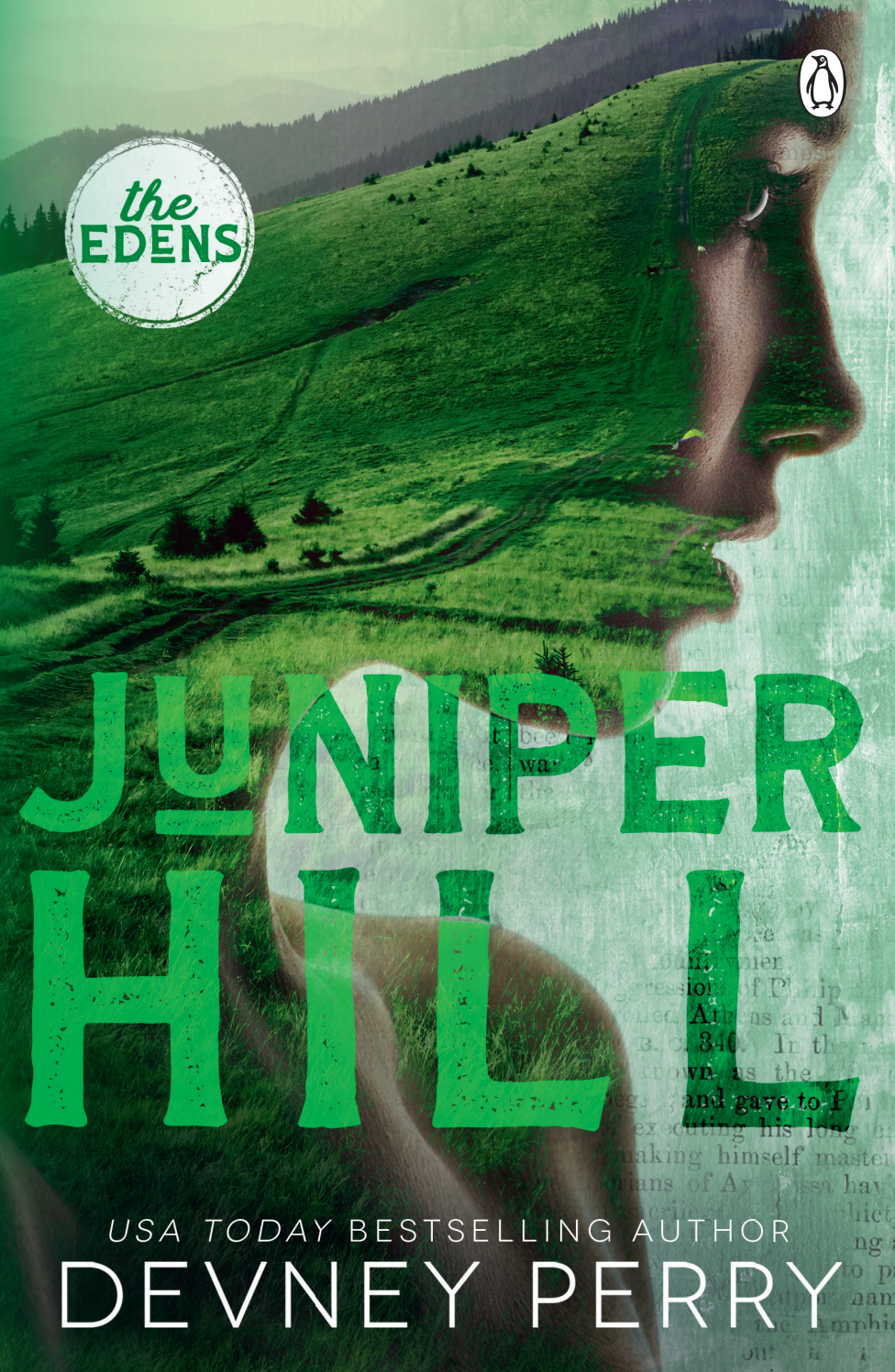

the EDENS
JUNIPER HILL
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DEVNEY PERRY

PENGUIN BOOKS

Juniper Hill

Devney Perry is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author of over forty romance novels. After working in the technology industry for a decade, she abandoned conference calls and project schedules to pursue her passion for writing. She was born and raised in Montana and now lives in Washington with her husband and two sons.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

JUNIPER HILL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEVNEY PERRY

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Devney Perry LLC 2021
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2023
001

