



CRIMSON RIVER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEVNEY PERRY

PENGUIN BOOKS

Crimson River

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.

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CHAPTER ONE

LYLA

“I’m staging an intervention.”

Not exactly the greeting I’d expected from my sister when she and her husband had walked into Eden Coffee a minute ago. “Huh?”

“I’m kicking you out.”

I blinked.

“Of here.” Eloise pointed a finger at the counter that separated us. “Right now. You have to leave.”

Leave? I was working. There would be no kicking me out. The last time I checked, this was my coffee shop. I stared at her for a long moment, then looked to Jasper standing at her side. “Is she drunk?”

“I’m staying out of this. Good luck, Lyla.” He kissed Eloise’s hair, then walked to a table against the wall, taking a seat.

“You’ve worked one hundred days in a row,” Eloise said.

A hundred? No way. That couldn’t be right. I opened my mouth to argue but she cut me off.

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"Yes, I counted. You haven't taken a day off since that Sunday in April when you went to Missoula to get your hair cut."

I scoffed. "I've taken other days off since then."

"Oh, really?" Eloise arched an eyebrow. "When?"

Uh . . . Well, it was September. And the last time I'd gone to Missoula had been April—my hair was in dire straits and in desperate need of another trip to the salon. But I'd taken time off this summer, hadn't I? Maybe not a full day, but there were days when I'd ducked out early. That was practically the same as a vacation, right?

Okay, so technically I'd come to the coffee shop for the past hundred days. Who cared if I worked a lot?

I huffed. "What are you, the work police? Who are you to talk, anyway? You're always at the hotel." If she wasn't at home with Jasper, then she was running The Eloise Inn across Main Street. "Go away. I'm busy."

"Nope." She planted her hands on her hips, and if she had been able to physically dig her heels in, I'd have had two dents in my hardwood floor. There was a stubborn set to Eloise's pretty chin that meant she was not letting this go.

My sister was amazing and exasperating all at the same time.

"One afternoon," she said. "That's all I'm asking for. You leave here for one afternoon and do something non-work related."

"Why?" Couldn't I just be left alone to work in peace?

The sad smile she gave me made me feel both loved and pathetic. "Because I'm worried about you. I don't want you to burn yourself out."

I sighed. "I won't."

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"But you might." She clasped her hands together. "Please? Just take the rest of the day off so I can stop worrying."

"I can't just leave, Eloise." This business was my everything. My *only* thing.

"Why not?" She waved to Crystal, my barista, as she came out of the kitchen carrying a fresh tray of scones. "Crystal is here. Jasper and I will hang out and help close."

Jasper might be able to handle it, but Eloise? Never. She was utterly hopeless when it came to cooking, and I wouldn't trust her to steam milk if my life depended on it.

But once again, the second I opened my mouth to object, she talked over me.

"Go home. Relax."

"I can't go home," I said. "If I do, I'll think of everything that needs to get done, and I'll come right back."

If anyone could relate, it should be Eloise. She knew exactly the commitment it took to run a business in downtown Quincy, Montana. Before she'd married Jasper, she'd probably put in her own consecutive hundred days at the hotel.

But now that Eloise had found love, her priorities had shifted, and she was shoving this *balanced lifestyle* down my throat.

This was arguably worse than my twin sister, Talia, who was a doctor at the hospital and kept trying to set me up on a blind date with an X-ray tech. Or my sister-in-law, Memphis, who thought the local UPS driver was cute—even in a brown uniform—and dropped not-so-subtle hints that I should ask him out the next time he brought a delivery to the shop.

It wasn't that I didn't want to date. I *had* dated. For years,

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I'd gone on blind dates. I'd let people set me up with their other single friends. I'd even tried a dating app—two matches and two horrible first dates and I'd never ventured down that road again.

I was just . . . over it. Completely, emphatically over it.

Was my devotion to Eden Coffee such a bad thing? Couldn't everyone just leave me and my single, workaholic life alone?

My only ally was Mateo. Just yesterday, my youngest brother had come in griping. Apparently, I wasn't the only Eden being constantly pimped out for dates.

"You could go to a movie," Eloise suggested.

Meh. Did I mind going to the theater alone? No. I'd just rather stay at work. "I don't feel like popcorn. Last time I was there I ate too much and it gave me a stomachache."

