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New York Times Bestselling Author

PENELOPE
DOUGLAS

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Penelope Douglas
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Proofreading & Interior Formatting by Elaine York, [Allusion Publishing & Book Formatting](#)



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The Fall Away Series

Bully
Until You
Rival
Falling Away
Aflame
Next to Never

The Devil's Night Series

Corrupt
Hideaway
Kill Switch
Conclave
Nightfall (coming 2020)

Standalones

Misconduct
Punk 57
Birthday Girl
Credence



playlist

- “Blue Blood” by LAUREL
- “break up with your girlfriend, I’m bored” by Ariana Grande
- “Dancing Barefoot” by U2
- “Devil In a Bottle” by Genitorturers
- “Do You Wanna Touch Me (Oh Yeah)” by Joan Jett
- “Fire It Up” by Thousand Foot Krutch
- “Give You Hell” by The All-American Rejects
- “I Found” by Amber Run
- “Kryptonite” by 3 Doors Down
- “Look Back at It” by A Boogie wit da Hoodie
- “Nobody Rides for Free” by Ratt
- “The Hand That Feeds” by Nine Inch Nails
- “Way Down We Go” by KALEO
- “Wow.” By Post Malone



“It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.
We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”
-Frederick Douglass



Tiernan

It's strange. The tire swing in the yard is the only thing that makes it look like a kid lives here. There were never any drawings in the house. None on the fridge or walls. No children's books on the shelves. No shoes by the front door or floaties in the pool.

It's a couple's home. Not a family's.

I stare out the window, watching the tire sway back and forth in the breeze as it hangs from the oak, and absently rub the red ribbon in my hair between my fingers, feeling the comfort of the smooth surface.

He always had time to push her on the swing, didn't he? He had time for her.

And she for him.

Walkie talkies shoot off beeps and white noise somewhere behind me while footfalls hit the stairs and doors slam above me. The police and paramedics are busy upstairs, but they'll want to talk to me soon, I'm sure.

I swallow, but I don't blink.

I'd thought the tire swing was for me when he installed it ten years ago. I was allowed to play on it, but my mother was the one who really loved it. I used to watch them out my bedroom window late at night, my father pushing her and the magic of their play and laughter making me want to be in the middle of it. But I knew as soon as they saw me the magic would change. It would disappear.

So, I stayed at my window and only ever watched.

Like I still do.

I bite the corner of my mouth, watching a green leaf flutter past the swing and land inside the tire where my mother sat countless times. The image of her white nightgown and light hair flowing through the night as she swung on it is still so vivid, because the last time was only yesterday.

A throat clears behind me, and I finally blink, dropping my eyes.

“Did they say anything to you?” Mirai asks me with tears in her voice.

I don’t turn around, but after a moment, I give a slow shake of my head.

“When did you last speak to them?”

I can’t answer that. I’m not sure.

Behind me, I feel her approach, but she stops several feet back as the clank of the first ambulance gurney jostles and creaks down the stairs and is carried from the house.

I tip my chin up, steeling myself at the distant commotion outside as the paramedics open the front door. The calls and questions, the horns honking as more people arrive, beyond the gates, where the media can no doubt see the body being wheeled out.

When did I last speak to my parents?

“The police found some medications in your parents’ bathroom,” Mirai broaches in her soft voice. “They have your father’s name on them, so they called the doctor and learned that he had cancer, Tiernan.”

I don’t move.

“They never said anything to me,” she tells me. “Did you know your father was sick?”

I shake my head again, still watching the tire sway.

I hear her swallow. “Apparently, he tried treatments, but the disease was aggressive,” she says. “The doctor said he... he wasn’t going to last the year, honey.”

A gust of wind picks up outside, churning the swing, and I watch the rope spin the tire as it twists.

“It looks like... It looks like they...” Mirai trails off, unable to finish her thought.

I know what it looks like. I knew when I found them this morning. Toulouse, my mother’s Scottish terrier, was clawing at the door and begging to get into their bedroom, so I cracked it open. The thought occurred to me that it was weird they weren’t up yet, but I let the dog in anyway. Just before I closed it again though, my eyes shot up, and I saw them.

On the bed. In each other’s arms. Fully dressed.

He wore his favorite Givenchy suit and she was in the Oscar de la Renta gown she wore to the Cannes Film Festival in 2013.

He had cancer.

He was dying.

They knew, and my mother had decided not to let him leave without her. She decided that there was nothing else without him.

Nothing else.

A sting hits the backs of my eyes, but it's gone almost immediately.

"The police haven't found a note," Mirai says. "Did you find—"

But I turn my head, meeting her eyes, and she instantly falls silent. What a stupid question.

I lock my jaw, swallowing the needles in my throat. Over all the years of nannies and boarding schools and summer camps where I was kept busy and raised by anyone but them, I'd found little pain in anything my parents did anymore. But it seems there are still parts of me to hurt.

They didn't leave me a note. Even now, there was nothing they wanted to say to me.

