

Fingers

Penelope had just finished eating breakfast (exactly 251 Cheerios, no milk), when she heard the knocking at the door. It was a loud and erratic rapping—nothing like the rhythmic, artificial knock of a door-to-door solicitor or a Jehovah Witness. Penelope set down the empty cereal bowl on the box of unpacked silverware she had been using as a table and listened.

Four knocks.

Penelope flinched as her brain began to cramp up, muscles writhing and contracting inside her head. She dug her fingernails into her wrist.

Four was not a good number. Four was not a safe number.

“Pen, can you answer the door?” Her father called over from the next room.

She counted to three, then five, then seven.

Dr. Uddin had told her that the counting would only make things worse.

The more you deny your disorder, the more it can control you.

She repeated her pattern one, two, three times.

Attempting to neutralize the thought isn't going to make it go away.

Four more knocks.

“Pen, answer the fucking door!” He was shouting this time, but Penelope could barely hear him over the stitch, burning and boiling deep within her skull. Her brain dissolved into a thick, molten liquid and poured out of her eyes. Plumes of white-hot fear. They trickled down her cheeks and she tasted salt water on her tongue. It almost reminded her of the beach that she used to go to with her mother—the one in Bay City—but this water was warm and sad and felt nothing like the ocean.

Then her mind went dark and there was no more pain but it itched itched itched and she kicked the box in front of her and the bowl that was once filled with 251 Cheerios fell off and shattered into tiny pieces. Her father shouted again but she couldn't hear him because there were so many pieces on the ground way too many pieces to count.

Seven more knocks.

Relief.

Seven was a good number. Seven was a safe number.

She heard the sound of her father's work boots across the hardwood floor. “For Christ's sake,” he grumbled. “Can't even have one day of goddamn peace and quiet.”

Penelope wiped beneath her eyes, took three deep breaths and crept behind her father into the foyer. The space was completely bare save for the ragged mat that sat in front of the doorway. It was imprinted with the words “home sweet home,” timeworn and faded so that the phrase was barely legible. The mat had been beautiful once, back when her mother had first bought it—cursive letters bright and bold, synthetic fiber still soft beneath her feet. Now it just looked out of place, unkempt and ignored in a house occupied only by Penelope and her father.

Five more knocks.

Her father cursed under his breath and unlocked the door. Penelope clambered halfway up the staircase that faced the threshold, plunging herself into darkness. Her father still hadn't replaced the lightbulb that hung from the ceiling above it. She perched herself on the seventh step and watched as her father opened the door, just enough so that she could make out the person on the other side. Penelope leaned forward. He was a boy, probably a few years older than her, tall, lanky and sickly pale.

“Can you tell me what's so urgent that you have to be bangin' on my door in the middle of the fourth quarter?”

“I'm sorry,” the boy said. It was raining, but her father didn't invite him inside.

“Sorry's not gonna rewind the Cowboys game.”

The boy cleared his throat.

“I'm Dylan.” He held out his hand to Penelope's father, who glared at it as if he were being offered a bag of boiling dog shit. Dylan pulled his hand away, using it to tousle his dark, curly hair. “My dad and I live down the street.”

“I used to have a dog named Dylan,” her father said. “He got rabies and I had to shoot him in the head.”

Penelope's chest began to throb, either out of sympathy for Dylan, or secondhand guilt on behalf of her father. She scooted herself further down the stairs, skipping one step so that she'd land on the fifth.

It's okay, she wanted to say to him. *He does this to everyone.*

“I just—” Dylan stammered, “I just, uh, wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

“By trying to break down my door?”

“I didn't mean to bother you,” Dylan said, looking past her father's shoulders and into the house. Penelope hoped that he couldn't see her, huddled on the stairs like a kicked puppy.

“It's not polite to look into other people's homes.” Penelope's father stepped completely in front of the doorway so that the only thing she could see was the back of his head. But she could still see the expression on his face; the one that fell somewhere between anger and annoyance. Overgrown eyebrows drawn together, forehead red and puckered, breathing misplaced through a set of dry, curled lips. She was used to that look.

“Well, it was very nice to meet you sir.” Dylan held his hand out again. Her father's hands didn't move from their position, clenched into fists at his sides.

“Now don't start comin' over here asking to borrow no sugar or nothin'.” He slammed the door in Dylan's face and retreated back to the living room, muttering something else about being interrupted in the middle of the game.

Penelope waited until her dad was out of sight to open the door. Dylan was already halfway down the driveway. “Hey,” she called softly from the doorstep. He didn't turn around, so she ran barefoot, across the wet asphalt, until she caught up to him. She tapped on his shoulder and he started, pivoting on his heels toward her. His face relaxed when he saw her.

“Sorry,” he said. “I thought you were your dad coming to kick my ass,” he gestured back toward her house. “That was your dad, right?”

