

# When the Clock Strikes Eight

## I:

Wally broke the clock.

Wally broke the clock and stopped time and now we're stuck in this eternal summer.

It's August twelfth and tomorrow is June eighth. My hair will be an inch shorter, the days will be an hour longer, and I'll have just told Walter Powell that I love him.

The clock will drop, time will stop.

On June eighth Wally broke time.

And it's all my fault.

## II:

"I love you."

My words hang heavy in the balmy air of June. Wally's lips are poised half-open, his even breathing suddenly heavy and hitched.

I hear a smash as the old wind-up clock at Powell's Antique's falls through Wally's fingers.

And Wally...Wally barely moves, his hands stiff and frozen mid-air, still held in the position of the rusted bronze timepiece. A spring rolls into my toe as I stand

breathless in the entryway of this tiny twelve by twelve shack on the beach, suffocated by a myriad of knick-knacks and the pressing weight of silence.

“What?”

There’s such despondence in his voice that I nearly double over with grief. Somehow I stay standing, my eyes glued to the dark, sand-smoothed wood of the floor. “I love you,” I repeat, but my voice is weak and unconvincing, even to my ears.

The soft lapping of the waves against the nearby shore is the only thing I manage to hear over the roaring of blood in my ears. The dilapidated little shop blends into a smear of browns and sand—so inconspicuous a place for my life to fall apart—and Walter Powell, my best friend, is suddenly so far away that I think it easier to touch the sky.

“Wally...” I start.

“Stop.”

The sun beats hot against my back, and before I’ve the cognizance to stop them, hot tears are rolling unbidden down my cheeks, leaving trails of warm salt in their wake. My just-bought yellow v-neck is quickly dampening, and the sandy wood beneath my toes feels like razor blades.

*Stop?*

He says nothing else, staring blankly and brokenly at the shattered bronze clock, moving only enough to grip the edge of the countertop for support.

And just like that, I'd lost him. Walter Powell, my laudably kind, strong, and fearless best friend of twenty years, had been undone by three simple words.

*I love you.*

I breathe out what sounds suspiciously close to a sob, then creep slowly away from the clock and the tears and the silence, slinking dejectedly onto the beach and enduring the singeing burn of white hot sand for the sake of escape.

I sit on the rocks until nighttime.

I'd always loved it here, especially after dusk, when the tourists stream away as the sun sinks below the horizon. They're a place untouched by people, by light, by Walter. That was what I needed. At least for now. Peace and darkness.

And it was there that I sat, every night, for sixty-seven nights. Life was nothing but a blur of different clothes and shorter days, heavy breaths and icy toes in the water, time marked only in terms of how long it had been since I talked to Wally.

Sixty-seven days without Wally, *my* Wally, a playground of sharp angles and brown curls whose smile shone brighter than the California sun at high-noon. Wally, whose eyes flashed like they were made of star-stuff.

But this night, this night was different. Sixty-seven. Sixty-seven was the night that was punctuated by the sound of sirens.

I hurriedly unfold myself at their pressing shriek, crawling quickly from the flat rock-top and dropping lightly into the sand. Blue and red. Red and blue. That's all I can see while I pad over to the other side of the beach—the pointed, patterned bursts of

police lights. As soon as I'm there, I hear a gasp from beside me and turn quickly to look past a wrinkled woman and down into the ocean, water crashing angrily over dozens of sharp, pernicious rocks. Stones that are darker somehow in the pale moonlight.

A man in navy blue tries to steal my attention away, but in the space of a breath I've already seen it. The curls, *my* curls, bleeding—crushed, red, beautiful curls lying motionless beneath the jagged cliff that rises and cuts through the air like teeth.

Blood and skull fragments kiss the shore with the foam of the waves, and I feel my knees buckle.

It's August twelfth, 8:00 PM.

And Walter Powell just committed suicide.

### **III:**

"I love you."

