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**DEVIL'S NIGHT**

**PENELOPE DOUGLAS**

**BERKLEY ROMANCE**

New York

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## CHAPTER I

## ERIKA

*He won't be here.*

**H** There'd be no reason for him to show up at his brother's farewell party, since they couldn't stand each other, so . . .

*No, he won't be here.*

Pushing up the sleeves of my lightweight sweater, I hurried through the front door of the Crist house and speed-walked across the foyer, heading straight for the stairs.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the butler rounding the corner, but I didn't stop.

"Miss Fane!" he shouted after me. "You're very late."

"Yes, I know."

"Mrs. Crist has been looking for you," he pointed out.

I shot up my eyebrows and immediately stopped, turning around to peer at him over the railing.

"Has she really?" I eyed him with mock astonishment.

He thinned his lips, annoyed. "Well, she sent *me* to look for you."

I broke out in a smile and leaned over the banister, planting a quick kiss on his forehead.

"Well, I'm here," I assured him. "You can get back to your important duties now."

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I turned and continued up the stairs, hearing the soft music coming from the party out on the terrace.

Yeah, I highly doubted Delia Crist, my mother's best friend and the matriarch of Thunder Bay, our small East Coast community, was spending her precious time looking for me herself.

"Your dress is on your bed!" he called after me as I walked around the corner.

I exhaled an aggravated sigh and powered down the dimly lit hallway, grumbling under my breath, "Thank you, Edward."

I didn't need a new dress. I already had several I'd worn only once, and at nineteen, I could definitely pick out my own clothes. Not that he would be here to see it anyway, and if he was, he wouldn't look at me.

No. I should be grateful. Mrs. Crist thought of me, and it was nice of her to make sure I'd have a dress to wear.

A light spatter of sand covered my legs and feet, and I reached down to grip the ends of my loose jean shorts, inventorying exactly how wet I'd gotten down at the beach. Would I need a shower?

No, I was already late. Screw it.

Diving into my room—the one the Crists' let me have for when I stayed the night—I spotted a sexy white cocktail dress lying on the bed, and I immediately began stripping.

The thin spaghetti straps did almost nothing to hold up my breasts, but it fit perfectly, molding to my body, and it made my skin look darker than it was. Mrs. Crist had awesome taste, and it was probably a good thing that she'd gotten me the dress, after all. I'd been too busy preparing to leave for school tomorrow to bother with what to wear tonight.

Dashing into the bathroom, I rinsed my calves and feet of the sand I'd picked up on my walk, and I quickly brushed out my long blond hair and applied a little lip gloss. I scurried back into the bedroom, grabbed the tan strappy heels she'd left by the dress, and ran back into the hallway and down the stairs.

*Twelve hours to go.*

My heart pumped harder and harder as I jogged through the foyer and toward the back of the house. This time tomorrow I'd be completely on my own—no mother, no Crists, no memories . . .

And most of all, I wouldn't have to wonder, hope, or dread that I'd see him. Or teeter on the edges of elation and agony when I did. *Nope.* I'd be able to hold out my arms and spin in a circle and not touch a single person I knew. Heat flowed through my chest, and I didn't know if it was fear or excitement, but I was ready.

Ready to leave it all behind. At least for a little while.

Veering to the right, I bypassed the kitchens—one for everyday use and another adjacent to it for caterers—as I headed for the solarium at the side of the large house. Opening the double doors, I stepped into the massive ceramic-tiled garden room, the walls and ceiling made entirely of glass, and instantly felt the rise in temperature. The thick, wet heat soaked through the fabric of my dress, making it melt to my body.

Trees rose above and all around me in the quiet, dark room, lit only by the moonlight pouring in through the windows overhead. I inhaled the sweet smell of the palms, orchids, lilies, violets, and hibiscus, reminding me of my mother's closet and all the perfumes from her coats and scarves blending together in one space.

I turned left, stopping at the glass doors leading to the terrace, and slipped into my heels as I gazed out at the crowd.

*Twelve hours.*

And then I straightened, reaching up, grabbing a handful of hair, and bringing it over my shoulder to cover the left side of my neck. Unlike his brother, Trevor would definitely be here tonight, and he didn't like to see my scar.

