

Chapter 8

Cherry Soda

“AUGGGHHH!!!” Penelope belted out into her pillow.

She was still embarrassed from what she just tried in her dream. Even though the Cody she saw in her dreams was likely just a figment of her imagination, she couldn't believe that her subconscious self would dare try to kiss him. Refusing to face the reality of her tiny bedroom, she pressed her face against a pillow that read “I ‘Heart’ NYC”. Clumps of her dyed red hair got caught in her mouth, resulting in her making a bunch of irritated spit sounds - as if the act of making the sound alone was enough to blow out her entrapped hair.

As she aggressively wiped her hair away from her face, she took a deep breath and gazed at her alarm clock. It was a record player tricked up to be an alarm clock. It was something her Uncle Tony made for her on her 16th birthday. She loved listening to her dad's old jazz records he got while living in New York. The works of artists like Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock became regular background tunes to her mom's apartment. After countless listens, she figured that these songs would be perfect for an alarm clock. Waking up was such a burden for her, and she had ruined too many beloved songs by using them as alarm tones on her phone. Despite that, she was confident that the New York jazz albums would be the exception.

This time, however, they failed to wake her up from making a fool out of herself. And now, they were failing to soothe her during a time of internalized humiliation. Suddenly, three THUNDEROUS knocks from her bedroom door would turn her red blushed cheeks to pale white.

RIA! She was supposed to pick me up. Is she early?

Penelope grabbed her phone and nearly had the wind knocked out of her when she checked the time.

1:47 PM??? How?

She may have been a ‘night owl’ who felt most peaceful being awake during the late nights where the rest of the world went quiet, but she still despised sleeping in.

Another round of thunderous knocks came from the door.

“Penelope!” Ria called out. “We’re gonna be late.”

“Coming!”

There was not a second to lose. Penelope leaped out of her bed, kicking her tangled sheets down to her carpet floor. Piles of dirty clothes kept the sheets from actually touching the carpet. As she danced around the dirty clothes piles, trying to only step on open patches of carpet, she gingerly turned off her delicate record player alarm. Immediately after, she skipped over to her sink and splashed her face with ice cold water. There was no time to do her hair, so she ran her hands around all her messy clumps and tied it into a tight, red bun that resembled a fireball of controlled chaos. She did a quick double-take to make sure nothing gross was on her face, and then she sprinted over to her desk which had a bottle full of strong peppermint gum. There was no time to brush her teeth, so she grabbed four or five of them and began rapidly chewing on them. Still wearing her crimson, plaid pajamas, she dashed to the door right before Ria could place a third thunderous knock.

“Finally! Did you just wake up?”

“I slept through my alarm.” Penelope replied as the two hastily marched through her apartment living room.

“That makes two of you.”

The two looked over at Penelope’s mom who was fast asleep on her couch next to an empty glass of wine and a ravaged box of chocolates.

“Looks like she had a fun Friday night.” Penelope remarked.

Ria half-scowled and half-chuckled, unsure if Penelope was upset or legitimately trying to make a joke. It was hard to see her face as she was rushed into a little laundry room next to the apartment’s cramped kitchen. Penelope yanked the dryer door open and pulled out a white karate gi out of a bundle of other white clothes. The whole load nearly tumbled to the floor, but Penelope used her leg to block and keep it in place. In a swift motion, she grabbed her red belt which she always kept on the coat hanger by the entrance. With her other hand, she seized the rusty knob of the front door and opened it while gesturing for Ria to exit first.

“Thanks. Um, we have time. Don’t you wanna change here?”

“Oh. Yeah.” said Penelope. “That’s a good idea. Give me a second.” She slammed the door shut and got to business.

At the dojo, Penelope was finally able to forget about her silly dream by engaging in the one activity that always helped her feel truly harmonious with the world... board breaking. Today, the upper-ranked belts were using 1 inch pine boards, one of the trickier slabs of wood to strike through. Now that Penelope was finally able to rank up to a red belt, she finally qualified as an upper belt. The process to get to this status wasn’t easy in the slightest. In fact, it wasn’t even her choice.

The closest martial arts dojo to Lumber Land was Danny's K'O Karate Dojo, an old cafe converted into an exercise studio. It served as a pilates class in the early morning, and then it turned into a karate class for the rest of the day. The result was a bunch of vaguely far-east paraphernalia and pictures being randomly placed all over the wall. Despite resembling a dimstore dojo, Master Danny made it a competent space for learning martial arts. Here, kids and teens could feel safe and practice REAL self defense. The problem for Penelope was the commute, a 90-minute bus drive. Penelope found it unbearable. Nonetheless, her mom had insisted she take these classes for safety reasons. The lessons were cheap, and the practice was fun, so she stuck with it. Eventually, she found herself really enjoying this pastime. Even the wait time on the long bus rides started to prove useful, for it was the perfect place to close off distractions and focus on homework for classes. She was far from a good student, but the extra study time from her karate class commutes had turned her into a somewhat decent student. Perhaps the self-discipline she learned from Master Danny also prevented her from turning into a dropout. There was no way to know. Right now, the only thing she wanted to know was whether she could kick through the pine board in front of her.

