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books



# PUNK 57

PENELOPE DOUGLAS

# CHAPTER 1

## MISHA

*Dear Misha,*

*So, have I ever told you my secret shame?*

*And no, it's not watching Teen Mom like you. Go ahead and try to deny it. I know you don't have to sit there with your sister, man. She's old enough to watch TV by herself.*

*No, actually, it's far worse, and I'm a little embarrassed to tell you. But I think negative feelings should be released. Just once, right?*

*You see, there's a girl at school. You know the kind. Cheerleader, popular, gets everything she wants... I hate to admit this, especially to you, but a long time ago I wanted to be her.*

*Part of me still does.*

*You would absolutely hate her. She's everything we can't stand. Mean, cavalier, superficial... The kind who doesn't have a thought stay in her head too long or else she needs a nap, right? I've always been fascinated with her, though.*

*And don't roll your eyes at me. I can feel it.*

*It's just that...given all of her detestable attributes, she's never alone. You know?*

*I kind of envy that. Okay, I really envy that.*

*It feels like shit to be alone. To be in a place full of people and feel like they don't want you there. To feel like you're at a party you weren't invited to. No one even knows your name. No one wants to. No one cares.*

*Are they laughing at you? Talking about you? Are they sneering at you like their perfect world would be so much better if you weren't there, messing up their view?*

*Are they just wishing you'd get the hint already and leave?*

*I feel like that a lot.*

*I know it's pathetic to want a place among other people, and I know you'll say it's better to stand alone and be right than stand in a crowd and be wrong, but... I still feel that need all the time. Do you ever feel it?*

*I wonder if the cheerleader feels it. When the music stops and everyone goes home? When the day is gone and she doesn't have anyone to entertain herself with? When she removes her makeup, taking off her brave face for the day, do the demons she keeps buried start playing with her when there's no one else to play with?*

*I guess not. Narcissists don't have insecurities, right?*

*Must be nice.*

My phone buzzes from the center console of my truck, and I look away from Ryen's letter to see another text roll in.

*Dammit. I'm so late.*

The guys are no doubt wondering where the hell I am, and it's still a twenty-minute drive to the warehouse. Why can't I be the invisible bass player no one cares about?

I stare at her words again, running over the sentence in my head. *When she removes her make-up, taking off her brave face for the day...*

That line really hit me the first time I read this letter a couple years ago. And the hundred times since then. How can she say so little and yet so much?

I go back and finish the last part, already knowing how the letter ends but loving her attitude and the way she makes me smile.

*Okay, sorry. I just had a Facebook break, so I feel better now. Not sure when I turned into such an idiot, but I'm glad you put up with it.*

*Moving on.*

*So just to set the record straight from our last argument, Kylo Ren is NOT a baby. You understand? He's young, impulsive, and he's related to Anakin and Luke Skywalker. Of course he whines! How is this a surprise? And he'll redeem himself. I'll bet you on it. Name your price.*

*Alright, I gotta go. But yes, to answer your question, that lyric you sent me last time sounds great. Go with it, and I can't wait to read the whole song.*

*Good night. Good work. Sleep well.*

*I'll most likely stop writing you in the morning,*

*Ryen*

I laugh at her *Princess Bride* movie reference. She's been saying that for seven years. The first year, we were required to write each other as part of a fifth grade project, pairing students in her class with students in mine.

But after the school year ended, we didn't stop. Even though we live less than thirty miles away from each other and have Facebook now, we continue to communicate this way because it keeps it special.

And I do not watch *Teen Mom*. My seventeen-year-old sister watches it, and I got sucked in. Once. I'm not sure why I told Ryen. I know better than to give her ammo to tease me, dammit.

I fold the letter back up, the worn creases of the black paper threatening to tear if I unfold and read it even one more time. A lot has changed in our letters over the years. The things we talk about, the subjects we bicker over, her handwriting... Writing that has gone from the big, unpolished penmanship of a girl who has just learned cursive, to the sure, confident strokes of a woman who knows who she is.