“Yeah,” Penelope said. “He's, uh—he's a lot.”

He smiled a crooked smile and held out his hand. “Dylan,” he said. “Dylan Crawford.”

She shook it, and took the moment to look at him. He had freckles across his nose and a dimple on his chin. “Penelope.”

“No last name?”

“King.”

“Any relation to the author?”

“I wish,” she tucked a piece of mousy brown hair behind her ear. “I mean, my dad *can* be Annie Wilkes-crazy sometimes.”

“Hopefully he doesn't try to cut your foot off with an axe.”

“Hopefully.” The two of them stood in silence for a moment, and Penelope counted the freckles across his nose. There were thirteen.

“By the way,” she started. “Is there any chance you go to school at Green Valley?”

Dylan shook his head. “I got expelled from Green Valley. Graduated from the continuation school last year.”

“Expelled?”

“Plagiarized a couple of essays,” he explained. “I'm kind of shit at writing.”

“Oh, that's a bummer,” she said, deciding not to probe further. “I'm about to start my first year.”

“Freshman year of high school in a whole new town? Rough.”

“Thanks for the encouragement.”

“Well, Penelope King,” he said. “I have to be at work in thirty minutes but let me get your phone number—you know, just in case I have to borrow some sugar or something.”

He pulled his phone from his back pocket, unlocked it and handed it to her. “Just don’t give me a fake one,” he said. “It’s really hard to avoid someone when you live on the same street.”

Penelope laughed, typing the last digits of her number into his phone and triple-checking them to make sure they were correct. Her fingers brushed slightly against his as she handed the phone back.

Dylan started walking backward down the driveway. “See you later, Penelope King,” he said before disappearing behind the U-Haul.

Dylan was the only thing Penelope could think about that night. While she ate dinner, while she unpacked and while she watched TV. Her dad was leaned back in his favorite recliner, the only piece of furniture he had bothered to move into the house. Penelope sat on the floor, her back rested against a box labelled “kitchenware.”

They were watching the news. Channel 7. Penelope liked the number seven.

Seven was a good number. Seven was a safe number.

Penelope didn’t like the news, though. Didn’t like watching it with her dad at least. He always drank too much and yelled at her because she didn’t know who was running for Senate or what war was going on where.

“You’re almost sixteen years old,” he told her. “When I was sixteen, I was already an officer in the Marines.”

“You can’t even join the military until you’re eighteen.”

“You think I’m a liar?”

“No, I’m just saying—”

“This is why I wanted a son,” her dad said. “A good son never talks back to his old man.”

Penelope didn’t say anything, but watched as he opened another can of beer. She had tried a beer once. It was with her best friend Emily, who stole a couple cans from the minifridge that her parents kept in the garage. It was bitter and smelled like the loaf of bread that had sat in her kitchen cabinet for three months.

When a segment on global warming came on, he grabbed the remote. “Don’t ever go to college,” he grumbled. “Unless you want to get brainwashed with this kind of bullshit.”

“But it’s true,” Penelope said. “The ice caps are melting.”

“Bullshit,” he repeated. He pointed the remote at the TV and skipped through several channels before settling on a documentary. It was on channel 24.

Penelope repeated the number in her head. 24. 24. 24. It wasn’t a good number at all. It made her brain start to itch. She scratched at her scalp, but couldn’t manage to reach the inside of her skull with her fingernails.

Penelope knew that if her dad didn't change the channel on the TV, then the whole thing would explode. It would impale them both with millions of shards of glass, and they would bleed out on the carpet that had just been vacuumed and shampooed.

"Can we watch something else?"

"When you pay for the cable, you can choose the channel."

The itch intensified until it burned, a searing tightness in her brain that made her eyes water. She ran to her unfurnished bedroom, clutching her temples, and curled into a ball on the floor. In the next room over, she could hear the sound of her dad cracking open another beer.

Penelope woke up the next morning with a feeling of impending doom and a single text message from Dylan Crawford.

Down for an adventure?

Penelope waited five minutes to reply. Five was a good, clean number. It was long enough so that she didn't seem too excited, but short enough so that she didn't seem too distant.

When?

He replied immediately.

Meet me at my house in 20. It's the one with the yellow door.

Penelope cringed.

I'll be there in 19.

When she got there, he was already waiting outside, leaned up against his house. He didn't notice her at first, but she walked further up his driveway until the crunch of the asphalt caught his attention. He looked up. He smiled.

"Where exactly are we going?" Penelope looked at him incredulously. As much as she was intrigued by Dylan, he was still a stranger.

"It's a surprise," he said. "Just follow me."

Penelope didn't want to follow him, but his eyes were deep and trustworthy. She hadn't noticed how blue they were before.

Penelope didn't want to follow him, but he had exactly thirteen freckles on his nose.