"Breathe. Remember to control your spacing." said Ria, holding up the board in front of Penelope.

You can do this, Penelope. You can do this.

Continuing to mentally chant encouragement to herself, she stepped forward and stretched out her leg to test how far her front kick could go. She had demolished 3/4 inch boards before easily. An extra quarter of an inch was nothing to be afraid of. She inhaled slowly through the nose, then slowly out the mouth, exactly how she was trained. The air seeped past her barely gritted teeth with the faintest twang of a whistle. Slowly blinking, she glanced at Ria who was nodding in assurance. Her attention drifted back to the board, no bigger than a standard book binder - a fairly easy target. She was ready now.

GO!

With the swiftness of someone who's done this a hundred times, she stepped forward and kicked. There was one small problem. She wasn't supposed to take a step before the front kick.

NO!!

The sudden regret manifested in the slightest of hesitations. The slow down was enough to throw her entire groove off and kick the bottom of the board instead.

AH!!!

Penelope only screamed internally, but it was evident to everyone in the room that she was in a great deal of pain. Her mouth was open, and her eyes nearly welled with tears. She tried to

casually walk it off. But the second her left foot made contact with the matted floors of the dojo, she could feel her foot shattering into a million pieces.

“You’re lucky I never threw out my crutches.” said Ria as she drove Penelope home. “You freaked out today.”

“I know. I know.” said Penny as she gently rubbed an icy water bottle against the bruised ball of her foot.

She was grateful Ria was able to drive her to class on Saturdays. The family minivan she drove wasn’t anything fancy, but it beat a bus full of smelly strangers and strange smells. Also, the very thought of limping to the bus sounded excruciating.

“If you want, I could drop you off at the urgent care. It’s no problem for me.”

“No thanks, I have another doctor I gotta see.”

“Court-mandated therapist?”

“Worse. School-mandated therapist.”

“On a Saturday? Ew.” Ria scrunched her eyebrows out of genuine disgust. “Okay, I got a plan. I’ll drop you off at school. And then I’ll fetch my crutches and deliver them to your mom-- unless you don’t want her to know.”

“She’d freak out. But then again, she’d freak out even more if I kept it from her.”

“I’ll play it really cool. I’m used to handling nervous parents.”

“In what world is that true? Your mom’s one of the chilliest people on the planet!”

“You shoulda seen her this morning. Her head looked like it was gonna pop like a balloon. Some dumb driver fell asleep in the wheel and crashed into the ice machine outside the gas station. The whole thing caught on fire and nearly burned down the whole building.”

“Oh gosh. That’s terrifying.” said Penelope. “What happened to the driver?”

“No clue. They drove off without a trace. Irony how they set an ice machine on fire.”

“No kidding.”

As Ria pulled to a stop at their high school, Penelope hesitated from exiting the door. She realized now was a perfect time to bring up her recurring dream to a professional.

Unfortunately, a school counselor would have likely gotten a wrong idea. She feared the worst. If they thought she was having hallucinations about a dead boy from over a year ago, there was a chance she'd be labelled crazy and possibly institutionalized.

“Actually,” Penny said, turning to Ria, “I don’t feel like going to Saturday school today.”

“Didn’t you say it was required?”

“What are they gonna do? Expel me? Come on, man. Let’s go to the store! I wanna see the burned ice machine.”

“Wow.” said Penelope. “You’d think the ice would have melted after all that.”

The two stood in shared confusion over the scene of crime. They each had a drink in hand. There was a tiny carton of strawberry milk for Ria and a glass bottle of cherry soda for Penelope. She loved the color red. It’s why she dyed her hair that color. It’s also why she bought drinks flavored in strawberry, cherry, and watermelon. That, and they were all delicious. After taking a swig from the bright, red bottle, Penelope kneeled down by the machine. The fizzy stream burned in her throat while it simultaneously tickled and soothed her tastebuds. She passed the bottle to her undominant hand, freeing her right hand to pick at a shiny object caught in a dent. It was a giant gold nose ring, big enough to function as a bracelet.

“An ornament from the car maybe?”

Ria shrugged. Penelope shrugged back, slipping the ring onto her wrist as a keepsake immediately after.

“Do you guys have some sort of fire insurance?” said Penny

“Not sure. Honestly, it makes no sense for a metal ice machine to catch fire.”

“You’re right. It looks more like the car was on fire when it crashed into the ice box. Is there a security camera?”

“Yeah,” Ria pointed to one by the roof of the store, “But it stopped working last week. I couldn’t tell you-”

Ria was interrupted by a purple monster truck with orange flames painted against the doors. It zoomed right past her, nearly running over her foot. While her tarsals were spared from being crushed, her clothes weren’t so lucky. Mud from yesterday’s rain splashed all over her. The truck kept on speeding along. Loud, obnoxious billboard rap music boomed from the bassy speakers.

Penelope, who had been spared from the mud splash, saw what happened. She was so focused on the ice machine, she didn't even notice that a gaudy truck full of hooligans was getting gas at the station.

"JERKS! I hope you find your absent father!" She cried out.

