3:42

This is it. I look down at the luminescent numbers on my forearm to see the seconds ticking away as the number becomes smaller and smaller.

55…54…53…52.

 I look around the room; who could it be? The guy I am destined to be with is somewhere in this room. I imagine him looking down at his own arm while his palms sweat and he looks around nervously as I am doing this very moment. *What does he look like? How old is he? Will he like me?* These thoughts are swimming in my head and throwing themselves against my skull.

45…44…43…42.

 I desperately try to find him now; I’m craning my neck and pushing past people in the cafeteria frantically looking for someone who seems to be in the same state of disarray as I am. However, I don’t see anyone.

35…34…33...32.

*Damn it! Where is he?* I catch the eye of a tall guy with a half smirk plastered on his face. I smile at him; he waves at me. Hey, he’s kind of cute. Then I see his arm. 4 months and 22 days. Damn. Not him.

25…24…23...22.

 I’m running out of time. I’m looking around like a madwoman, scaring the people around me as they begin to take steps back.

15…14…13…12.

I begin to panic. 10 seconds left until I meet him. *What if I’m not ready? What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t spend the rest of my life with this guy?*

5…4…3...2.

 Then I fall.

I open my eyes and see grey.

A grey ceiling. Grey walls. I’m even covered in a grey blanket.

“Erghm” I groan as I try sitting up.

“Don’t move,” says a voice from the corner of the room. I look over and see Andrew, my best friend’s brother.

Andrew is 3 years older than me and Kate - his sister - but he and I always got along really well. We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember. I know the entire school is pretty much in love with him, because of him being dreamy and all, but I don’t know why. To me, he is the little 8 year old boy that pushed me in the sandbox on my first day of school, not the 6 foot tall guy who is the captain of the soccer team. To me, he is the 10 year old boy that brought me ice cream when I was in the hospital for a broken arm, not the homecoming king. To me, he is the guy that I’ve known my entire life and consider a brother, not some dreamboat as he has the rest of the school convinced he is. And even though he graduated 3 years ago, he still shows up every now and then to check on me and Kate. Like I said, he is basically my brother.

“Wh-what happened?” I ask, my voice a little hoarse.

“You were moving pretty quickly in the cafeteria earlier and you kind of tripped on my foot and fell and hit your head, “he says chuckling. He stares at his hands causing his hair to fall in his face. “Don’t worry though, you’ve only been out for a couple of hours and the nurse said you’re fine. You should be able to walk out of here in an hour or so.”

Oh, I must be in the infirmary. I begin to stand up when it hits me.

*I missed it!* I scramble to get the sleeve of my sweater up past the numbers. My face hot with anxiety as I struggle with the simple fabric. There they are. What I see makes me want to faint. Or puke. Or both. Where the glowing green numbers had been my entire life now had only black zeros, looking as though they had been tattooed on my forearm.

I begin to cry.

“I-I-I can’t believe I missed it!” I scream. “Is that even possible?” I yell at Andrew, making him jump. I didn’t mean to scare him but I have been waiting for this moment for as long as I can remember. To see the clock hit zero. To see into his eyes and know he was the one. But now that was over. I had never heard of someone not meeting their Other. It couldn’t be possible. Everyone had to have an Other. I had never seen someone without one.

We are born with these numbers in our skin to count down the seconds until we meet our one true match, the one person we connect with, the one person we will spend the rest of our lives with. No one really knows where they came from but the elders give a big speech to all the children in year 7, when everyone turns 13. That is when the clock starts ticking. They say that when it hits zero, that is when you will meet them; your Other. Maybe once you read this, the numbers will be gone. We lived without them before, I’m sure they will become obsolete once again. Now some people have mere months to wait; those people are lucky. While others, like myself, wait for years. Although mine wasn’t too bad. 4 years. That was my start time. 4 years, 6 days, 8 hours, and 25 seconds. It was destined to stop at 3:42 this afternoon.

And now I had missed it.

As I am having my meltdown, Andrew moves from the chair to the side of my bed. He seems anxious. As he walks over he seems to limp; I’m worried until I remember I tripped over his foot and probably hurt him in the process. His hands shake as he sits down on the side of the bed and a bead of sweat rolls down the side of his face. He then tries to calm me down. He lays his hand over mine and starts tracing small circles on my palm which he knows relaxes me. His breath catches in his throat and he coughs slightly. I look at him and begin to cry even harder.

“Oh god – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you,” I manage to say between sobs. “None of this would’ve happened if I had just stayed still and quiet and waited for him.