"Miss?" a waiter said as he stepped up with a tray.

I smiled, taking one of the highball glasses that I knew was a Tom Collins. "Thank you."

The lemon-colored drink was Mr. and Mrs. Crist's favorite, so they insisted that the servers circulate it.

The waiter disappeared, moving on to the many other guests, but I stayed rooted, letting my eyes drift around the party.

Leaves fluttered on their branches, the calm breeze still holding remnants of the day's heat, and I surveyed the crowd, all dressed in their casual cocktail dresses and suit jackets.

So perfect. So clean.

The lights in the trees and the servers in their white waistcoats. The crystal-blue pool adorned with floating candles. The glittering jewels of the ladies' rings and necklaces that caught the light.

Everything was so polished, and when I looked around at all the adults and families I grew up with, their money and designer clothes, I often saw a coat of paint that you apply when you're trying to cover up rotting wood. There were dark deeds and bad seeds, but who cared if the house was falling apart as long as it was pretty, right?

The scent of the food lingered in the air, accompanied by the soft music of the string quartet, and I wondered if I should find Mrs. Crist and let her know I'd arrived or find Trevor, since the party was in his honor, after all.

But instead I tightened my fingers around my glass, my pulse quickening as I tried to resist the urge to do what I really wanted to do. What I always wanted to do.

To look for *him*.

But no, he wouldn't be here. He probably wouldn't be here.

He might be here.

My heart started thumping, and my neck heated. And, against my own will, my eyes started to drift. Around the party and over the faces, searching . . .

*Michael.*

I hadn't seen him in months, but the pull was everywhere, especially in Thunder Bay. In the pictures his mother kept around

this house, in his scent, which drifted into the hallway from his old bedroom . . .

He might be here.

"Rika."

I blinked, jerking my head to the left, hearing Trevor call my name.

He walked out of the crowd, his blond hair freshly cut close to the scalp, his dark blue eyes looking impatient, and his stride determined. "Hey, baby. I was starting to think you weren't coming."

I hesitated, feeling my stomach tighten. But then I forced a smile as he stepped up to me in the doorway of the solarium.

*Twelve hours.*

He slipped a hand around the right side of my neck—never the left side—and rubbed his thumb across my cheek, his body flush with mine.

I turned my head, shifting uncomfortably. "Trevor—"

"I didn't know what I was going to do if you didn't show up tonight," he cut in. "Throw rocks at your window, serenade you, maybe bring you flowers, candy, a new car . . ."

"I have a new car."

"I mean a *real* car." He finally grinned.

I rolled my eyes and pulled out of his hold. At least he was joking with me again, even if it was just to dis my brand-new Tesla. Apparently electric cars weren't *real* cars, but hey, I could take the dig if it meant he was finally over making me feel like shit about everything else.

Trevor Crist and I had been friends since birth, gone to school with each other our entire lives, and were always thrown together by our parents as if a relationship were inevitable. And last year, I finally gave in to it.

We dated almost our entire first year in college, attending Brown together—or actually, I applied to Brown, and he followed—but it ended in May.

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Or I ended it in May.

It was my fault I didn't love him. It was my fault I didn't want to give it more time. It was my fault I decided to transfer schools to a city where he wouldn't follow.

It was also my fault he gave in to his father's demand to transfer, as well, and finally attend Annapolis, and it was my fault I was disrupting our families.

It was my fault I needed space.

I let out a breath, forcing my muscles to relax. *Twelve hours.*

Trevor smiled at me, his eyes heating as he took my hand and led me back into the solarium. He pulled me behind the glass, holding me close by the hips and whispering in my ear, "You look gorgeous."

But I pulled away again, giving us a few inches of space. "You look good, too."

He looked like his father, with his sandy-blond hair, narrow jaw, and that smile that could make almost anyone putty in his hands. He also dressed like Mr. Crist, looking polished in his midnight-blue suit, white shirt, and silver tie. So clean. So perfect. Trevor did everything within the lines.