Penelope didn't want to follow him, but she did.

They walked along the trail that led into the woods behind her house until they reached a bridge. It was overgrown with nettle and creeping myrtle, and the river that ran beneath it was nearly full. Part of Penelope's brain told her to jump into it, curious as to how it would feel if the current dragged her under and tossed her around like a wet sock. She dismissed the thought and proceeded to take exactly fifteen steps across it—any more, any less and it would collapse.

"I'm pretty sure you brought me out here to kill me," Penelope stepped carefully along the forest floor, a careful few feet behind him.

“It’s just past this bunch of trees.” Dylan stopped in front of what appeared to be a large clearing. Penelope caught up with him and saw what was there. In the middle of the expanse of empty ground in front of her was a barn, its crumbling exterior rusted and worn. Obviously abandoned.

“Okay, now I’m certain that you brought me out here to kill me.” Penelope tried to take a step back, but Dylan grabbed onto her wrist.

“I know it’s kind of creepy,” he loosened his grip on her arm. “But it’s the place I come to think about things. You’re actually the only person I’ve ever brought here.”

“Why?” Penelope asked. “No offense, but I’ve barely known you for twenty minutes.”

“Thought a Stephen King fan might appreciate it,” he said. “But we don’t have to go in today. This is a good spot too.”

“A good spot for what?”

He sat down against a tree and beckoned for her to sit next to him. She took a seat at a slight angle, so that their knees touched but their shoulders didn’t. Penelope watched as Dylan pulled what looked like a poorly made cigarette out of his pocket. He lit it, inhaled deeply and let out an opaque cloud of smoke. Penelope wrinkled her nose; it didn’t smell like the Marlboros her dad smoked—more like a combination of skunk and earth. He drew in another long breath of smoke, this time holding it in his lungs until what he exhaled was translucent. He held it out to Penelope, who hesitated. “If I ever smoked a cigarette, my dad would kill me.”

Dylan laughed. “It’s a joint,” he said. “You know, weed.”

“I think that would be worse.” Penelope knew what weed was—her friends from her old school used to smoke it out of hollowed-out apples and pen caps. She was always too scared to try it herself.

“Trust me.”

Penelope looked at the joint, then back up at Dylan. If there was any time to try it, it was now. Tentatively, she took it from his hand and tried replicating his motions, positioning the unlit end between her lips and inhaling. She swallowed what felt like fire down her throat, and immediately coughed it all out in several short, sputtering breaths.

“You’ll get used to it,” Dylan said. Penelope tried it again, this time more slowly, and was able to repeat the process more smoothly, only coughing once. She passed the joint back to Dylan. Seconds later, she felt a wave of pleasure wash throughout her body. Her head was weightless, but her body felt as if it would sink into the ground, deep and dark and far away.

“I feel weird,” she giggled.

“Feels nice, doesn’t it?” Dylan smiled at her, and Penelope was suddenly aware of how wide she was grinning. She felt as if the muscles in her face were permanently stuck in that position.

“Like my head is floating,” she laughed. He laughed too, and angled himself toward her so that they were pressed up next to each other. Penelope could feel her heartbeat quicken. They

sat in silence as they finished the rest of the joint. Penelope took exactly seven puffs—one more, one less and she would have a heart attack. By the time they were done smoking, Penelope was deep inside her thoughts. She picked a piece of bark off the tree with her fingernail.

“I hate my dad,” she blurted, surprising herself.

“No offense,” Dylan laughed. “But I think I hate him too.”

“He wasn’t always like this,” she said quietly. “I mean, he was never nice, especially when he was drinking—but when my mom died last year, he just kind of lost it.”

Silence.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t really talk about.” Penelope looked down at her knees, suddenly self-conscious. There was a fire ant crawling across her jeans.

Dylan put his hand over hers. “You have no reason to be sorry.”

“I just miss her so much.” Penelope focused on the ant, salt water collecting at the inner corner of her eye. Dylan stroked her hand with his thumb.

“How um, did it happen?” he asked. “I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Breast cancer.”

“I’m so sorry, Pen.”

Penelope flinched at the nickname. The only person who had ever called her that was her father. “It’s just weird living without her.”

“I know how it feels,” Dylan sighed. “To lose your mother.” He drew a circle in the dirt with his finger. “Pancreatic cancer.”

“How long ago did she, uh—”

“She died three years ago.”

Silence.

“It fucking sucks.”

“I know.”

Silence.

“You know,” Dylan said. “I think we were meant to meet each other.”

“I think so too.”

They sat there, side by side on the forest floor, until the sun went down.

That night, Penelope didn’t watch TV with her father. She went straight to her room and sprawled across the twin sized mattress on the floor. The disassembled pieces of her bedframe were pushed into the corner. She pulled out her phone. There was one new text message from Dylan.