"Then don't get popcorn."

"Then what's the fun in going to a movie?"

"You're exhausting." She rolled her eyes. "Go for a hike then. You love hiking, and I know you hardly went this summer. It's a beautiful day. Get some fresh air. Disconnect. Do anything. Just leave this building until tomorrow morning."

"Why?" I whined. "I like it here. Let me stay. I'll make you something yummy. Chocolate croissants?"

"Tempting. But no." She shook her head. "This job is becoming your personality."

What? No, it wasn't. I scrunched up my nose. "Harsh."

"You came into the hotel on Monday and asked if you could get me anything else. In my building."

Was making sure my sister had a coffee or cookie while she worked a damn crime?

"You serve and wait on people every day," she said. "Just . . . for one afternoon, do something for you."

This job *was* for me. I liked watching people come into my coffee shop and unwind. I liked that I'd created an atmosphere where friends could meet to chat. Where people could treat themselves to a pastry or dessert or fancy latte.

But there was no arguing with Eloise. Not today. She had that determined look on her face, one she'd inherited from Dad.

I groaned. "You're not going to leave me alone until I agree, are you?"

"Nope."

"Fine. I'll go for a hike or whatever."

"Yay. Thank you." She failed to hide a victorious smile. "Maybe you'll meet your dream guy while you're out hiking."

Uh-huh, sure. Because Montana hiking trails were teeming with eligible, handsome men who'd worship the ground I walked on.

I untied my apron. "I'm starting to think my dream guy doesn't exist." And maybe that was okay. Maybe this coffee shop, my family, was all I needed. "You'll call me if something goes wrong."

"Yes," she promised.

I locked my blue eyes with hers. "There's plenty of food in the kitchen, but if for any reason cooking is required—"

She held up a hand. "I promise not to go anywhere near an oven. That's why I brought Jasper. Or I'll ask Crystal."

Damn it, this was stupid. I didn't want to go for a hike. I wanted to stay in my coffee shop, surrounded by the scents of vanilla, coffee beans and cinnamon. And the walls with their scuffed molding. And the floor that would need to be

mopped tonight. And the sticky tables that would need to be wiped down.

So maybe I was a teeny-tiny bit sick of this place.

Besides, this seemed to be something Eloise needed. And after the shooting at the hotel this summer, well . . . if this would take one worry off her heart, then I could give her an afternoon.

"All right," I said. "You win. I'll go. Happy now?"

"Yep." That smug grin of hers widened.

While she gloated to Crystal, I trudged into the kitchen to collect my stuff.

With my coat slung over an arm and my purse on a shoulder, I headed for the rear exit, ignoring Eloise as she practically shoved me outside. The minute I was alone in the alley, I stuck out my tongue toward the steel door and Eloise, who was probably watching from the peephole.

"An intervention," I muttered as I climbed in my car. Weren't interventions supposed to include more than one person? Jasper didn't count, considering he'd bolted after five seconds.

"Now what?" My finger hesitated over the ignition button. I stared at the back of Eden Coffee. Couldn't I just go back inside where it was familiar? No. I sighed and started my navy-blue Honda. I'd be back tomorrow at four in the morning anyway.

I reversed out of my space and headed down the alley, taking my regular route to my house on the outskirts of Quincy.

The house was quiet. It was always quiet. The couch and TV were tempting, but what I'd told Eloise was true. If I stayed home, I'd think about work and go back. So I swapped out the tennis shoes I'd pulled on this morning for my hiking

boots. Then with a warmer coat and a beanie to cover my dark hair, I returned to my car and aimed my tires at the mountains.

Montana was magnificent this time of year. The trees surrounding my small hometown were a riot of color. The bold evergreen forests were infused with limes, yellows, oranges and reds. A layer of mist and fog clung to the mountaintops.

As I made my way along the winding road that led to my favorite hiking area, I cracked the window an inch, breathing in the crisp, cool air.

My shoulders relaxed deeper into the seat. My pulse calmed. Maybe after this hike, I'd feel more like myself.

Ever since my thirtieth birthday this spring, I'd struggled to feel . . . normal. Something was going on with me, but I couldn't quite pinpoint it. Was it depression? Anxiety? Restlessness?

Quincy was home. It had always been home. The idea of moving to a new town made my stomach churn, but lately I'd been wondering . . .

