Store parking lot. He needed to pick up some feed for his horses.

After parking, he entered the store to see it packed, as was usual on a Saturday. He headed for the counter and had to stand in line.

“Hey, Ian.”

Ian turned to see Warren Coleman.

“Hey, Warren. How are you doing?”

“Good. You?”

“I’m good.”

“Still at the Bur Oak?”

“Yes. I like it there.”

“Well, if you ever want to come work for us, you let me know. We’d love to have you.”

“I appreciate that, Warren, but I’m happy where I am.”

“Okay. Good enough. Talk soon. I need to pick up dog food. See you later.”

“Yep.” Ian watched him walk off. Warren and his brother, Wes, ran a huge cattle ranch and they’d been after him for years to work for them. If he didn’t like his job so much at the Bur Oak, he’d take them up on it. They had one of the best spreads in Montana.

When it was his turn, he placed his order, then walked around the store. He ran into a lot of his friends. Saturdays seemed to be the day to go to the Feed Store and stock up. Most ranchers were too busy during the week.

Ian knew a lot of ranchers and farmers got their feed delivered from Beckett Feed. Ash Beckett sold organic animal feed and he made a killing at it. A lot of ranches grew it for him. He’d saved a lot of ranches by having them grow for him.

When Ian’s name was called over the PA, telling him his order was ready, he made his way to the parking lot, then backed his truck up to the dock. He watched the men load his truck, then he gave them a nod, entered his truck, and drove home.

The day was heating up. He was sure everyone was having a good time at the ranch, and he wondered what Eden was doing today. She could be nursing a hangover.

“You have got to stop thinking about her,” he muttered.

He backed his truck into the barn, unloaded the feed, filled the buckets with oats, and mucked out the stalls. The four horses he had at his place were out in the pasture and once he finished putting new straw down, he’d get them in to eat.

He kept Breeze at the Bur Oak. He liked his own horse and was used to him. Sometimes, on his Saturdays off, he’d bring the horse home so he could ride him, but he didn’t do it often. Ian rode him so much there that he thought the horse needed a break on the weekends.

Ian worked every day except Saturday. There were no activities on the weekends. The guests were allowed to do whatever they wanted. Some of them took trips to Spring City,

Hartland, or Clifton, to shop, or they stayed around the pool, or played tennis. Some of them just stayed in their cabins to relax.

He wasn't sure about going to the dance tonight. The dance was held every Saturday to say goodbye to the guests leaving the next day. A minimum of a week's stay was required. Check-out was on Sundays before noon, and check-in for new guests was after two on Sundays.

The dance was always a success, and some people from the towns attended too. Devin and Jaxon used to only allow non-guests to come to the last dance of the year, but people showed up anyway and they changed it. It would get packed, but everyone had a great time. A huge buffet was set up, along with a free bar, and a live band played. He usually had a good time when he went, but he had a feeling Bonnie would be on him like white on rice if he went tonight. Unless she was still pissed that he'd helped Eden with her horse. The woman needed to just back the fuck off. He was not interested. Not in her, anyway, and being interested in Eden was just wrong.

Once she left and headed back to Chicago, maybe he'd be able to get back to work and not think about her. *Yeah, right.*

"Shit," he swore.

After he finished in the barn, he strode to the house, entered, and sighed at the cooler air. He needed a shower and then he'd decide about going tonight.

Eden and Cammie walked toward the barn, laughing, and talking. Eden wore a dark green sundress with pink flowers on it. It had a fitted bodice with thin spaghetti straps and a flowing bottom half, and on her feet were her cowboy boots.

"Three more weeks. This first week went fast," Cammie said.

"Yeah. I hate the idea of leaving," Eden said.

"I'm sorry? What? You didn't want to come here in the first place."

“I know, but I’ve been having so much fun. It’s just such a great place.”

“It is, but I am more than ready to go home.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I miss home.”

“You’re not thinking about checking out early, are you?”

“No. We paid for a month, so I’ll stay.”

“Okay. You had me worried for a minute.”

“You know, when we first arrived, if I had said we’re only staying a week, you would have been happy.”

Eden shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“It has nothing to do with a certain cowboy, does it?”

Eden stopped and looked at her.

“Seriously? No. Why would it?”

“I see how you look at him. Though, I don’t blame you. The man is gorgeous.”

“No fraternizing, remember?”

Eden mentally winced. She’s the one who needed to remember. After that kiss last night, she had a lot of trouble *not* thinking about Ian Brennan.

“Well, too bad. I’d definitely... *fraternize* with him if I thought I could get away with it.”

Eden laughed. “He’d never go for it. I’ve seen a brunette practically undressing him with her eyes, and he shot her down. She got pissy with me at the pool after the horse-riding incident. I even told her he wouldn’t go for it, but she thinks she can wear him down. Good luck to her. I think he likes his job too much to go against the rules.”

“I’m happy he rescued you.”

“Me too. I was terrified, but once it was over, I was better.”

“Well, having that hot cowboy pull you onto his lap, would make any woman feel better. Maybe I need to have my horse

act up on the next trail ride.” Cammie laughed. “Have you even thought about the partnership?”

“Not really. I have time. I hope.” Eden sighed.

They arrived at the barn and both gasped as they looked inside. It looked great. Bare light bulbs on wires hung from the rafters, hay bales sat along each wall, the cloth covered tables were close to the entrance, and the stage for the band was at the opposite end. A large parquet floor sat in front of the stage for dancing. The bar and buffet were beside the stage. The barn had the sweet smell of hay along with the aroma of mouthwatering food. Eden’s stomach growled.

“Everything smells so good,” she said.

“It smells like heaven. I’m so hungry. Well, I think I’d be hungry anyway with that food smelling so good.” Cammie smiled. “Let’s find a table.”

They sat at a table and watched people coming into the barn.

“It looks like just about everyone is here.” Eden glanced around.

“Yes.” Cammie looked around. “I don’t see Ian though.”

“Would you stop?”

“What? I’m just sayin’.” Cammie shrugged.

“He’s off on Saturdays so maybe he doesn’t come to the dance.”

“How do you know he’s off on Saturdays?”

Eden shrugged. “When I went to the pool today, I saw Chip and I asked him where Ian was.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you ask where Ian was?”

“I was just curious.”

Cammie burst out laughing. “You are so full of it. You are interested in him whether you admit it or not.”

“I’m not—”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.” Cammie leaned close. “I bet that man could set your pants on fire.”

Eden sputtered out a laugh. “My God! You are so bad.”

A while later, they made their way to the buffet, filled their plates, and headed back to the table. Eden waved at Willa when she saw her.

“Hi, are you two having fun?” Willa asked them when she reached them.

“We are. I hate the thought of leaving,” Eden said.

Willa laughed. “Yeah, I went through that. I’m so glad I came back. You two enjoy yourselves tonight. Get out there and dance. Oh, you can ask any of the men to dance, but they’re not allowed to ask you. They can refuse too, but don’t take it personally.”

“I love to dance.” Eden grinned.

“There will be plenty of chances for that and there are a lot of ranch hands who would love to get you on the dance floor. A lot of line dances too. The band is great. If you think you can keep up, ask Devin to dance. Enjoy.” Willa waved then walked off.

“Oh, I might have to ask Devin to dance. That sounded like a challenge.” Eden grinned.

“I might ask that hot cowboy over there,” Cammie said as she stared at a man leaning against the wall.

“Which one?”

“He has a white hat on, blue T-shirt, and blond hair.”

“Oh, I see him. Go for it. He keeps looking at you.”

“I know.” Cammie looked at him and smiled then laughed when he grinned and touched the brim of his hat.

“God, I love when they do that. Manners for sure.”

“Most cowboys have wonderful manners. Yep. I’m going to ask him to dance.”

After they finished eating, Eden watched the band set up, and when they played, she was in awe of how good they sounded.

When they played *Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy*, a song by Big and Rich, Eden and Cammie got in a line dance. They were laughing and having a blast when Eden looked toward the door to see Ian leaning against the doorjamb of the barn with his arms folded across his broad chest, with his eyes on her.

“I see he made it,” Cammie said, sounding out of breath.

“Who?”

Cammie shook her head and laughed. “You are fooling no one.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Eden snapped, but laughed when Cammie did.

They returned to their seats after the song, but Eden refused to look at Ian. She couldn’t. God! How could she want him? He was not her type at all. What was it about him?

The band played a slow song, and Cammie got to her feet.

“Wish me luck. Here I come, cowboy.”

Eden shook her head and laughed. “No fraternizing, remember?”

“I forget what that word means.” Cammie walked toward the cowboy.

Eden watched as he straightened up when he saw Cammie heading toward him. She sighed when he touched the brim of his hat again, grinned, took Cammie’s hand, and led her to the dance floor.

“Are you having a good time?”

She looked up to see Ian standing beside her chair. She nodded.

“I am. The band is great.”

“Yeah, they’re here every Saturday night.”

Eden glanced around. She had no idea what to say to him. He made her nervous but not in a creepy way, he was just so... male.

“Well, enjoy your evening,” he said, and walked away.

Eden sighed. Should she ask him to dance? She glanced around and saw Bonnie giving her the evil eye, so Eden waved at her, then chuckled when Bonnie quickly looked away. Eden hoped Bonnie was leaving tomorrow, but she didn't know for sure. Somehow, Eden suspected she was here for another week.

As the night wore on, Eden and Cammie danced more line dances and Cammie danced with the cowboy several more times. Eden noticed when Bonnie asked Ian, he turned her down. Eden smiled. It was exactly what that woman deserved. She glanced around and saw Devin at a table with Willa, Jaxon, and another woman. Should she ask him to dance? It didn't seem like Willa minded or she wouldn't have told them to ask him. When the band played *Country Girl Shake It For Me*, a Luke Bryan song, she got to her feet and made her way to the table.

“Devin, would you like to dance?”

He looked at her and grinned. “Sure.”

He stood, took her hand, and led her to the dance floor where he spun her around the floor. The man could dance, and she was having a ball with him. Now she knew what Willa had meant by keeping up. Eden laughed when he pulled her close then spun her away from him, then pulled her back into his arms.

Once the song was over, he walked her to her table, touched the brim of his hat, and headed back to his wife. Eden couldn't keep the smile off her face.

At close to midnight, Eden stood and looked around for Cammie but didn't see her anywhere. Taking her cellphone from her pocket, she sat, and sent her a text.

Where are you?

I'll never tell.

Eden grinned.

You'd better not be doing any fraternizing!

I'll see you tomorrow. Love you!

Love you too. Do not get that cowboy fired!

She laughed when Cammie sent a laughing emoji back. Eden decided to head to her cabin. She hated walking alone, but she was sure she was safe. She just hated walking alone in the dark. She always had.

With a sigh, she headed toward the door and saw Ian again, leaning against the wall close to the door. He was looking at her. Taking a deep breath, she walked toward him.

Chapter Four

Ian watched Eden walking toward him, then she stopped in front of him.

“Leaving?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah. It’s late.”

“Where’s your friend?”

“She left earlier,” she said. He saw the pink in her cheeks and knew she wasn’t telling him everything. “I’d better go.”

“I’ll see you Monday.”

“Okay.” She walked away then turned back. “Ian? Would you mind walking me to my cabin? I know it’s safe here, but I hate walking in the dark alone.”

“Sure.”

They walked out of the barn, and he got on the outside of her.

“Your mother raised you right,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, she did.”

“Is she still living?”

“Yeah, she lives in Clifton.”

“And your father?”

“He passed away twelve years ago. My mom never remarried.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Both of my parents are gone. Almost sixteen years now. They were killed in a plane crash. I was just eighteen at the time.”

“You’re thirty-four?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I thought you were younger. Mid to late twenties.”

“Well, thank you. How old are you?”

“I’m forty-two.”

“Oh, wow. On a downhill spiral, huh?” She laughed when he stopped walking and narrowed his eyes at her.

“I’m still in my prime,” he said.

“If you say so.”

He shook his head, and they continued walking until they reached her cabin. She stepped onto the porch, unlocked the door, then walked back to the steps and looked up at the sky.

“I have never seen so many stars. It’s just beautiful here.”

“Yes, beautiful,” he murmured, as he stared at her.

“I should go inside,” she said, but didn’t move.

“Yes, you should.” He stepped up beside her and moved closer.

Eden backed up until she came up against the door and stared into his eyes.

“Ian?”

“Are you going to ask me to kiss you again?”

“I would but you’d refuse this time.”

“Think so?”

“Yes, because you regretted the first time.”

“I didn’t regret the kiss. I regret that I couldn’t do more of it.”

“Why couldn’t you?”

“Because I could lose my job.”

“I see. So, we just ignore each other, huh?”

“We have to.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Have a good evening.”

When he turned away from her, she touched his hand, making him look at her.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Ian huffed a laugh. “Eden, if I come inside that cabin with you, we both know coffee is the last thing I want.”

“Good, because I don’t have any.”

He hissed in a breath, stepped so close that his body almost touched hers, and stared into her eyes.

“You don’t know what you’re asking.” He shook his head, stepped back, and walked down the steps.

“I do,” she said softly.

Ian turned around, stalked back up the steps, and walked across the porch. Eden stayed against the door. He stopped in front of her and without giving her a chance to say anything, he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her against him and took her lips in a deep, hard, kiss.

She moaned as she slipped her arms around his neck and plastered her body against his. She could feel his hard cock against her stomach and arched her hips against him. He slowly raised his head and stared into her eyes.

“Open the door, Eden,” he said in a low voice.

She reached behind her, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. She stepped back into the cabin, and Ian followed her. He kicked the door closed, pulled her to him and kissed her again. She backed up until she bumped into the back of the sofa, his lips never leaving hers. She removed his hat from his head and tossed it.

He gathered the material of her dress in his hands and slowly pulled it up to her waist. He moved one hand to her panties, then slid it inside the leg opening between her legs. Eden moaned when his finger moved along her slit, but gasped when he quickly turned her away from him, putting her back to his chest. He put his hand on her upper back, and pushed her forward, then he lifted her dress up to her waist, and tore her panties off. His hand moved between her legs, and he ran his finger along her slit. He placed his lips on the back of her neck as his finger drove her wild.