Copyright © Devney Perry LLC, 2021

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–96415–9

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018179

Copyrighted Material

OTHER TITLES

The Edens Series

Indigo Ridge

Juniper Hill

Garnet Flats

Jasper Vale

Crimson River

Sable Peak

Christmas in Quincy - Prequel

The Edens: A Legacy Short Story

Treasure State Wildcats Series

Coach

Blitz

Clifton Forge Series

Steel King

Riven Knight

Stone Princess

Noble Prince

Fallen Jester

Copyrighted Material

Tin Queen

Calamity Montana Series

The Bribe

The Bluff

The Brazen

The Bully

The Brawl

The Brood

Jamison Valley Series

The Coppersmith Farmhouse

The Clover Chapel

The Lucky Heart

The Outpost

The Bitterroot Inn

The Candle Palace

Maysen Jar Series

The Birthday List

Letters to Molly

The Dandelion Diary

Copyrighted Material

Lark Cove Series

Tattered

Timid

Tragic

Tinsel

Timeless

Runaway Series

Runaway Road

Wild Highway

Quarter Miles

Forsaken Trail

Dotted Lines

Holiday Brothers Series

The Naughty, The Nice and The Nanny

Three Bells, Two Bows and One Brother's Best Friend

A Partridge and a Pregnancy

Standalones

Ivy

Rifts and Refrains

A Little Too Wild

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	35
Chapter 4	47
Chapter 5	57
Chapter 6	69
Chapter 7	83
Chapter 8	97
Chapter 9	111
Chapter 10	127
Chapter 11	141
Chapter 12	155
Chapter 13	167
Chapter 14	181
Chapter 15	193
Chapter 16	207
Chapter 17	219
Chapter 18	235
Chapter 19	249
Chapter 20	263
Chapter 21	275
Chapter 22	285
Chapter 23	301
Epilogue	311
Bonus Epilogue	321
Acknowledgments	329
Preview Chapter	333

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER ONE

MEMPHIS

"Juniper Hill. Juniper Hill." I plucked the sticky note from the cupholder to double-check that I had the correct street name. *Juniper Hill.* "There. Is. No. Juniper. Hill."

My palm smacked on the steering wheel, adding a whack with each word. Frustration seeped from my pores as I desperately scanned the road for a street sign.

Drake screamed in his car seat, that wailing, heartbreaking, red-faced scream. How could a noise so loud come from such a small person?

"I'm sorry, baby. We're almost there." We had to be close, right? This miserable trip had to end.

Drake cried and cried, not giving a damn about my apology. He was only eight weeks old, and while this trip had been hard on me, for him it was probably akin to torture.

"I'm screwing everything up, aren't I?"

Maybe I should have waited and made this trip when he was older. Maybe I should have stayed in New York and

Copyrighted Material

dealt with the bullshit. Maybe I should have made a hundred different choices. A thousand.

After days in the car, I'd begun questioning my every decision, especially this one.

Escaping the city had seemed like the best option. But now . . .

Drake's scream said otherwise.

It seemed like a decade ago that I'd packed up my life—our life—and loaded it into my car. Once, I'd been a girl who'd grown up in a mansion. A girl who'd had a private jet at her disposal. The realization that the only possessions truly mine would fit into a Volvo sedan was . . . humbling.

But I'd made my choice. And it was too late to turn back now.

Thousands of miles and we'd finally made it to Quincy. The site of our fresh start. Or it would be if I could find Juniper Hill.

My ears were ringing. My heart was aching. "Shh. Baby. We're almost there."

Neither did he understand nor care. He was hungry and needed a diaper change. I'd planned to do it all when we arrived at our rental, but this was the third time I'd driven this stretch of road.

Lost. We were lost in Montana.

We'd come all this way and were lost. Maybe we'd been lost since the morning I'd driven out of the city. Maybe I'd been lost for years.

I swiped up my phone and checked the GPS. My new boss had warned me that this road wasn't on a map yet so she'd given me directions instead. Maybe I'd written them down wrong.

Copyrighted Material

Drake's tiny voice cracked. The crying stopped for a split

second so he could refill his lungs, then he just kept on wailing. Through the rearview and the mirror above his seat, his little face was scrunched and flushed and his fists balled.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as tears blurred my vision. They fell down my cheeks and I couldn't swipe them away fast enough.

Don't give up.

My own sob escaped, joining my son's, and I eased off the highway for the shoulder.

But God, I wanted to quit. How long could a person hold on to the end of their rope before their grip slipped? How long could a woman hold herself together before she cracked? Apparently, the answer was from New York to Montana. We were probably only a mile from our final destination and the walls were beginning to crumble.

A sob mixed with a hiccup and the tears flowed until my tires were stopped, the car was in park and I was hugging the steering wheel, wishing it could hug me back.

Don't give up.

If it was only me, I would have given up months ago. But Drake was counting on me to endure. He'd survive this, right? He'd never know that we'd spent a miserable few days in the car. He'd never know that for the first two months of his life, I'd cried nearly every day. He'd never know that today, the day when we'd started what I hoped would be a happy life, had actually been the fifth-worst day of his mother's life.

Don't give up.

I squeezed my eyes shut, giving in to the sobs for a minute. I blindly felt along the door, hitting the button to roll down the windows. Maybe some clean air would chase away the stink of too many days in the car.

Copyrighted Material

"I'm sorry, Drake," I murmured as he continued to cry. As we both cried. "I'm sorry."