Same time tomorrow?

Penelope smiled at her phone.

I'll meet you there.

Goodnight Penelope.

Goodnight.

Penelope dreamed of a boy with thirteen freckles on his face.

The next day was July 24th. She braced herself, staring at the date on her phone for several minutes before realizing that nothing was going to happen. Penelope reveled in the wave of relief that washed over her body. It was more satisfying than school being cancelled after a snowstorm. It was more satisfying than taking off her bra at the end of the day. She thought about the documentary her father had been watching the other night. The one on channel 24. She thought about how badly it had made her hurt. How much it had terrified her.

It was July 24th, and Penelope was completely fine. Still, she dug through her bedside drawer for the Klonopin that Dr. Uddin prescribed her.

Take one—for emergencies only.

July 24th wasn't an emergency, but she could never be too careful.

She washed the orange pill down with a glass of water and made her way toward the forest. By the time she reached the clearing, her brain was remarkably quiet. Dylan was leaned back against the same tree, staring off toward the barn. He was wearing a pair of headphones that made an indent in his unruly hair. Penelope gently laid her hand on his shoulder, but he didn't flinch. He smiled when he saw her and took her hand in his. "I have something to show you."

July 24th was the day they found the mattress.

It was on the edge of the clearing, slightly weather-worn but otherwise in good shape. "“This is what you wanted to show me?” Dylan nodded, lifting it up onto its side. Penelope thought the mattress was disgusting, probably used by God knows who for God knows what. For some reason, Dylan was excited about it. It was the same kind of excited that her father had been when he brought home an old, ratty recliner from the thrift store. Her mother had hated it—she told him it was too ugly to keep in their house, and that he needed to get rid of it. That was the hardest Penelope had ever seen him hit her.

Dylan was excited about the mattress, so she didn't say anything. She only watched as he carried it by himself into the barn, lean, wiry muscles straining beneath its weight. He placed it on the ground near the entrance. "So we have a nice place to watch the sunset," he smiled.

July 24th was the hottest day of the summer.

The barn was unusually cold. As if the sun couldn't penetrate the damp, crumbling wood. The smell of mold and rot was refreshing. It reminded Penelope of the basement in her old house. She had spent weeks renovating it with her mother, but the smell was permanently embedded in the walls and the floors. It was where she hid whenever her dad's breath was sickly sweet and his words slurred into strings of incoherent shouting. When the house finally fell

silent, her mother would creep down the stairs and sit next to her on the rough polyester carpet. Sometimes she had bruises on her arms. Sometimes on her face. She would cradle Penelope in her arms and they would both cry until their eyes were too swollen to keep open. The barn felt safe, especially as she sat next to Dylan, legs touching, on the edge of the mattress.

July 24th was the day that Penelope lost her virginity.

Dylan rummaged through his backpack. “I have something you’re gonna like,” he smiled. Penelope hoped that it was another joint, but the bottle he produced from the largest zipper pocket was filled with brown liquid and said “Jack Daniels” on the label. Whiskey. She had seen her dad drink it a million times before, the empty bottles scattered around the house like Easter eggs.

“Drink it.” He thrust the bottle into her hands, and she twisted off the cap. It smelled like gasoline. She took a small sip and swallowed it before it could touch her taste buds. It burned all the way down to her stomach. She shuddered.

“That’s terrible,” Penelope coughed, handing the bottle back to him.

“Please tell me this isn’t the first time you’ve ever had alcohol,” Dylan laughed.

“I’ve had beer before, but I hated it,” she admitted. “I like wine coolers though. The fruity ones that come in little bottles.”

“That stuff’s straight sugar,” Dylan said. “A Smirnoff Ice isn’t going to make you feel anything but sick.” He took a drink and passed the bottle back to her. Penelope braced herself and took a more liberal drink. She gagged, but didn’t throw up. They took turns passing the whiskey back and forth. Penelope took exactly five swigs. Five was a good number. Five was a safe number. The whiskey hit her quickly. She should have eaten something besides Klonopin. It made her head feel light like the weed did, but it didn’t make her body feel heavy. She felt comfortable and warm.

“I’ve never actually been drunk before,” Penelope said, setting the bottle on the ground in front of them.

“Guess I’m a bad influence.” Dylan smirked.

Penelope’s head was swimming. It was the same sensation she felt when she got out of bed too fast in the morning, flecks of black and white floating in her peripheral vision. She looked down at her hands and counted all ten of her fingers. The itch, always festering in her brain, began to surface. She clasped her hand around one of her index fingers, imagining that she only had nine of them. Nine was a good, safe number.

“You good?” Dylan asked, his gaze resting suspiciously on her hands. Penelope was jerked back into reality, and she quickly released her grip on her index finger.

“Yeah,” she said, placing her hands on her thighs. “I’m fine.”