I blink away the tears and turn back around, trying to stare hard at the swing again as it twists and glides back and forth in the wind.

I hear Mirai snuffle and sob quietly behind me, because she knows. She knows what I'm feeling, because she's been here since the beginning.

After another minute I see her outside the window, walking past me, and I hadn't even realized she'd left the room.

She carries shears in her hand and charges right up to the tire swing, and as she raises the scissors to the rope, I clench my fists under my arms and watch her press the handles together, working through the rope until the tire hangs by twine and eventually falls to the ground.

A single tear finally falls, and for the first time since I've been home all summer, I feel something like love.



Hours later, the sun has set, the house is quiet again, and I'm alone. Almost alone. Reporters are still lingering beyond the gates.

Mirai wanted me to come home with her to the small, one bedroom she was certainly paid more than enough not to have to live in. But since she had always been here night and day and traveling wherever my mother

went, it made more sense not to keep an apartment at all, much less rent a bigger one. I politely declined.

She took Toulouse, since that dog gets along with me about as well as he would a wet cat, and said she'd be back first thing in the morning.

I should've been nicer to her. When she offered to stay here instead, I just wanted everyone gone. The noise and attention made me nervous, and I don't want to hear all the phone calls Mirai has to make tonight, which will just be a reminder of how all hell is breaking loose out in the world and on social media.

They're saying things about my parents.

They're speculating about me, no doubt.

The pity. The predictions of when I'll follow my mom and dad, either by overdose or my own suicide. Everyone has an opinion and thinks they know everything. If I thought I lived in a fish bowl before...

I walk back to the stove, letting out a breath. My parents left me to deal with this shit.

Steam rises from the pot, and I turn off the burner and pour the ramen into a bowl. I rub my dry lips together and stare at the yellow broth as my stomach growls. I haven't eaten or drank anything all day, but I'm not sure I had any intention of eating this when I finally wandered into the kitchen tonight to make it. I just always liked the process of cooking things. The recipe, the procedure... I know what to do. It's meditative.

I wrap my hands around the bowl, savoring the heat coursing through the ceramic and up my arms. Chills break out over my body, and I almost swallow, but then I realize it'll take more energy than I have.

They're dead, and I haven't cried. I'm just more worried about tomorrow and handling everything.

I don't know what to do, and the idea of forcing small talk with studio executives or old friends of my parents over the weeks to come as I bury my mother and father and deal with everything I've inherited makes the bile rise in my throat. I feel sick. I can't do it.

I can't do it.

They knew I didn't have the skills to deal with situations like this. I can't smile or fake things I'm not feeling.

Digging chopsticks out of the drawer, I stick them in the bowl and pick it up, carrying it upstairs. I reach the top and don't pause as I turn away from their bedroom door and head left, toward my own room.

Carrying the bowl to my desk, I pause, the smell of the ramen making my stomach roll. I set it down and move to the wall, sliding down until I'm sitting on the floor. The cool hardwood eases my nerves, and I'm tempted to lie down and rest my face on it.

Is it weird I stayed in the house tonight when they died just down the hall this morning? The coroner estimated the time of death about two a.m. I didn't wake up until six.

My mind races, caught between wanting to let it go and wanting to process how everything happened. Mirai is here every day. If I didn't find them, she would've. Why didn't they wait until I'd gone back to school next week? Did they even remember I was in the house?

I let my head fall back against the wall and lay my arms over my bent knees, closing my burning eyes.

They didn't leave me a note.

They dressed up. They put the dog out. They scheduled Mirai to come late this morning, instead of early.

They didn't write me a note.

Their closed door looms ahead of me, and I open my eyes, staring across my bedroom, through my open door, down the long hallway, and to their room at the other end of the hall.

The house sounds the same.

Nothing has changed.

But just then, a small buzz whirs from somewhere, and I blink at the faint sound, dread bringing me back to reality. What is that?

I thought I turned off my phone.

Reporters know to field requests for comment through my parents' representatives, but that doesn't stop the greedy ones—of which most are—from digging up my personal cell number.

I reach up, pawing for my phone on my desk, but when I press the *Power* button I see that it's still off.

The buzzing continues, and just as realization dawns, my heart skips a beat.

My private cell. The one buried in my drawer.

Only my parents and Mirai had that number. It was a phone for them to reach me if anything was urgent, since they knew I turned off my other one a lot.

They never used that number though, so I never kept it on me anymore.

Pushing up on my knees, I reach into my desk drawer and pull the old iPhone off its charger and fall back to the floor, looking at the screen.

Colorado. I don't know anyone in Colorado.

This phone never gets calls though. It could be a reporter who somehow tracked down the phone, but then it's not registered under my name, so I doubt it.

I answer it. "Hello?"

"Tiernan?"

The man's voice is deep, but there's a lilt of surprise in it like he didn't expect me to answer.

Or he's nervous.

"It's Jake Ver der Berg," he says.