A better mother would probably get out of the car. A better mother would hold her son, feed him and change him. But then I'd have to load him into his car seat again and he'd cry, like he had for the first hour of our trip this morning.

Maybe he'd be better off with a different mother. A mother who wouldn't have made him travel across the country.

He deserved a better mother. And a better father.

We had that in common.

"Miss?"

I gasped, nearly jumping out of my seat belt as a woman's voice cut through the noise.

"Sorry." The officer, a pretty woman with dark hair, held up her hands.

"Oh my God." I slapped a hand to my heart as the other shoved a lock of hair from my face. In the rearview, I spotted the familiar blue and red lights of a police car. *Shit*. The last thing I needed was a ticket.

"I'm sorry, Officer. I can move my car."

"It's all right." She leaned in, peeking inside my car. "Is everything okay?"

I wiped furiously at my face. *Stop crying. Stop crying.* "Just a bad day. Actually, a really bad day. Maybe the fifth-worst day of my life. Sixth. No, fifth. We've been in the car for days and my son won't stop crying. He's hungry. I'm hungry. We need a nap and a shower, but I'm lost. I've been driving around for thirty minutes trying to find this place where we're supposed to be staying."

Now I was rambling to a cop. *Fantastic*.

Copyrighted Material

The rambling was something I'd done as a kid whenever my nanny had busted me doing something wrong. I didn't like to be in trouble and my go-to response was to talk my way through it.

Dad had always called it making excuses. But no matter how often he'd scolded me, the rambling had become a habit. A bad habit I'd correct later in life on a day that didn't rank in the top ten worst days.

"Where are you going?" the woman asked, glancing at Drake, who was still yelling.

He didn't care that we'd been pulled over. He was too busy telling her that I was a horrible mother.

I scrambled to find the sticky note I'd dropped, showing it to her through the open window. "Juniper Hill."

"Juniper Hill?" Her forehead furrowed and she blinked, reading the sticky note twice.

My stomach dropped. Was that bad? Was it in a sketchy neighborhood or something?

When I'd tried to find a rental in Quincy, the pickings had been slim. The only options had been three- or four-bedroom homes, and not only did I not need so much space, they'd been outside of my budget. Considering this was the first time in my life I'd had a budget, I was determined to stick to it.

So I'd called Eloise Eden, the woman who'd hired me to work at her hotel, and told her that I wouldn't be able to move to Quincy after all.

When she'd promised to find me an apartment, I'd thought maybe a guardian angel had been looking out for me. Except maybe this studio apartment on Juniper Hill was really a shanty in the mountains and I'd be shacked up next to meth dealers and criminals.

Copyrighted Material

Whatever. Today, I'd take the crackheads and murderers if it meant spending twenty-four hours not in this car.

"Yes. Do you know where it is?" I tossed a hand toward the windshield. "My directions led me right here. But there isn't a road marked Juniper Hill. Or any road marked, period."

"Montana country roads rarely are marked. But I can show you."

"Really?" My voice sounded so small as another wave of tears crashed open the dam.

It had been a while since anyone had helped me. The little gestures stood out when they were rare. In the past month, the only people who'd offered me help had been Quincy residents. Eloise. And now this beautiful stranger.

"Of course." She held out a hand. "I'm Winslow."

"Memphis." I sniffled and shook her hand, blinking too fast as I tried to stop the tears. It was useless. I was exactly the train wreck I appeared to be.

"Welcome to Quincy, Memphis."

I breathed and damn those tears just kept on falling. "Thank you."

She gave me a sad smile, then hurried back to her car.

"We'll be okay, baby." There was a sliver of hope in my voice as I scrubbed at my face.

Drake continued to cry as we eased off the road and followed Winslow down to a cluster of trees. Between them was a narrow dirt road.

I'd passed this road. Three times. Except it wasn't a real road. Certainly not a residential street. She slowed, her brake lights glowing red, and turned down the lane. Dust flew from beneath her tires as she followed the trail, driving farther and farther away from the highway.

Copyrighted Material

My wheels found every bump and every hole but the bouncing seemed to help because Drake's wailing simmered to a whimper as I followed a bend in the road toward a hill that rose above the tree line. Its face was covered in dark evergreen shrubs.

"Juniper Hill."

Wow. I was an idiot. Had I stopped and looked at my surroundings, I probably would have figured this out.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I'd pay attention to Montana. But not today.

The road went on for another mile, following the same line of trees, until finally we rounded one last corner, and there, in a meadow of golden grasses, was a stunning home.

No mountain shanty. No questionable neighbors. Whoever owned this property had plucked it straight out of a home decor magazine.

The house was a single story, stretched long and wide with the hill as its backdrop. The black siding was broken up by enormous sheets of crystal-clear glass. Where a normal house would have walls, this place had windows. Through them I could see the open kitchen and living room. On the far end, a bedroom with a white-covered bed.

