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# **FIRE NIGHT**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**PENELOPE DOUGLAS**

*Kai*

I always loved my parents' house. I was the only one out of my friends who didn't mind being home.

Michael's home life had bored and aggravated him, and Damon wanted to be wherever we were. Will had it pretty good growing up, but he'd needed action. If trouble didn't find him, he'd go looking for it.

I'd wanted to be home, though, and years later, there was still a comfort in walking through the front door of the house I grew up in.

"Ah!" A distant roar boomed as I stepped inside.

I smiled as I closed the door behind me, recognizing Banks's growl. She was in my father's dojo, either winning or *really* losing.

Inhaling, I drew in the clean scent of fresh air and leaves, the whole house permeated by the smell of the herbs and plants my mother grew in the solarium off the kitchen.

I reached out, brushing the philodendron tree and bamboo palm as I walked down the hallway.

While the exterior of the house blended with the English country estate-style of the other homes in the neighbor-

hood, the inside was very different. The uncluttered, clean, minimalist design suited my father's taste. Natural elements like plants, stones, and sunlight brought the outside in, which helped during the long winter months indoors.

But whereas the Japanese-style favored white and bright, my mother's influence was evident, as well. Dark teak floors, rugs, and color splashed about here and there. It always felt like you were walking into a cozy cave. My parents were good at compromise, and I always felt safe here.

Candles glowed inside their sconces on the wall, ready for Fire Night. Christmas wasn't for a few days, and while my parents didn't really rush to indulge the new yule tradition in Thunder Bay, they knew Jett and Mads loved it, so they obliged.

I brought my hands up, blowing warm air against my chilled fingers, feeling my icy wedding band.

"Grandma..." I heard Jett giggle.

Peering around the corner, I leaned against the door frame and watched my mom turn away and laugh as my daughter threw a pinch of flour at her, her own nose and cheeks dusted with powder, too.

I dropped my eyes, seeing my daughter's bare feet sticking out behind her as she knelt on a stool and continued kneading the dough. Eight years ago, I could fit those things in my mouth. She was growing too fast, and I kind of wanted time to stop.

Or I wanted more kids.

That was until I went over to Damon's house and then I'd be running out the front door ten minutes later with a migraine. Their nanny day drank, and I wasn't even going to pretend that I didn't understand why.

I watched my mom and my daughter working side by side, just happy they were happy. Mads had come along

with his mom and sister, but he was nowhere to be seen at the moment. Probably tucked away in the wine cellar, reading. He had a nook to hide in at every house. A corner deep in the garden maze at home. A closet at Damon's. The gallery at St. Killian's. A window seat behind the drapes at Will's.

While I worried about him in ways I didn't worry about Jett, I always knew where to find him. He never scared me.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," Jett announced, hopping off the stool.

"Wash your hands," my mom told her.

Jett scampered to the mud room, wiping her flour-coated hands on her little apron, and closed the door.

I stepped into the kitchen. "You're a good mom, you know?"

My mom glanced at me, pausing with her hands in the bowl.

"You should have had a house full of kids," I told her.

She smiled to herself, working the dough as I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. I tucked my chin into her neck playfully.

"You were enough," she said.

"Maybe too much?"

"Oh, yeah." She scoffed. "Way too much."

I chuckled, appreciating the jest even though she wasn't really lying. Getting arrested and imprisoned was hell for them, and I was ashamed enough for the disappointment and heartache I'd caused, but even more so since I was their only child. I hated myself for not doing better.

I glanced down at the small silver pendant hiding behind my mother's apron. St. Felicitas of Rome. I squeezed her tighter, and she paused, letting me.

She loved being a grandmother.

"They still in the dojo?" I asked, pulling back and plucking one of the slices of a mandarin orange from the little bowl that was probably Jett's snack.

I stuck it into my mouth.

"For two hours now," my mother replied. "Go see if she's still alive."

"My wife can take that old man."

I walked toward the hall, feeling my mother's eyes on me. I stopped and threw a look over my shoulder, shaking my head. "Never mind. I knew that was stupid when I said it."

She laughed, both of us knowing we still hadn't seen one person who could take my father.

"You're coming tonight, right?" I asked her.

I saw her chest fall in a heavy sigh and her hooded eyes shoot me a look. "I feel like a calm evening, thank you."

"What do you mean? It'll be calm."

Her eyebrow arched up, and I bit back my laugh.

*Okay, okay.*

"Maybe," she said, returning to her work.