Eden placed her hand over her mouth and screamed into it when she came hard. Ian turned her around to face him and

pressed his lips to hers. He removed his wallet from his jeans, retrieved a condom, then reached between them and unbuckled his belt, unsnapped his jeans, and lowered the zipper. She lifted his T-shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. His six-pack stomach had her salivating.

She could feel his cock against her, and she trembled in anticipation. She shoved his jeans down past his hips.

When he stepped back, she lowered her eyes and watched him roll the condom on, then he lifted her, sat her on the top of the sofa, and plunged into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he took her hard.

“Kiss me, please,” she begged, and he complied.

As he pounded into her over and over, she knew she was going over and tightened her legs around him, making him grunt. She lifted her lips, and cried out as she came. A deep guttural groan tore from deep in his chest as his orgasm hit him and she could feel him throbbing inside her when he came.

They took deep breaths, trying to calm their beating hearts. Then Ian stepped back from her, pulled up his jeans, and headed for the bathroom.

Eden couldn't move to save her life. That had been the hottest sex she'd ever had, and she wanted it again.

Ian stared at himself in the mirror and swore.

“You fucking idiot,” he muttered, as he tossed the condom into the trash, then washed his hands.

He was risking his job for this, and he knew better. He was well aware of the consequences. Taking a deep breath, he left the bathroom and returned to the living room where Eden sat on the sofa and had put her dress back on. He didn't know what to say to her. Hell, he had trouble looking at her. He took a deep breath, but she spoke up.

“I knew you would regret it.”

He jerked his head around, glancing at her before looking

away. She stared at him, and he couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze, or he would never leave.

"I don't regret it—"

"Don't lie," she whispered.

Ian let out a heavy sigh and took a seat on the back of the sofa.

"I'm not lying. I don't regret the sex, but I do regret the consequences that could result from it. This shouldn't have happened, but—"

"But what?"

"I'm finding it hard to resist you. You're always on my mind, but nothing can come of this. Even if it weren't against the rules, you're leaving, and we won't see each other after that. It shouldn't have happened," he repeated.

"Fine. Then just go and we'll pretend it never did. How's that?" She stood up, placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. Ian jumped to his feet.

"Can you forget it? Because I don't think I can or will. I'll go and for the rest of the time you're here, let's just stay away from each other."

"That's fine by me." She stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Ian stared at the closed door and let out another sigh. He found his hat, placed it on his head, and exited out the front door with a loud slam behind him.

Eden leaned back against the door with her hand over her mouth. She jerked when the door slammed, then she slid to the floor, and cried.

As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. They were breaking the rules and she'd hate to see him lose his job because he seemed to love working at the Bur Oak. She took a quick shower and headed to bed. She was sure she'd get no sleep tonight.

Sunday, she refused to leave the cabin. She hadn't even heard from Cammie. She hoped her night was a lot better than hers had been. Well, the way it ended. The sex had been fantastic. She'd never had sex that hot, and she rarely orgasmed during sex. Ian Brennan knew what he was doing, and she knew no other man would make her feel that damn good.

She put her hands over her face and groaned. He was right. It shouldn't have happened, but it did. It wasn't because it was frowned upon, it was because she knew, deep in her heart, that she would never experience sex like that again. Damn Ian Brennan. He had probably spoiled her for any other man.

When her cellphone buzzed Monday morning, she groaned, and picked it up to see Cammie's face.

"Hey, Cam," she said then yawned.

"Are you still in bed? I thought we were going on the trail ride this morning?"

"Shit. What time is it?"

"Almost six. You know the ride starts at seven. Are you going or not?"

Eden wasn't sure what to do. After the way Ian left Saturday night, she wasn't sure she could face him. They had agreed to stay away from each other but how could they do that when he led the trail rides and other activities? She couldn't stay in her cabin for three weeks. She sighed.

"Yes. I'll meet you at the barn. I have to grab a shower."

"All right. See you there." Cammie disconnected.

Eden put her phone on the nightstand, got out of bed, and entered the bathroom to shower. Fifteen minutes later, she strolled to the barn.

She raised her face to the sun and smiled. After the storms, the sun felt wonderful. She wasn't sure of the reception she'd get from Ian, but she'd ignore him.

"Yeah, that'll work," she muttered as she entered the barn.

She saw Cammie and headed for her. Stopping beside her, she glanced around, but didn't see Ian, just Chip and another man.

"Where's Ian?" Cammie whispered.

"No clue."

Had he decided not to do the trail ride because she was on it? God, she hoped not. She didn't want him to stop doing his job because of her. She blinked tears back.

"Maybe he's doing something else," Cammie said.

"I suppose." Eden nibbled on her bottom lip.

"Good morning, everyone. This will be an hour ride. Some of you have done this before, but for the newcomers, I'll explain. We'll ride up to the north pasture and turn around at the creek. We will stop to let the horses drink, and you can fill your water bottles if you'd like, then we head back. Nothing to it. The horses know to follow along so all you really need to do is hold on. Please follow all directions."

"Where is Ian?"

Eden saw Bonnie across from her, staring at her as she asked the question. Eden raised her eyebrow at her, making Bonnie look away. Eden had a feeling she'd be here another week and seeing her confirmed it. She hoped it was her last week.

"Ian is on another activity this morning. It will be Frank and me taking you on this trip. You can choose your horse now," Chip said with a smile.

Eden wanted to cry. She knew it was because of her that Ian had switched to another activity. He made it clear that he would stay away from her while she was here.

"Are you okay?" Cammie asked her.

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't sound like it."

"I am. Let's pick our horses."

As they rode along the trail, Eden just wanted to go to her cabin and hide.

“Eden? What’s bothering you?” Cammie said as she rode alongside her.

“Not now. I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay, but you’re worrying me. You were fine at the dance.”

“I promise, Cam, I’ll tell you later. Let’s just enjoy this.”

“Well, I know I will, but I’m not so sure about you.”

Eden didn’t answer her, and Cammie got back in line behind her. All she wanted to do was sit in her cabin and sulk. Should she talk to him? No. She couldn’t do that. She’d be too afraid he’d tell her to get lost and leave him alone. Maybe she should just go home.

“Cammie? If we leave before our stay is up, are we still charged for the full stay?”

Cammie reined her horse to a stop and looked at her in surprise.

“Why are you asking me that? Do you want to leave?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head.

“Okay, you are definitely telling me what happened when we get back. Because something did.”

“I’ll tell you. I promise.”

Cammie nodded then rode on and soon the group reached the creek. She listened as Chip told everyone about how to ride down and back up the embankment.

After dismounting, she led her horse to the creek and watched it drink, then she got back into the saddle, and rode up the embankment. She was so ready to get back and do nothing.

“How about we hit the pool later?”

Eden shook her head, then sighed, and nodded. It wasn’t fair to Cammie if she stayed hidden in her cabin. They came

here together and planned to do activities.

“Yeah, we can do that. It’s going to be a hot day.”

“Yes.”

Eden glanced at her to see her frowning at her. She shrugged. She knew Cammie was worried about her lack of enthusiasm, but she just wasn’t feeling it. The next three weeks were going to be difficult to get through.

Ian rode along the fence, checking it for any problems. He’d been out since sun-up and was more than ready to head back. Jaxon asked him to do this because Ken wasn’t feeling well. Ken had been the manager when the ranch first opened, but his health declined, and a lot of his delegations were passed on to Ian.

Ian didn’t mind. It took his mind off things. Things like Eden Fairchild. He wondered if she’d gone on the trail ride this morning. He hadn’t checked the list because he knew he wouldn’t be leading it. Not today.

He was leading the camping trip tomorrow but didn’t know who was on the list to go yet. He’d check when he got back. He enjoyed the camping trips, but if Eden was going, he knew his dick would suffer for it, knowing how hot it was between them, and not being able to do anything about it.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

As he continued along, he saw a post leaning over, so he stopped his horse, removed tools from his saddlebags, and repaired it, then mounted his horse, and rode along the rest of the fence. Nothing else needed fixed, so he headed back to the barn. It was close to noon, and he was damn hungry. He had skipped breakfast this morning since he had no appetite, but now he was paying for it. His stomach growled as he spurred Breeze into a run.

He rode into the barn, then cooled the horse. The calves were rounded up for inoculations, and he told the men to get them to the chutes. This was another job he wasn’t fond of, but it had to be done. It was a hot, dusty, dirty job and no one liked

doing it, but they preferred it over baling hay.

“Hey, Ian.”

“Chip, how’s it going?”

“Good. A guest asked where you were this morning.” Chip grinned.

Ian’s heart skipped a beat thinking it might be Eden.

“Who?” He held his breath but blew it out when Chip answered.

“That Bonnie woman. She has got it bad for you, man.”

“I don’t know what else I can do to get her to leave me alone.” Ian shook his head.

“She seems determined to wrangle you.”

“That will not happen,” Ian said as he strode to his office.

“She leaves Sunday, so hang in there for a little while longer. She’ll be gone and you’ll never see her again,” Chip said then walked off.

“Just like when Eden leaves,” Ian muttered, as he strolled around his desk, and took a seat.

He picked up the clipboard for tomorrow and swore when he saw Eden’s name, along with Bonnie’s. Great. Just fucking great. One he couldn’t get far enough away from and the other, he didn’t want to.

Eden and Cammie walked out of the lodge to head for their cabins. They decided to eat before going to the pool.

“Okay, what’s up?” Cammie asked her.

Sighing, Eden wondered where to begin, but realized the beginning was always best.

“After you left the dance, I got up to leave and stopped to talk to Ian for a minute.”

“And?”

“Well, you know how I hate walking in the dark, so I asked

him to walk me to my cabin. Being the man he is, he did.”

“Then what?”

“I...” Eden blew out a breath. “I asked him to come into the cabin and we had sex.”

“*What?*” Cammie came to a standstill.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my God! How was it?”

Eden stared at her. “Best ever. That man is great in bed, though it wasn’t an actual bed, but when it was over, I knew he regretted it. We argued and he said we should just stay away from each other. Even if we could be together here, I’d be leaving, and we’d never see each other again.”

“He’s right, though, correct?”

“Yes. Once we leave here, I will never see him again. Damn, Cammie. I hate it. I can’t believe how attracted I am to him.”

“Maybe you’re attracted to him because he’s *not* your type and it’s just the thrill of being with him?”

Eden shook her head. “I don’t know. I look at him and I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, boy. Wait. Do you think that’s why he wasn’t on the trail ride this morning?”

“I’m not sure. He said it wasn’t the sex he regretted, it was the fact that it wasn’t allowed, and he could lose his job. And it couldn’t happen again.”

Cammie put her arm around her. “What do you want to do? If you want to check-out, we will.”

“We’ll lose the money.”

“That doesn’t matter. If you’re miserable, and you will be, seeing him, we can leave.”

She thought about it, then shook her head.

“No. We’ll stay. That’s just wasting a lot of money. I’ll get past it. Somehow.”

“I’m here for you. What about tomorrow? Do you still want to go on the camping trip?”

“Yeah, he probably won’t take that one either.”

“Okay.”

They reached Eden’s cabin.

“I’ll come and get you once I change.”

“Okay. Eden? I think you need to talk with him.”

“And say what? ‘I know you could lose your job, but let’s have sex anyway.’ I’m sure he’d go for that.”

“I’m so sorry. We’ll do our best to go on activities he’s not leading.”

“I’m not sure how we’d know.”

“I’ll see what I can find out. I’ll see you in a few minutes. A lazy day at the pool sounds perfect. Hey, maybe we can get in a game of tennis one day.”

“Sounds good.” Eden stepped onto the porch, inserted the key and pushed the door open. “I’ll be over in a few minutes.”

She didn’t wait to see if Cammie replied, she closed the door, and leaned against it. God! What was she going to do about Ian?

“Nothing. There is nothing you can do.”

Shaking her head, she walked to her bedroom, stripped, and then pulled on her swimsuit. She slid her feet into her flip-flops, picked up a couple of towels, and walked out the door to head for Cammie’s cabin.

At the door, she knocked, and the door opened. Cammie wore a red bikini with a towel wrapped around her waist.

“Are you hoping to see Dusty with that on?”

Cammie grinned. “He’s seen me in less.”

“Oh, dear Lord.” Eden laughed.

Later, as they lounged around the pool, Eden sat up to apply more sunscreen. As fair as she was, she’d look like a lobster if

she didn't. She glanced around and saw Ian walking along the walkway surrounding the fence of the pool. He hadn't looked her way, but she drank in the sight of him.

"There's Ian," Cammie said.

"I see him." Eden didn't take her eyes off him. "Did I tell you he has one hell of a body? He has an amazing six-pack stomach."

"Is that all that's amazing?" Cammie teased.

Eden looked at her and laughed. "Oh, hell no. Hung would be an understatement and he knows how to use every inch of it."

"Oh, God. I want to have sex." Cammie sat up and glanced around. "Where's Dusty?"

Eden burst out laughing. "You're a slut."

"Hell, yeah, I am."

"Are you going to have a problem leaving him?"

"I don't know, Eden. I really don't. I have so much fun with him, and he's hot in bed too. I sure didn't come here looking for a relationship."

"Isn't he afraid of getting fired?"

"He never said, so I guess not."

"You both need to be careful. I know you'd hate to see him lose his job."

"I would. I'll talk to him about it. I don't want him getting into trouble, but I'm not sure I could stay away from him."

"I get it." She stared at Ian as he walked away.

"Damn, he has a great ass, too."

"Stop. You're not helping me by pointing out his qualities. Point out his flaws."

"What flaws?" Cammie laughed.

"True." Eden smiled.

They stayed at the pool for a few hours then walked to their

cabins, agreeing to get together for dinner at the lodge later. She hoped Ian would lead the camping trip tomorrow.

Tuesday morning, Ian placed the saddle on Breeze's back and watched as guests entered the barn. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Eden, but yet, he was. When he saw her and Cammie enter, his heart hit his stomach. Was it possible to have strong feelings for her so fast? He never let a female guest get to him, but she had. All she had to do was look at him with those green eyes, and he was a goner.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she walked to a horse and mounted it. She looked around and her eyes met his. They stared at each other until she glanced away from him. He blew out a breath, mounted his horse, and placed his forearms on the saddle horn to watch everyone, and help if needed.