"I don't want you going to Meridian City," he said, narrowing his eyes on me. "You won't have anyone there, Rika. At least I was at Brown with you, and Noah was less than an hour away in Boston. You had friends close by."

*Yeah. Close.*

Which is exactly why I needed something different. I'd never had to leave the security of the people around me. There was always someone—parents, Trevor, my friend Noah—to pick me up when I fell. Even when I went off to college and gave up the comfort of having my mother and the Crists close by, Trevor had still followed me. And then I had friends from high school going to universities close by. It was like nothing had changed.

I wanted to get into a little trouble. I wanted to catch some rain,

find something that made my heart pump again, and I wanted to know what it was like to not have anyone to grab onto.

I'd tried to explain it to him, but every time I opened my mouth, I couldn't find the right words. Out loud it sounded selfish and ungrateful, but inside . . .

I needed to know what I was made of. I needed to know if I had a leg to stand on without the umbrella of my family name, the support of others having my back, or Trevor's constant hovering. If I went to a new city, with new people who didn't know my family, would they even give me the time of day? Would they even like me?

I wasn't happy at Brown or with Trevor, and even though the decision to move on was hard and disappointing to those around me, it was what I wanted.

*Own who you are.*

My heart fluttered, remembering Trevor's brother's words. I could barely wait. Twelve more hours . . .

"But then again, I guess that's not really true, is it?" he asked, an accusing tone in his voice. "Michael plays for the Storm, so he'll be close to you now."

I hooded my eyes, taking in a deep breath as I set down my drink. "With a population of over two million people, I doubt I'll run into him often."

"Unless you look for him."

I crossed my arms over my chest, holding Trevor's eyes and refusing to let him engage me in this conversation.

Michael Crist was Trevor's brother. A little older, a little taller, and a lot more intimidating. They were almost nothing alike, and they hated each other. Trevor's jealousy of him had been there ever since I could remember.

Michael had just graduated from Westgate University, being snatched up by the NBA almost immediately afterward. He played for the Meridian City Storm, one of the top teams in the NBA, so yes, I would know one person in the city.

Lot of good it would do me, though. Michael barely ever looked at me, and when he spoke to me his tone was no better than if he were speaking to a dog. I wasn't planning on putting myself in his path.

No, I'd learned my lesson a long time ago.

Being in Meridian City had nothing to do with Michael anyway. It was closer to home, so I could visit my mother more often, but it was also the one place Trevor wouldn't go. He hated large cities, and he loathed his brother even more.

"I'm sorry," Trevor said more gently. He took my hand and pulled me in, sliding a hand around the back of my neck again. "I just love you, and I hate this. We belong together, Rika. It's always been us."

*Us?* No.

Trevor didn't make my heart pump so hard that I felt like I was on a damn roller coaster. He wasn't in my dreams, and he wasn't the first person I thought about when I woke up.

He didn't haunt me.

I tucked my hair behind my ear, noticing his gaze briefly flash to my neck. He quickly averted his eyes as if he didn't see it. The scar made me less than perfect, I guess.

"Come on," he urged, dipping his forehead to mine and gripping my waist. "I'm good to you, aren't I? I'm nice, and I'm always here for you."

"Trevor," I argued, trying to twist out of his hold.

But then his mouth came down on mine, the scent of his cologne burning my nostrils as his arms wrapped around my waist.

I pressed my fists into his chest, pushing at him and tearing my mouth away.

"Trevor," I growled low. "Stop it."

"I give you everything you need," he fought, his voice turning angry as he dived into my neck. "You know it's going to be us."

"Trevor!" I tensed every muscle in my arms and pressed against

his body, finally pushing him off. He dropped his hands and stumbled away a step.

I immediately backed away, my hands shaking.

"Rika." He reached for me, but I steeled my spine, backing away again.

He dropped his hand, shaking his head. "Fine," he bit out, sneering. "Go to school, then. Make new friends and leave everything here behind all you want, but your demons will still follow you. There's no escaping them."

He ran his fingers through his hair, glaring at me as he straightened his tie and walked around me out the doorway.