What next?

I'd spent the better part of a decade establishing my business. From the day I'd graduated college and moved home, I'd poured everything into Eden Coffee. I'd proved to myself that I could be a successful entrepreneur. I wasn't just the best pastry chef in a hundred-mile radius, but I also had the intelligence and savvy to manage a profitable business. I'd used my inheritance wisely and hadn't squandered the gift from my parents.

I lived debt-free. Both the building downtown and my home were mine and mine alone. I'd made enough last year from the shop to buy this new car with cash. Beyond that

financial stability, I was surrounded by family and friends. If I wanted a buzzing social life—which I didn't—I could have one.

And men, well . . . I could date if I wanted to date. But I didn't.

From the outside, my life was rock solid. So why couldn't I shake this unease? This feeling that I was missing something. This feeling that somehow, I'd failed. That I was marching in the wrong direction.

I was off-kilter and didn't know how to find steady.

It was easier to ignore those feelings at work. The shop was busy and kept my head from wandering. Was that my problem? I'd been ignoring myself for too long?

Was Eden Coffee my personality? Was I okay with that?

I didn't have an answer. So instead, I concentrated on the road, driving to a small, familiar turnout off the highway.

There wasn't an established trailhead along this particular section of the river. It was a secluded area mostly frequented by local, experienced hikers.

The tourists who flocked to Quincy every summer typically headed to Glacier to hike. Those who stayed close used the wider, maintained trails.

This spot was really nothing more than an access point to the Clark Fork River. The woods were dense, and unless you knew what to expect, it didn't exactly scream *Stop Here to Discover Montana!*

In the spring, I preferred hiking trails that led to open meadows where I could pick wildflowers. But in the fall, when the river was low and the rocky banks dry, I could meander along the water as I took in the scenery.

It was my parents who'd taught me to love the outdoors. My dad had always said that breathing in Montana's fresh

air for an hour was a surefire way to cure any ailment. His preferred way to explore was on horseback. So was Talia's and Griffin's. And while I did love riding my horse, Mercury, there was something peaceful about walking through nature on my own two feet.

My hiking backpack had been sitting in the bottom of my closet for far, far too long. I zipped my keys in its front pocket, patting the side pouch that held my bear spray. Then with my empty water bottle stowed away, I donned my coat and hat before heading into the woods, breathing in the scent of earth and pine.

By the time I made it to the river, a weight had lifted off my shoulders.

I hadn't even realized how much I'd needed to get away. To ignore the stress from work and just . . . breathe.

Okay, so maybe Eloise had a point. Tomorrow, I'd have to say thank you. She'd never let me live it down.

I tugged my phone from my pocket to check the time, and to make sure I hadn't missed any calls. The screen was blank.

A few years ago, I would have been flooded with texts on a Friday afternoon. My sisters wanting to go out to dinner. My brothers wanting to meet at Willie's for a drink. Mom and Dad inviting us all to some activity in town.

But lately, it seemed like everyone had their own life.

Was that what was bothering me? That I felt left behind?

With the exception of Mateo, my siblings were married. They were all having children, growing their own families. Mom and Dad were reveling in their retirement and grandkids.

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I refused to be jealous of their happiness. Refused.

It was harder to refuse the loneliness.

On a sigh, I tucked my phone away and filled my lungs with the crisp mountain air, holding it in until it burned. Then I headed off my path, following the river as I made my way deeper into the forest.

Another reason I liked this area was because it kept cell service. I had my pepper spray in case I encountered an animal, but if I ever got lost, I had my phone and GPS to find my way home. So I walked in no hurry, with no destination in mind, breathing easier and easier as my muscles warmed and loosened.

A hawk's scream pierced the sky, echoing through the river valley. The bird soared overhead, then disappeared past the treetops.

After an hour, sweat beaded at my temples and my throat was parched. I unstrapped my pack, pulling out my empty water bottle, then traversed the round, smooth rocks that bordered the river. The best part about this spot was the clean, cold water.

I twisted the lid from the bottle, crouching to fill it, but froze when a trickle of red washed past my feet like a crimson cloud floating in a stream.

Blood.

Every muscle in my body tensed, my heart climbing into my throat. *Shit.*

Slowly, I stretched an arm backward, lifting my can of pepper spray from its pocket. That blood had to be coming from a recent kill. A deer had probably come to the river for a drink, like me, and been ambushed by a predator.