But the paper never changes. Not even the silver ink she uses. Seeing her black envelopes in the pile of mail on the kitchen counter always gives me a nice shot of adrenaline.

Slipping the paper into my glove box, among a few other of my favorites of Ryen's letters, I take my pen, hovering it over the notepad that sits on my lap.

"Spread on your bravery, line the eyes and the lips," I say under my breath as I write on the paper, "glue up the cracks and paint over the rips."

I stop and think as I pull my bottom lip in between my teeth, grazing the piercing there. "A little here," I mumble, the lyrics turning in my head, "to cover the bags under your eyes, and some pink on your cheeks to spread the lies."

I quickly jot down the words, my chicken scratch barely visible inside the dark car.

I hear my phone beep again, and I falter. "Alright," I growl, willing the damn texts to stop. Can't my bandmates host a party without me for five minutes?

I put the pen to paper again, trying to finish my thought, but I stop, searching my brain. What the hell was next? *A little here to cover the bags under your eyes...*

I squeeze my eyes shut, repeating the line over and over again, trying to remember the rest.

I let out a breath. Shit, it's gone.

*Dammit.*

I cap the pen, tossing that and the notepad onto the passenger seat of my Raptor.

I think about her last sentence. *Name my price, huh?*

Well, how about a phone call then, Ryen? Let me hear your voice for the first time?

But no. Ryen likes to keep our friendship status quo. It works, after all. Why risk losing it by changing it?

And she's right, I guess. What if I hear her voice and her letters become less special? I get to imagine her personality through her words. That would change if I heard her tone.

But what if I hear her voice and I like it? What if her laughter in my ear or her breathing into the phone haunts me as much as her words, and I want more?

I'm already obsessed enough with her letters. Which is why I'm sitting in my truck in an empty parking lot, rereading one of her old ones, because they inspire my music.

She's my muse, and she has to know it by now. I've been using her as a bouncing board for years, sending her lyrics to read.

My phone rings, and I look down to see Dane's name.

I let out a hard sigh and snatch it up. "What?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm on my way." I start the truck and put it in Drive.

"No, you're sitting in some parking lot writing lyrics again, aren't you?"

I roll my eyes and end the call, tossing my phone onto the passenger seat.

So driving helps me think. He doesn't need to bust my ass just because I can't help it when ideas hit me.

Pulling onto the street, I lay on the gas and head to the old warehouse outside of town. Our band is hosting a scavenger hunt to raise money for our summer tour in a few months, and even though I thought we should just set up some gigs—maybe team up with a few other local bands—Dane thought something different would draw in a bigger crowd.

I guess we'll see if he's right.

The bitter February chill cuts through my hoodie, and I turn on the heater and flip on my brights, the wide light casts a glow deep into the darkness ahead.

This is the road to Falcon's Well where Ryen lives. If I keep going, I'll pass the warehouse, the turn off for the Cove—an abandoned amusement park—and eventually, I'll arrive in her town. Many times since I got my license I've been tempted to drive there, my curiosity overwhelming, but I never did. Like I said, it's not worth the risk of losing what we have. Unless she agrees to it, too.

I lean over to the passenger seat and shove the notepad and other papers away, searching for my watch. I'd left it in here yesterday when I washed the outside of the truck, and it's one of the only things I'm responsible with. It's a family heirloom.

Kind of.

I find it and hold the steering wheel, fastening the black suede cuff around my wrist with a time piece inserted between two brackets. It had been my grandfather's before he passed it down to my dad at my parents' wedding, to be given to their firstborn son. My father finally gave it up last year, only for me to realize he'd lost the original time piece in it. An antique Jaeger-LeCoultre watch that's been in the family for eighty years.

And I will find it. But until then I'm stuck with a piece of crap sitting in its place on my grandfather's cuff.

I finish securing the strap and look up, seeing something on the road ahead.

As I get closer, I make out a form moving along the side of the road, the blonde ponytail, the black jacket, and the neon-blue running shoes unmistakable.

*You gotta be kidding me.* Son of a bitch.