The sight of its pillows made me yawn.

Detached from the house was a wide, three-stall garage with a staircase that ran to a door on a second story. Eloise had said she'd found me a loft.

That had to be it. Our temporary home.

Winslow parked in the circular gravel driveway. I eased in behind her, then hurried out of my seat to rescue my son. With Drake unstrapped, I lifted him to my shoulder, hugging him for a long moment. "We made it. Finally."

Copyrighted Material

"He was just sick of his car seat." Winslow walked over

with a kind smile. "I have a two-month-old. Sometimes he loves the car. Most times, not so much."

"Drake's two months too. And he's been a trooper," I breathed. Now that he'd finally stopped crying, I could breathe. "This has been a long trip."

"From New York?" she asked, glancing at my license plates.

"Yep."

"That *is* a long trip."

I hoped it had been worth it. Because there was no way I was going back. Forward steps only, from now on. The city was a memory.

"I'm the chief of police," she said. "You know Eloise Eden, right?"

"Um . . . yes?" Had I told her that?

"Full disclosure. Memphis is a unique name and Eloise is my sister-in-law."

"Ah." *Damn it to the moon and back.* This was my new boss's sister-in-law, and I'd just made an epically horrible first impression. "Er . . . what are the chances?"

"In Quincy? Pretty good," she said. "You'll be working at the inn?"

I nodded. "Yes. As a housekeeper."

Before Winslow could say anything else, the front door to the house opened and a pretty brunette rushed outside, smiling and waving.

Eloise. Her blue eyes sparkled, the same color as the cloudless September sky.

"Memphis!" She rushed my way. "You made it."

"I did," I breathed, shifting Drake to extend my hand.

Whatever makeup I'd put on two days ago at our hotel in Minnesota had worn off from fatigue and tears. My

Copyrighted Material

blond hair was in a sloppy ponytail and my white tee was stained orange at the hem from an energy drink that had exploded on me this morning. I looked nothing like the version of Memphis Ward who'd done a virtual interview with Eloise weeks ago. But this was me. There was no hiding reality.

I was a mess.

Eloise moved right in to my space, ignoring my offered hand to pull me in for a hug.

I tensed. "Sorry, I smell."

"Not at all." She laughed. "You met Winn?"

I nodded. "She was kind enough to help me when I got lost."

"Oh no." Eloise's smile dropped. "Were my directions bad?"

"No." I waved it off. "I've just never driven on a dirt road. I didn't expect it."

Up until this trip, I hadn't driven much at all. Yes, I'd had a car in New York, but I'd also had a driver. Thankfully, I'd spent enough time behind the wheel going to and from the Hamptons to feel comfortable making this journey.

"Can we help you get unpacked?" Winslow asked, pointing toward the loft.

"Oh, that's okay. I can manage."

"We'll help." Eloise squeezed the trunk's release button.

The duffel bags and suitcases I'd shoved inside practically jumped out. Yes, all of my belongings fit into my Volvo. But that didn't mean it hadn't been a chore to stuff them inside.

She hefted a backpack over her shoulder, then lifted out a suitcase.

Copyrighted Material

"Really, I can do this." My face flamed red at the sight of

my new boss hauling out my things. The bag she carried had my underwear and tampons.

But Eloise ignored me, marching to the garage's steel staircase.

"Trust me on this one." Winslow walked to the trunk. "The sooner you just go along with Eloise, the easier your life will be. She's persistent."

Like how she'd refused to listen when I'd had to decline the job offer. She'd ordered me to get to Montana, promising we'd have a home once we arrived.

"I'm learning this." I giggled. It was the first laugh I'd had in . . . well, in a long time.

I held Drake closer, breathing in his baby smell. Standing there, with my feet on the ground, I let myself breathe again. For one heartbeat. Then two. I let the soles of my shoes be warmed by the rocks. I let my heart sink out of my throat and return to my chest.

We made it.

Quincy might not be our forever home. But forevers were for dreamers. And I'd stopped dreaming the day I'd started ranking my worst days. There'd been so many, it had been the only way to keep moving forward. To know that none had been as awful as the first-worst day. To know that if I'd survived that one, I could endure the second and the third and the fourth.

Today marked the fifth.

It had started at a gas station in North Dakota. I'd pulled over last night to get some sleep. Twenty minutes, that's all I'd wanted. Then I'd planned to get back on the road. Drake had been zonked and I hadn't wanted to wake him up by hauling him into a seedy hotel.

Copyrighted Material

Napping in the car had been a reckless decision. I'd

thought I was safe beneath the parking lot's bright lights. My eyes hadn't been closed for more than five minutes when a truck driver had knocked on my window, licking his lips.

I'd sped away and, hopefully, run over his toes.