I shook my head and turned, smiling. *It had better be fucking calm tonight.*

I headed down the hallway, exited the sliding door, and stepped into the rock garden. The miniature trees, bushes, and ponds covered with snow created a peaceful oasis in the open air at the center of the house. Banks and I had created something like it at our home in Meridian City, which was a feat, considering she preferred the wild overgrowth and garden maze of our house here. I favored the more stylized landscape that I grew up with.

Clouds hung low, promising more snow tonight, and I could smell the ice in the air. Devil's Night was in our blood, but Fire Night was starting to become my favorite. I loved this time of year.

Coming to the door, I slid open the panel and spotted them immediately, sparring in the center of the dojo as I quietly slipped inside and closed the fusuma behind me.

Festivities in town had already begun, and we were going to be late, but my heart swelled, and I couldn't interrupt just yet. I loved watching Banks and my father. I loved watching her spend time with my parents.

"You're looking at me," my father said, blocking her kick.

She charged him, hair that had come loose from her ponytail hanging in her eyes, and sweat covering my dad's chest and neck.

He blocked a punch, advancing on her. "Stop looking at me," he barked.

She retreated when she should've circled him to gain time.

"When you watch me, you don't see," he told her. "You must see everything."

She growled, throwing a punch and then a high kick, the latter he caught and threw off without so much as a scowl of those severe black eyebrows of his. Mads looked more and more like him every day.

I folded my arms over my chest, remaining in the shadow of the beam that stretched to the ceiling as I watched my wife stumble to the side, breathing hard and already worn out.

We trained at Sensou several times a week. She was in great shape. Or should've been.

My father approached her, dressed in loose black pants with more sweat matting the salt and pepper hair to his forehead.

He pulled her back up and stared down at her. "Close your eyes."

Her back was to me, but she must not have listened, because he said it again.

“Close your eyes,” he urged.

She stood there, and after a moment, I noticed her shoulders square and her breathing even out.

“In,” he said, inhaling with her. “Out.”

A smile pulled at my lips as a few snowflakes fluttered to the still ground outside the windows.

I remembered this lesson.

“Again,” he said.

They both inhaled and exhaled slowly as he waited for Banks’s mind to clear.

“Keep your eyes closed,” he instructed.

Her arms hung at her side, and she continued her steady breathing.

“Do you see me?” he asked. “Do you still have the picture of me in front of you in your head?”

“Yes,” I heard her reply.

“What do you see?”

She hesitated.

“What do you see exactly?” he clarified.

“Your eyes.”

“And?”

“Your face.”

He studied her for a moment and then continued. “Zoom out. Now what do you see?”

“The...the room around you?” she answered.

He inched in, calming his voice. “Breathe,” he whispered. “What else do you see? Make me move.”

She cocked her head a little, like she was watching a scene in her head. “Your arms and legs.”

“And?”

“Your feet,” she said. “They shift.”

Finally, he nodded as if she'd finally seen what he wanted her to see. "If you look too closely, you won't see anything. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

She needed to see but not specifically, as if everything in her vision, even the peripheral, was the focus. I saw them, but I also saw Frost, my mother's cat breathing quietly on the rafter above. I could see Banks and my father facing each other, but also the snowflakes almost floating in the air outside.

"Open your eyes," he instructed.

He took a step back and fell into a fighting stance. "Zoom out."

Before she could move into position, he stepped and threw a fist. She shot her hand up and knocked it away, and then quickly dodged another fist as it came in.

I smiled.

And then, they were at it. She jumped into a stance, and in less than a moment, fists and feet flew everywhere. Arms and legs swept, flying, and grunts filled the room as he caught her thigh and she landed a fist in his side.

They moved, Banks advancing on him and then him on her, their steps flitting across the mat as they circled each other. One hand knocked away a fist before the other came in and pushed away another.

I couldn't follow what each of them were even doing, they were moving so fast. Arm up, wrist hitting wrist, and then the kicks flying through the air only to be defended.

It was like a dance.

My heart pounded as I watched a smile cross my father's face, my breath stopping for a moment, and then...

He stumbled back a couple of steps, she came in with another punch, and he caught her wrists just in time, stopping her.

He smiled, Banks frozen, as hard breaths filled the room and she stared at my dad.

*Jesus.* He'd stopped first. She'd worn him out.

I covered my smile with my hand, pride swelling my heart. Soon, Mads and Jett would be just like that, and while I'd never anticipated danger in our future, I knew it was possible. I breathed easier, knowing my family was at least a little prepared for anything that might come.

But not tonight. Tonight was for partying.

Releasing her, he straightened and walked up to her, taking her shoulders. They hadn't acknowledged my presence, but my father probably knew I was here.

Her body moved up and down as she tried to catch her breath.