My headlights fall across my sister's back, lighting her up in the dark night. I turn down my music as she jerks her head over her shoulder, finally noticing someone is there.

Her face relaxes when she sees it's me, and she smiles, continuing jogging.

And she has her fucking earbuds in, too. *Awesome safety precautions, Annie.*

I slow the truck, roll down the passenger side window, and pull up beside her. "You know what you look like?" I bellow, anger curling my fist around the steering wheel. "Serial killer candy!"

Letting out a silent laugh, she shakes her head and speeds up, forcing me to, as well. "And do you know where we are?" she argues. "On the road between Thunder Bay and Falcon's Well. No one's ever on this road. I'm fine." She arches an eyebrow at me. "And you sound like Dad."

I frown in disgust. "A," I say. "I'm on this road, so no, it's not empty. And B. Don't shake your head at me just because you're the only one dumb enough to jog in the middle of nowhere at night, and I don't want you to be raped and murdered. And C. That was uncalled for. I don't sound like Dad, so don't kick me in the nuts like that again. It's not nice." And then I bark, "Now get in the damn truck."

She shakes her head again. Just like Ryen, she loves to tease me.

Annie is my only sibling, and despite my less-than-stellar relationship with our dad, she and I get along really well.

She continues jogging, breathing hard, and I notice the bags under her eyes and the sunken look of her cheeks. An urge to scold her nips at me, but I hold it back. She works too hard, and she's barely sleeping.

"Come on," I tell her, growing impatient. "Seriously, I don't have time for this."

"Then what are you doing out here?"

I look out to the empty road to make sure I'm not swerving. "It's that scavenger hunt thing tonight. I'm putting in an appearance. Why aren't you on the well-lit track at the park with the safety of the two dozen other joggers around? Huh?"

"Stop babysitting me."

"Stop doing stupid shit," I retort.

I mean, what the hell is she thinking? It's bad enough being out here alone during the day, but at night?

I'm a year older, graduating this May, but normally she's the responsible one.

And that reminds me. "Hey," I grumble. "Did you take sixty dollars out of my wallet this morning?"

I noticed it missing, and I'd just taken out money yesterday. I didn't spend it, and this is the third time my cash has gone missing.

She puts on the ten-year-old sad face she knows works on me. "I was going shopping for some science project supplies, and you never spend your money. It shouldn't go to waste."

I roll my eyes.

She knows she can just ask our dad for more cash. Annie's his angel, so he'll give her anything she wants.

But how can I be mad at her? She's going places, and she's a happy kid. Anything I can do to make her happier, I guess.

She grins, probably seeing me relent, and lurches over, grabbing onto the window frame and hopping up onto the cab step under the door. "Hey, can you pick me up a root beer?" she asks. "An *ice cold* root beer on your way home from the warehouse? Because we both know you're only going to stay there for five minutes unless you find a hot girl who entices you to be sociable, right?"

I laugh to myself. Twerp.

"Fine." I nod. "Get in the truck, and you can go to the gas station with me. How about that?"

"And some caramels," she adds, ignoring my request. "Or anything chewy." She then hops off the step, taking off at a faster pace down the street away from me.

"Annie!" I lay on the gas, catching up to her. "Now."

She looks over at me, and snickers. "Misha, my car is right there!" She points ahead. "Look."

I shoot my glare farther up the road and see that she's right. Her blue MINI Cooper sits on the right shoulder, waiting for her.

"I'll meet you at the house," she tells me.

"You're done running then?"

"Yesssss." She bows her head in dramatic nods. "I'll see you when you get home, okay? Go get my root beer and candy."

I give her a joking smile. "I wish I could, but I don't have any money."

"You have money in your center console," she throws back. "Don't act like you don't stuff change everywhere and anywhere instead of putting things in their proper place. I bet you have a hundred bucks all over that truck."

I snort. Yeah, that's me. The bad, older brother who doesn't pick up after himself and eats mozzarella sticks for breakfast.

I step on the gas and head down the road, but I hear a yell behind me.

"And some dill potato chips!"