“It’s fine, really. I was just bringing Kate her lunch, which she forgot, when I saw you running around. I was worried about you so I went to see what was wrong and that’s when you tripped. So really, it was my fault.”

I pull him closer. He climbs in the small, lopsided bed with me and wraps his arms around my midsection. We talk for what seems like hours. We talk about how he is loving college and how he wants to become a doctor so he can help people. I giggle a little bit at that. He used to faint at the sight of blood (which he made me swear to never tell anyone as he sat on me tickling me to make sure I would promise). We talk about how I am in the running for homecoming queen. As the words leave my lips his whole face lights up.

“Really? That’s great! I always knew you would be homecoming queen.” He told me while blushing.

“Well I’m not homecoming queen yet but at least I know I would have your vote if you still went here,” I joke with him, sticking my tongue out at him as I say it.

He shakes his head and laughs. He then proceeds to lightly punch me in the arm, which causes me to giggle as I push him out of the bed.

“Well, I guess that’s my cue to leave,” he sighs.

“No, please don’t go, we were having so much fun. “

“I should be getting back, my roommate will be wondering where I am,” he says. He then turns to leave. When he reaches the doorway he pauses and turns back to look at me.

“Yes…?” I ask him, a little confused by his hesitation.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it squirt,” he replies, smiling at the nickname he gave me years ago; but I’m not convinced that’s the end of it.

*That was strange*. I think after he leaves.

Two hours later I’m at home. I was diagnosed with a mild concussion from my encounter with the floor of the cafeteria, but other than having a slight headache, I’m fine. For the most part.

The moment I arrived home, I sat myself down in the corner of my room. I keep running my fingers over the black ink on my arm. *Why? How? What did I do wrong?*

**Ring! Ring! Ring!**

My cellphone lights up on my bed. I can already tell who is calling; it’s the only person who actually uses the phone for what it is made for: Kate.

“It happened,” she sobs, “it finally happened.” I can barely understand her through the tears.

“Wait, slow down. Take a deep breath darlin’. Just start from the beginning. What happened?”

My heart is pounding. Kate isn’t known for being emotional. And what she tells me makes my stomach sink.

The phone falls out of my hands and cracks as it hits the floor. My head iss exploding. Tears are streaming down my face but I can’t feel them. All I can feel is pain. From my heart, from my head, from my whole body. My legs disappear from under me and all of a sudden, I am on the floor for the second time today.

“Andrew died.”

I can’t breathe. It feels as though someone is sitting directly on my chest.

No. No no no no no.

I didn’t know I was screaming until Kate ran into my room. She lives a few houses down and I guess she ran over when she heard the line go dead.

“I thought you knew. I’m so sorry,” she keeps apologizing over and over again as she holds me.

“Knew what?” I choke out between sobs and dry heaves. I feel like puking.

“About his cancer. I made him promise to tell you today. He had osteosarcoma. He had it for 3 years. He was at the hospital a week ago for a checkup and he was told it had spread to his lungs. The nodules in his lungs were inoperable. They said he had days left; we didn’t know that meant today. He had no time left. We thought he had a few more days but he came home to grab a few things and he collapsed. There was nothing anyone could do.”

So that’s why he came to see me. Not to bring Kate her lunch. I should’ve pushed more when he hesitated at the door; I knew he had something to say. I was too caught up in my own drama to notice or care. My last day with him and the last thing I did was push him off the bed.

I didn’t sleep at all that night.

I wake up on funeral day. I didn’t sleep but I don’t care. I shower but I don’t feel my body. My limbs move on their own, as if there is a puppet master with strings controlling my every movement. I dress in the black dress left for me on my bed by my parents and I walk over; the ceremony is being held at their house. The thought of being there without him makes me sick but I can’t let the family down by not showing up.

The ceremony is small and quiet. A few people speak about him; telling jokes and smiling through the dark cloud over the whole place. But I can’t see or hear any of it. I am gone. Andrew had been the one person I could depend on in my life. More than my parents. More than Kate (but don’t tell her I said that). More than myself most of the time. I can’t imagine life without him.

Someone clears their throat. I look up and see Kate. Her makeup is smudged and her eyes are red. I’m sure I don’t look any better.

“Here,” she says, holding out a small envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Well, I didn’t read it but the note had your name on it. I found it in his jacket pocket and I put it in the envelope,” she says. Then she turns around and walks away.

I open the envelope. Inside the envelope is a napkin. The same type of napkin that Andrew had stashed everywhere in his car from his chronic fast food habit. He must have written it after he left me at school. There is only one sentence.

*It was me.*

*3:42*

2131 words