He sighed with relief when he saw Bonnie get on a horse by herself, then frowned. She sure learned fast. Had she been conning him?

"If everyone is ready, we'll move out," Chris told them. "This is an overnight trip. It won't take us long to get there. If you've been on this before, you'll know what's expected. Tents and blankets are in the saddle rolls. You'll need them. Let's go. Single file."

Ian watched Chip lead the group out and noticed that Eden was at the front of the line. He knew she did that to stay away from him. Damn it. He wanted her again, but was it worth losing his job over? He didn't think so.

As he rode out of the barn, he noticed Bonnie right in front of him. He shook his head. He was going to have to do as Chip suggested. Be cruel to be kind. There was no way anything could or would happen between them. He did his best to ignore her, hoping she'd take a hint.

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bonnie, please."

Ian nodded but didn't say anything. Maybe if he didn't speak, she'd move on to someone else. He hoped so, anyway.

When they reached the camping area, Chip signaled for them to stop. He turned in the saddle to address the group.

"You can dismount, remove the saddles, and set your tents up. Please stay close to the firepit. It can get chilly here at night because of the higher elevation."

Ian watched everyone do as Chip told them. He saw Eden laughing with her friend. Apparently, she wasn't bothered about not speaking with him. He climbed off the horse, removed the saddle, then led the horse to the post to tie him. He set the saddle under the rail, and out of the way of the horse, so he wouldn't step on it.

After removing his sleeping bag, he snapped it out by the pit, then strolled off into the woods to gather kindling and firewood. As he gathered it up, he heard a twig snap and clenched his jaw. If it was Bonnie, she was in for a rude awakening.

"Ian?"

He turned and was surprised to see Eden.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about Saturday."

He huffed. "I am too. I shouldn't have walked out like that."

"I get it. I was angry too. Is that why you didn't lead the trail ride yesterday?"

"No. Jaxon had me check the fence since Ken wasn't feeling well."

"Oh, I was sure it was because you didn't want to face me."

"I didn't, but that isn't why I wasn't there."

"I see. Okay, I'll leave you alone." She turned to go.

"Eden?"

"Yes?"

“I wish you didn’t have to, but I’m not sure how this is going to do either of us any good. You’re leaving soon. What good can come from any of this?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Right. I’m attracted to you, but there is no sense in being together. I am not into flings. If I were, I’d be more than happy to be with you, but I’m not. I’m into relationships and I know I can’t have that with you.”

“I thought about cutting my vacation short, but I don’t want to.”

“Maybe you should. Get it over with,” he snapped.

“Do you think I like the idea of going?” She placed her hands on her hips.

“Why wouldn’t you? You have a job that you love and once you return to it, the Bur Oak, along with me, will just be a memory.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. There is nothing you can do. Just go back to the group. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Once we get back to the ranch, we’ll stay away from each other. It’s for the best.”

She stared at him, and he wanted to kick his ass when he saw tears in her eyes, then she turned and walked out of the woods. Well, what did she expect? This would never work for them. The day was going to come when she’d leave, and he had to prepare himself for it. He hoped he didn’t see her the last night she was here. It would be better if he just accepted it and let her go.

Chapter Five

Eden was miserable. She should never have gotten involved with him. It still surprised her that she had. She didn't sleep around, but one look at Ian Brennan and she wanted him. A man, who in her mind, should never appeal to her, but did.

"Are you okay?" Cammie asked her when she sat beside her on the log.

"No. I apologized to him, and he did the same, but he also said there was no way we could be together. He said since I'm leaving, there was just no sense in it, and once we return to the ranch, we'll stay away from each other."

"I'm so sorry, Eden, but he is right. You're going back to Chicago and he's here. Do you want a long-distance relationship?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I do know that I hate the thought of never seeing him again."

"I certainly understand that. I feel the same about Dusty, but I have a feeling he wouldn't want that type of relationship, either. Let's just get through the rest of this vacation, and we can get out of here."

"That's not as appealing as it used to be." Eden sighed.

She saw Ian come from the woods, carrying firewood, and watched him dump it beside the pit, then he walked to where Chip stood, and talked with him.

"He really is a gorgeous man," Cammie said. "Tall, dark, and handsome all rolled into one. Not to mention those eyes."

"Yes, and I'd best stop thinking about him. It will never happen again."

"I was hoping when we returned to Chicago, we'd be all rested, and happy. But we won't be."

"No, we won't. I have barely slept since Saturday night and if the next three weeks drag, I'll go insane." Eden sighed looking at Ian, but he never looked her way.

After a dinner of hot dogs and hamburgers, everyone relaxed around the fire. All she wanted to do was crawl into her tent, and not come out until they were ready to head back.

As everyone sat around the fire, Eden looked up at the millions of stars.

“It’s just beautiful here,” she said.

“Yes, it is. The air is so clean. Don’t get me wrong, I love Chicago, but you don’t see a sky like this at night in the city,” Cammie said.

“Could you live here?”

“What?”

“I’m just curious. Could you?”

“I don’t know. I’d miss home.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Could you?” Cammie asked her.

Eden looked across the firepit at Ian. His eyes met hers, but he looked away.

“I honestly don’t know.” She sighed.

The following day, after everything was cleaned up and the horses were saddled, Ian mounted his horse, and the group headed back to the ranch.

When thunder rumbled overhead, he saw some of the guests get fidgety.

“Don’t worry. It’s probably just a pop-up shower. Stay in line. You’ll be fine.” He rode his horse along the line to check on everyone. Some looked as if they were going into full panic mode. “Relax. The horses can feel your tension. As long as you stay calm, they will.”

He stayed beside the line as they rode past. He watched Eden go by without even looking at him. When the sky opened, rain poured down, soaking everyone. He watched as some of the riders laughed, while others were trying not to

panic.

“Chip, get them going. This is going to be a hell of a storm.”

“Okay, everyone, we’re going to pick up the pace. Stick with me. Your horses will keep up with mine. Just hold on to the reins, and saddle horn if you need to. We need to get out of this.”

As soon as Chip finished speaking, lightning lit up the sky, and thunder cracked overhead.

“Go,” Ian shouted and watched as the riders nudged their horses to run behind Chip. Ian knew it wasn’t the safest thing to do in having unexperienced riders run their horse, but being out in the middle of a field with lightning striking wasn’t either.

He saw Eden nudge her horse and take off, with Cammie behind her. At least they knew how to ride. He noticed Bonnie doing the same. Yep, she had conned him. Shaking his head, he grinned. He should have known.

When they reached an open pasture, rain pelted down, and lightning streaked across the sky. He saw Chip get his horse to go a little faster, and the others followed. Ian fell in line behind them.

He could see Eden ahead, running her horse, and he saw her hat blow off and land in a puddle. He spurred his horse and caught up. He saw her turn her horse around to go back for the hat. He reached it before she did, and without getting out of the saddle, he leaned over, picked up the hat, and rode to her.

“Thank you. I don’t know what good it’s going to do me now. My hair is soaked.”

“So is your hat,” he said, as he leaned over, and put the wet hat on her head.

She hissed in a breath as water from the hat rolled down her face and the back of her neck.

“Gee, thanks for that.” She glared at him.

“Whatever. Get going,” he growled.

“I’m going,” she snapped, nudged her horse, and rode off.

“Hardhead,” he murmured. He spurred his horse and took off after her.

When he caught her, she looked over at him, then away. She nudged her horse to get it moving faster. Ian shook his head. No matter how good a rider she was, that horse would never keep up with Breeze. With a grin, he spurred his horse, and ran after her. He caught her and when she looked at him again, he touched the brim of his hat, nudged the horse, and left her. He glanced back over his shoulder to see her trying to catch him, but he pulled away. He held up four fingers as he rode off and grinned. Round four was his.

Eden gasped when she saw him hold his fingers up and she knew he was telling her that round four went to him. Damn that man! He loved getting the better of her.

“I’m never going to win a round with that man,” she muttered.

She nudged her horse to get it to run faster but there was no way she’d ever catch up to Ian. That horse was flying. She could see the mud flying up behind it. The rain pelted her face as it blew into her. Her hat wasn’t any protection at all.

Ian was so hard to understand. One minute, he’d be nice and the next, he was snapping her head off, and that would make her snap back at him. If she were being honest though, he was probably going through the same emotions she was about their situation. If she knew how to fix it, she would. But she just didn’t see how.

When she entered the barn with the other riders, she didn’t see Ian anywhere. How did he cool his horse that fast? Then she saw him ride in from the opposite end. He looked so good on that beautiful horse. She loved watching him ride since they moved as one. He was definitely a cowboy. Through and through.

He dismounted and began cooling the horse. He led the horse toward her, but turned around to go back before he

reached her. Eden clenched her teeth. So, that's how it was going to go, huh? She had never met a more stubborn man in her life. She shook her head. Stubborn seemed like such an understatement when it came to Ian Brennan.

"I'm about frozen now," Cammie said from beside her.

"I know. That rain makes it chilly." Eden dismounted and handed the reins off to a ranch hand.

"I guess we have to make a run for it to the cabins," Cammie said.

"Cam, we're already wet," Eden said, laughing.

"Oh, yeah." Cammie chuckled. "Well, let's go then."

"Okay," Eden said but didn't move as she watched Ian walking along the aisle with his horse. "Damn that man can fill out a pair of Wranglers. Front and back."

"You're really going to miss him, aren't you?"

"Yes, but he's right. I hate it, but he's right. We have to stay away from each other. Nothing can come of this." She sighed.

The night of the dance, Eden swore she wasn't going, but found herself going through her closet for something to wear. As she moved the clothes along the rod, her cellphone buzzed. She pulled it from her pocket and grinned.

"Hey, Cam."

"What are you wearing?"

"Right now?" Eden snorted.

"Smartass. Tonight."

"I'm thinking jeans and a T-shirt. I know I'd be more comfortable."

"I'm glad you decided to go."

"Me too. As much as I hate to admit it, I want to see Ian. Even though he won't talk to me."

"I wish I knew what to tell you to do."

"I wish you did too. Hey, I'm going to grab a shower."

“Okay, I’ll come over around seven. I’m hungry too.”

“Me too. Okay, see you then.” Eden disconnected and tossed the phone onto the bed.

After finding a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, she placed them on the bed, got clean panties out, along with a matching bra, then entered the bathroom to shower.

As she stood in the stall, she thought about Ian, and tears filled her eyes. She’d been in relationships before, but just being with Ian once was enough to make her see those other men didn’t mean a thing. All she thought about was him.

A tear rolled down her cheek and she angrily wiped it away. She had to leave him. Her life wasn’t here, and his wasn’t there. She wished she’d never come to the Bur Oak ranch.

Ian had no plans to go to the dance tonight. He didn’t want to see Eden.

“Who the hell are you trying to kid? You see her every time you close your eyes,” he said.

There was no way he was going to that dance tonight. It wouldn’t be the first time he stayed home, or he could go to Dewey’s. He always had a good time anytime he went there.

With his mind made up, he headed for the bathroom to shower, then he’d head to Dewey’s and have a few beers.

At eight o’clock, he entered the barn and swore under his breath that he had no fucking willpower where that woman was concerned. He should be in Dewey’s having a beer and maybe talking to a pretty woman, but no, his truck drove him here. He huffed a laugh. It wasn’t the truck’s fault.

He leaned against the doorjamb of the barn and glanced around. It looked like a lot of the guests were here tonight. He hadn’t seen Eden yet though. He did, however, see Bonnie heading for him. He straightened up when she reached him.

“Hello, Ian.”

“Ma’am. Are you having a good time?”

“I’d have a better time if you’d dance with me.”

Ian shook his head. “I’m not much for dancing.” *Liar! He’d love to hold Eden on the dance floor.*

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” she said, as she tilted her head and smiled.

“I’m sure you’ll be glad to get back home.”

“You could make this a memorable night for me.”

“Ma’am—”

“Bonnie.”

Ian sighed. “*Ma’am*, I’ve done everything I can to let you know I am not interested.”

“Fine, but I know you were with Eden. I saw you go into her cabin last week.”

“And?” Ian raised an eyebrow.

Bonnie gasped, turned, and stalked off. *Well, that went well.* He was glad she was leaving because he was sure she’d cause problems if she stayed longer.

He walked to the buffet to get something to eat and that was when he saw Eden on the dance floor in a line dance. She looked like she was having fun. At least one of them was.

After filling his plate, he walked out of the barn and headed to his truck. He opened the door, and sat on the seat sideways, put his feet on the running board, and ate. He moaned at the first bite. Damn, Rosita could cook.

Once he finished, he walked to the trash can outside of the barn and tossed his paper plate into it, then strolled back to his truck. He didn’t want to go back inside, but he also didn’t want to go home to sit around and stare at the walls.

He got back into his truck but left the door open. As he sat there, he could hear the bullfrogs and crickets chirping. Stars filled the sky. Sighing, he decided to just go home. He turned on the seat, and reached for the door, but just as he was about to close it, he saw Eden emerge from the barn, and lean against the wall, with her hands behind her, and stare up at the night

sky.

He knew she didn't know he was here. He needed to go, but he stepped from the truck, closed the door, and walked toward her. She looked his way when she heard the truck door close.

"Ian? I didn't think you were here."

"I haven't been very long. I wasn't going to come here tonight."

"Why not?"

He shook his head, blew out a breath, and looked at her.

"You know the answer to that. I was going to go to Dewey's but ended up here."

"I see."

"Are you leaving?"

"No. I just needed some fresh air."

He leaned against the barn beside her.

"Two more weeks," he said.

"Yes," she whispered.

Neither spoke for a few minutes, then he looked at her.

"Will you go for a ride with me?"

"A ride? Where?"

"Just come with me." He reached for her hand, and after a slight hesitation, she placed hers in his and he led her to his truck.

He opened the passenger door for her and held her hand while she climbed into the cab, then he shoved it closed, strolled around the front, and got in behind the wheel.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Just trust me."

"I do," she said quietly.

He nodded, started the truck, and drove out of the Bur Oak. He drove to Clifton, then onto his property.