Jake Van der Berg...

"Your *Uncle* Jake Van der Berg."

And then I remember. "My father's...?"

"Brother," he finishes for me. "Step-brother, actually, yes."

I completely forgot. Jake Van der Berg had rarely been mentioned in this house. I didn't grow up with any relatives, so I'd completely blanked on the fact that I had one.

My mother grew up in foster care, never knew her father, and had no siblings. My dad only had an estranged, younger step-brother I'd never met. I had no aunts, uncles, or cousins growing up, and my father's parents were dead, so I didn't have grandparents, either.

There's only one reason he's calling me after seventeen years.

"Um," I mumble, searching for words. "My mother's assistant will be handling the funeral arrangements. If you need the details, I don't have them. I'll give you her number."

"I'm not coming to the funeral."

I still for a moment. His voice is on edge.

And he hasn't offered condolences for "my loss," which is unusual. Not that I need them, but why is he calling, then? Does he think my father wrote him into his will?

Honestly, he might have. I have no idea.

But before I can ask him what he wants, he clears his throat. "Your father's attorney called me earlier, Tiernan," he tells me. "Since I'm your only living relative, and you're still underage, your parents apparently left you in my care."

In his care?

Apparently. Sounds like this is news to him, too.

I don't need anyone's care.

He continues, "You'll be eighteen in a couple months, though. I'm not going to force you to do anything, so don't worry."

Okay. I hesitate for a moment, not sure if I feel relieved or not. I didn't have time to process the reminder that I wasn't a legal adult, and what that meant now that my parents were gone, before he assured me that it wouldn't mean anything. My life won't change.

Fine.

"I'm sure, growing up in that life," he says, "you're a hell of a lot more world-wise than we are and can take pretty good care of yourself by now anyway."

"We?" I murmur.

"My sons and I," he says. "Noah and Kaleb. They're not much older than you, actually. Maybe a few years."

So, I have cousins. Or... step-cousins.

Whatever. It's basically nothing. I play with the light blue thread on my sleep shorts.

"I just wanted to reach out to tell you that," he finally says. "If you want to emancipate yourself, you'll get no argument from me. I have no interest in making anything harder for you by uprooting you from your life."

I stare at the thread, pinching it between my nails as I pull it tight. *Okay, then.*

"Well... thank you for calling."

And I start to pull the phone away from my ear, but then I hear his voice again. "Do you *want* to come here?"

I bring the phone back to my ear.

"I didn't mean to sound like you weren't welcome," he says. "You are. I just thought..."

He trails off, and I listen.

He chuckles. "It's just that we live a pretty secluded life here, Tiernan," he explains. "It's not much fun for a young woman, especially one who has no idea who the hell I am, you know?" His tone turns solemn. "Your dad and I, we just...we never saw eye to eye."

I sit there, saying nothing. I know it would be polite to talk to him. Or maybe he expects me to ask questions. Like what happened between him

and my father? Did he know my mother?

But I don't want to talk. I don't care.

"Did he tell you we lived in Colorado?" Jake asks softly. "Close to Telluride but up in the mountains."

I draw in a breath and release it, winding the thread around my finger.

"It's not a far ride to town in nice weather, but we get snowed in for months at a time during the winter," he goes on. "Very different from your life."

I raise my eyes, letting them slowly drift around the barren room I've barely ever slept in. Shelves filled with books I never finished reading. A desk piled with pretty journals I liked buying but hardly wrote in. I thought about decorating in here during breaks at home, but as with everything else, the wallpaper was never purchased, because I could never decide. I have no imagination.

Yeah, my life...

The weight of my parents' door looms ahead of me, down the hall.

Snowed in, he said. For months at a time.

"No cable. No noise. No WiFi sometimes," he says. "Just the sounds of the wind and the falls and the thunder.

My heart aches a little, and I don't know if it's his words or his voice. *Just the sounds of the wind and the falls and the thunder.*

Sounds amazing, actually. All of it sounds kind of nice. No one can get to you.

"My boys are used to the seclusion," he tells me. "But you..."

I pick up the thread again and twist it around my finger. *But me...?*

"I came out here when I wasn't much older than you," he muses, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "I had soft hands and a head full of shit I didn't know what to do with. I was barely alive."

Needles prick my throat, and I close my eyes.

"There's something to be said for sweat and sun." He sighs. "Hard work, solace, and keeping busy. We've built everything we have here. It's a good life."

Maybe that's what I need. To run away like he did at my age. Dive into anything different, because the only thing I feel anymore is tired.

"Have you had a good life?" he nearly whispers.

I keep my eyes closed, but I feel like I have a truck sitting on my lungs. I've had a great life. I have a closet full of all the designer clothes and bags

everyone expects a famous star's daughter to own. I've been to two dozen countries, and I can buy anything I want. My home is huge. My fridge is stocked. How many people would happily trade places with me? How lucky am I?

"Do you want to come here, Tiernan?" he asks again.