I blink and feel my mouth settle at the end of the last syllable, as though it were moving on its own accord. Wally—*Wally?*— is standing motionless, again. The clock ceases its quiet ticking. I'm wearing a yellow v-neck, the sun is just rising, the calendar on the beaten countertop says June 8<sup>th</sup>; and Walter, *my* Walter, my blue-eyed, delicate-featured best friend is standing right in front of me—*alive*.

Sixty-seven days ago.

I draw in a raspy breath, spinning on my heels to stare out the open doorway and search the beach for signs of his suicide. It's empty of blood and curious bystanders, a placid reflection of how life was before it had come crashing down around me.

Walter, as expected, does not respond. I don't wait for him to. I bolt out of the shop and towards town, my heart so high in my throat it feels like I'm suffocating.

I've traveled back in time.

Or so it would appear.

To sixty-seven days ago, down to the very moment I uttered the chilling words that had left my best friend quite literally *crushed* on a smattering of sharp rocks on the same beach as his Californian antique shop.

I reach a tiny side-street just off the boulevard, a cross-section of gray roadways and pastel houses, and walk blindly in the midday sun for at least an hour, trying to collect myself. Instead, I end up somewhere in the center of town, no closer to finding answers.

I slow at another street corner, pausing briefly to evaluate a short boy who sits dejectedly on a stoop halfway down the road, his sharp, green eyes assessing me coolly from his position on the porch. I find myself drifting towards him, drawn forward like a hooked fish on a line.

He can't be any older than sixteen, with coarse black hair and eyes that seem to have sunken into his face. He dons a pair of thin khaki pants, with a thrift store jacket and a dilapidated bronze bracelet.

“You need to fix it, you know,” he says simply, putting a cigarette to his chapped lips and taking a long drag.

I stop suddenly on the sidewalk in front of him.

“I’m sorry?” I manage.

“Your friend. You need to stop him. That’s why you’re doing this. *Again.*” He has the nerve to look mildly put-out, tapping cigarette ash onto the lawn. “I haven’t the faintest why you left him alone after a revelation like that.”

*I was embarrassed. Mortified. Afraid.* I think to myself.

“And *who*, exactly, are you?” I spit instead, blinking rapidly like I’d been hit in the face.

The boy purses his lips, tipping backwards to lean against the side of the ramshackle blue house. He knocks his boot rhythmically against the porch railing’s beams and takes another drag, letting the smoke seep lazily through the corners of his mouth. “I’m here to help you fix this...*mess*,” he says finally.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I remark, my gaze landing blankly on the bronze bracelet hanging limply from his slender wrist.

His mouth quirks into an insincere smile. “Call me Ian, then.”

*Ian* stamps his cigarette out on the white wood of the porch, tossing the butt onto the lawn, where it lands beside a worn-down *For Sale* sign. “Now, push aside all your questions—at least for now. We have somewhere to be.”

He makes a move to leave, but I stay still, frozen solid despite the afternoon sun beating mercilessly on my olive skin.

“Luke, if you want to know why Walter kills himself, we need to go.”

I feel panic trickle through me; slow, like chilled molasses. “How do you know my name?” I whisper, tentatively meeting his eyes and suppressing a shiver.

“Later,” Ian responds forcefully, and despite my better judgment, I feel myself drifting forward to follow him, again, a sense of hollowness filling my chest, my thoughts hardly more than a single-minded mantra.

*Walter is alive.*

*Walter is alive, and I have to stop him.*

#### **IV:**

It only takes us eight minutes to get there.

I know immediately where we are, the artificially green grass and shrill sounds of the buzzer more familiar to me than anything else on Earth.

Walter’s soccer game.

The thought has me gasping for air, eyes trained down at the figures running up and down the field with a hard, painful sense of nostalgia.

Wally had always loved soccer; even when we were just kids, and soccer meant hitting a ball between trees and tackling each other into the mud. He’d been good, even

then. He'd eventually played on a top University team his freshman year, words like "professional" thrown around by coaches and teammates alike.