My heart had hammered for the next hour, but once the adrenaline had worn off, soul-deep exhaustion had burrowed under my skin. I'd been afraid of falling asleep at the wheel so I'd pulled over on the interstate to hop out and jog in place under the stars. I'd stretched for all of thirty seconds before a bug had flown under my shirt and left two bites along my ribs.

The sting had kept me awake for the next hour.

At dawn, I'd found another turnoff to stop and change Drake. When I'd lifted him out of his seat, he'd spit up all over my shirt, forcing me to give myself a baby-wipe bath. Any normal day, it wouldn't have been a big deal. But it had been one more straw and my back was close to breaking.

During our last gas station stop, he'd started crying. With the exception of a few short naps, he hadn't really stopped.

Hours of that wail and I was fried. I was weary. I was scared. I was nervous.

My emotions were battling each other, fighting to take first place. Fighting to be the one that pushed me over the edge.

But we'd made it. Somehow, we'd made it.

"Let's go check out our new spot." I kissed Drake as he squirmed—he had to be hungry—then shifted him to the cradle of my arm. With one hand, I hefted out the next duffel in the stack, but I'd forgotten how heavy it was. The nylon strap slipped from my fingers, the bag plopping to the ground. "Ugh."

Copyrighted Material

"I'll get it." A deep, rugged voice sounded from behind me, then came the crunch of boots on gravel.

I stood, ready to smile and introduce myself, but the second I spotted the man walking my way, my brain scrambled.

Tall. Broad. Tattooed. *Gorgeous*.

Why had I kept driving last night? Why hadn't I stopped at a hotel with a shower?

I was in no place to crush on a guy. The new Memphis—mom Memphis—was too busy getting formula stains out of her shirts to preen for men. But the old Memphis—single, rich and always up for an orgasm or two Memphis—really, *really* liked sexy, bearded men.

He bent and picked up the duffel before grabbing the largest suitcase from the trunk. His biceps strained the sleeves of his gray T-shirt as he carried them both toward the garage. Narrow hips. Sinewed forearms. Long legs covered in faded jeans.

Who was he? Did he live here? Did it matter?

Drake whined and that sound snuffed the laser beam that had been my gaze on this guy's sculpted ass.

What the hell was wrong with me? *Sleep*. I needed sleep.

Before anyone could catch me staring, I dropped my chin and rushed after him, pausing long enough to snag the diaper bag from the backseat.

The metal on the stairs gave a low hum with each step. The man had almost made it to the landing when Eloise popped out.

"Good, you're helping." She smiled at him, then waved us all inside. "Knox Eden, meet Memphis Ward. Memphis, this is my brother Knox. This is his house."

Copyrighted Material

Knox set down the bags and jerked up his chin. "Hi."

"Hi. This is Drake. Thanks for renting us your apartment."

"I'm sure another spot will open up in town." He shot Eloise a glare. "Soon."

The tension rolling through the loft was thicker than traffic on East Thirty-Fourth from FDR Drive to Fifth Avenue.

Winslow studied the honey-colored floors while Eloise narrowed her gaze at her brother.

Meanwhile Knox did nothing to disguise the irritation on his face.

"Is, um . . . is this place not for rent?" It would be on par for my day to arrive somewhere I was unwelcome.

"No, it's not," he said as Eloise said, "Yes, it is."

"I don't want to cause any trouble." My stomach churned. "Maybe we should find another place."

Eloise crossed her arms over her chest, raising her eyebrows as she waited for her brother to speak. She was too pretty to be intimidating, yet I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that look.

"Fine," Knox grumbled. "Stay as long as you need."

"Are you sure?" Because it sounded a lot like he was lying. I'd heard my fair share of lies as a New York socialite.

"Yeah. I'll get the rest of your bags." Knox breezed past me, the scent of sage and soap filling my nose.

"Sorry." Eloise put her hands on her cheeks. "Okay, I need to be honest. When you called and said there weren't any apartments around town, I did some checking too. And you're right. Nothing is available in your price range."

I groaned. So she'd pawned me off on her unwilling brother. I was a charity case.

Copyrighted Material

Old Memphis would have refused charity.

Mom Memphis didn't have that luxury.

"I don't want to intrude."

"You're not," Eloise said. "He could have told me no."

Why did I get the feeling it was hard for people to tell her no? Or that she rarely accepted it as an answer? After all, that was how I'd driven out here.

After an hour-long Zoom interview, I'd fallen in love with the idea of working for Eloise and I hadn't even seen the hotel premises. She'd smiled and laughed through our conversation. She'd asked about Drake and complimented my résumé.

I'd taken this job not because I aspired to clean rooms, but simply because she was the *anti-Father*. There was nothing cold, ruthless or cunning about Eloise. My father would hate her.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Absolutely. Knox just isn't used to having people out here. But it will be fine. He'll adjust."

Was that why he'd built a home full of glass? Out here, he didn't need the privacy of walls. The location gave him seclusion. And I was intruding.

We didn't have a lease agreement. As soon as a vacancy in town came open, I doubted Knox would mind losing my rent check.