“Seriously,” Dylan said. “Something’s up, I can tell.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Not if it’s bothering you.”

Penelope exhaled. “There’s something wrong with my head,” she said.

“Sounds like someone can’t handle their alcohol,” he grinned, reaching over to tickle the side of her waist. Penelope knew he was only teasing her, but she was tired of not being taken seriously. She grabbed his arm and shoved it away from her. Any remnants of humor left on Dylan’s face dissolved into concern.

“No,” Penelope said. “There’s something wrong with my *brain*.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain.” She paused, chewing at her lower lip until she could taste blood. “Sometimes it hurts, like it’s on fire. If I can’t make it go away, I feel like something bad will happen.”

“How often does it happen?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“The numbers,” she said softly. “Not all of them—it’s only ever even numbers that trigger it. They make me feel unsafe; like I’m constantly surrounded by bad omens.”

Dylan dabbed at the blood on Penelope’s lower lip. He didn’t say anything, but his eyes were thoughtful and attentive. They told her to keep talking.

“What’s bizarre is that I always have this fight or flight response,” she explained. “Like God replaced the primal instinct that’s supposed to make me afraid of bears and serial killers with one that sends me into hysterics over the number of pages in a book.” Penelope realized she was rambling, but she didn’t care. “It’s not always painful, either—sometimes it’s just kind of annoying, like a cavity or a fly landing on your arm.”

“I’m sorry, Pen.”

“Even if it hurt every single time, the pain still wouldn’t be the worst part.”

“What could be worse than your brain being on fire?” Penelope could tell he was trying to be lighthearted, but she couldn’t bring herself to smile.

“Not knowing when it’s going to happen,” she said. “It’s unpredictable. I never know exactly which number are going to set it off. I never know how badly I’m going to react. I never even know if I’m going to react at all.” Penelope didn’t realize that she was crying until Dylan was wiping her eyes with the sleeve of his shirt.

“I thought you said that it was always triggered by even numbers.”

“I said that it was *only* triggered by even numbers,” Penelope sniffled between quiet sobs. “Not *always* triggered by even numbers.”

Dylan cocked his head to the side. It reminded Penelope of a German Shephard. A German Shephard with blue eyes and curly hair. “I’m confused,” he said.

“It’s almost as if my brain decides the rules day by day,” she explained. “The other night, the number twenty-four sent me into a spiral. This morning, it didn’t bother me at all.”

“Shouldn’t that be a good thing?” Dylan asked. “That you were okay?”

Penelope sighed. “I shouldn’t have to feel lucky that the number 24 didn’t make my brain implode.”

Dylan looked at her in a way that conveyed something between pity and empathy; like she was only an insect and he was an entire garden. She didn’t want him to look at her like that.

Penelope’s cheeks burned. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

“I want you to tell me these things,” he said.

“Then why are you looking at me like I’m crazy?”

“I’m not,” he said. “I just hate that there’s nothing I can do to help you. I know how hard it can be.”

“No,” Penelope said, her voice charged with an unintended bite. “You don’t.”

“My mother used to have OCD,” Dylan said. “She would brush her teeth eight times a day and wash her hands until they bled.” He looked down at his own hands. “I remember when she shaved her head—it was before the cancer. She thought that her hair was unsanitary, no matter how many times she washed it.”

“Stop trying to relate to me,” Penelope snapped. “What your mom went through has nothing to do with what I’m going through.” The guilt hit her as soon as the words left her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he said, seemingly unphased by her sudden aggression. “I just don’t want you to feel alone,”

“I just want to feel normal. I just want my brain to work.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your brain, Pen.”

“It definitely feels like there is.”

“Trust me, there’s not.” Dylan placed his hand on her knee.

“How do you know that?” Her voice cracked again as the tears began to reform at the corners of her eyes.

“Please, just listen to me,” Dylan said. “I’m not saying this because I want to relate to you or get close to you or whatever the fuck else you think my intentions with you are. You opened up to me, so I’m going to open up to you.”

“Okay,” Penelope said. “Do it.”

“I used to get the pain too,” he said. “The one in my brain.”

Penelope almost laughed. In a matter of seconds, she was heaved violently across the spectrum of emotions. Her anxiety turned into sadness. Her sadness turned into confusion. Her confusion turned into hope. As her hope dissipated into anger, she looked Dylan in the eyes.

“Please Dylan,” she begged, exasperated. “You need to stop.”

“Stop what?” He looked genuinely confused. Penelope wanted to scream at him, but something about the solemnity in his voice made her uneasy. If he was trying to tease her or make a joke, then he was terrible in his delivery.

“You’re so full of shit,” she hissed, standing up from her spot on the mattress. Dylan grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. Her anger turned into fear.

“You’re not the only person with problems, Penelope.”