I see her in my rearview mirror, her hands framing her mouth as she shouts. I honk the horn twice, letting her know I heard her, and speed ahead, pulling over in front of her car.

I see her shake her head in the mirror, like I'm so overbearing, because I won't leave until she's in the car.

Sorry, but yeah. I'm not leaving my pretty, seventeen-year-old sister on a dark road at ten o'clock at night.

She pulls her keys out of her jacket pocket, unlocks the door, and waves to me before she climbs in. When I see the headlights come on, I put the truck in Drive again and finally go.

I lay on the gas and sit back in my seat, heading down the road toward the abandoned warehouse. Her headlights fade from view in my mirror as I go over a small hill, and worry creeps in. She doesn't look right. I don't think she's sick, but she looks pale and tired.

*Just go home and get in bed, Annie. Stop getting up at 4:30 in the morning, and get a decent night of sleep.*

She's the perfect one out of the two of us. A 4.14 GPA, star of our school's volleyball team, coach of a little girls' softball team, not to mention the clubs and extra projects she takes on...

My bedroom walls are covered in posters and black marker from writing lyrics everywhere. Her walls are covered with shelves of trophies, medals, and awards.

If only everyone could tap into the energy she seems to have.

I pull onto the gravel road, round a few turns, and see a clearing ahead, surrounded by dark trees. The massive building stands tall and imposing in front of me. Most of the windows are shattered, and I can already make out the lights inside and the shadows of people moving around.

I think they used to produce shoes here or something, but once Thunder Bay became an affluent, wealthy community, production was moved to the city, keeping the noise and pollution far away from the fragile ears and noses of its residents.

But the warehouse, although falling into ruin, still has its uses. Bonfires, parties, Devil's Night... It's a space for havoc now, and tonight it's ours.

After parking, I climb out of the truck and lock it, more conscious of protecting Ryen's letters and my wad of notes than my wallet in the console.

I walk for the entrance but once inside, I don't stop to look around. *Square Hammer* by Ghost plays as I weave through the crowd and make my way for the corner where I know I'll find the rest of the guys. They always snatch up the seats over there when we party here.

"Misha!" someone calls out.

I glance up and nod at a guy standing with his buddies near a pillar. But I keep going. Hands pat my back and a few people say hi, but mostly I see everyone moving about, their laughter rivaling the music as phone screens light the air and pictures snap around me.

I guess Dane was right. Everyone seems to love the event.

The guys are exactly where I knew they'd be, sitting on couches in the corner. Dane works on the iPad, probably managing the event online. He's dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, his usual attire no matter what temperature it is outside. Lotus fastens his black hair into a ponytail as he talks to a couple of chicks, while Malcolm raises his bong to his mouth and lights the stem, his curly brown hair covering his, no doubt, blood-shot eyes.

*Awesome.*

"Alright, I'm here." I lean down to the table, picking up the guitar cables one of them left laying in a spilled drink, and fling them to the couch. "Where do you want me?"

"Where do you think?" our drummer, Malcolm snaps. Smoke pours out of his mouth as he jerks his head to the crowd behind me. "They want you, pretty boy. Go make the rounds."

I shoot a look over my shoulder, grimacing. "Yeah, no." Getting up and singing or playing a guitar is one thing. I have a job then, and I know what to do.

But this? Humoring people I don't know to raise money? We need the cash, and I have my gifts, but conversation is not one of them. I don't mingle.

"I'll do security," I tell them.

"We don't need security." Dane stands up, the ever-present hint of a smile on his face. "Look at this place. Everything's awesome." He walks up to me, and we both turn to look out at the crowd. "Relax and go talk to someone. There's tons of good-looking girls here."

I cross my arms over my chest. *Maybe*. But I'm not staying long tonight. That song is still in my head, and I want to finish it.

Dane and I watch the crowd, and I see people carrying cards around, which they picked up at the door. Each one has various tasks to complete for the scavenger hunt.

*Get a picture of a six-person pyramid.*

*Get a picture of a man with lipstick on.*

*Get a picture of you kissing a stranger.*

And then some of the tasks get a little dirtier.