He came striding up the staircase, the thud from his boots reverberating through the loft. His frame filled the doorway as he walked inside carrying another three bags.

"I can get the rest," I said as he set them on the floor. "And I'll be quiet. You won't even know we're here."

Drake chose that moment to let out a screech before nuzzling toward my breast.

Copyrighted Material

Knox's mouth pursed in a thin line before he retreated down the stairs.

"Can we help you get unpacked?" Winslow asked. "I'd much rather stay here than head back out on patrol and write speeding tickets."

"No, that's okay. I can handle it. There isn't much." Just my entire life in bags. "Thank you for rescuing me today."

"Anytime."

"Are we still on for an orientation tomorrow?" I asked Eloise.

"Sure. But if you want a day or two to settle in before work—"

"No." I shook my head. "I'd like to jump right in."

Dive headfirst into this new life. Drake was starting at his daycare tomorrow and though I hated leaving him for the day, that was the life of a single mother.

The daycare cost would swallow thirty-one percent of my income. Quincy had a low cost of living compared to larger Montana towns, and renting this loft at only three hundred dollars a month would allow me to build a cushion, but unpaid weekdays were not an option. Not yet.

Life would have been easier, financially, in New York. But it wouldn't have been a life. It would have been a prison sentence.

"Okay." Eloise clapped. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. Come in whenever you're ready."

"Thank you." I held out my hand once more because shaking her hand was important. It was one of the few lessons my father had taught me that I didn't loathe.

"I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too."

Copyrighted Material

Winslow and Eloise waved as they walked out the door. Another whimper from Drake sent me flying into action, digging out a bottle from the diaper bag before we settled on the couch. While he chugged, I surveyed my new temporary home.

The white walls were pitched with the roofline and a thick wooden beam the color of the floors ran the length of the space. Three dormer windows had been cut into the side facing the house, giving me a view of Juniper Hill and the indigo mountains beyond. Alcoves and half walls created different compartments in the floorplan.

Across from the couch and behind a short partition was a bed covered in a patchwork quilt. The kitchen was on one side of the loft, next to the door, while the bathroom was at its opposite. The space was just large enough for a shower stall, sink and toilet.

"You'll have to have baths in the sink," I told Drake, taking the empty bottle from his mouth.

He stared up at me with his beautiful brown eyes.

"I love you." I hadn't told him that enough on this drive. We hadn't had enough moments like this, just the two of us together. "What do you think about this?"

Drake blinked.

"I like it too."

I burped him, then dug out a baby blanket, settling him on the floor while I rushed to bring in the last couple of loads and unpack.

Hours later, my clothes were refolded and put away in the one and only dresser. The drawers built into the bedframe I used for Drake's outfits. The small closet was stuffed by the time I hung a few coats and sweaters, then stowed the large suitcases stuffed with smaller suitcases stuffed with bags and backpacks.

Copyrighted Material

I'd bought two sandwiches at the last gas station I'd stopped at, thinking there wouldn't be time to make a grocery store run, so I ate my dry ham and swiss, chasing it down with some water, and went about giving Drake his first kitchen-sink bath.

He fell asleep in my arms before I placed him in his portable crib. I summoned enough energy to shower and wash my hair, then crashed within seconds of my head hitting the pillow.

But my son wasn't much for letting me rest these days and just after eleven he woke up hungry and fussy. One bottle, one clean diaper and one hour later, he showed no signs of sleep.

"Oh, baby. Please." I paced the length of the loft, walking past the open windows, hoping the clean, cool air would settle him down.

Except Drake was not having it. He cried and cried, like he did most nights, squirming because he just was not comfortable.

So I walked and walked, bouncing and swaying with every step.

A light from Knox's house flipped on as I passed a window. A flash of skin caught my eye and stopped my feet.

"Whoa."

Knox was shirtless, wearing only a pair of black boxer briefs. They molded to his strong thighs. The waistband clung to the V at his hips.

My neighbor, my landlord, wasn't just muscled, he was cut. He was a symphony of rippled muscle that sang in perfect harmony with his handsome face.

Pure temptation, poised at the window of a woman who could not afford to stray from her path.

Copyrighted Material

But what was the harm in a look?

I hovered beside the window's frame, staying out of sight, and stole another glance as he raised a towel to dry the ends of his dark hair.

"Not everything about today was bad, was it?" I asked Drake as Knox strode out of his bedroom. "At least we've got a great view."

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER TWO

KNOX

There was no place I'd rather be than standing in my kitchen, a knife in hand, with the scents of fresh herbs and baked bread swirling in the air.

Eloise swept through the swinging door that connected the kitchen to the restaurant. "And right through here is the kitchen."

Correction. There was no place I'd rather be than standing in my kitchen *alone*.

"Isn't it awesome?" she asked over her shoulder.