“Where are we?”

“My place. I want to show you something.”

“Okay.”

When he drove past his house, security lights lit up the area. She sat up and looked around.

“You have a nice place here, Ian.”

“Thanks.”

He drove the truck through the open gate and followed the dirt road up to the north pasture. The truck bounced over the ruts, and he saw Eden grab the handle above the door.

“Sorry, but the rain we had made this a mess.”

“How much of this belongs to you?”

“Twenty acres. It’s not much, but it’s mine.”

He turned off the road and drove through the tall grass, then he stopped in the middle of the field. He shut the truck off, opened his door, stepped out, and strode around the front to her side. Then he opened her door, put his hand out for her, and helped her step down. He led her to the back of the truck by the tailgate.

“Shit. I’ll be right back.” He walked back to the driver’s side, reached behind the seat, and removed a blanket then he returned to her. “Hold this for a second.”

Eden took the blanket from him, and he lowered the tailgate. He stepped up into the bed of the truck, took the blanket from her and laid it out flat in the bed, then he turned, and put his hand out to her. She put her hand in his, and he lifted her up into the bed.

“Come sit down.” He helped her sit on the blanket. “Now, lie back.”

“Lie back?”

“Please, trust me.”

She nodded and laid back on the blanket. He lay beside her and looked at her.

“Look up,” he whispered.

When she did, she gasped when she saw the billions of stars filling the sky.

“Oh, my. It’s so gorgeous.”

“Yes. This is why I love it here. Nothing can replace that.”

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in my life.”

“Neither have I,” he said, and she turned to look at him.

“Why hasn’t some woman snatched you up?”

“I never found the right one. I was in a few relationships, but none of them amounted to anything. Why aren’t you married?”

“I rarely dated. I was so busy with school and then finding a law firm to work for. I want to get married, though.”

“Any siblings?”

“No. You?”

“I have a sister in Virginia.”

“How did you become a cowboy?”

Ian chuckled. “I was born into it. My grandfather had a large spread, but he got cancer, and the ranch was sold. My dad didn’t want it. His heart wasn’t in it after gramps died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, darlin’.” He stared into her eyes.

“Ian—”

He leaned toward her, pressed his lips to hers, cutting her off. He had to have her. For as long as she was here, he had to be with her. Damn the consequences. He moaned when her arms wrapped around his neck. He raised his lips and stared into her eyes.

“I want you so much, Eden. I know it’s wrong, and it won’t go anywhere, but while you’re here, I want to be with you.”

A tear rolled from the corner of her eye.

“I want that too, but—”

“Let’s talk about it later. I want you too much right now.”

Ian put his lips over hers again and kissed her deeply. He moved his tongue into her mouth then almost jumped out of the truck bed when her hand slid over the material covering his hard cock as it strained the zipper. She moved her hands to his belt buckle, unhooked it, unsnapped his jeans, and lowered the zipper. Her hand reached inside his boxer briefs to wrap around his cock. When she squeezed it, he groaned and took her lips in hard kiss.

He slid his hands to the bottom of her T-shirt and lifted it over her head. He tossed it over the side of the truck, and she laughed.

“You had better be able to find that.”

He chuckled. “I will. Later.”

He unhooked the front clasp of her bra, and her beautiful breasts were exposed to him. He leaned down and took a nipple between his teeth then sucked it into his mouth. She started moving her legs back and forth in impatience. He grinned against her breast.

“You’re impatient.”

“It’s been a week. I need you so much. Please.”

“I don’t want to rush this.”

“Please, please rush this.”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ian swiftly removed her shoes and socks then stripped off her jeans. He tossed everything over the side of the truck. Then he stood, removed his T-shirt, took his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, and got a condom out. He toed off his boots, removed his socks, shoved his jeans, and underwear off, then after opening the packet, rolled it on. He got on his knees between her legs and slid his finger along her slit.

“You’re wet.”

“I need you, damn it. You’re pissing me off, Brennan,” she

snapped.

Ian chuckled. "I'd hate to see you in a courtroom."

She laughed, then he kissed her, and slid his tongue into her mouth as he inched his way into her body. She wrapped her legs around his waist and moved her hips in rhythm with him. He slid his hand under her butt and pulled her tighter against him, then picked up the pace.

"Ian, please," she whispered in his ear, and it sent him over. He slammed into her over and over again until he felt her clenching around his dick. She gasped, then cried out. They laughed when it echoed off the mountains. Ian moved harder and faster against her. When she came again, he tumbled over with her. He put his face in the crook of her neck and tried to catch his breath. Damn, it was so good with her.

Eden raked her fingers through the damp ends of his hair while she tried to catch her breath. It was so good with him. How was she going to leave him? She didn't have a choice. She had a job she loved, and she was sure she was going to take the partnership. This shouldn't have happened. All they did was prolong the inevitable.

"I can feel you pulling away," he murmured.

"I'm just wondering what we're doing, Ian. We said we would stay away from each other, then you bring me up here. You knew this would happen."

"You think I brought you up here for sex?" He raised his head to look at her.

"Why else? You had a blanket."

"For your information, I keep that blanket in the truck in case I get stranded in the winter. I brought you up here to show you the stars. To show you how beautiful it is here in Montana."

"I know how beautiful it is, but we know I'm leaving, and this shouldn't have happened again." She shook her head. "God, Ian, you knew this would happen," she repeated.

She watched as he jerked on his underwear, jeans, and shirt, then sat, pulled on his socks, and boots, and jumped out of the truck bed and slammed the tailgate shut.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting a flashlight so I can find your damn clothes,” he snarled.

“Well, I didn’t ask you to throw them all over the place,” she snapped.

He turned around and walked back to her.

“You said I knew this would happen, which I didn’t. I’m not that type of man, but I also didn’t hear you say no,” he said quietly.

Eden hissed in a breath. “So, it’s my fault?”

“You know what? I think it is. If you *had* said no, we wouldn’t have had sex.” He shrugged.

“Oh, my God! Save me from a man’s way of thinking. Give me my clothes and take me back to the Bur Oak.”

He walked around the truck with his flashlight then came to the truck and threw her clothes into the bed.

“Get dressed so I can take you back.” He got into the cab and slammed the door.

Eden dressed as quickly as she could but had to keep wiping the tears away. Why did they do this? Did they enjoy torturing each other? They knew they couldn’t be together, but they wanted to be so badly.

“We can’t,” she whispered and hiccupped. Then she climbed over the tailgate, she’d be damned before she’d ask him to lower it, jumped down, and walked to the passenger side. She opened the door, climbed in, slammed the door, pulled her seatbelt on, and folded her arms across her chest.

He started the truck and drove her back to the Bur Oak with nothing said between them. He drove to her cabin and pulled to a stop in front of it. She opened the door and stepped out. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

She couldn't say a word as tears rolled down her face. She closed the door, walked across the porch, and entered the cabin. She quietly shut the door, then walked to the sofa, sat, and sobbed.

Monday morning, Ian entered the barn to see guests listening to Chip explain about the trail ride they were taking. He folded his arms, and looked over the group, and tightened his lips when he saw Eden. He'd been hoping she wasn't going on the ride, but there she was. Looking as beautiful as ever with her long hair in a ponytail and painted on jeans. Her T-shirt stretched tight across her breasts. Her perfect breasts. He groaned, turned, and mounted his horse.

Damn it. How was he supposed to see her and not want her? He hoped the next two weeks went fast, then she'd go back to where she belonged, because it wasn't here.

As he watched everyone mounting their horse, he saw one of the ranch hands flirting with Eden. Nope. Not gonna happen. Ian nudged his horse and rode over to them.

"Is everything all right here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I was just adjusting the stirrups for Ms. Fairchild," the man said.

"Is that a problem, Mr. Brennan?" Eden asked.

"No. Not a problem at all, Ms. Fairchild. Just get it done so we can go." He turned the horse and rode back to where he'd been. "Idiot," he muttered.

The riders got into line and followed Chip out the doors, while Ian stayed at the back. He noticed Eden was close to the front with her friend. That was fine. He didn't need her anywhere near him.

"I've never been on a horse in my life," a female voice said from beside him.

"Yes, ma'am. It can be a little intimidating."

"I bet you've been riding all your life. The way you sit in the saddle. You're so relaxed."

“I was probably riding before I could walk.”

The woman laughed. “I believe it. I’m Cathy Mercer. My husband, Steve, is up ahead. He’s ridden before. I told him to go first so if I fall out of the saddle, he won’t see me and can’t make fun of me.” She grinned.

Ian chuckled. “Would he do that?”

“In a damn heartbeat.” Cathy nudged her horse and fell into line.

Ian was happy she wasn’t flirting with him. Every week it seemed a new woman would come on to him. He wasn’t vain, but while here working, he didn’t need the added pressure.

He rode behind the line, keeping an eye on the riders. They seemed to be moving along just fine. As he looked along the group, he saw Eden turn in the saddle and look at him. He stared back at her, then raised an eyebrow. She flattened her lips and turned back to face the front. He knew he was baiting her, but it would probably be for the best if he kept her pissed at him. That way, when she did leave, she’d be happy to get away from him.

That sure didn’t sit well with him, but it would be easier letting her go if she didn’t give a rat’s ass about him. He knew he’d have problems once she left, and he’d do his best to get over it, but keeping her angry would make it easier on her. At least that’s what he kept telling himself. Who knew? He’d never understand how a woman’s mind worked.

He grinned as he thought about Jaxon telling him Presley was mad at him.

“For what?” Ian asked.

Jaxon shook his head. “I have no idea. I asked her what I did, and I got that, ‘well, if you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you’ shit.”

Ian laughed. “You’ll figure it out or she’ll get over it and you’ll never know what was wrong. There’s no figuring out how a woman thinks.”

Jaxon had agreed and went in search of his wife. Ian was

sure that even though Jaxon didn't know what he'd done, he'd still be kissing Presley's ass.

"And we men think we rule the world," Ian muttered as he followed the group.

The sun beat down mercilessly as they rode along the trail through the pasture. Ian pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his brow. Sweat rolled down his chest and back. His T-shirt was sticking to him.

He saw Eden stop her horse, take a water bottle from a saddlebag, and pour water on a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. He clenched his teeth as he watched her move the cloth around her neck, and the top of her chest.

"Son of a bitch," he swore. Was she doing that on purpose? He nudged Breeze to ride up to her. She glanced over at him when he reached her, but she ignored him. He had no idea what he was going to say to her anyway.

How was he going to get through the rest of her vacation? Maybe he should have taken some time off, but he knew he wouldn't. They were too busy, and he had all damn winter off. From the second week of September to the first of March, he was off since the ranch was closed, but the Callahans still paid the staff. They wanted them to be happy to return for next season. It was rare that anyone took time off during the time the ranch was open, but it was allowed as long as someone was able to cover for them. Ian never took time off when the ranch was in operation. He hated letting anyone down. Most of the staff worked the week after the last guests left so they could close, but a few ranch hands remained at the ranch to care for the horses and cattle.

He sighed. He knew, even if he did take time off, he'd still think about Eden, so what good would it do him? It was going to kill him when she left. How had these feelings happened so fast?

Chapter Six

Eden followed the line of riders as they rode down the embankment to the creek. She shouldn't have come on this trip. It was too hard seeing Ian. He rode his horse along the line but always turned around before getting to her.

"It's so hot today," Cammie said from beside her.

"I know. I can't wait to get to the creek. I think I'll jump in." Eden smiled.

"You and me both." Cammie stared at her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. We're staying away from each other." She shrugged.

"You might be staying away from each other, but you are not okay."

"I will be. Don't worry about me. I've been through broken hearts before."

Cammie didn't say anything as they dismounted by the creek.

Once there, Eden squatted, filled her water bottle, dipped the handkerchief in the water, and placed it on the back of her neck. It was so hot that the water wasn't even cool.

After a few minutes, she heard Chip tell everyone to mount up so they could head back. Cammie mounted her horse and rode back to the group while Eden placed the cloth in the water again, removed her hat, and dabbed the sweat from her forehead. She glanced up when she heard the gravel crunching at the creek bed, and saw Ian on his horse, watching her. He had his forearms folded on the saddle horn.

"Let's go," he said.

She stood up so fast, she got a head rush.

"I'm trying to cool off," she said between clenched teeth.

"Do it faster. We need to get back and get out of this heat."

"Why do you have to be such a prick?"

He shrugged. "It's in my nature. Get on the damn horse, *Ms. Fairchild.*"

She tightened her lips at how he'd said her name, then she mounted the horse, and turned it to ride up the embankment.

"You can kiss my ass... *Mr. Brennan.*" She nudged the horse and rode up the incline then spurred her horse into a run to catch the group. Damn him. She wiped tears away as she rode away from him. He was angry, she got that, but he didn't have to be a dick about it.

Ian watched her ride off and could kick his ass for hurting her. He didn't like talking to her like that, but it was for the best. If he could keep himself angry at her, maybe he wouldn't want her so much and his heart wouldn't break when she left him. *You just keep telling yourself that.*

Once they returned to the ranch, he had chores to oversee, and that was fine with him. The less he saw of Eden Fairchild, the better.

"*Ms. Fairchild.* Damn, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

When they reached the barn, everyone dismounted, handed their horses off, and walked out of the barn. Ian saw Eden and Cammie leaving and she never looked back.

Why would she? He treated her like shit. He shook his head. Cruel to be kind. Is that what that was? Being a prick to her was being cruel to be kind?

Ian knew if he kept her angry at him, she'd stay away from him. No one liked having their feelings hurt, but he had to do it with Eden. He had to keep her away from him.

After cooling Breeze, he led him to the stall, put him inside and filled his bucket with oats and got him fresh water. Ian patted the horse on the neck and left the barn, then walked to the other one to make sure the men were doing what they were supposed to.

Thursday morning, Ian led Breeze out of the stall, and tied him up while he got the tack. He tossed the blanket onto the

horse's back, threw the saddle on, and tightened the cinch. Breeze took the sleeve of his T-shirt in his mouth and tugged on it.

"Stop," Ian snapped, but the horse pulled harder. "Damn it, quit it, Breeze."