They have to upload the photos to Facebook, tag our band's page, and we'll pick a random winner to win...something. I forget. I wasn't paying attention.

Everyone has to purchase a ticket to get in, but since there's a full bar, it clearly—from the looks of it—wasn't hard to draw a crowd and get people to pay the price. The bartenders are supposed to card everyone, but I know it's bullshit. Everyone drinks and gets away with it in this town.

"So how are you doing?" Dane asks. "Your dad on your case again?"

"I'm fine."

He pauses, and I know he wants to push harder, but he lets it go. "Well, you should've brought Annie. She would've liked this."

"Not a chance." I laugh, the scent of weed drifting into my nostrils. "My sister is off limits. You got that?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything." He feigns innocence, a cocky smile on his face. "I just think she works hard and could use some fun."

"Fun, yes. Trouble, no," I correct. "Annie's on a good track and doesn't need distractions. She has a future ahead of her."

"And you don't?"

I feel his eyes on me, the challenge lingering in the air. I didn't say that, did I?

Dane stays quiet for a moment, probably wondering if I'll answer, but again he just changes the subject.

"Alright, so check this out," he says, leaning in closer and holding the iPad in front of me as he scrolls. "Four hundred and fifty-eight people have checked in already. Videos and photos are being posted, hundreds of tags, and people are even going live on their own profiles... This worked better than I could've imagined. The exposure is already paying off. Our YouTube videos have quadrupled in hits tonight."

I glance at the screen, noticing our band's name with a lot of pictures in the feed. Drinks are raised in the air, girls smile, and some videos play as he scrolls, showing the warehouse.

"You did good." I gaze back out at the warehouse. "Looks like the tour is bankrolled."

I have to hand it to him. Everyone's having fun, and we're making money.

"Come by tomorrow," I tell him. "I have some lyrics I want to try out."

"Fine," he answers. "Now do me a favor and go relax, please. You look like you're at a chess tournament."

I shoot him a scowl and grab the iPad out of his hands, letting him walk back to the guys, laughing.

Drifting around the action, I scroll the feed as I walk, recognizing lots of names of friends and classmates who showed up to support us. The small fires from the pits waft through my nostrils, and I study a picture of a guy with the word *HORSE* written in Sharpie over his fly. A girl points to it, posing for the camera with her hand over her mouth in surprise. The caption reads, *I found a horse!*

I laugh. Of course, some of the tasks, like snap a picture of yourself with a horse, can't be done unless you get really creative. Good for her.

There are a zillion pics and videos, and I don't know how Dane's going to sort through all this shit tomorrow. Though, knowing him,

the winner won't be random and fair at all. He'll just choose the best looking girl from the photos.

Scrolling down, I spot a video that starts playing, and I watch as a girl takes a bar gun, faces it upward and away from herself, spraying water. It shoots up and then falls back down like a fountain.

She performs a sexy little dance move and laughs at the camera. "I'm standing in a fountain!" she announces, her breasts barely contained in her tank top.

A tank top she's wearing in the chilly New England February weather.

But then one of the bartenders snatches the gun out of the girl's hand and sets it back in place at the bar, shooting her an annoyed look.

I hear a quiet laugh from the other side of the camera.

The girl in the tank top reaches for the phone. "Okay, that was embarrassing. Give it here. I need to edit it before I post it."

"Uh, uh," the female voice behind the camera taunts as she backs away.

But tank top girl charges her, squealing, "Ryen!" And then I hear laughter, and the video ends.

I stand there, staring at the iPad, my heart slowly starting to pound in my chest.

*Ryen?*

The girl behind the camera is named Ryen?

No, it's not her. It can't be. There are tons of girls who probably have that name. She wouldn't be here.

But I look at the video, and my gaze is drawn to the names at the top of the post. She'd tagged the band and a few other people, but then I look at the name of the person who posted it.

*Ryen Trevarrow.*

I straighten my back, my chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

*Oh, my God.*

Shit! I instantly look up, unable to stop myself from scanning the crowd, drifting from face to face.