Memphis stepped out from behind Eloise, and I did a double take. Her blond hair was straight and hanging in sleek panels over her shoulders. The bright lights brought out the caramel flecks in her brown eyes. Her cheeks were rosy and her soft lips painted a pale pink.

Well . . . fuck.

I was in trouble.

It was the same woman I'd met yesterday, but she was a far cry from the frazzled, exhausted person who'd moved

Copyrighted Material

into the loft. Memphis was . . . striking. I'd thought the same yesterday, even with blue circles beneath her eyes. But today her beauty was distracting. Trouble.

I had no time for trouble.

Especially when it came to my new *tenant*.

My knife worked through a batch of cilantro, my hand moving faster as I focused on the task at hand and ignored this intrusion.

"If the fridge in the break room is ever full, you can keep your lunch in here," Eloise said, gesturing to the walk-in.

Wait. What? The knife dropped from my palm, nearly hitting a finger. No one kept their lunch in here. Not even my waitstaff. Granted, they rarely had to bring meals because I'd typically cook them a meal. Still . . . that walk-in was off-limits.

Eloise knew it was off-limits. Except my wonderfully annoying sister seemed intent on forcing Memphis into every aspect of my life. Wasn't my home enough? Now my kitchen?

"Okay." Memphis nodded, scanning the room, looking everywhere but at where I stood at the stainless-steel prep table in the center of the space.

She inspected the gas range along one wall, then the industrial dishwasher at her back. On the walls were shelves filled with clean ceramic plates and coffee mugs. She studied the tiled floor, the rows of spices and racks crammed with hanging pots and pans.

"Here's the ice machine." Eloise walked to the cooler, lifting the lid. "Help yourself."

"All right." Memphis's voice was no more than a murmur as she tucked a lock of hair behind an ear. She'd promised

Copyrighted Material

yesterday to be quiet. I guess she intended to keep that vow at the hotel too.

I glanced at Eloise, then jerked my chin to the door. The tour was over. This was a kitchen. Just a commercial kitchen with bright lights and shiny appliances. And I was busy. This was my time alone to breathe and think.

But did Eloise take the hint and leave?

Of course not. She took up space against my table and leaned. Why the fuck was she leaning?

I clamped my teeth together and picked up my knife, gripping the handle until my knuckles were white. Normally I'd tell Eloise to scram, but I was making nice at the moment. Very nice.

This *niceness* was the reason I'd agreed to let Memphis crash in the loft above my garage. My sister had asked for a favor, and at the moment, I was granting them all. Soon enough, we'd have a difficult conversation. One I'd been dreading and avoiding. One that would change our relationship.

Until then, I'd let her invade my kitchen and allow her newest employee to stay at my home.

"So that's the hotel," Eloise told Memphis.

"It's beautiful," Memphis said. "Truly."

Eloise circled the room with a finger. "Knox renovated the kitchen and restaurant last winter. That's when my parents annexed the building next door for events."

"Ah." Memphis nodded, still looking anywhere but at me.

The crunch of cilantro beneath my knife filled the silence.

My parents owned the actual hotel, The Eloise Inn, but the restaurant and kitchen were mine. The building itself

Copyrighted Material

we'd incorporated as a separate entity, the shares split equally between us.

Originally, this space had been a smaller industrial kitchen attached to a basic ballroom. They'd rented out the space for weddings and events, but when I'd moved home from San Francisco years ago, I'd filled the room with tables. It had worked as a restaurant for a while, but it had lacked style and flow. When I'd told Mom and Dad that I wanted to convert it to an actual restaurant, they'd jumped at the chance to expand the hotel's footprint and grab the building next door.

According to our projections, the annex would pay for itself within the next five years. My renovations would pay for themselves in three assuming the traffic at the restaurant didn't die off. Considering I had the only upscale restaurant in town, I'd happily cornered that market.

"Would you mind if I stepped out for a minute?" Memphis asked Eloise. "I'd like to just call and check in with Drake's daycare. Make sure he's doing all right."

"Sure." Eloise stood straight, escorting her to the door and finally leaving me in peace.

I put the cilantro aside and went to the walk-in to grab a handful of tomatoes. Then I shoved the sleeves of my white chef's coat, not yet stained, up my forearms before I resumed chopping.

Could I run this hotel? Did I even want to? Change was on the horizon. There were decisions to make, and I dreaded them all.

Beyond the renovations, a lot had changed here in the past year. Mostly, my parents' attitude. Besides our family's ranch, The Eloise Inn had been their most time-consuming

Copyrighted Material

business venture. Their desire to keep a finger on the hotel's pulse was dwindling. Fast.

Now that Dad had retired from running the ranch and handed control to my older brother Griffin, Mom and Dad seemed in a hurry to offload the rest of their business ventures to us kids.

That, and Dad had gotten spooked. As Uncle Briggs's dementia progressed, Dad had all but convinced himself that he'd be next. *While his mind was fresh*, he wanted his estate settled.