Would I prefer a run-in with a mountain lion or a grizzly bear? Mountain lion. Probably. Damn it.

Please don't be a grizzly bear or a mountain lion.

I rose to my feet, barely breathing as I moved an inch at a time. Maybe if I could sneak away, whatever predator was having a snack upstream wouldn't even notice me. With a silent step, I turned, bracing as I scanned the riverbanks.

Not a grizzly bear or a mountain lion.

A hunter.

The air rushed from my lungs. Oh, thank God.

I returned my canister of pepper spray to its pocket, then twisted the lid on my water bottle.

The hunter was positioned with his back in my direction. He rested on his knees as he washed his bloody hands in the river.

Closer to the trees, I spotted his kill. Not a deer, but an elk. Its tan hide had been folded into a neat square. He must have quartered the animal already because there were hunks of meat in white game bags strapped to his pack. A bow and quiver of arrows were propped up against a nearby log. And about twenty feet from his pack was the gut pile—red and greenish gray and still steaming.

The hunter stood, shaking out his wet hands.

I opened my mouth, about to make a sound so he'd know he wasn't alone, when he turned and spotted me.

He did a double take.

I waved. "Hi. Sorry to sneak up—"

He burst into long strides, moving toward me with such intensity that I glanced over my shoulder to make sure there wasn't actually a grizzly bear behind me.

When I faced forward again, he was still marching toward me so fast that I stepped backward, stumbling on a rock. I righted myself and held up both hands, dropping my water bottle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I'll leave."

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He kept coming, like a bullet intent on its target. He moved too fast for me to escape. Too fast for me to make any sense of this.

Run, Lyla.

He reached me before I could run. And before I could scream or make a sound, he wrapped his large, wet hands around my neck.

Pain exploded through my throat. I tried to drag in a breath but his grip was impossibly tight. My eyes burned and tears streamed down my cheeks.

“Stop.” My voice was barely a gurgle. My hands came to his wrists, tugging and pulling. Smacking and slapping.

He squeezed harder.

No. No, this wasn’t happening. This was just a nightmare. I’d tripped on a stick in the woods and hit my head. This was my imagination playing tricks on me. I was really at home, asleep on the couch and having a bad dream. Because why would this man want to kill me?

No, this wasn’t real.

I gasped for breath, desperate to fill my lungs. Balling my hands into fists, I bashed them against his forearms, but he was too strong. Too tall. Too big.

I kicked at his shins, but the edges of my vision were growing fuzzy. The lack of oxygen was already pulling darkness closer.

This man was going to kill me. This was where I’d die. Beside the river, in the middle of the Montana wilderness, strangled by a stranger.

Dad was on the expanded search and rescue team for the county. So was Griffin. So was Knox. So was Mateo.

Please don’t let one of them find my body.

Through the tears, I took in my killer’s face. He had

reddish-orange hair—a ginger. The stubble on his granite face was the same color. His eyes were a rich brown, like the brownies I'd made this morning at the coffee shop. There was a jagged scar on his face, pink and about six inches long. It ran from the corner of his eye all the way to his chin.

How did he get that scar? I guess I'd never know.

The black crept closer, faster.

Why? I mouthed the word, unable to speak.

My arms and legs were getting so heavy. I batted at his wrists again, using the last of my strength until my hands dropped to my sides and my knees buckled. My eyelids might as well have been made of lead. They drifted closed as my head began to float.

The bear spray. I reached for the pocket, my movements sluggish, but I managed to slip my index finger through the trigger's circle. But before I could even think about lifting the can, his hold on my throat loosened. The can slipped from my grip, clattering against the ground at my feet.

Then I was falling too.

My knees cracked on the rocks and pain ripped through my legs. I collapsed on a shoulder, my hands coming to my throat. It burned like he'd set it on fire, but his hands were gone.

He'd let me go.

I coughed and gagged, dragging in air through my nose, anything to fill my lungs. I clutched my stomach, curling up on the ground, gasping for a full breath. Every inhale ached. The tears kept flowing, my insides churning as my head spun in circles.

He'd let me go.

Why? I forced my eyes open, risking a glance in the distance. The backpack, the bow and the man were gone.

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He was gone.