"Looks like a big group on this trip," Chip said from beside him.

Ian looked around. "Yeah. Is everyone here?"

"I think so. I have fifteen on the sheet." Chip looked over the group and did a head count. "We're missing two. Ms. Fairchild and Ms. Hart aren't here yet."

Ian looked at the riders, then saw Eden and her friend enter the barn. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her. She looked so good in her jeans and a green shirt that matched her eyes. He was dying.

Chip walked to them, and Ian heard him telling them to pick their horses and they'd be ready to go.

"I hope we didn't make you wait," Eden said, shifting her eyes to Ian, then back to Chip.

"No, we're just getting ready to head out," Chip told her.

Ian saw her smile at Chip, then walked to a horse; the same palomino she always picked. She mounted it, and a ranch hand adjusted the stirrups for her. Ian wanted to throttle him when she smiled at him, and he grinned back.

"I'll fire your ass just for the hell of it," he murmured, then shook his head. He was being an idiot, but he didn't like seeing her smiling at any other man. Only him. He huffed. She sure didn't want to smile at him anymore.

With a deep sigh, he mounted his horse, and rode through the group. Some of the women smiled at him, and not in a friendly way. More of a 'let's have sex' way. There were times it drove him crazy. Now he knew how women felt when men came onto them and made them uncomfortable. Turnabout was fair play, he supposed.

He nodded but didn't stop to talk with them. He didn't want

to give them any ideas. He mentally shook his head. Sometimes they already *had* ideas. Like Bonnie. He was sure he would have heard something by now from Devin or Jaxon about getting involved with Eden, through Bonnie.

It wouldn't have surprised him a bit. He knew he'd pissed her off, and by acting like it didn't bother him when she told him she knew, he was sure he was number one on her shit list. She wasn't the first woman to let him know she was interested, but she was a little more pushy than necessary, and it had made him damned uneasy.

He listened as Chip explained how the trip would go. When he mentioned possible showers, Ian looked at Eden to see her looking at him. He smirked when he saw a small smile lift her lips, then he looked away. He'd never forget that day. It was the first time he'd kissed her. Mud and all.

He removed his hat, raked his fingers through his hair, and resettled it on his head. It was going to be a hot day and that's why there was a possibility of thunderstorms. Ian hoped they held off. It was bad enough to move cattle with inexperienced riders, but in the rain and mud, it would be worse.

Chip told everyone to line up, and then he led them out of the barn. Ian watched the line go by, so he could bring up the rear. He touched the brim of his hat to two women who smiled at him, then he saw Eden staring at him. He raised his eyebrow, and she looked away.

As he followed the last rider out, he put his sunglasses on and hoped he could stay away from her.

Eden removed her hat and fanned herself with it. They'd just left the barn and she was so hot. Sweat beaded on her upper lip and trickled down between her breasts. She'd melt by the time they got to the pasture. She snorted. She remembered Ian telling her she wouldn't melt. God, she missed him. She shook her head.

"If you miss him when he's close, how is it going to feel when he isn't?" she muttered.

“You’re talking to yourself,” Cammie said. “You must have that man on your mind.”

Eden sighed. “I do and I shouldn’t.”

“All you have to do is get through the rest of this week, and the next one. Then we’ll be gone.”

God that hurt! So bad that she couldn’t breathe for a minute. She placed her hand over her heart and sucked in deep breaths.

“Are you okay?” Cammie asked with concern.

Eden nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

“I thought you were going to pass out.”

“It must be the heat. I’ll be fine.” She continued to fan herself with her hat and noticed she wasn’t the only one.

It looked like everyone was miserable with the heat. She hoped it would get cooler once they reached the higher elevation. It would be a wonderful reprieve. She brought her swimsuit since she found out the creek had a swimming hole, and they could use it. As hot as it was, she might get in and not get out.

Once they reached the campsite, everyone dismounted, and sighed in unison. Eden chuckled along with everyone else.

She removed the saddle and blanket, then took her bedroll over toward the firepit. After picking her spot beside Cammie, she erected the tent, then sat on the log beside the pit, and watched the guests talking and laughing.

“I’m so glad you told me to bring my suit,” Cammie said when she sat down beside her.

“I’m happy I did too. I am getting in that creek very soon.”

“I’ll be right behind you.” Cammie sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I am going to miss this place.”

“This place or Dusty?”

“Both. Is it possible to fall for someone so quickly? Wait. What am I saying? You know the answer to that.”

“Stop.”

Cammie shrugged. “You, Eden Leigh Fairchild, know I’m telling the truth.”

Eden sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“God, what a mess we’ve gotten ourselves into.”

“I know. Who would have thought that we’d be so miserable that we want to leave early?”

“Really. I remember you bitching about me booking us here.”

“I should still bitch at you. Because I came here with you, I fell for a cowboy I can’t have.”

“I should bitch at myself.” Cammie sighed.

“You got that right. Why did I let you talk me into this?”

Cammie snorted out a laugh, and Eden laughed with her.

“Well, at least we can be miserable together.”

Eden put her arm around Cammie’s shoulder and hugged her. If she was feeling about leaving Dusty, even half of what she felt about leaving Ian, she had to be hurting too.

“We can make it. We’re strong.”

Cammie nodded. “We got this.”

At least Cammie didn’t have to see Dusty on the activities. Eden had no choice since Ian led most of the rides she went on.

After a lunch consisting of sandwiches and potato salad, Eden climbed into her tent, stripped off her clothes and pulled her swimsuit on, then picked up the robe she brought, slipped it on, slid her feet into her flip-flops, and exited the tent.

She waved at Cammie to let her know she was going to the creek.

“I’ll be there soon,” Cammie called out to her.

Eden nodded and made her way to the creek. She looked over her shoulder but didn't see Ian anywhere. She hoped he was staying cool wherever he was.

As she followed the path through the trees, Eden could feel the temperature rising with every step. When she finally reached the creek and saw him standing at the edge, she understood why he had come here. The sun beat down, mercilessly heating up everything in its path.

She found herself mesmerized by his movements as he removed his T-shirt and squatted at the water's edge. He dipped a handkerchief into the cool water, wrung it out, and gently wiped the sweat from his chest. She couldn't blame him; it was unbearably hot. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, and she watched as he removed his hat and ran his fingers through his damp hair, causing it to curl at the nape of his neck. He looked so lost in thought and she wondered what he was thinking.

She must have made a sound because he turned to look at her. His piercing eyes quickly scanned her from head to toe before settling back on her face. He got to his feet, pulling on his shirt before walking toward her. The heat radiating off him was almost suffocating.

He stopped in front of her, and Eden could feel the intensity in his gaze. Her heart fluttered as he glanced at her lips before looking back into her eyes.

"Have a nice swim," he said curtly before turning and walking back toward the campsite.

Eden closed her eyes and let out a sigh. Ian Brennan was infuriatingly unpredictable. One minute they were getting along, the next he was avoiding her like the plague. But no matter how much they aggravated each other; she couldn't deny the intense attraction she felt for him.

Feeling suddenly self-conscious, she glanced around before removing her robe and laying it across a nearby rock. She kicked off her flip-flops and took a few steps toward the water, ready to cool off in its inviting embrace.

But just as she was about to dip her toes in, she heard gravel crunching and turned to see Ian storming toward her. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes were dark with anger.

“Ian?”

He grabbed her arms and jerked her against his body then he slammed his lips down on hers. She moaned and pulled her arms free to wrap them around his neck. He groaned when she pushed her hips against him. He slowly raised his lips and gazed into her eyes.

“I miss you so much,” he whispered.

“I miss you too. Please come to my cabin tomorrow night.”

“If you’re sure. Don’t change your mind once I get there.”

“I won’t. I want you way too much to do that.”

“All right. I’ll be there at seven-thirty.” He kissed her again, turned and left her.

Eden placed her hand over her lips to feel them tingling. She wished it was Friday.

All the way back on Friday, Ian couldn’t keep his eyes off her. Anytime she looked at him, she’d smile, and he wanted to take her into the woods and have his way with her, but he would tonight. He knew she wouldn’t change her mind.

She was leaving him in a week, and he wanted tonight to be memorable. He knew he’d never forget it and hoped she wouldn’t either. He wished he had the balls to ask her to stay, but he knew she wouldn’t, and his heart would just shatter.

That evening, after he got home, he showered, shaved, and dressed, then walked out of the bedroom, turned around and headed for the nightstand. He opened the drawer and removed a few condoms.

“Damn, do you think you have that much stamina?” he said aloud. He shrugged and put them in the front pocket of his jeans. “One can only hope.”

A few minutes later, he was driving past the registration

cabin, and to the barn. He drove around the back of it, exited the truck, and strode through the barn. It was empty since it was past seven.

He strolled past several cabins then reached hers. He walked up the steps and knocked on the door. It opened almost immediately, and she stood there in a silk robe.

“Hi—” He was cut off when she grabbed his belt loops and pulled him into the cabin. She kicked the door shut, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Ian wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her. Her legs encircled his waist. She removed his hat and tossed it to the sofa. He groaned when she rubbed against him then he carried her to the bedroom. He placed her on the bed and stared at her. As he watched, she untied the robe, and spread it open. He almost came looking at her laying there naked.

“You’re killing me,” he said.

She smiled, sat up, and removed the robe, then she crooked her finger at him.

“Come here, cowboy.”

Grinning, he toed off his boots, unbuckled his belt, and unsnapped his jeans. He removed the condoms from the pocket and tossed them on the bed. She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Someone feels awfully confident.”

“Hopeful,” he said, and chuckled.

“We’ve got all night, right?”

“I’ll have to leave before sunrise, but yeah, we have all night.”

She got on her knees, hooked her fingers into his belt loops, and tugged him closer to the bed. As she looked into his eyes, she lowered the zipper, shoved his jeans and boxer briefs down, and his hard cock jutted out. Without taking her eyes off him, she slid her mouth down over his cock. He thrust his fingers into her hair as she moved her mouth up and down his length.

Ian couldn't resist moving his hips in rhythm with her mouth, but he couldn't take much more of this. He wanted to be inside her. He put his hands on her shoulders, and gently pushed her onto her back.

He pulled her by her ankles to the edge of the bed and ran his finger along her slit.

"You're wet for me," he whispered, then dropped to his knees. He moved his tongue up her leg to her thigh then to her curls. He placed his lips over her clitoris and sucked on it, then slid his tongue up and down her slit and back to her clitoris. Her hands fisted the sheets then she cried out when she came. He got to his feet, rolled on a condom, leaned down to kiss her lips, then gazed into her eyes.

"I knew you'd taste good, baby," he whispered, then drove into her.

He groaned when her legs wrapped around his waist, and he picked up the pace. He placed his knuckle against her clitoris, making her gasp, then moan. He pumped into her, and her inner muscles clenched around his cock. She cried out as she came again. He pulled back from her and motioned for her to roll over. She did and he lifted her hips and slammed into her from behind. She moved with him, and he groaned out her name when he came. He hung his head and took deep breaths. She fell forward onto the bed, and he could hear her breathing hard too.

Ian's chest heaved as he tried to breathe normally. Sex with her was fantastic, and he knew he'd never have that with any other woman.

"Damn it," he muttered as he stepped back from her. He entered the bathroom to dispose of the condom. He washed his hands and then walked back into the bedroom.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Ian—"

"I said, nothing," he snarled.

“Oh, here we go again. Seriously?”

“What?”

“You’re regretting—”

“I am *not* regretting this. What I’m regretting is getting involved in the first place. I never do that. And it’s all for nothing because, you’ll be gone and out of my life in another week.” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have gotten involved with you.”

“Do you think it’s possible that just once we could have sex, and not argue afterward?” she snapped.

“Probably not. It pisses me off every fucking time,” he growled.

“Why? It’s why you come here,” she shouted as she got up, pulled her robe on, walked to the bedroom door.

“That’s bullshit,” he yelled. “You know I want to be with you, but we shouldn’t be doing this. Not only because it could jeopardize my job, but because *you’re leaving.*”

Eden opened the door. “It’s time you left. *Again.*”

Ian sighed as he quickly dressed. Why in the hell did he put himself through this with her? Every damn time they had sex, a fight broke out. They had so much going against them and he knew he should stay the fuck away from her, but he couldn’t. He was falling for her, and it killed him because he could never have her in his life permanently.

“I’m done with this, Eden. No more. I can’t take this. It tears me apart every time we do this. We know we can’t be together, but we also can’t stay away from each other.” He shook his head. “We have to. You’re leaving next Sunday, and that will be the end of it.”

“I know and I’m tired of you running hot and cold.”

“You think I run hot and cold? Well, maybe I do, and do you know why? Because if I don’t stay angry about you leaving, I’ll beg you to stay, and I know that’s not what you want. This arguing we do is because we know this could never work. I’m leaving now, and we’re not doing this anymore. I

hope you have a good life in Chicago and take that partnership you so desperately want.” He strode out of the room, along the hall and into the living room where he picked up his hat and walked out the door. He quietly closed it behind him, climbed into his truck and drove home.

Eden walked to the bed, lay across it, and cried. She was sure she cried more in the past three weeks than in her entire life. It sure felt like it.

As tears rolled down her temples, she thought about his words. *I’ll beg you to stay*. She knew he was hurting because she was too. So much that her heart ached. What if he did ask her to stay? What would she do?

“There’s nothing I can do. I can’t stay.” She shook her head. “I just can’t.”

She jerked when someone knocked on her door. Had he come back? She quickly got up and ran to the door. She pulled it open, and her excitement died at seeing Cammie.

“I just saw Ian leaving. What happened?”

“Come inside. The same thing as always. We argued after sex. It’s a pattern with us.” She closed the door once Cammie stepped into the cabin.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. He said he was done, and we weren’t doing this anymore. I was hoping we’d spend my last week together.” She wiped a tear away.

Cammie wrapped her arms around her, and Eden broke down. She sniffed and looked at Cammie.

“He said he stayed angry about me leaving because if he didn’t, he’d beg me to stay.”

Cammie gasped. “Oh, my God. Would you?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I thought I wanted that partnership.”

“*Thought* you did?” Cammie led her to the sofa and they

both sat.

“Yes. I don’t know if it’s that important anymore.”

