11:57

He drains the last dregs of his latte and puts his mug down for the first time "today."

Usually, I love being here at Joules. The murmur of other patrons mixed with the quiet jazz playing provides gentle ambient noise. The coffee is a divine pick-me-up, no matter the situation. But "today," the cafe is almost silent, and the coffee leaves a bitterly acrid aftertaste.

He slides the cup aside for the waiter to pick up, and leans forward onto his folded arms. His cheeks crease into dimples as he catches my gaze.

Jake likes saying that my eyes are maps he would follow all day. Usually, I let him trace the paths and explore deep down inside of myself. “Today” is different though, and I look down at my watch ticking away the seconds.

"Rowan, is there something wrong?" he asks.

Everything is wrong with this day.

"It's nothing.”

“How did you do on the last calculus test?”

“I got a 78%, so not bad.”

“Do you still have a cold?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Is everything ok?”

“Everything is ok.”

"Are you sure?”

I want to tell him everything, but I’m not sure if he would even believe me. I glance up and meet his eyes again.

"Yeah."

Every time I look at Jake, all I can see are the other versions of him, the ones I failed to save. They all look at me with dead hazel eyes, blood trickling down their faces. I can't look him in the eye anymore, and I glance down at my half-finished coffee.

He takes my hand, running his thumb along the pulse in my wrist.

It's 11:47. 10 more minutes. 10 more minutes for another chance.

"Jake, let's go home."

He pays the bill again as we pull on coats, and I don't bother to try to argue my way into paying for my own coffee. Time is passing, and I can feel it ticking its reminder against my skin.

We reach the curb, and he starts to step forward.Pulling him, I clutch his arm to my chest, burying my face into his shoulder. I don't know what his expression is, but he leans down and kisses my forehead endearingly. I dig my fingers slightly into the down of his jacket, and he places his arm around my shoulders to squeeze reassuringly.

It’s 11:49. 8 more minutes for another chance.

*11:57 - Jake is lit by the glare of yellow headlights. Horns honking accompanied screams as a ragdoll body was thrown through the air, blood melting into the snow.*

We cross the street and cut through the Memorial Park. Although he seems surprised at our strange detour through the run-down playground rather than our usual path under the pine trees, he doesn't say anything about it. He hums Let It Snow quietly as the snowflakes dust his hair.

It’s 11:51. 6 more minutes for another chance.

*11:57 - We didn't realize how much last night's snowfall had weighed down the power lines. Neither of us saw the fallen wires underfoot until he stepped on them. The hush of falling snow and his humming was quickly replaced by the crackle of electricity and a howl of agony.*

The stairs up to the covered iron bridge open up before us. I intertwine my fingers in between his, my knuckles turning white, holding onto him for dear life.

It’s 11:53. 4 more minutes for another chance.

*11:57 - The steps were slick with snow and hidden ice. He missed a step, and he reached out to grab onto anything as he fell back, legs and arms flailing. I could only brush his fingertips before he plummeted to the unforgiving ground.*

"Rowan."

He pulls me to a stop under the archway leading inside the bridge. Icicles refract the winter sunlight, lighting little spotlights across his frown. I glance quickly at my wrist.

It’s 11:55. 2 more minutes for another chance.

"Something's bugging you," he says. "And if it's something important you don't have to tell me but I want you to know that I'm always here to listen-"

"-I want to tell you.” It’s 11:56. 1 last minute for another chance. "But I don't know how to say it."

"Just go from the top."

"Today's...a strange day."

There's a small cracking sound, and a glittering rain of tiny ice shards fall, catching the light. Jake holds out his hand, catching the crystalline pieces in his palm. He shows them to me.

"I guess strange days can still have their share of beauty."

There's another crack, and we both look up. An icicle plunges.

Jake's head snaps back as the icicle makes impact with his forehead and shatters. He stands there, eyes staring vacantly upwards, blood trickling off of the gash on his forehead and onto the pristine snow. Teetering, he slowly collapses on the ground.

It’s 11:57. I lost my chance.

Tears drip, mingling with the red dyed snow. I was so close, so close to saving him. So close to not repeating the day again.

I kneel down and carefully close his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Whiteness creeps along the edge of my vision, signifying the restart. I close my eyes and wait for it to transport me back to the start.

There's no sound of the cafe ambience, and no smell of my bitter coffee. I slowly open my eyes.

There is no cafe, just a white room and a single door in front of me. Grabbing the handle, I try leaving the room, but the door shakes as it fights against its lock.

Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock.

Stepping back, I see the room isn’t empty. The walls are plastered with white-faced clocks, all ticking away synchronously. The clock faces are exact copies of my watch, with the gold floral detailing around the edges and the slightly curlicue hands.

The ticking echoes in my ear, and I feel it resonating through my chest and my heart.

Th-thump, tick tock. Th-thump, tick tock.

Four clocks on top of the door aren't ticking. Instead, they're frozen at the same time.

11:57.

One for the truck, one for the live wires, one for the stairs, and one for the icicles.

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

All I can see are endless walls of clocks stretching, decades of future loops taunting me. Decades of watching Jake die in front of my eyes again and again and again-

I can't live that life. Being haunted by the ones I failed, knowing that every move I make determines what happens to him... I can't do this, and I can't do it to Jake.

Each clock in this room will stop when he dies. What will happen if I take his place?

Standing up, I try the door again, and it unlocks.

He drains the last dregs of his latte and puts his mug down for the last time "today." The day is the same as it always has been, but this time, I'm in control of how the story ends.

"Rowan, is there something wrong?"

Not anymore.

"Nope, everything's good."

I'll finish this. For Jake.

"Shall we get going?"

For me.

Paying the bill one last time, we exit the cafe, approaching the curb. The lights are about to turn red, but I let him step out onto the street. My heart and watch tick away the seconds before the truck arrives.

Yellow headlights light up the street, illuminating Jake. He turns to face the truck, the honks of the truck piercing through the snow. Reaching forward, I grab his wrist and pull him back while propelling myself forward onto the street.

His raw voice screams out for me, his hand is reaching out-

It's 11:57, and I smile at him.

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He drains the last dregs of his latte and puts his mug down for the first time today. He looks over at the seat in front of him, hoping to see warm brown eyes watching him and smiling.

It's empty, just like it has been for the past year. Jake remembers what happened.

*Rowan is lit by the glare of yellow headlights. Horns honking accompanied screams as a ragdoll body was thrown through the air, blood melting into the snow.*

His phone lights up with a notification, his wallpaper flashing to show the last photo he took of Rowan. She stands in front of the Christmas tree downtown, bathed in the golden light that illuminates her smile. He tries to remember her as that shining girl, to forget that her light was buried under the dirt and snow.

Hesitantly, he looks at the time.

It's 11:57, and the tears start dripping down and splashing into the mug.

Word Count: 1481