I stared out the windows after him, anger building in my chest. What the hell did that mean? There was nothing holding me down and nothing I was trying to escape. I just wanted freedom.

I moved away from the door, unable to go back outside. I didn't want to disappoint Mrs. Crist by sneaking out on her son's party, but I no longer wanted to spend my last hours here. I wanted to be with my mom.

I twisted around, ready to leave, but then I looked up and instantly stopped.

My stomach flipped, and I couldn't breathe.

*Shit.*

Michael sat in one of the cushioned chairs all the way at the back of the solarium, his eyes locked on mine, looking eerily calm.

Michael. The one who wasn't nice. The one who wasn't good to me.

My throat thickened, and I wanted to swallow, but I couldn't move. I just stared, paralyzed. Had he been there since I first walked down? The whole time?

He reclined in his heavy armchair, nearly shrouded by the darkness and the shadows of the trees overhead. One hand rested on a basketball that sat on top of his thigh, and the other hand lay on the armrest, the neck of a beer bottle hanging from his fingers.

My heart started to pound so hard it hurt. What was he doing? He raised the bottle to his lips, still watching me, and I dropped my eyes for a split second, embarrassment heating my cheeks.

He'd seen the whole episode with Trevor. *Dammit.*

I looked up again, seeing his light brown hair, which was styled to look like he should be on the cover of a magazine, and his hazel eyes, which always looked like cider with flecks of spice. They seemed darker than they actually were, hidden in the shadows, but they pierced me under straight brows that slanted inward, making him look just as formidable as he was. His full lips held no hint of a smile, and his tall frame nearly consumed his chair.

He wore black pants with a black suit jacket, and his white shirt was open at the collar. No tie, because, as usual, he did what he wanted.

And that's all anyone could ever go on with Michael. How he *appeared*. How he looked. I didn't think his parents even knew what was happening behind those eyes.

I watched him rise out of his chair and drop the basketball into the seat, keeping his eyes on me as he walked over.

The closer he got, the taller his six feet four inches looked. Michael was lean but muscular, and he made me feel small. In many ways. He looked like he was walking straight for me, and my heart hammered in my chest as I narrowed my eyes, bracing myself.

But he didn't stop.

The faint hint of his body wash hit me as he passed by, and I turned my head, my chest aching as he walked out the solarium doors without a word.

I folded my lips between my teeth, fighting the burn in my eyes.

One night, he'd noticed me. One night, three years ago, Michael saw something in me and liked it. And just when the fire was starting to kindle, ready to flare and burst apart in a flood of flames, it folded. It tucked its rage and heat away and contained itself.

I shot off, heading back into the house, through the foyer, and

out the front door, anger and frustration chewing at every nerve in my body as I headed to my car.

Other than that one night, he'd ignored me most of my life, and when he did speak to me, it was clipped.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and climbed into my car. I hoped I wouldn't see him in Meridian City. I hoped we never crossed paths and I never had to hear about him.

I wondered if he even knew I was moving there. It didn't matter, though. Even in the same house, I might as well be on a different planet from him.

As I started the car, "37 Stitches" by Drowning Pool poured through the speakers, and I accelerated down the long driveway, pushing the clicker to open the gate. I sped out onto the road. My house was only a few minutes away and an easy walk I'd made many times in my life.

I forced deep breaths, trying to calm down. *Twelve hours.* Tomorrow I'd leave everything behind.

The high stone walls of the Crist estate ended, giving way to trees lining the road. And within less than a minute, the gas lamp-posts of my home appeared, lighting the night. Veering left, I clicked another button on my visor and inched my Tesla through the gate, seeing the outside lamps cast a soft glow around the circular driveway with a large marble fountain sitting in the center.

Parking my car in front of the house, I hurried to my front door, just wanting to crawl in bed until it was tomorrow.

But then I glanced up, doing a double take at seeing a candle burning in my bedroom window.

*What?*

I hadn't been home since late this morning. And I certainly hadn't left a candle burning. It was ivory colored and sitting in a glass hurricane candleholder.

Walking to the front door, I unlocked it and stepped inside.

"Mom?" I called out.