“Because of Ian?”

“Yes. Damn it. I didn’t come here looking to fall in love.”

“You’re in love with him?” Cammie asked in a shocked voice.

“Yes. I have denied it enough, but it does me no good.”

“God, I wish I knew how to help you.”

“Just be here for me. No matter how long it takes to get over him.”

“Eden, I hate to tell you this, but I don’t think you’ll ever get over him. You were meant to come here and meet him.”

“But why when we can’t be together?”

Cammie shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s a mess, isn’t it?”

“It’s a disaster, is what it is.”

“Do you want to do anything tonight?”

“No, and I’m sorry, but I’m not going to the dance tomorrow night. I can’t.”

“He probably won’t go either.”

“Good, then I’ll know for sure I won’t see him.”

“I’ll probably go so I can see Dusty.”

“You’ll have fun. I’m going to spend the day being lazy.”

“You’re going to be miserable when we leave.”

“I am already.”

“How about we watch a movie or two or five? It will take your mind off things.”

Eden nodded. She knew nothing was going to take her mind off Ian, and tonight was going to be another long, sleepless night.

Chapter Seven

The sun had barely risen when Ian entered the barn on Monday, his footsteps echoing through the empty stalls. The smell of hay filled the air as he went to Breeze's stall. He peered in at the horse munching on oats.

"Good morning, buddy," Ian greeted, a small smile tugging at his lips. Breeze raised his head and gazed back at him with soft, brown eyes before trotting to the gate. Ian reached out and gently rubbed the horse's nose through the bars. "Are you ready for our ride today?"

Despite being exhausted from a sleepless night, Ian knew he couldn't miss the trail ride. It was the one thing keeping him going as he tried not to think about Eden leaving at the end of the week. He could hear birds chirping outside as he leaned against the gate and felt a gentle breeze blowing through the open doors. The familiar sights and scents of the barn surrounded him, offering a sense of comfort and stability amidst all the changes happening in his life.

As he ran his hand along the softness of the horse's neck, he couldn't help but wonder if Eden would show up for the ride. Maybe she hadn't even signed up for the ride, he sighed heavily. He made his way over to where the wooden clipboard hung on a post, the names of all the riders scribbled onto it in neat rows. And there it was, right at the top, Eden's name. His heart sank, and he let out a string of curses under his breath. Was she intentionally trying to drive him insane? They knew they needed to stay away from each other, but here she was, signing up for the very same ride that he would be on.

How was he supposed to make it through this week, knowing he'd never see her again come Sunday? It just wasn't fair. Out of all the women he had met, she was the one he truly wanted to be with. Yet fate had dealt them a cruel hand. He couldn't understand God's reasoning behind bringing her into his life only to take her out of it so soon. As much as he tried to push away his feelings for her, they grew stronger each day. But for now, all he could do was focus on this ride before their

inevitable goodbye Sunday.

What could he possibly do? How could he ever let her leave?

“She doesn’t want to stay,” he muttered.

“Ian? You’re here early,” Chip greeted him as he entered the barn.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“You look exhausted.”

“That’s an understatement, Chip.”

“I can take care of the riders. Why don’t you just relax and stay here?”

Ian smirked. “You know I can’t do that. I’ll be fine. If I look like I’m about to fall out of the saddle, just tie me to it.”

Chip chuckled. “That day will never come when you fall out of the saddle.”

Ian grinned. “It might be today.”

A little while later, Ian mounted Breeze and observed the group of guests filing into the barn. As he scanned the crowd, he didn’t see Eden or Cammie. Perhaps they decided not to come. But as soon as that thought crossed his mind, he spotted them entering and walking to the horses. Damn it. He was torn about her leaving. He knew the partnership was important to her, but he didn’t want her to leave him. She wore jeans, a sleeveless blouse, and her cowboy hat and boots; he had never seen anything so stunning. The mere thought of never being able to gaze into her beautiful eyes again or make love with her made his entire body ache.

Taking a deep breath, he listened to Chip explain about the ride, and had everyone mount up. Ian watched the ranch hands help with the stirrups. His ass was too tired to fool with it. He knew if he got out of the saddle, he’d never get back in it.

As he watched, one of the ranch hands helped Eden, and he clenched his jaw when she smiled at the man, then her eyes met his, and he could see the pain on her face. She was hurting

as much as he was. He glanced away from her. He was sure this was one broken heart he'd never get over.

Eden's heart ached as Ian turned away from her. She knew she shouldn't have signed up to go on this ride. It was only causing more pain and torture for herself.

"Are you okay?" Cammie's voice broke through her thoughts.

"No, I'll never be okay again. I should just go back to my cabin. This was such a mistake," Eden replied, her voice heavy with regret.

"If you want to leave, we will," Cammie offered.

Eden looked at her best friend, feeling grateful for her unwavering support. "What would I do without you?"

"You'll never have to find out."

"You're not only my paralegal, but my closest friend. I couldn't imagine going through this without you," Eden said, her voice quivering.

"I'm here for you, always. Just tell me what you want to do," Cammie reassured her.

"Does he look as exhausted as I feel?" Eden asked, glancing over at Ian who appeared drained, and sleep deprived.

"Yeah, he does. He wants you to stay, but he won't ask," Cammie explained.

"Because he knows I wouldn't," Eden whispered, feeling torn.

"Wouldn't you?" Cammie questioned.

Eden hesitated before shaking her head. "No, I can't. You know how I feel about being offered that partnership."

Cammie shrugged. "What I think is, you don't know if you want that partnership because it doesn't matter to you as much as it did before. You said so yourself that you *thought* you

wanted it, but because of Ian, you're not sure. That's just my observation."

"Well, you're wrong. It still matters to me. It's all I've been thinking about and it's what I want," Eden insisted, fighting back tears.

"That's not what your heart wants, and deep down, you know it. But whatever decision you make, I'll support you," Cammie said with a reassuring smile.

Eden blinked back tears of gratitude. "I know. Thank you for always being there for me."

"I will always have your back. And once we get back from this ride, we'll play some tennis. How does that sound?" Cammie suggested.

Eden nodded, grateful for the distraction. "I would like to go to the bonfire Wednesday night, if you'll go with me."

"Of course, I will."

Chip had everyone get in line and he led them out. Eden got as close to the front as she could. There was no way she wanted to be in the back with Ian. He probably wouldn't even speak to her. She snorted. Why would he? It was plain he was done with all this back and forth between them.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw him at the back looking around. When he looked to the front, she quickly turned around. The last thing she needed was for him to see her staring at him like a lovesick fool.

The sun was high in the sky when they reached the spot where they turned around. All she wanted to do was go back to the cabin and hide. She didn't want to come out until Sunday when it was time to go and leave Ian Brennan behind. She hiccupped and placed her hand over her heart. It hurt to even think about going. How was she going to feel the day she did leave?

How was she going to drive out of Bur Oak never to return? She removed her hat and rubbed her temples. A killer of a headache was taking up residence in her head, and she wanted to turn around and go back.

Once they reached the creek, she dismounted, filled her water bottle, and watched as the horse drank. A tear slid down her cheek as she placed her forehead against the horse's neck.

"Are you okay?"

She froze when she heard his voice and raised her head to look at him. He must have seen the tears because he looked as bad as she felt.

"I will be," she whispered.

He nodded. "I'm sure you will."

"Will you?"

He stared at her for a few seconds and shook his head.

"No. We need to head back." He walked away from her.

Eden wrapped her arms around the horse's neck and cried. Why did she come here? Why did she meet the one man who would be good to her? Why did she fall in love with him?

She hated how they argued but it was their defense mechanism. If they fought, they wouldn't love. She shook her head. She would always love him. It just wasn't fair to either of them. Why meet him if she couldn't be with him?

"God, you sure work in mysterious ways." She climbed into the saddle, rode up the embankment and waited for everyone to get in line.

"Were you talking to Ian?" Cammie asked her in a whisper.

"He saw me crying and asked if I was okay."

"Did you tell him no?"

"No. I said, I will be. I asked him if he was, and he said no." Eden wiped another tear away. "I want to leave here, but I'll tough it out."

"If you're sure? I have no problem checking out early."

"What are you going to do about Dusty?"

"I don't know. I do know that I'll miss him, but probably not as much as you'll miss Ian." Cammie shook her head. "You're crazy to leave that man, Eden."

“I don’t have a choice. This is my career.”

“Yeah, well what good does that do you? A career won’t keep you warm at night. I think you’re making a terrible mistake.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think,” Eden snapped then immediately felt horrible. “I’m so sorry, Cam. I’m just a mess.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re hurting, but he is too. You’re both miserable and there has to be some solution.”

“There isn’t. Don’t you think I’ve tried to think of something? It all comes down to I won’t stay here, and he won’t go to Chicago, and I understand that. Chicago is not for him. He’s a Montana born and bred cowboy, and I’m an idiot for getting involved with him.”

Cammie didn’t say anything as she joined the line of riders and followed Chip back. Eden looked over her shoulder and saw Ian at the back. His eyes met hers, but she turned away from him. If she didn’t, she’d ride back to him, and beg him to make love with her one more time. She decided this would be the last trail ride for her and she wouldn’t participate in any activities. She was going to laze around the pool, play tennis, and relax in her cabin. She didn’t want to see Ian again.

Wednesday night, she walked to Cammie’s cabin, and knocked on the door. It opened, and Cammie stepped onto the porch.

“It’s a beautiful night,” she said.

“Yes.” Eden really didn’t want to go to the bonfire, but she hated sitting in the cabin and thinking about Ian and how she had to leave him.

They arrived at the spot for the bonfire to see just about everyone there. She saw Willa and Devin and Jaxon and Presley there too. People sat in lounge chairs or on logs and watched as the men carried wood to the pit and lit it. As she sat there, she looked across the pit and saw Ian staring at her, then the flames lifted higher, and she lost sight of him.

“Are you okay?” Cammie whispered.

“No. God, Cammie, I hate feeling this way. My heart is just breaking.”

Cammie slipped her arm around her.

“I hate that you’re hurting like this.”

“I do too. Love is supposed to be this wonderful feeling and all I feel right now is hurt.” Eden sighed. “I’m going to go. I’m sorry. You stay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She didn’t give Cammie time to say anything as she made her way through the crowd to head to her cabin. She was almost at the road leading to the cabins when she saw Ian leaning against his truck. He hadn’t seen her, but she knew the second he did. He straightened up, turned, and opened the truck door to climb inside the cab.

“Ian?”

She saw him sigh as he turned to face her.

“Don’t, Eden.”

“Don’t what? Talk to you?”

“Well, that would be a good start. You need to stay away from me. In four days, you’ll be gone. So, just go to your cabin.”

“Ian—”

“Just go, Eden. Please.” He climbed into his truck, started it, and drove off.

Tears rolled down her face as she watched him go.

Saturday evening, she packed her clothes, and cried the entire time. It was killing her to go, but she didn’t have a choice. She knew she was going to miss him so very much.

After changing into a soft, worn T-shirt and comfortable lounge pants, she padded barefoot to the living room and turned on a movie. The sound of dialogue and music filled the room as she sank into the plush cushions of the sofa. Lost in the story on screen, she was startled when a loud knock sounded on the door. Jumping up from her seat, she cautiously made her way to the door, and curiosity mingled with

apprehension coursing through her.

Peering from behind the curtain beside the door, she gasped when she saw Ian standing there, his muscular frame silhouetted against the moonlit night. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she placed her forehead against the cool wood of the door. Why was he here? Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she opened the door, and her heart slammed into her ribs as she looked at the one man she'd always love.

"Ian? What are you doing here?" she asked, voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes searched hers for a moment before answering. "I'm sorry about Wednesday, but I wanted to see you before you left tomorrow. I can go."

"No, it's fine. Come inside."

He stepped into the cabin and removed his hat, glancing around at the familiar surroundings. She couldn't help but notice his lips tighten at the sight of her packed suitcases by the door.

"Packed and ready to go, huh?" he commented, and she could hear the hurt in his voice.

"Uh, yes." Her throat felt tight as she tried to push down the emotions threatening to spill over. "Would you like something to drink?"

He shook his head, stepping closer until they were only inches apart. Cupping her cheek in his hand, he gazed into her eyes with such intensity that it took her breath away.

"All I want is you, for one last time," he murmured, his words sending shivers down her spine.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she closed her eyes, trying to block out the pain. But all resistance melted away when she felt him pull her into his arms. She took his hat from his hands and placed it on the sofa before leading him to the bedroom. It was wrong. She knew it. But she wanted this last night with him, something to hold onto when she left him.

In the dim light of the bedroom, she stared into his

handsome face and did all she could not to cry. He put his hands on her waist and pulled her closer, their bodies pressed together in a familiar embrace. Then, without a word, he placed his lips over hers and kissed her with such tenderness and love that it brought tears to her eyes. Eden wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with every ounce of passion and longing in her heart, savoring every moment of their final encounter.

Ian picked her up, placed her on the bed, and lay beside her. His hand slid under her T-shirt, up to her breast, and cupped her naked breast in his hand. He moved his hand back down to the hem of her shirt, rolled it up, and tugged it over her head, and let it fall to the floor. He lowered his head and placed his lips over her nipple and sucked it deep into his mouth. She fisted her hands in his hair.

She glided her fingers down his back and tugged his T-shirt from his jeans, then lifted it over his head, and tossed it to the floor, then she scraped her nails down his chest, to the buckle of his belt. After unhooking it, she unsnapped his jeans, lowered the zipper, and slid her hand inside his boxer briefs to wrap her fingers around his hard cock. She squeezed her hand around it, making him groan.

He rolled away from her and stood. He toed off his boots, removed his socks, shucked his jeans and underwear, and then pulled her lounge pants off, and dropped them to the floor.

“Commando?” He lay beside her again.

“I just took a bath,” she murmured and mentally shook her head. *What a stupid answer!*

Ian reached over to the side of the bed, removed his wallet from his jeans, and got a condom out and handed it to her. As she stared into his eyes, she ripped the packet open, removed the condom, and slowly rolled it down over him. She watched his jaw clench as he tried to calm himself.

“I need you so much, Eden.”

“I need you too.”