I gave myself three heartbeats. Then I shoved up to my feet.

Run, Lyla.

This time, I ran.

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CHAPTER TWO

VANCE

Where the hell was my wallet? I patted my jeans pocket for the tenth time, then scanned the bedroom again. It wasn't on the nightstand. I'd put it on the nightstand. The damn thing couldn't have sprouted legs and walked away.

"For fuck's sake." I didn't have time to search for my wallet when I needed to get on the road, but before I could get on the road, I needed my fucking wallet.

"Tiff," I hollered, pinching the bridge of my nose.

She emerged from the hallway and stood in the doorway, hazel eyes still blazing from our argument. "What?"

"My wallet. Have you seen it?"

She pursed her lips.

"Tiff," I clipped. Did she really think if she kept me here long enough, I'd change my mind?

She huffed and fished my wallet from her back pocket. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed it on the bed so it landed beside my backpack and suitcase.

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I gritted my teeth, holding back a snide comment. “Thanks.”

“You’re really going.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her nostrils flaring.

“I have to go.” I swept up my wallet, tucking it in my own pocket, then slung my backpack over a shoulder. The zipper’s seams were stretched to the max. The same was true for my suitcase. Not having any idea how long I’d be in Montana, I’d erred on the side of too much rather than not enough.

“I mean it, Vance. I won’t be here when you get back.”

She’d said the same earlier after I’d told her I was going to Montana. It hadn’t really surprised me, probably because I’d been expecting it for, well . . . a long time.

“You don’t have anything to say?” she asked.

No. No, I didn’t. And my silence only heightened her frustration.

She threw a hand in the air. “When are you going to give this up?”

“Never,” I whispered.

Until my dying day, I would never give up this search. Everyone else had stopped looking for Cormac. Everyone else had abandoned Norah and the girls. They deserved justice. They deserved vengeance.

There was no giving up.

“You won’t find him,” she said.

“I might.”

“He’s. Gone.” She punched each word, like volume alone would make me believe them.

He wasn’t gone. That son of a bitch didn’t get to be gone.

Maybe this lead would turn into nothing, just like every other lead I’d followed in the past four years. But if there was

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even the slightest chance I could catch Cormac's trail, then I'd take it.

I hefted my suitcase off the mattress, moving for the door, but Tiff shifted and blocked my path.

"I can't do this anymore." Her chin began to quiver. "I can't stay here and wait while you chase your demons."

"Then don't."

When we'd first gotten together, Tiff had encouraged me to go. But at some point in the past three years, she'd become just like everyone else. She wanted me to let it go and move on with my life.

I couldn't move on. I *wouldn't*. And if she didn't understand that, well . . .

"Leave the keys on the counter." We were over. We'd been over. It was time to stop pretending like we had a future together.

"That's it?" Her eyes flooded. "I tell you I'm moving out and you ask me to leave the keys on the counter?"

Yes. "I need to go," I said, jerking my chin for her to get out of the way.

She shifted, just enough for me to slide past, then followed me down the hallway. "You never would have done this before the shooting."

My jaw clenched. "This has nothing to do with the shooting."

"Vance."

I sighed, turning to face her. "What?"

"Please don't go." Tears glistened in her eyes. "Stay. Stay with me."

This was why we were over.

If she truly loved me, she'd never ask me to stay.

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I set my suitcase and backpack on the floor, then put my hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry."

I was sorry that I wasn't the man she needed. I was sorry that I couldn't be the man she'd expected. I was sorry that I didn't love her too.

"I love you." A tear fell down her cheek.

I didn't catch it.

"Bye, Tiff." I stepped away as a sob escaped her mouth. Then I collected my bags and, without a backward glance, walked to the garage. My gun was already loaded in the glove box of my truck, so with my things in the back seat, I climbed behind the wheel and took off.

Maybe I should have hurt, knowing that Tiff would be gone when I got home. Instead, I felt . . . relieved.

Tiff was a good woman who'd helped me through a hard period in my life. She'd filled a void, for a time. She'd made me laugh when I'd thought it impossible. But she deserved a man who loved her entirely.

That man wasn't me.

Maybe she was right. Maybe this endless search for Cormac was ruining my life. It sure as hell had taken a toll on my job. But I wasn't going to stop. So I put Coeur d'Alene in my rearview mirror and raced along the interstate toward Montana.