While he was gone I'd worked a steady job at a bakery in town, and even though I called him every night with confectioner's sugar still on my hands, he was still the sweetest part of my day.

But when his dad had passed away a year ago, he'd moved back home to take care of his fragile mother, offering to coach the local children's team in his free time. Every Sunday, after his shift at the family antique shop, he'd come out to teach them, and I'd sit on the bench, handing out snacks and smiles.

Of course that day—*today*—I hadn't come.

Until now.

The sun is blazing when we get there, making the suburban cars parked in neat lines beside the field shine with an painful glow. Practice is ending, kids filing off the field, sweaty and smiling. Wally is hanging back, collecting extra balls into a mesh bag and staring down at the grass, looking thoughtful.

"What am I looking for?" I mumble, hooking my fingers through the chain-link fence that surrounds the field and dragging my eyes over Wally's solid, healthy body.

*Alive.*

"Her," Ian answers from behind me, and before I can ask, a short, slender woman is storming across the pitch, holding the remnants of the broken clock in a clear Ziplock



bag. She throws it, hard, against Wally's chest, screaming so piercingly that I can make out a few words here and there, even from so far away.

*Useless...clumsy fag...him...*

It takes me a minute to recognize her. Mrs. Powell, or some cruel caricature of who she used to be. She's a stark contrast to the tender woman I knew, her stringy hair tangled up in a pathetically ineffective bun, eyes drawn, wary, and mean.

"This isn't it, Luke," Ian whispers, and for the first time, when I meet his eyes, I see sympathy swimming beneath his gaze. "This isn't all."

I refocus on the scene playing out in front of me, and notice abruptly that Mrs. Powell is swaying and unfocused, markedly intoxicated. She spits out one last, nasty thing to Walter then stumbles off, leaving him to collapse on the field in a fit of broken sobs. I watch him for what feels like an eternity, then turn to Ian, who's watching Mrs. Powell start her red Jetta, her slender hands trembling and uncertain on the wheel.

"What do I do?"

I watch Ian. Ian watches the Jetta. I hear the screeching of tires, a breath of tense—suspended—silence, and then the sickening crunch of metal.

"Head to the hospital," Ian answers simply, the piercing sound of sirens filling the air in a way that has me sick to my stomach with memories. Or would it be prophecies now?

He lights another cigarette. "He'll need you more there."

## V:

The hospital isn't far from the field, and I get there just after the ambulance has pulled into the circular drive, still in my tattered jean shorts and no shoes. The skin on the soles of my feet feels raw, but the rest of my body feels numb.

In my peripheral vision I see Wally, curled up on the curb in front of the neon red *Emergency* sign, his slender build curled in on itself. He's still in his loose red shorts, a t-shirt, and sneakers, his wet hair a mix of sweat and tears. He's trembling, and I can barely hear his small, broken cries when I sit down next to him.

He peers up at me eventually, sticky tears rolling unabashedly down his cheeks.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispers.

I don't hesitate before I wrap him in an embrace so tight it's almost painful. He returns it fiercely, burying his head into my shoulder, a growing dampness collecting at the nape of my neck. I feel the bag with the clock clutched in his fingers, held tight against my back.

"Me too," I whisper back.

## VI:

Day twenty-two.

I listen to Ian with trepidation, quietly packing a small suitcase of Wally's things for his stay at the hospital. It shouldn't take me as long as it has, I've known the layout of his room since we were five, but I was uneasy about Wally coming home at some point

to shattered glass and crushed cans of cheap beer, so I'd taken a few minutes to clean up the living room.

"You needed to make the right choices this time, which is why I'm helping you," Ian tells me, then bites his lip, handing me a pair of tightly rolled white socks from the far right side of Wally's top dresser drawer.

Everything in Wally's room is like that; orderly, perfect, tightly-wound. It's the essence of who he is, distilled into clothes and furniture; lines, sets, and stacks.