“So what, it’s all just a coincidence? That I met you by chance, and we just happened to share 70% of the same life experiences?” Penelope was breathing heavily. It was the first time she had ever lashed out at someone like that, but something about Dylan made her brain hurt in a way that she wasn’t used to. It was more of a dull throb than a sharp pain, but it was infinitely more unbearable.

Dylan looked at her expectantly, as if he was waiting for her to say more. If he had been affected by her outburst at all, he didn’t show it. “I think you’re just afraid that you found someone like you. Someone you can empathize with. Someone who understands you, at least a little bit. Someone who cares about you.”

Penelope’s chest tightened. She wanted to tell him that he was probably right. That she liked Dylan, who she had known for less than a week, more than she had ever liked someone before. That she was sorry. But she was too stubborn. “You sound like my therapist,” Penelope said instead.

“Now will you please hear me out?”

Penelope nodded.

“I’m not lying to you, Pen,” he said. “I used to get the pain all the time—I mean, half of me did.”

“What do you mean by ‘half’ of you?”

Dylan cleared his throat. “There are two different people inside of me,” he said. “One of them is good, the other is bad.” Penelope only stared at him, panic bubbling inside of her. “I know how it sounds,” he said, registering her strained expression. “I’m not completely insane. I know there aren’t literally two different people inside of me. That’s just how my psychiatrist used to explain it to me—when I was younger.”

Penelope thought about the first time she saw Dr. Devereaux—her doctor before Dr. Uddin. She was only seven years old. She couldn’t pronounce Dr. Devereaux’s last name so she just called her Dr. D. Penelope sat down next to her mother on a long, black couch and watched

as Dr. D pulled out what looked like a small, hollow tube. It was woven together like the basket that her mother used to put dirty laundry in.

“I’m going to try and make this easier for you to understand,” Dr. D told her. Her voice was calm and soothing. She handed the tube to Penelope. “Put one of your fingers in each end.” Penelope did as she was told. “Now, try to take them out.” When she tried to pull her fingers apart, the tube only tightened around them. She tried again and again, tugging harder each time.

“I’m stuck,” Penelope said, holding out her conjoined fingers to Dr. D.

“Try relaxing them,” she said. Penelope let her fingers slacken, and the tube loosened immediately. She pulled her fingers out as easily as she had inserted them. She held the tube up to her face, observing the strange device from every angle.

“Is this thing magic?” She asked, turning it over in her hands.

“It’s a Chinese Finger Trap,” Dr. D said. “The harder you try to pull your fingers out, the more stuck you become. The only way to escape it is to relax and allow yourself to let go.”

“That’s weird.” Penelope stared at her, wide and unblinking.

“You know those bad thoughts you have?”

Penelope nodded.

“Well, I want you to think about your bad thoughts in the same way as the Chinese Finger Trap. If you try to fight them, they will only get worse. If you stay calm and let them sit, you’ll be able to move on.”

Penelope looked at Dylan, who was in the exact same place as her at one point. Just a scared child in a room full of people who didn’t understand him. He was harmless, just like she was. He needed her to be compassionate, just like he was to her.

“The people inside of you,” Penelope began. “Who are they?”

He took a few moments to think before speaking. “The first person is me, the Dylan that you know—I’m him most of the time. He’s the good one. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.” He smiled at Penelope as if to reassure her. “But then there’s a second Dylan. He’s the one that gets this pain, this *urge*. Like he wants to hurt someone.”

“You want to hurt people?” Penelope jerked away from him. Her eyes darted toward the entrance of the barn.

“I don’t,” Dylan explained. “He does. And he doesn’t want to hurt anyone—it’s more like he *needs* to. It’s the only thing that he thinks can make the pain go away.”

“Does he want to hurt me?” Penelope asked, softening her voice.

“No,” Dylan said. “Of course not. I would never let anybody hurt you.”

“When was the last time you—” Penelope stopped herself. “I mean, when was the last time *he* hurt someone.”

“When he was eight years old, he killed the class hamster. He forgot to feed it.”

Penelope looked at him, puzzled. “He never hurt a person? On purpose?”

“We got it under control before he could do anything like that.”

“Oh,” Penelope said quietly. “That’s good.”

“You don’t have to worry about him,” Dylan said. “I take medication to keep him away.”

“So, I’m talking to the good Dylan right now?”

“One hundred percent of him.”

“Good,” Penelope smiled. “I like him.” She was still trying to process everything Dylan had just told her. She didn’t even know if she could trust him. All she knew that they were the only people who could help each other, and maybe that was enough. Penelope’s attention drifted back toward her finger, which looked out of place. Like it didn’t belong there. She bent it forward, imagining what it would be like if it was gone.

“What’s wrong with your finger?” Dylan asked, watching her as she fidgeted with it. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No,” Penelope said softly. “I just feel like I have one too many.”