He trailed his fingers along her inner thigh, sending shivers

up her spine. She couldn't help but squirm as he teased and explored her.

"Ian, please," she pleaded.

"I always do, darlin'," he murmured, a hint of a smirk on his lips. He shifted over her, using one knee to gently spread her legs open before pressing his lips to hers. His kiss was slow and deliberate, his tongue dancing with hers in a passionate dance. She moaned into his mouth as he slowly entered her, inch by agonizing inch.

She wanted him to take her hard and fast, but at the same time she wanted this moment to last forever. Her body trembled with desire as Ian held still inside her, gazing into her eyes with an intensity that made her heart race. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she urged him to move.

But instead of giving in to her demands, he shook his head.

"I want to take my time with you," he whispered.

The anticipation was killing her as he started moving at a torturously slow pace. Every thrust sent waves of pleasure through her body, but it wasn't enough. She tried to speed up the rhythm, but he gently stopped her.

"I want this to last," he explained, kissing her deeply before rolling onto his back, taking her with him.

Eden straddled him, savoring the feeling of their bodies pressed together. Each movement brought her closer to that blissful release. And when it finally washed over her, she cried out his name.

Ian sat up and captured her lips once more. She pushed him back down and kissed him eagerly. He grabbed onto her hair tightly as they continued to explore each other's mouths. Just as she started to get lost in the moment, he suddenly flipped her onto her back again. As he pulled away to gaze at her, she saw a lone tear trickle down his cheek. She tried to hold back her own emotions, but tears streamed down her face, nonetheless. They both knew this was the end. But Ian seemed determined to make it unforgettable. He picked up the pace and thrust into her with an intensity that made her moan with

pleasure. Their passionate kiss never broke as they reached their peak together. Afterward, he rolled off her and she rested her head on his chest, more tears streaming from her eyes. There was a heavy silence between them before Ian got up and went to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. When he returned, he quickly dressed without saying a word and left without looking back. The sound of the front door closing echoed through the room as Eden broke down in sobs.

On Sunday, Ian entered the registration cabin and came to a stop when he saw Eden standing at the counter. He was hoping she'd be gone by now. She turned to look at him but quickly looked away. He strode around the counter.

“Did you need something, Ian?” Josie asked him.

Did he need something? Yes, for Eden not to leave.

“I got it, Josie. I'll be out of here in a minute.”

“Okay,” she said, then he heard her talking with Eden and Cammie. “We hope you enjoyed your stay at the Bur Oak and will come back to see us.”

He didn't hear their response to her and instead focused on finding the necessary file in the cabinet. Once he found it, he took a deep breath and returned to the counter where Eden was standing. He couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness knowing that she would soon be gone from his life forever. He tore his gaze away from her, opened the door, and stepped outside onto the porch. The hot air surrounded him as he hung his head, realizing that last night had only brought more heartache. When he heard the door open behind him, he turned to see Eden and Cammie joining him on the porch.

Cammie quickly made her way down the steps and got into their car, leaving him alone with Eden. He looked out at the woods surrounding the cabin before turning to face her.

“Goodbye, Eden Fairchild,” he muttered with a hint of bitterness in his voice, touching his hat as he descended the steps to his truck. The sun beat down on him, heavy and hot, as he drove to the barn. Despite the warmth, a chill had settled

over him, seeping into his bones and making him feel worse with each passing moment as the day wore on. She had only been gone for a few hours, but already he missed her fiercely. It was painful to know that she not only left behind the Bur Oak, but also him.

He couldn't help wondering if their relationship could have worked if she had stayed. He had never considered a long-distance relationship before, but now the thought nagged at him. Would it have been better than never seeing her again? He shook his head, knowing deep down that it would have been just as hard, if not harder, to be apart from her for extended periods of time.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed those thoughts aside. It was better to let go and move on. She would take the partnership and Ian would fade from her memory with each passing day. He tried to convince himself that it was for the best, but deep down he knew that parting ways would leave an ache in his heart that would never fully heal.

“Hey, Ian.”

He saw Jaxon walking toward him.

“Jax.”

“Are you ready to leave for the day?”

“No offense, but hell yes. Especially after this heat we've been having.”

“It's been a hot month. I'm heading to the office to go through some last-minute things, then we'll close for the winter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah. I'm fine. I need to get busy on the stalls.”

“Okay. If I don't see you before you leave next week, I guess we'll see you in March. The ranch hands will take care of the place over the winter. You enjoy your time off.”

“I'll try. You too.”

Jaxon stared at him for a few seconds, then walked off. Ian knew he wasn't fooling anyone. Those who knew him knew something was wrong, but he'd keep it to himself. He had a week left here before he was off for the winter.

Eden was back in Chicago in no time and was called into the conference room when she returned to the office. She pulled a chair out and sat. Most of the senior partners were in attendance. She'd rather be anywhere but here. No. Not anywhere. She'd rather be at the Bur Oak instead of anywhere. This job had meant so much to her just a month ago. Now all she could think of was Ian. Would he miss her like she already missed him?

"If everyone is ready, we'll get started."

Eden smiled. She was anxious about this partnership. She did want it. Didn't she?

With a deep sigh, she watched her boss stand and glance around the table.

"Eden, we were happy to give you time to think about this, and we'd like to know your decision."

Eden swallowed hard and slowly got to her feet.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Robey."

"Say you're going to accept." He smiled at her.

"Uh, I'm sorry, I'm just so overwhelmed." Overwhelmed? Try speechless. This is what she'd been wanting. She still did. Right? Oh, God. *Did* she want this? Did she want to take this and seal her fate of never seeing Ian again?

"Eden."

She looked at her boss to see him frowning at her.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Robey. I think I still need time." She sat back down.

"More time? We thought this was what you wanted. You've been here the longest and you're one of the best lawyers in this firm."

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“Everyone, give us the room, please,” Mr. Robey said.

Once the room cleared out, she placed her hands on the table and wrung them together. Her stomach was in knots over this. She jerked when he pulled out the chair beside her and sat.

“Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No, sir.”

“Eden, I have known you since you were a little girl. Your father was one of my closest friends. I know when something is bothering you.”

“I’m not sure I want the partnership,” she said quietly.

“What? I thought that was all you wanted?”

“I did too. A month ago.”

“So, what happened in a month?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. Can I still think about it, or do you need to know right now?”

“I can give you a little more time, but don’t take too long. If you don’t take it, I’ll have to give the next in line the opportunity.”

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me who it would be?”

“Jefferson.”

“Oh, good. I thought you’d pick Ron.”

“I’m not blind to Ron’s actions. He’s not partner material.”

Eden stood and he did too.

“I’m sorry I can’t let you know right now. I just need a little time.”

“Any idea how long?”

“A few days at the most.”

“All right. How about you let me know by Monday?”

“I can do that.”

“Would you like to take a few days off to think about it? Would that help?”

“I just got back from a month’s vacation, Mr. Robey.”

“I’m sure you still have days left. Why don’t you take them? You won’t be able to work here in the office and decide.”

“It would let me think easier.” She nibbled on her bottom lip.

“Then I’ll see you Monday.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

After he walked out, she headed for her office. Everyone stopped her to congratulate her. She smiled and quickly went into her office. She strode around her desk, pulled the chair out, sat, and put her hands over her face.

“Congratulations.”

She dropped her hands and looked up to see Ron in the doorway.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t seem too happy.” He leaned against the doorjamb.

“Ron, if you’ve got something to say, just say it.”

He straightened up. “I don’t. Not yet. If you don’t take that partnership, all you did was string the rest of us along and I for one, do not appreciate it.”

Eden got to her feet. “I don’t give a rat’s ass what you do or don’t appreciate. You wouldn’t get it anyway. Everyone here knows how you kiss ass. Even the higher ups. So, you can just shut the fuck up, and get out of my office.”

He glared at her for a minute, then left, pulling the door closed. Eden blew out a breath and sat. She jerked when her door opened, and Cammie entered.

“I have been waiting to hear what happened.”

“They offered me the partnership,” Eden said.

“Oh, wow! That’s great,” Cammie gushed.

“Yeah.” She shook her head as tears threatened.

“You don’t sound excited. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if I want it.”

“It’s Ian, isn’t it?”

“Yes. God, Cam, I’m so miserable without him.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. What did you and Dusty decide to do?”

“We’re going to try the long-distance thing. I hope it works.”

“I hope it does for you too. I know Ian wouldn’t go for that.” She huffed. “Mr. Robey told me to take a few days to think about it. I have until Monday. I don’t know what to do.”

Eden blinked back tears as she thought of never seeing Ian again. She loved him so much.

“Oh, girl, you have it bad. This from a woman who didn’t want a blue-collar man but has the hots for a cowboy. What a change.”

“I know, right? I was attracted to him from the start, but in my mind, he was the wrong man. But he made me feel so... right.”

“I hate that you’re hurting. I bet Ian is too. I think he fell hard for you.”

“God, I miss him. I love him. I don’t know what to do,” Eden repeated in a choked voice.

She was sure her heart would never heal from this hurt. She wanted to crawl into a ball and leave the world behind.

Cammie stared at her. “I think you do.”

“We had sex the night before you and I checked out.”

“You did? And you’re just telling me now?”

“It hurt too much to talk about. It was so tender and sweet. Cammie, we both cried.”

“Oh, my God. Eden, you have to go back to him.”

“What if he won’t take me back?”

“He loves you, Eden. Anyone seeing you two together can see that.”

“I need to speak to Mr. Robey.” She stood, walked out of the office, and looked for her boss.

The following Friday, Ian led his horse through the barn after checking the fence, when he saw Devin heading toward him.

“Ian, could I see you in the office?” Devin asked him.

“Uh, sure. Now?”

“Yes, please. Jax and I would like to speak with you.”

“Yes, sir. Let me cool my horse—”

“Chip can do it. Now, please.” Devin turned and walked off then Ian watched as he entered the office in the barn.

Shit. Ian didn’t like the sound of this. Why would both of them want to speak with him? About what? He snorted. He knew about what. Apparently, Bonnie reported him. Damn her. He handed his horse off to Chip.

“Is everything okay?” Chip asked him.

“I have no idea. I guess I’ll find out.” Ian walked to the office, opened the door, and entered to see Jaxon in one of the chairs in front of the desk, and Devin behind it. He inclined his head for Ian to take a seat. He swallowed hard as he thought about getting fired.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“There’s no easy way to say this. A guest reported you for fraternizing with another guest recently.”

Ian wasn’t sure what to say. He could deny it, but what good would that do him? He would not only be accused of fraternizing but also of lying. He wasn’t a liar, so he took a deep breath and nodded.

“I did. I know it’s against the rules...”

“It is, but we’re not going to fire you. Both Jax and I would be hypocrites if we fired you for doing something we did.”

“I don’t understand. It’s the rules.”

Devin nodded. “Those... *rules*, are more for the guests than the staff. Let me try to explain. When we first opened the ranch, you know we had a lot of single people coming here and flirting with the staff and each other. That is not the kind of operation we wanted. We don’t allow kids, for safety reasons, and I suppose some people took that to mean, it was for people to mingle. Single or not. So, we made the new brochures up to state no one was to get involved with a staff member or other guests. I know people still flirt but they seem to know it’s harmless flirting, and nothing can happen between them. But attraction can happen. Anyone can meet the love of their life here.” Devin smiled. “Jax and I did, so if this Ms. Fairchild means so much to you, don’t let it slip by. You just have to be discreet about it.”

“It doesn’t matter. She left. I won’t see her again.”

“She left?” Jaxon asked him as he sat up.

“Yes. She checked out Sunday to go back to Chicago. She’s up for partnership at her law firm, and she really wants it.”

“That was almost a week ago. Have you heard from her?”

“No, and I won’t. I know she won’t be back. I’ll be fine. It didn’t go too far.”

“You were in her cabin for a while.”

“How do you know that? No. Never mind. I know how.” He clenched his jaw.

“I’m sure you do know. That’s why any time something like this happens, it has to be kept quiet. Some people can be damn manipulative when they’re pissed.” Jaxon sighed. “Look, the rules are in place so there is no, uh, people screwing anyone they can. We’re not that kind of place. We know there are people who are only out for a good time, but as far as fucking around with other guests or staff just for the hell

of it, will not be tolerated. We know that's not what was happening with you. I've seen you looking at her, Ian. You're way past attraction. We're closed now and once we get everything done around here for the winter, you need to go and talk to her."

Ian shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Being offered a partnership was her dream." He shrugged. "It's all she wanted."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that but maybe you still need to talk with her."

"Why? I don't want a long-distance relationship and I'm not moving there. I can't. I've worked too hard to get where I am, and I know she won't move here. That's her dream job." He shook his head. "It would never work."

"We both know what it's like having the woman you love, leave you. I had to go after Willa and Jaxon went after Presley. It's what you do for love."

"I never said I was in love with her. We barely know each other," Ian said.

Devin chuckled. "I knew I was in love with Willa the minute she stepped from that limo. Love at first sight does happen. Though, Jax here, denied it."

"Hey, screw you. I finally admitted it."

Ian smiled. "I remember all of that going on. You were a little hardheaded on that Jax."

"Yeah, whatever." Jaxon stood. "I'm going back to the lodge and get some things done. Ian, you do what you think is right. We'll support you." He nodded, then strode out the door. Devin got to his feet, then followed his brother out.

Ian sat there staring at the back wall. They didn't get it. Willa and Presley were willing to give up their jobs, but he knew Eden wasn't. She worked hard to get where she was, too, and he was proud of her, but they could never be together. Pushing to his feet, he strode from the office.

November brought cold weather and snow. Ian sat in his

living room, staring out the front window. His heart was never going to heal. Eden had been gone almost three months and he'd never been so miserable in his life, and he knew he'd never get over losing her.

A few days later, he walked along the barn's aisle. The stalls needed mucked out. The Bur Oak was closed for the season, but there were still things to take care of at home and the stalls needed fresh straw put down every day. That was his daily routine. Get up before sunrise, grab a cup of coffee, take the horses to the outside corral, break the ice in the troughs, then clean the stalls. After that, he'd lead the horses back into their stalls where he fed and watered them. Then he'd head inside and stare at the damn walls. He missed her desperately.