It was a three-hour trip to Quincy, meaning if I hurried, I'd arrive before dark with time to poke around town and get my bearings. I'd already called ahead for a hotel room, booking it for a week. With any luck, I'd pick up Cormac's trail by then.

This lead was the closest I'd ever been to finding that slippery bastard. It had been two days since the APB had been issued, and while two days was plenty for him to disap-

pear, maybe he'd gotten complacent. Maybe he wouldn't feel the need to rush. Or maybe he hadn't left Montana at all.

I'd spent four years chasing Cormac Gallagher. From Washington to Utah to Oregon to Colorado, the man had proved impossible to find. He'd beaten me at every turn. But this time around, something felt different.

How long had he been in Montana? Why had he come so close to Idaho? Had he been hiding right under my nose for months? Years?

Or would this turn out to be another dead end?

Three years ago, I'd followed a lead to Colorado. Police had reported a man matching Cormac's description. Red hair. Brown eyes. Same build and height. But that man hadn't had a scarred cheek, and when I'd found him hiding in a ramshackle house in the mountains outside of Fort Collins, I'd turned him over to the authorities, then come home and drowned myself in a bottle of cheap whiskey.

Six months later, I'd followed a lead to Utah. Another bust. Four months later, I'd been in Washington. Three months after that, Oregon. I'd spent four years traipsing around the Pacific Northwest, following any lead.

Chances were, my trip to Montana would be another wasted trip. Except the all-points bulletin from Quincy had clearly described a man with a scar. None of the others had given that much detail.

This time, it would be different. It had to be different.

I pulled out my phone to call Dad. The minute it started ringing through the truck's speakers, my grip tightened on the wheel. *Go to voicemail.*

"Hello," he answered.

I sighed. "Hey Dad."

"Hold on a sec." There was a rustling noise in the

background. Then came the sound of a door opening and closing. "What's going on?"

There was an echo, like he'd closed himself in the garage.

That was usually how it sounded when we'd talk. Either he'd disappear to the garage or he'd go outside so he could talk to me where Mom wouldn't overhear.

How had it come to this? How had I become the villain?

"I'm heading to Montana. Might be gone a week or two," I told him, knowing he wouldn't ask why or how long I'd be gone.

Asking too many questions might cross that invisible line drawn between me and my family. Besides, Dad knew why I left town. And like Tiff, he thought I should have moved on years ago.

"All right," he murmured.

"I left in a hurry. Would you mind taking the trash to the curb on Wednesday?"

"What about Tiff?"

"She's moving out."

"Oh." He paused. "Okay."

"And would you mind grabbing my mail every few days? Just so it doesn't pile up."

"Sure."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Yep." He ended the call.

These stunted, abrupt conversations had become normal. And somehow, that was my fault.

Next time I left, I'd call a friend to check on the house.

I set my phone aside and focused on the road, taking in the landscape along the way. Plenty of mountains. Dense evergreen forests. This part of Montana wasn't all that

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different from Idaho. Maybe that was why Cormac had returned. He'd wanted a taste of home.

The only thing he deserved to taste was three squares a day from a prison cafeteria.

Fuck, but I hoped this lead was something real. Hope was a dangerous game for a man like me, especially where Cormac was concerned. But with every passing mile, it stirred, building and swelling in my very bones.

By the time I arrived in Quincy, my muscles were jittery. My fingers drummed on the steering wheel as the highway slowed, turning into Main Street. As I eased down the road, I soaked in the small town like a sponge.

The Eloise Inn, the hotel where I'd booked a room, was the tallest building in sight, interrupting the jagged mountain horizon in the distance. Businesses, restaurants and a couple of bars filled the downtown area.

The lampposts that lit the sidewalks were wrapped in twinkle lights. Store windows were decked out in autumn décor, pumpkins and potted mums and vibrant leaves.

As I passed a hardware store, I made a mental note to stop by and pick up a map of the local area. Digital maps and GPS worked for some, but I'd always preferred paper.

My mentor had taught me that.

He'd also taught me that time was critical. If a suspect had too much of a head start, catching up became impossible. The APB had been posted Friday afternoon. Unfortunately, it was Sunday. But two days was faster than any of the other leads I'd found.