So the opposite of such a messy end.

"And if I don't? If I don't make the right choices?" I finally ask, my voice is quiet and fragile. I can barely hear myself.

"Then you try again," Ian says, and my head whips around, eyes connecting with his flashing green ones. "Wally needs to live, or time can't move forward."

"Why?"

Ian runs his tongue over his teeth, handing me another pair of rolled socks. This time they're a creamy ivory, folded into a perfect egg shape. "That antique clock? It holds time steady. When Walter broke it, you lost your sieve, the thing that sets you straight when you make hard choices."

"I don't understand."

Ian sits on the edge of Wally's impeccably made bed, rummaging through his pocket for a cigarette. "Think of this entire situation like a broken record player. We'll

keep replaying the same piece of the song until someone rights the needle so it can start the next verse. But if the rest of the record isn't there, it can't continue playing."

Ian pauses to think, lighting the edge of his cigarette with a match, then continues. "Because the sieve, the clock, was broken, it couldn't guide you towards the right decision. You've felt that, right? Everyone has. A pull in the right direction. A *destiny* of sorts." He takes a second to breathe, smoke leaking gently from his lips. "You made the wrong choice, Luke. A decision that ultimately led to Walter's death. Your timeline can't move forward without him. You two are tied together. I was sent here to repair your mistakes and create a new artifact to help guide you in the future."

"So you're a...time-keeper, of sorts?" I stare down at my hands, picking absently at my nailbeds, then shut the suitcase forcefully and zip it up. Ian nods, but doesn't elaborate.

"And Wally isn't supposed to die," I murmur. It sounds more like a statement than a question. "If he does, there's no future."

"No, he isn't supposed to die." Ian confirms, then looks up at me, his thick brows raised. "Because you were supposed to be there. You're the change, Luke. You made the wrong choice, staying away from him, and the clock wasn't there to stop you. I waited as long as I could. But you stayed away until the end. So...I rewound things a little."

I stare blankly at the small black suitcase, wringing my hands together.

It was...

And always has been...

All my fault.

## VII:

Walter's mother is going to die.

There are only three days left until Wally dies too.

She's lying motionless in a nest of wrinkled white hospital sheets, with a thick breathing tube stuffed down her throat and clunky, off-white monitors keeping track of her slightly sporadic heartbeat.

It's been sixty-four days since I jumped time, and even though I've spent more than two months quietly watching Walter fall apart, we still haven't talked about that day in the shop.

"The say she can hear everything," I say to Wally when I pass him a hot coffee from the hospital cafeteria, taking his free hand and slipping back into the chair next to his. I'd only been gone for ten minutes, but it had felt like an eternity.

"She can't hear a word, and you know it," he whispers back, but he squeezes my hand and takes a sip of his black coffee.

We sit in contemplative silence, my fingers drawing leisurely circles on Wally's palm, when I suddenly hear ragged breathing from the entrance to Mrs. Powell's room. As soon as I look up I notice Ian leaning against the doorframe, and I feel my gut sink. I hadn't seen him for almost a month.

I'd taken his absence as a good sign. *I was doing things right.*

And this...this was most certainly bad.

“It’s day sixty-four,” Ian breathes, and even I’m confused. He meets my eyes, and it hits me with sudden, sharp clarity. Today. She’s going to die today. *Now. “It’s day sixty-four, Luke.* He was supposed to go downstairs with you. *Why didn’t you bring him? You two have to leave.”*

Wally is standing before I can stop him, his gaunt face warped in uncharacteristic outrage. “What the *hell* are you talking about? Who are you? This is a private room!”

I rise and gently place my hand on his thigh, nodding in Ian’s direction. “He’s okay, Wally. We should just do what he says.”

Walter rips his hand away, curling it into a tight fist, his mouth twisting into a snarl.

But I know we don’t have much time. The urgency in Ian’s voice says it all.