When he finished with the stalls, he placed the rake in the wheelbarrow, and put it in the back room. He stepped from the room, pulling on his coat when he saw the barn door open, and someone entered. He couldn't see who it was yet, but his heart slammed into his ribs when he realized it was Eden walking toward him. What was she doing here?

“Eden?”

A smile lit up her beautiful face when she spotted him. She wore a coat, mittens, and a blue beanie with a fuzzy ball on the top of her head. Snow covered the cap and the shoulders of her coat.

“Hello, Ian.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.”

“You're looking for me?” he asked, confused.

“I've been looking for you my whole life,” she replied.

“What?” He furrowed his brow and tilted his head in confusion.

She walked toward him until she stood in front of him.

“I said, I've been looking for you my whole life.”

“Eden—”

“I love you, Ian Brennan. With all my heart.”

“It won’t work.”

“What won’t?”

“Us. This,” he gestured between them. “I won’t do a long-distance relationship.”

“It doesn’t have to be long distance.”

“I can’t move to Chicago. It may be a nice place, but it’s not for me.”

“I would never ask you to move to Chicago.” She stepped closer, placed her hands on his waist, inside his coat, and looked into his eyes. “But maybe you could ask me to stay.”

He frowned, but then realization dawned in his eyes, although he shook his head.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” Eden stepped back, looking confused.

“I don’t want you to leave your job and move here. You’d end up regretting it and resenting me.”

“Oh, Ian, I could never resent you. And I’ve come to love this area as well.”

“But what about your job?”

“I have a job in Clifton. When I turned down the partnership and resigned, I told my boss why. He made a call to a friend of his, Dirk Wallace. My boss recommended me, and I spoke with Mr. Wallace two days ago.” She smiled widely. “He hired me. As a probate lawyer, I can practice in any state. I start after the first of the year.”

“You’re staying here?”

“Well, I should since I have a job here, don’t you think?”

“Wait. You said you told your boss you were leaving and why. What did you tell him?”

“I told him I fell in love with a cowboy.”

He hissed in a breath and cupped her face in his hands.

“Please be sure about this, Eden.”

“I’m more than sure, Ian. I love you and I want to be where you are. In Clifton and Spring City. I’m here in a friggin’ snowstorm, Ian. You tell me I’m not sure.”

“I’ve never been so miserable in my life when you left.”

“I was too. I wasn’t sure about the partnership until I got back to Chicago. Nothing mattered without you.”

“We’ll argue,” he said with a smirk.

She laughed. “Looking forward to it. Especially the making up afterwards.”

“I’m not dreaming, am I?”

“Nope. I’m home.”

Ian blinked his eyes quickly. This is what he wanted.

“You’re sure?” He didn’t want her to regret this.

“I am absolutely positive. Now, isn’t there something you want to tell me, Ian Brennan?”

He frowned. “Is there?”

“There’d better be,” she snapped.

Ian laughed. “What a temper, Ms. Fairchild.” He kissed her lips. “I am so in love with you.”

“Damn good thing, *Mr. Brennan.*”

“It will never be boring with you, that’s for sure.”

Eden put her arms around his neck.

“Are you finished here in the barn?”

“I am. Follow me, darlin’.”

“I’d follow you anywhere.”

He took her hand and led along the barn’s aisle.

Later, as they lay in his bed, she had her head on his chest. His arms were wrapped around her, and he rested his cheek on her head.

“What did Cammie think about you not taking the partnership?”

“She was shocked but knew why. She’s moving here too. I don’t think I told you but even though she’s my best friend, she’s also my paralegal. I asked Dirk about bringing her with me, and he was happy to allow it. He seems like a great person.”

“I know Dirk. He’s a good man.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Cammie is excited to come back too. She misses Dusty—”

“Dusty?” Ian sat up.

“Uh, yeah. I couldn’t tell you. I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s okay. I understand, but Eden, what could I say? I was doing the same thing.”

“I know, but we were all breaking the rules.”

Ian grinned and told her what Devin and Jaxon had told him.

“So, they got involved with guests too?”

He chuckled. “Yep. But after they explained what the rules were really about, I didn’t feel so bad about it.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t get into trouble or fired.”

“Me too. Why did it take you so long to come back?”

“I had a few cases to wrap up. I didn’t want to make extra work for my colleagues because I was leaving.” She yawned. “I’m so tired. I’ve barely slept since leaving you.”

“Then let’s grab a nap, baby. I think we’ve earned it.”

“Okay.”

“You know, I make good money,” he said.

“Where did that come from?”

“I just want you to know that I can take care of you.” He kissed her forehead.

“I don’t need you to take care of me. I can take care of

myself,” she snapped.

“And here we go,” Ian said with a chuckle. Eden laughed.

“We are always going to disagree on some things, but I love you and we’ll get past anything that comes our way.”

“Damn right, we will, darlin’.”

She sat up, leaned down, kissed his lips, and then snuggled against him again. She smiled when his arms wrapped around her and held her tight. This was where she needed to be. Nothing could be better than this because she knew she would love this man for the rest of her life, and she knew he felt the same way. She mentally shook her head thinking about when she first arrived at the Bur Oak, and a cowboy was the last thing on her mind. Now it seemed like Ian was always on her mind and she couldn’t imagine being with any other man.

She smiled as she heard Ian’s breathing deepen, signaling that he had fallen asleep. Resting her arm across his waist, Eden closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep beside her cowboy, knowing their love would last a lifetime.

Epilogue

Ian watched the group mount their horses and the ranch hands adjust the stirrups for them. It was a big group this morning.

“Follow Chip out, in a single file. Your horse will follow his with no problem,” Ian said as he looked over the group. “This is an overnight trip. Each of you have a sleeping bag and a tent rolled up behind your saddle.”

“I’ve never been on a horse in my life,” a female said.

Ian looked at her and she smiled at him, making him smirk. It never failed. There was always a woman who had never ridden before and needed help. He didn’t mind. He’d help them. It was his job, but he knew some of them faked it just to get a cowboy to help them.

“Just relax. The horse can feel your tension. They’re very calm but you don’t want them getting nervous.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“You’ll be fine.” Ian looked to the barn entrance to see Eden entering.

She walked to her horse, mounted, and looked at him. He grinned and rode over to her.

“Do you need your stirrups adjusted, Ms. Fairchild?”

“I do, Mr. Brennan. Do you know anyone who could help me?” She batted her eyelashes at him, and he knew she was teasing him about the women flirting with him.

He dismounted. “I might be able to help.”

Ian walked around to the other side, adjusted the stirrups, and looked up at her.

“How’s that?”

She shrugged. “It’s okay.”

He bit his lip to keep from grinning, then moved around to the other side, and did the same.

“Let me know if that feels good.”

She smirked. “I have a feeling anything you do would feel good, but what do I know? I’m a city girl.”

He squeezed her knee. “I happen to like city girls.”

“Good thing, Brennan.”

Ian chuckled then mounted his horse and looked at the group.

“All right let’s head out. Chip, lead the way.”

“Yes, sir.” Chip raised his hand and signaled for everyone to follow him.

Ian stayed at the back as usual. A few women hung back too, including Eden. When she rode past him, she winked at him, making him chuckle. He loved her so much and thanked God every night for having her in his life.

As they reached the spot where they stopped before turning back, everyone dismounted. He glanced around for Eden but didn’t see her.

“She went to the creek,” Chip said when he walked by.

“Thanks, Chip. I’d better see what she’s up to.”

Ian rode to the creek and found her filling her water bottle.

“You need to hurry up,” he said.

He watched her stand, turn and glare at him. He bit his lip to keep from grinning.

“Just don’t you worry about it. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Do it now so we can get moving.”

“God! What a pain in the ass you are.”

“Come on, city girl, you’re holding up the group,” Ian said as he stared at her.

“Give me a damn minute, Brennan. I’m hot, and I want to fill my water bottle.”

“You’ve had enough time. Get on the damn horse, Ms. Fairchild.”

Eden turned around to face him and stalked toward him. She glared at him and placed her hands on her hips. Ian did all he could not to laugh.

“I will get on my damn horse in a minute. Quit being so damn impatient,” she snapped.

“You know you’re hot when you’re angry,” he said with a grin.

Eden sputtered out a laugh. “Stop. I’m trying to be pissed at you.”

“It looks like you’re having a hard time with that.”

She touched his leg as she stared up at him.

“I’m trying because I like making up,” she said with a smile.

“Not as much as I do, darlin’.” He winked.

“So, that’s why you pick fights all the time.”

Ian grinned. “You’re on to me.”

She sighed, walked to her horse, and mounted it, then turned the horse to climb the embankment. She glanced over her shoulder at him, grinned, then winked. He chuckled. He’d been right. Life was never boring with her.

They still argued but always made up. She drove him crazy, and he was sure she felt the same about him.

Nudging Breeze, he followed her up the embankment and back to the riding trail. It was a hot July day, and everyone looked to be suffering. Eden had taken the day off, and he was glad she decided to spend it with him on the ride.

“If everyone is ready, we can get moving,” Ian said as he looked over the group. A few women smiled at him, and he gave a slight nod. He knew women would still come onto him, but there was only one woman he wanted.

The riders formed a line and Chip had them follow him. Ian stayed in his usual spot in the back and noticed the two women back there with him. As he glanced along the line, he saw Eden move her horse from the line and sit watching the riders

pass by. He knew she was going to ride in the back with him.

Once the end of the line reached her, she rode beside him. The two women frowned at her, but when she raised her eyebrow at them, they looked away, making him grin.

“You’re killing my chances,” he said.

Eden burst out laughing. “Is that what I’m doing?”

“You know you are.”

“If you want a chance... have at it.”

Ian reined in his horse and grabbed her reins, making her halt her horse. She looked at him and he could tell she was trying not to laugh.

“What?” she asked him.

“I have enough on my hands with you. I sure as hell don’t need another woman.”

“Good thing, Ian Brennan, because if you ever do take a chance with another woman, you will no longer have balls.” She took the reins from him and rode off.

Ian shuddered. She’d do it too. He grinned. She didn’t have to worry. He loved her so much; no other woman would ever compare. He couldn’t wait to see what the future would bring. He spurred Breeze to catch up with her.

As Eden rode along beside Ian, she knew she had made the right decision to come back to him and Montana. She moved into his house when she returned in November, and they had a wonderful Christmas. She looked at the three-carat diamond ring on her left hand and smiled, remembering him giving it to her...

“Open this one,” he said, handing her a small, wrapped package as they sat on the floor before the tree.

“You’ve given me enough,” she said.

“I will never be able to give you enough.”

She leaned over, kissed his lips, and opened the gift. When

she saw the small, black velvet box, she froze.

“Ian?”

“Open it.”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because it might not be what I’m hoping it is.”

He slid his hand under her hair and squeezed her neck.

“Only one way to find out, darlin’.”

She took a deep breath and slowly lifted the lid, stared at the diamond, then looked at him.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Is it what you were hoping it was?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He took the box from her, lifted the ring out, placed it on her finger, and kissed her knuckles.

“I love you, Eden Leigh Fairchild, and I want to marry you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

“Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have bought that ring if I wasn’t.”

“It’s so gorgeous,” she said as she held her hand out and watched the sun hit it, making prisms dance along the wall.

“It looks good for a cubic zirconia, doesn’t it?”

She looked at him, narrowed her eyes, and then laughed at the teasing in his eyes. She kissed his lips.

“I will marry you.”

“Damn good thing, city girl.”

“A city girl in love with her cowboy.”

She came back to the present when she heard Ian riding Breeze along the line of riders. She loved seeing him on that

horse. She patted the neck of the horse she rode.

“We’ll just relax back here, Butterscotch.”

Ian had given her the palomino for Christmas, and she cried when she saw her. She told him she loved the golden horses but never expected him to give her one.

She smiled as she watched him on Breeze. The man was born in the saddle, and he belonged to her. She giggled when a female rider rode alongside him, talking to him. She saw him touch the brim of his hat, turn the horse around, and ride back to her.

“Was she flirting with you?” She stopped her horse, and he did the same.

“Yeah, another damn city girl who has no idea what she’s doing.”

“Excuse me? I know how to ride.”

He grinned. “Oh, that you definitely do, darlin’. I love it when you ride me.”

“I’ll do that tonight.”

Ian groaned. “You are going to be the death of me, woman.”

Eden laughed. “I do love you.”

He grinned. “Glad to hear that. Now, get your ass in gear, and let’s go.”

She narrowed her eyes, kneed her horse, and ran to catch up with the riders. She glanced over her shoulder to see him still watching her. She put her hand to her lips and blew him a kiss. She laughed when he grinned and spurred Breeze to catch up. When he did, he reached over and took her hand, and they rode back to the barn.

Once the horses were cooled down, Ian took her hand and led her to his truck.

“Where are we going?”

“Home for a quickie.”

Eden laughed. “We can’t do that.”

“It’s almost lunchtime. We can have lunch at home.”

“*Lunch?* Is that what you’re calling it now?”

Ian stopped, stared at her, and grinned.

“Do you want me to say what I call it?”

She gasped. “Don’t you dare.”

He laughed. “Why not? You love it when I whisper in your ear that I want to fu—”

“Stop it. You know how hot that makes me.”

He pulled her into his arms, kissed her lips, then stared into her eyes.

“I do. Why else do you think I like whispering it to you?”

She tilted her head. “Maybe I should whisper it to you. You know, like, Ian, I want you to—”

“Shit. Okay, I get it. I’ll only say it at home. Damn. The city girl can dish it out.” He kissed her lips. “You win this round, darlin’,” he said.

She laughed. She was so happy. She loved her job. Dirk was a fantastic boss, and she’d become good friends with a colleague, Kenzie Porter. Eden was also glad for Cammie. Dusty treated her like gold; they were very much in love, just like her and Ian.

Who knew when she came to the Bur Oak last year that she’d meet the love of her life? But she couldn’t imagine not having him in her life. He was one stubborn cowboy, but she wouldn’t have him any other way. He was the best thing to ever happen to her. Not her job in Chicago. Not the partnership. Just him, and for that, she would always be thankful.

The End

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