

Chapter 27: The Finger

Chapter 27: The Finger unfolds in a place where the human spirit is constantly tested, and where resilience is a rare currency. From the moment Dodo was awakened by Monkey Pants, the day felt heavier than the last. Though Dodo had been recently freed from his final cast, his mind remained imprisoned. Walking among the other patients showed him the harsh hierarchy within Pennhurst's walls. Stronger inmates controlled food, space, and any shred of normalcy, while the weaker ones endured humiliation in silence. For someone like Dodo—young, deaf, and visibly different—this reality wasn't just intimidating; it was shattering. When Monkey Pants tried to engage him with signs and questions, Dodo was too defeated to respond. The guilt he carried about Miss Chona's injury and the absence of Uncle Nate and Aunt Addie weighed heavily on him, becoming the new cast binding his heart.

Guilt and loneliness merged into a single, overwhelming force. Dodo's thoughts wandered through memories of minor mischiefs—stealing marbles, sneaking chocolate—and convinced himself these sins justified his current suffering. That night, Monkey Pants noticed his withdrawal and tried to reach him through their own shared language. He held out a finger, urging Dodo to touch it, to play their silent game, to reclaim even a small part of their lost childhood. The gesture pulled Dodo back from despair. Touching fingers between the bars of their cribs turned into a game of endurance, laughter, and temporary escape. As their fingers held on, the ward's harshness faded. Dodo found joy in recounting his day to Monkey Pants, filling the silence with stories instead of sadness. The boys clung to the connection not just as a challenge, but as survival. In that brief contest of will, they became boys again—not patients, not inmates—just two friends keeping each other alive in a world that forgot them.

As darkness fell, their game persisted. Despite the aching muscles, the soiled sheets, and the unnoticed dinner trays, the boys remained locked in silent resistance, fingers connected. The shift change came, and with it, the dimmed lights and relative quiet of the sleeping ward. But sleep didn't come easy for Dodo. The soothing presence of Monkey Pants was suddenly cut off—Son of Man had returned. His looming presence between their cribs shattered the fragile sense of safety they had built. In a terrifying moment, he disabled Dodo's crib bars and subdued him with suffocating force. Dodo tried to scream, to flee, to fight, but the man's strength was unmatched. Just as the horror reached its peak, a violent tremor shook the ward.

The disruption had a source—Monkey Pants. In an act of defiant courage, he hurled his own excrement at Son of Man mid-seizure, striking him in the head and alerting the entire ward. Lights blazed on, patients stirred, and attendants rushed in. Monkey Pants's seizure had not just been a medical episode—it had been a lifeline. Dodo's attacker, humiliated and covered in waste, stepped away, his dominance shattered. Though the attendants initially attempted to carry on as if nothing unusual had occurred, a young doctor's appearance shifted the tone. He questioned the crib arrangement, the timing of the medication, and the suspicious behavior. Son of Man's façade crumbled in the doctor's presence, and for the first time, authority stood on Dodo's side—however briefly. Monkey Pants was examined, sedated, and left to rest, while Dodo lay wide-eyed in his crib, unable to sleep, dreading Son of Man's return.

What followed was a night marked not by silence, but by the sound of Dodo's own heartbeat, the pressure of guilt, and the raw memory of what nearly happened. His fear transformed into belief—he was being punished. For misbehaving, for hurting others, for simply existing. He thought he was in that place for life. In the dim light, with no comfort and no way to express his anguish, the young boy began to cry. It was a sob not just of fear, but of surrender. He believed he was broken beyond repair. But what he didn't fully grasp was that Monkey Pants had, in that moment of filth and fury, saved him. That fragile, steady finger held out hours earlier wasn't just a child's game—it had been a bond stronger than the bars of the cribs that held them. And though Dodo felt lost, he had not been alone. That finger—briefly touching his—was

hope, resistance, and love. A reminder that even in the darkest of places, someone might still reach back.