Before Walter can say another word I’ve curled my long fingers around his wrist and yanked him into the hallway. Wally’s cup of coffee splashes onto the floor and covers the hem my jeans in hot, fragrant liquid while the door slams shut behind us.

“What the *hell*, Luke!” He roars, breathing heavily.

I pull him into a suffocating embrace, just in time to hear the beep of Mrs. Powell’s heart monitor race for a few moments before it fades into stomach-turning silence.

Walter gasps, twisting to meet my eyes in silence question, then shudders, settling into a limp, helpless sort of weeping while the nurses and doctors push us aside, soft, worried whispers filling the air around us. I rub his shoulders, running my fingers through his hair and murmuring easy comforts into his ear.

“He would have seen it,” Ian says quietly, and I seem to be the only one who notices.

“He would have seen her die.”

## **VIII:**

Walter looks so handsome in black.

I trace his bicep through the thin fabric of his father’s suit. The prayers being muttered to his Mother’s nicely framed picture, a picture of the good days, echo through the tall church. Wally sits still beside me, tightly clasping my hand, tears rolling openly down his cheeks and staining his porcelain skin with dry salt.

Tonight’s the night Walter commits suicide. Though, if I’ve done my job, he won’t.

The air is thick, just like it was that day in early June. Sweat is licking at the back of my neck, and I’m pressed tightly against Walter, gently resting my head on his shoulder and letting slow tears build behind my eyes.

The silver cross that usually lies flat against Walter’s chest sits abandoned on the pew beside him—jewelry for a person with faith, jewelry for someone who had something to believe in.

Neither of us knew what to believe in anymore.

We sit for several hours, long past when any of the other mourners stay, through the reception and official burial, until the priest very kindly tells us that we should really be getting home. We leave in the throes of a nasty thunderstorm, the dirt in the Church's cemetery plot freshly overturned when we walk by.

A storm is appropriate for a night like this.

Wally hands me his keys, his fingers lingering a few seconds too long on the palm of my outstretched hand. "Luke, meet me back at the car in a few, alright? I just...I need a couple minutes alone with her."

I hesitate but eventually nod and traipse back to his car, sitting in acute agony as I watch the digital clock's numbers flip slowly by, biting my lip the farther they go. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. Thirty minutes. Should I go after him? Sure he wouldn't have walked to the beach on his own. It's much too far.

*7:20. 7:30. 7:40.*

I see Ian appear in the rearview mirror, and it hits me.

He's not coming back. It hadn't been enough. He was still going through with it.

*I was supposed to follow him.*

I start the car with shaking hands and speed toward the ill-fated beach, screeching to a stop at the edge of the shore, seeing that my head of brown curls was perched precariously on the ledge.



7:52. I have eight minutes to plead my case.

I slam my way out of the car and stumble into the pouring rain and towards the hill. Forcing back tears, I focus in on the sounds of my shined black shoes as they crunch up the gravel at the base of the cliff, the water rolling down my shivering body.

“Wally,” I say, cautiously, when I finally reach the top.

His reaction is almost instantaneous, and he jumps back ever-so-slightly from the open air, turning his watery blue eyes onto me. He’s wrecked. From the pain in his eyes to the blood beneath his fingernails, it’s obvious. Thin slits crisscross his wrists, a discarded and bloody knife at his feet, and I realize with unease that this wasn’t even his first attempt.

“Don’t stop me,” he whispers, his hair limp and pasted to his cheeks. “I’m going to jump, and there’s nothing you can say that *will* stop me. I don’t have anything left, Luke. My entire family is gone.”

Behind me I can hear Ian rapidly approaching, waiting for me to screw this up. But I’m too absorbed in Walter to care. I realize now why I had to be there these past two months. Now I can prove it to him. I can prove that I love him. *I can prove it.*

I step forward slowly, still too tentative to touch him. “So is mine, Wally. But you can move forward....it...it gets better. You know that. What about the kids on the team? They love you. You’re their coach,” I aim for soothing, but my voice comes out strained.