Griffin had always loved the Eden ranch. The land was a part of his soul. Maybe that was why the rest of us hadn't taken an interest in the cattle business. Because Griffin was the oldest and had claimed that passion first. Or maybe that passion was just a part of his blood. Our family had ranched for generations and he'd inherited a joy for it beyond anything the rest of us could comprehend.

Mom always said that Dad gave his love of the ranch to Griffin while she'd passed her love of cooking to my sister Lyla and me.

My dream had always been to run a restaurant. Lyla's too, though she preferred something small, and owning Eden Coffee fit her perfectly.

Talia hadn't taken an interest in any of the family businesses so she'd used her inheritance of brains to attend medical school.

Mateo was still young. At twenty-three, he hadn't yet decided what he wanted to do. He worked on the ranch for Griffin. He pulled a few shifts every week for Eloise, covering when she was short staffed at the front desk—which was often.

Copyrighted Material

Eloise loved The Eloise Inn and working as the hotel's manager.

My sister was the pulse of this hotel. She loved it like I loved cooking. Like Griffin loved ranching. But my parents hadn't approached her about taking over.

Instead, they'd come to me.

Their reasons were solid. I was thirty years old. Eloise was twenty-five. I had more experience with business management and more dollars in my bank account to fall back on. And though Eloise loved this hotel, she had a soft and gentle heart.

It was the reason Mom and Dad had just come out of a nasty lawsuit.

Her tender heart was also the reason she'd hired Memphis.

That, and desperation.

Our proximity to Glacier National Park brought people from across the world to Quincy. Tourists flocked to this area of Montana. Given that The Eloise was our town's best hotel, during the summer months, we were booked solid.

Turnover in the housekeeping department was constant and we'd recently lost two employees to desk jobs. Their vacancies had been open for six weeks.

Eloise had taken to cleaning rooms. So had Mateo. So had Mom. With the holiday rush fast approaching, we couldn't afford to be understaffed. When Memphis had applied and agreed to move to Quincy, Eloise had been ecstatic.

Not only was Memphis an able human body—a sexy, lithe body at that—but she was also so overqualified for a housekeeping job that, at first, Eloise had thought her

Copyrighted Material

application a joke. After their virtual interview, Eloise had said it was really a dream come true.

I'd been happy for my sister because solid hires were hard to find. That happiness had lasted a whole week until Eloise had shown up at my doorstep and begged me to let Memphis live in the loft.

I favored a solitary life. I preferred to go home to an empty house. I liked peace and quiet.

There'd be none of that with Memphis and her baby in the loft. That kid had cried for hours last night, so loud I'd heard it all the way from the garage.

There was a reason I'd built my house on Juniper Hill and not on a plot on the ranch. Distance. My family could visit and if they needed to spend the night because they drank too much, well . . . they could crash in the loft. No pavement. No traffic. No neighbors.

My sanctuary.

Until now.

"It's temporary," I told myself for the thousandth time.

The swinging door that led to the restaurant flew open and Eloise waltzed in once more, a wide smile on her face.

I glanced past her shoulder, looking for Memphis, but Eloise was alone. "What's up?"

"What are you making?" She hovered over my shoulder.

"Pico de gallo." I didn't have a huge menu, but it was enough to give the locals and hotel guests some variety. Each weekend, the dinner menu featured a special entrée. But for the most part, breakfast and lunch were consistent.

"Yum. Will you make Memphis a plate of tacos?"

The knife in my hand froze. "What?"

"Or whatever else you have on hand. I noticed that she didn't bring anything with her this morning."

Copyrighted Material

The clock on the wall showed it was ten thirty. My two waitresses were in the dining room, rolling silverware into cloth napkins and refilling salt and pepper shakers. Mondays weren't typically busy, but they weren't quiet either.

There was no such thing as quiet these days.

Apparently not even at my own home or kitchen.

"I don't make the other housekeepers lunch."

"Knox, please. She just got here. I doubt she's even had a chance to get to the grocery store."

"Then let her leave early. You don't need her cleaning today."

"No, but we have paperwork to do. And orientation videos. I get the impression that she'd like the hours. Daycare is expensive. Please?"

I sighed. *Please*. Eloise wielded that single word the way a warrior would a sword. And I was being *nice*. "Fine."

"Thank you." She plucked a tomato cube from the cutting board and popped it into her mouth.

"What's her story?"

"What do you mean?"

"That baby is the same age as Hudson." Our nephew was two months old, and Winslow, though she pulled a shift here and there, was still on maternity leave. "Isn't that young to have a kid in daycare full-time?"

"She's a single working mother, Knox. Not everyone has the luxury of maternity leave."

"I get that but . . . what's the story with the kid's father? Why'd she move all the way to Montana from New York?" And why had she taken that drive alone? That wasn't a safe trip, especially with an infant. She should have had help. How did an educated, gorgeous woman end up traveling across the country alone with a baby and what

Copyrighted Material