The truck skidded around the gas stall, nearly hitting it. Penelope couldn't believe what she was seeing. They needed to be taught a lesson for disrespecting her friend. Without the slightest hesitation, she readied her soda bottle and hurled it at the truck before it could exit the parking lot. It smashed right against its tail light. While the glass wasn't even cracked, the commotion was loud enough for the drivers to hear. The car halted immediately. Then, it began to reverse, heading straight towards them.

"P-p-penelope, get in the car." Ria said, skedaddling into her family's minivan.

"No! They need to learn their lesson."

The truck backed up to the ice machine before spinning to another halt. Its lights turned off.

"Don't be stupid. Get in the car!"

"I'll do what Master Danny taught us. Run them over if they try anything."

"Why would you put that burden on me!?"

The truck doors opened. Two guys in their late teens stepped out nonchalantly. They were both tall and broad shouldered. They clearly looked like former jocks who just discovered they could grow facial hair. Unfortunately, Penelope knew both of them, and they were both idiots.

"What up, Penny!" the guy from the passenger seat called out. He was an East Asian man with a fake hood accent. He wore slicked back hair, fake gold chains, and baggy clothes that probably belonged to a gangster from a 90's crime show.

"Kylar," said Penny. "Tell your boyfriend to watch where he's driving."

"You can tell him yourself, chipmunk." Kylar retorted, so proud of his senseless insult.

He sauntered over to Penelope, getting uncomfortably close to her. She held her breath and didn't move. She frowned at him as he looked up and down at her in her karate gi?

"Dang, you gonna do some karate action on me?" Kylar said, grabbing on the sleeve of her gi.

Penelope smacked his hand away.

"WHOOO! We got a fighter in the house."

“We’re outside, Einstein.”

“Try that slap on me. See what happens. JUST SEE WHAT HAPPENS.”

“Enouh, Ky.” said the other guy, the driver. He had a black beanie, a wife beater, and ripped jeans that were sagging. There was a big tattoo of a bull on his arm. It supposedly went along with the fresh cowboy boots under his tattered pants. “You know what you just did? You vandalized my property. We could send you to jail for that.”

“Your dad paid for the truck. He can pay for the repair.”

“Watch your mouth, Penny.”

“Don’t call me that.” She stepped forward, concealing every ounce of pain felt on her left foot.

“And don’t go making a fool of yourself, little girl.” Calen stepped forward, not at all intimidated by Penelope’s gesture.

“I’m only two years younger than you, Calen.”

“You still gotta respect your elders. Your dad didn’t teach you that?”

Calen got up real close to Penelope. Kyler stepped back and approached her from behind. Penelope simply just straightened her shoulders and pointed to the camera on the roof.”

“You guys do realize you’re on the security cam, right?” Penny said with a scowl that could cut through bricks.

“Good. We’re not here to do anything.” said Calen, casually raising his hands like he was in some pretend arrest.

“Great, so you can go now.”

Penelope stepped away to the side. Even though she kept her eyes on both men, Kyler was still quick enough to grab her by the wrist and twist it. He then tugged her into an armbar hold. His sticky fingers dug in hard, pressing her new gold bracelet into her skin. Her breath instantly got snatched away as he pulled her down to an agonizing level. She felt completely helpless.

Calen then leaned in close to her face. “Listen. I like to think of us as friends, so I’m willing to let it go this one time.” He held out his finger close enough to where it was just a hair away from touching her chin. “But if you ever mess with me again--”

“Or else what?” a voice echoed from the store.

It was Mrs. Kumar. Ria must've run and gotten her mom to come out... with a crowbar in her hands

"That's not necessary, Mrs. Kumar, we were on our way out." Calen said with a smile.

Kylar dropped Penelope to the ground. Her whole body fell flat onto the wet ground. Her hair - now untangled from her makeshift bun - now had mud splattered all over. Calen offered his hand to help her up, but she turned her head away, refusing to acknowledge him.

"If you're leaving now. You better do so, or else you'll be fixing more than a tail light on that insecurity monument you call a truck." Mrs. Kumar aimed the shotgun at the truck.

Calen shrugged and then sauntered over to his truck alongside Kylar.

The vehicle sped off out of the parking lot, not before knocking down a trash can in the process.

Ria ran over to comfort Penelope, shivering and crying in place. Her mom watched from the storefront, discreetly hiding her crowbar behind the broken ice machine.

"It's okay, Penelope. I'm here now. I won't leave you."

She embraced her dear friend, soon realizing that Penelope's whimpered cries were actually tempered giggles.

"W-what?" said Ria. "What's so funny?"

From underneath her muddy gi, Penelope gingerly pulled out a thick, leather pouch. "I got that little rich boy's wallet."

Ria and her mom both dropped their jaws in shock as they watched Penelope pinch out a wad of cash from the wallet. As she tossed what was left into the trash, she caught a glimpse of her astounded audience..

"Penelope," said Mrs. Kumar, "You are a wonder of the world, but don't ever leave yourself vulnerable like that."

"Pfft. I've known those two since kindergarten. They're harmless even when they try not to be."

"You don't know that. The world isn't what you make of it. It's far bigger, and far crueller. Next time, be careful."