“Ten’s not a good number?”

“Ten’s a terrible number.”

Dylan rested his hand on Penelope’s knee. “Just because our brains work differently, it doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with us.”

“I know,” she said.

Dylan moved his hand until it reached her upper thigh. Penelope’s heartbeat quickened. “You know, you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.” His hand snaked further up her leg, but Penelope didn’t stop him. A boy had never told her she was beautiful before. He kissed her, gently at first. His hand made his way beneath her shirt as he pressed his lips closer against hers. He lowered her so that her back was against the mattress. His hands were everywhere all at once.

“I’ve never done this before,” she said.

“Just trust me.”

And she did.

It became an everyday thing. Her, Dylan and the barn. They scavenged for abandoned furniture. The barn became a place of their own. Beaten chairs and tables placed over a dusty Persian rug, empty horseshoes lined the walls as decoration, battery-powered twinkle lights hung from the rafters. They explored every crevice of the building, looking for forgotten relics in the form of rusted tools and old salt licks.

One time she asked him why he never hung out with his other friends.

He said she was the only thing he needed.

Penelope was okay with that.

Dylan held her when her brain felt like it was burning through the back of her skull. He kissed her in the corners that the sun couldn't find. They fucked on the mattress in broad daylight. He was the only thing she needed too.

Then Dylan disappeared. Several weeks passed without so much as a glimpse of him. Penelope knocked on his front door but nobody opened it. He wouldn't answer her texts and her calls went straight to voicemail. The summer crept by slowly without him. She thought that it would be easier for her to get over, but the ache in her chest persisted, growing stronger with each passing day. She spent most of her time inside, surrounded by twos and fours and thermostats always set to 68 degrees.

One day, right before sunset, she received three texts from an unknown number.

Hey

It's Dylan

We need to talk

Penelope responded immediately this time.

Where have you been?

Three minutes passed before her phone dinged again.

I'll explain later

I figured out how to make it stop

Meet me at the barn

Penelope sighed, put on a pair of shoes, walked out the front door and set out in the general direction of the woods. Her legs were on autopilot, and the only thing on her mind was Dylan. His eyes, his hair, the thirteen freckles on his nose.

When she got to the clearing, he wasn't outside. She looked up at the barn—it looked prettier in the evening. The pink and orange in the sky gave the building color, and she could almost imagine that it was alive, the horse shoes on the ground occupied and the chicken coops full. One of the doors was open. She made her way across the field until she reached the double doors, greeted by the familiar scent smell of the decaying wood.

“Hello?” She called into the darkness. There was no answer. She turned her phone flashlight on and crept slowly through the threshold of the barn. Dylan was sitting on the mattress, which now looked out of place in the middle of the empty building. He looked up at her. He smiled.

“Sit down,” he said.

“Why have you been ignoring me?”

“Just sit down.” His voice was weak. As she got closer to Dylan, she could see how worn he looked. As if he hadn’t slept in weeks. She sat down on the opposite end of the mattress, placing her phone face down next to her so that there would be some source of light. Dylan scooted over, closing the gap between them. He turned on his phone flashlight, placing it next to hers. It was different than the one she had put her number into weeks before. He dug around in his backpack and Penelope could hear the familiar clink of glass bottles against each other. He pulled out two clear bottles of Vodka.

“Do we really need two?” She forced a laugh, hoping that it would lighten his mood.

“It’s better to be safe than sorry.” He still didn’t smile, but handed her one of the bottles. It looked full, but the seal was already broken. She twisted it open. Dylan did the same to his.

“Cheers,” Penelope said, holding her bottle up to his. Dylan drained the bottle into his mouth, swallowing it like it was water. He didn’t come up for air for ten seconds. “Wow,” she said. “Have you been practicing?”

“You should try it.”

Penelope didn’t want to drink. She just wanted answers. But most of all, she wanted Dylan back in her life. She wanted him to like her again. So she tilted her head back and began pouring the Vodka into her own mouth. She managed six seconds of uninterrupted chugging before the burn in her throat became too much to handle. She looked over at Dylan, searching for a sign that he was impressed with her. The glimmer of attraction in his eyes that used to be there. “I really missed you,” she said. He looked at her but didn’t say anything. Penelope’s chest began to ache again. She drank more.

“I have to tell you something.” Dylan broke his silence.

“What is it?”

“I really like you Penelope,” he said, his voice suddenly alert. It was as if he had regained weeks of lost sleep in a matter of seconds. “I knew I liked you the moment you ran after me in the driveway. It was like we had an instant connection.” He hesitated momentarily. “And I want to be completely honest with you.”

Silence. Dylan took a deep breath and then exhaled. Penelope held hers in, lungs tightening and refusing to expand.

“I wasn’t expelled from school for plagiarism.”

“What?”

“I’m not a bad person,” he said.