He gazed down. "Good," he said in a gentle voice.

She stared up at him, but then I saw her head drop and her jaw flex.

"Now go have fun tonight," he told her.

I pushed myself off the wall and walked over to Banks as she turned and met my eyes. Tears hung in hers, and she quickly looked away as my father headed out the way I came in, nodding as he passed me.

Tipping her chin up, I looked down at her beautiful face, glowing with a light layer of sweat and her green eyes glistening.

She glanced after my father, Jett passing him in the rock garden and giving her grandfather a salute as he passed. He returned the gesture.

"You're very lucky, you know?" Banks said, her voice shaking. "He's proud of you."

I touched her face.

"You're so lucky," she said again, and I could hear the crack in her voice.

Bringing her in, I kissed her forehead as she shook with more tears.

“He’s proud of you, too,” I whispered.

Taking her in my arms, I held her tightly, hating all the memories she didn’t have. How she’d suffered without parents, and how much I’d taken for granted. My father was never particularly warm, but he was far from Evans Crist or Gabriel fucking Torrance. He was a good man, and she was more than thirty years old before she got to know what a real father felt like.

“He’s so proud of you, baby,” I told her again.

Warm or not, my father was never not here for any of us. We were all lucky.

Jett approached, her arms wrapping around us—as far as she could reach anyway—and joined in on the hug. I chuckled, holding my girls.

After a moment, Banks dried her eyes and drew in a deep breath, pulling back a little.

She looked down at our daughter. “Help me with my makeup?” she asked.

But I stopped them right there, telling Jett instead, “Actually, go ask Grandma how to repot a chestnut,” I said. “I need to help Mommy with her shower first.”

“Kai...” Banks chided.

*What?* I gaped at her. *What were grandparents for anyway?*

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“Aren’t you cold?” Banks slipped her arms around mine, hugging me for warmth.

I inhaled the crisp, evening air and blew out the steam, taking in the snow hanging on the evergreens and the bare,

black branches of the maples stretching up into the night sky.

"I love it," I told her, listening as we stood outside my parents' house an hour later. "Everything is so quiet."

I looked down at her, admiring how it barely took her any time at all to get dressed. Her red strapless gown glittered, stunning with her dark hair curled and pinned to the side at the nape of her neck. She was gorgeous.

She and Jett had both decorated their faces, looking like cute clowns with white diamond shapes over their eyes and jewels glued to the points.

I threw the black cloak around her and tied it as she dug into the inside pocket and pulled on her gloves.

"The cold slows the spread of molecules," I explained. "Less pollution. The air is so clean."

And quiet. I loved winter the most for that reason. The stars peeked out through the clouds, and you could hear water in the distance, although there was no water nearby. The frozen blanket over the land in the stark night silenced the world so much, you could hear things you normally couldn't.

It was haunting.

"Snow's coming," she told me. "We better hurry."

Yeah. "Just enjoying the calm before the storm," I teased.

And I didn't mean the snow. My mother was right. Drama always went down when the family got together.

Mads walked out of the house, straightening his black tie over his black shirt and suit, and Jett came running past him and up to me.

I scooped her into my arms, her pink dress and white tights picked out by her mom who never wore pink in her life. Ever.

She smiled at me, her white teeth peeking out at me through red lips. "Fire Night is my favorite," Jett said, looking up at the flickering lanterns lining the driveway.

"You ready to go light some more candles?" I asked.

She nodded. "Can we walk?"

I opened my mouth to tell her no, knowing this wasn't a quick jaunt, especially with Banks in a long gown and high heels, but...

Her mom tightened her cloak around her and chirped, "Absolutely."

I set Jett down and took her hand, she and Mads walking between Banks and me as we set off.

My parents' house was on the opposite side of town from St. Killian's, and even though the trek would be cold, I wouldn't complain about getting to enjoy the evening a while longer. I just hoped Banks didn't sprain an ankle on the way.

The moon glowed overhead as we crossed the street and strolled through the park, more lanterns carving our path with their firelight.

That was the rule tonight. No electric lights.

Not that it was a law or anything we enforced, but everything looked different in the firelight, and I wasn't sure which one of us set the standard, but everyone seemed to agree it was beautiful.

In no time at all, it was tradition. Once the sun set on the winter solstice, Thunder Bay was lit almost entirely by fire—candles, lanterns, bonfires...

Voices carried on the breeze, the choir at the cathedral singing in the distance and warming the frost in the air and the slumbering roots under our feet.

Gazing left, I saw the fires in the village, much of the town enjoying the festivities and the parade, and slowly, I