Maybe Cormac thought that after four years, the world had forgotten about his crimes. Maybe he'd gotten comfortable wherever it was he was hiding. Maybe if he'd built a

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shelter, settled into the area, he might not be as quick to leave.

A string of maybes. That was all I had.

It would have to be enough.

I parked on Main, taking my bags from the back of my silver Dodge and hauling them into The Eloise Inn. The desk clerk checked me in efficiently, sending me to my room on the fourth floor with two keys and restaurant recommendations for dinner.

I was too anxious to eat much, so rather than stop by Knuckles, the hotel's restaurant, I dropped my bags in my room, then headed outside.

"Howdy." A man nodded as I passed him on the sidewalk outside the hotel.

"Evening." I dipped my chin, already liking Quincy's friendly atmosphere and the fact that here, I was a nameless, faceless stranger.

I'd hardly left the house in the past two weeks because of the recent media attention. The one time I'd gone to the grocery store, I'd gotten plenty of sideways glances. The cashier had flat-out asked me if I was *that cop*.

Until that shitstorm died down, I was more than happy to spend my days in Montana.

Ironic, that I'd started my career to stand apart. To be one of the heroes. To wear my gleaming badge with pride. These days, the last thing I wanted was attention. And my badge had a tarnish that no amount of polishing seemed to erase.

Exactly why I'd left it behind.

I crossed Main, heading for the coffee shop. The small green building had a sandwich board out front advertising today's specials. *Mocha latte. Ham, apple and swiss panini.*

Pumpkin chocolate chip cookies. The words were written in chunky block letters, each adorned with swirly flowers.

The shop's large, black-paned windows consumed most of the street-facing wall, giving patrons a clear view of the sidewalk and street. In the evening light, they acted like a mirror, reflecting the cars that passed as well as people walking by, me included.

Goddamn, I looked like shit. I dragged a hand through my hair, attempting to tame the dark strands. It needed a cut, and I hadn't shaved in a few days. The stubble on my jaw was thick. Maybe I'd leave it, grow a beard.

Tiff hated beards.

That didn't matter anymore. And a beard might distract from the dark circles beneath my eyes. Sleep had been light since, well . . . I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept for more than four or five hours in a row.

I finger combed my hair one more time, but the effort was futile, so I straightened the collar of my plaid jacket before reaching the coffee shop's door.

Eden Coffee was written on its face in gold lettering. I pulled it open and breathed in the scent of coffee and food. Good food. My stomach growled. Guess I was hungry.

I'd been in the middle of lunch with my laptop when I'd come across the Quincy Police Department's APB. That meal had been abandoned in the trash, and I hadn't stopped again once I'd hit the road.

The shop's walls were the same deep green as the exterior, giving it a warm, inviting feel. Wooden tables and chairs filled the space on either side of the aisle that led to a counter at the back of the café.

The glass display case overflowed with pastries and desserts. The espresso machine's hiss dulled the conversation

from the occupied tables. My boots thudded on the hardwood floor as I made my way to the counter.

The barista wore a pine-green apron. Her jet-black hair was pulled into a short ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had thick, winged eyeliner and her lips were stained purple. Not plum or wine, purple, like a grape jellybean.

She held up a finger as she finished steaming her jug of milk. "Give me one minute."

"Sure." I nodded, scanning the large chalkboard menu mounted to the wall behind the counter.

A table in the far corner beside the glass windows would give me an open view of Main and also provide a decent workspace. Better than the cramped desk in my hotel room.

"What can I get you?" the barista asked.

"Ham and swiss panini, please. And a, uh . . ." I peered into the display case. "What's your favorite thing in there?"

"It's all good, but I think Lyla is just finishing a batch of her cowboy cookies. Highly recommend." She pinched her fingers together and did a chef's kiss.

"Sold." I dug out my wallet, handing over a twenty just as a woman emerged from the hallway that led deeper into the building.

She carried a tray of cookies, her hands covered in tangerine oven mitts. Her apron was the same pine-green shade as the barista's. A dusting of flour covered her heart and there was a one-inch streak on her forehead, above her delicate right eyebrow.

Her cheeks were flushed the same pretty shade of pink as her soft pout. A tendril of dark hair had escaped the messy knot on the top of her head and swept across her temple.

My hand lifted, acting on its own, either to tuck that lock of hair behind an ear or wipe away the flour streak.