“They don’t matter!” He cries, clenching his fists at his sides, a trickle of blood rolling down his thumb and dripping onto his shoe, mixing with lukewarm rainwater. “Don’t you understand that? Do you know what she said to me before she left, Luke?”

Walter snarls, his teeth clenched together, the soft pitter-patter of his tears lost in the white noise of ocean waves and raindrops. “She said: ‘You useless, clumsy *fag*. You’re a disgrace, you know...How could you do this to me? How could you love *him*, of all people? That’s why you came back, isn’t it? Not for me. For *him*. I can’t stand to look at you anymore, Walter. I hope you disappear. ”

His shattered eyes meet mine. “She was right, Luke. I didn’t come back for her, I didn’t come back because of her or Dad. I came back for you.”

I don’t even notice when my tears begin to fall, on tempo with Wally’s.

“I want you to stay here. With me.” I let out a shaky breath, my lips damp with tears and rain. “Don’t disappear. I don’t think I could bear it, Wally.”

Walter’s breath hitches, but he shakes it away. “I’ve loved you for so long, Luke, but you’ve never...” He chokes, his eyes flickering back to the thundering water.

I rush towards him, grabbing his hand, feeling the dampness of his blood on my fingers. “I do, Wally. That’s why I’ve been here. This entire time.”

My hands trail up his arms, settling on his shoulders. “I love that you drop things for no reason. I love that you sort your socks by color, and I love that you don’t put sugar in your coffee because heaven knows I use enough of it for the both of us.”

I smile gently. “I love your hair, and I love your smile. I love your cheekbones and your stupid red shorts with the hole in the pocket. I love the way you put other people before yourself.”

I place one hand on the side of his face, making sure to meet his eyes when I say it. That blue, their blue, is deeper than any sea, and far more beautiful.

“But more than anything, I love *you*.”

Wally’s irises grow less clouded with the sorrow that I’ve become so accustomed to seeing. “Luke...”

Before he can protest, before he can change his mind or run of *jump*, I’ve grabbed his face and pressed my lips to his, pouring it all into him, filling him like the ocean fills a cove, kissing away the taste of blood lingering on his lips.

He pulls me closer, wet tears dripping onto my cheeks, his trembling hands clutching the back of my head tight, as though he were afraid if he let me go this would all disappear.

When we finally part, breathless and crying, Wally stumbles forward, bawling into my chest. I pull him close; afraid at any moment the two of us may splinter apart, my eyes fluttering closed.

“8:01.”

My eyes snap open, and the two of us turn to see Ian, smiling sadly.

“Luke.”

My throat closes. I'd saved him. *I'd saved him.* "Ian," I choke, and he smiles softly again, brushing his calloused fingers down my cheek, tears dotting his eyes for the first time.

Wally mumbles "The boy from the hospital?" but continues to watch us quietly, still clutching one of my hands with both of his.

"Now that the timeline's been fixed, it's time for me to go," he says simply, slipping his jewelry off and placing the delicate bronze band on my free wrist. I know what it is almost immediately. Ian offers a teary grin. "You know, I really could have just given you this at the beginning, but it's just not quite as satisfying, somehow."

Walter twines his fingers with mine, and Ian steps back, glowing a faint gold that reminds me of the setting sun. The one Walter would be seeing tomorrow.

"Ian..." I gasp. My world starts to spin. "Ian, wait!"

"Goodbye, Luke. Take care of the bracelet, and the boy," he gives one last, bright smile, then lights a cigarette with a giddy laugh, slowly fading into a cloud of light purple dust.

The last thing I see is a puff of grey smoke.

I take a deep breath and sigh, Wally's hand heavy and damp in my own.

"Come on," I whisper, kissing his jaw and delicately leading him down to the car, the cool metal of my bracelet, the weight of time and knowledge, balancing heavy on my wrist. "It's time to go home."