Penelope dug her fingernails into the mattress. Her brain tried to work faster but her thoughts came out sluggish and foggy. “What did you do?” Her voice was low.

“It was Stuart,” he said flatly. “He was this kid in my Chemistry class.”

“What about him?”

“We were doing some stupid experiment for our final exam. I don’t even remember what it was.” He paused. “But I remember the nitric acid.”

“Nitric acid?”

“It has a pH of 1.0. Our teacher told us that it was acidic enough to dissolve a human body—she was just using it for a demonstration. We weren’t allowed to touch it.”

Penelope was silent.

“Stuart was a terrible lab partner—I honestly think there was something wrong with him,” Dylan continued. “Kid didn’t even know how to spell chemistry. He thought it had a ‘K’ in it.”

“Just tell me what happened.” Penelope’s voice was firm.

“Apparently his uncle had just taught him how to juggle—said that he could juggle *anything*. That dumbass ended up breaking eight of our beakers. They were still filled with chemicals and shit. Everyone had to evacuate the classroom.” Dylan sighed. “It was an automatic fail for both of us. An ‘inability to comply with lab safety.’”

“And that’s what got you expelled?”

“I’m not done.” He began picking at a scab on his chin. “They kept both of us after class to help our teacher clean up.”

“I don’t understand,” Penelope said. “It wasn’t even your fault.”

Dylan exhaled. “But it was my fault that I threw the nitric acid into his face.”

“W-what?” Penelope

Penelope stood up from her place on the mattress, nearly losing her balance. Dr. Uddin had told her that Klonopin didn’t mix well with alcohol. “What the hell, Dylan?” She tottered on her heels. “Why would you do that?”

“I don’t know,” his voice fell into a whisper. “I was just so angry. I was a perfect student, Penelope—I had a 4.2 GPA. Early admission into UCLA. Stuart fucked it all up in a matter of seconds.”

“That doesn’t mean you can do that to someone!” Penelope was yelling now. “You’re insane!” Her voice cracked as bile rose through her esophagus and into her throat.

“Just sit down,” Dylan said coolly. “I can explain.”

Penelope backed away from Dylan, swaying slightly as she did. “

“It was almost involuntary—I just walked up to her desk and grabbed it like my body was on autopilot.”

“What happened to Stuart?”

“I’m not a bad person,” he repeated. “Please, just sit down.”

“What the fuck happened to him?” Penelope was yelling now.

“He was wearing safety goggles.”

“What happened to Stuart, Dylan?”

“The school raised money for his skin graft,” Dylan said.

“You should be in prison,” Penelope said. The rest of the alcohol hit her all at once, and she stumbled backward, landing on her back. Dylan rushed to help her but Penelope picked herself back up before he could.

“Stuart told them that it was an accident. He said he had been crouching down next to the teacher’s desk. That I had bumped into it by mistake, and the bottle fell off and broke over his head.”

“Why would he lie?”

“Because he was scared of me.”

“And why shouldn’t I be scared of you?”

“Because we’re in this together.”

“I don’t know if you’re fucking with me right now,” Penelope had her eyes on the open door of the barn, watching as the sun slowly descended behind the trees. “But you’re really starting to freak me out.” She wanted to get up, to run away from Dylan and the barn and the mattress that was soaked through with their combined matter, but her legs wouldn’t budge. There was a disconnect between her brain and her body.

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me,” he said. “The day we found the mattress. I think I figured out a way we can solve both of our problems at the same time.”

“What are you talking about?” Penelope squirmed in place, begging her useless legs to work. “What did I tell you?”

“I’m almost offended that you don’t remember,” he said. “I haven’t been able to forget.”

Penelope’s vision began to soften. “What else was in that bottle?” She didn’t feel drunk, only lightheaded and weak.

“I want you to know that I stopped taking my medication,” he said.

Why?”

“Because I know that you’re the only person who will love both sides of me.”

“Dylan,” Penelope begged, her words slurring together into a half-coherent sentence. “Tell me what you put in that bottle.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Dylan said softly, digging through his backpack. The way the pink sky glinted off of the blade in his hands didn’t scare her. She only felt numb, dizzy. “I just want you to feel better.”

"The easiest finger to live without is your index finger," he said, ignoring her question. He grabbed her hand, which felt limp and useless, and Penelope realized what was about to happen. "I'm only doing this because I love you."

Penelope tried to protest, but there was a disconnect between her brain and her voice, so the only sound that came out was a pathetic moan. The sun had almost completely disappeared, plunging them both into blackness.

Penelope drifted above far and beyond the bench that they sat on until she was watching herself sitting next to him, Dylan holding her hand in his left and the knife in his right. She watched as he kissed her. She watched as he laid her hand flat against the bench. She watched as he brought the knife up.

And she watched as he brought it back down.