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## **Lingering**

*Tick Tock.* That haunting sound. *Tick Tock.* That menacing ring. *Tick Tock.* That taunting click.

I wondered why we still had a wall clock. It had been out of fashion since the 1980's, yet Nellie insisted on keeping it. I suppose my sister always had a penchant for old things - be it our grandfather's old watch that she always wore, the cassette tape in her pocket, or her senior boyfriend she had dated as a freshman in college. I never knew what was on that tape, nor what she saw in *him*. As close as we were, she remained a mystery even to me. But I really cared for her.

Nellie had always been a closed book. Not in the way that she was distant—she was always there, always present—but in the way that she never let you read past the cover. She laughed easily, teased often, but when it came to anything real, anything deeper, she would just shrug and change the subject. I never pushed. I figured that was just how she was.

All those times when Mom said I was too dramatic or too emotional, she never disagreed. She never told me I was right, either. But she would just listen, silent and steady, letting me spill every irrational thought onto her shoulder. And at the end of it, she'd always say the same thing.

"You'll figure it out," she would say.

There was something comforting about that quiet reassurance; as if she knew something I didn't. She was the only person who ever truly listened to what I had to say. That's what made her birthday so special to me too.

*Tick Tock. Tick Tock.*

It was an hour to midnight, and I opened the small box I had wrapped for Nellie. It was a silver locket - simple, yet elegant. Something timeless, like the things she loved. I imagined how she'd smile when she saw it. I wanted to give her something that could last.

I sat on the couch, turning the locket in my fingers, listening to the metronome of the wall clock. I had meant to find her earlier, but she had gone out, like she always did. She always drifted between coffee shops and old record stores, leaving only a faint scent of lavender behind.

I heard footsteps on the patio. The front door creaked open. *Thud.*

"Nellie?" I said.

The air felt different, a bit heavier and lavender-less. I stood, the locket still clutched in my palm, and moved toward the hallway. The floorboards groaned under my steps. That was when I saw her. She was lying on the floor, motionless. A dark pool spreading beneath her.

And then, I felt it. A weight pressing against my chest. A sound tried to claw its way out of my throat, but I couldn't breathe. My legs buckled as I fell beside her, shaking her, calling her name, pressing my hands against the wound—where was it? What happened? My mind scrambled, grasping at anything that made sense, but there was only the scent of iron, the cold touch of her skin.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

For a second, everything went dark. And then, I was back, sitting on the couch with the locket in my hand. The air felt normal again. No blood on my fingers, yet the weight still on my chest. The front door had not yet opened.

I gasped, standing abruptly, my pulse a frantic drumbeat. The clock still ticked, the same steady, taunting sound. My hands trembled as I looked down at the locket, still nestled in my palm, like nothing had happened. But I remembered. I remembered everything. I tried to jolt myself awake from this dream, yet it was to no avail.

I heard her footsteps again, her black boots kicking the ground. This time, I ran to her before she could step inside. She blinked, surprised.

"What's up with you?" she said.

I didn't know how to answer. I just knew I had to keep her close. I couldn't let *it* happen, whatever that was. I dragged her inside and asked her how her day went.

"It went okay," she said. "But that's besides the point, you look like you've seen a ghost."

"I- I'm fine," I said, words failing me. "But that's enough about me - you're turning 21 in less than 10 minutes!"

"And so are you," she said, grinning as she kicked off her boots.

*Tick Tock. Seven minutes to midnight.*

I forced a smile, but my stomach churned.

“Let’s stay in tonight,” I said.

“Since when do you care about staying in?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“Since tonight,” I said.

I grabbed her wrist, just to be sure. She looked at me strangely but didn’t pull away.

“We can watch something,” I said. “Or open presents early, if you’d like?”

Her eyes flickered to the small box in my other hand.

“Alright, fine,” she said. “But you’re acting weird.”

*Tick Tock. Five minutes to midnight.*

We sat on the couch, and I held my breath as if that would keep her tethered to this moment. I opened the box and handed her the locket.

“Oh,” she whispered. She ran her fingers over the smooth silver. “It’s beautiful,” she said.

*Tick Tock. Three minutes to midnight.*

“Help me put it on?” she said, unclasping the chain.

I nodded, stepping behind her. My hands fumbled as I brushed her hair aside, fingers shaking.

But before I knew it, it was mere seconds to midnight and I felt a sense of relief. It was just a dream, perhaps I had fallen asleep on the couch earlier. She was there, and she was smiling.

*Tick Tock. Tick Tock.*

It was all so momentary. Thunder roared and then the window shattered, as shards of glass rained onto the floor. A sharp gust of wind whipped through the room. And then—a scream. *Her* scream. I barely registered the blood. The way she lurched forward. The way her hands clutched at her throat, silver slipping between her fingers.

I caught her before she hit the ground, my own hands pressing desperately against the wound, but it didn't matter. It never mattered. Her lips parted. She was trying to say something. And that fucking clock had to steal her last words too.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

And I was back on that couch. Tears ran down my face. This couldn't be it. I hurried to the door, and saw Nellie walking up the stairs to the patio. I ran into her arms, and gave her a hug. She was never the most fond of hugs.

“What happened, Ben?” she said, slightly worried.

I didn't say anything. I just hugged her as tight as I could. I knew I wouldn't let it end that way.

And so, I kept her inside. But she choked in her sleep.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

I pulled her outside. But a car hit her in the street.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

I never let her out of my sight. But she tripped on the stairs, her head hitting the edge of the banister.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

Every time the clock hit midnight, I was back in that moment. The locket. The couch. The door creaking open.

*Tick Tock. Cling. Tick Tock.*

Yet, I still stood in front of the wall clock, watching the second hand creep toward midnight. I prayed to all the gods I had never believed in for some sense of atonement. That's all that could have been, right? Punishment so relentlessly cruel that I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. The ticking filled the room, steady and indifferent, as if it hadn't haunted me for an eternity already. Nellie sat on the couch, legs tucked under her, flipping the silver locket between her fingers. She hadn't put it on yet.

I knew what was coming. I knew that in a minute, or ten, or whenever time saw fit, she would die. Again. And I would watch. Again.

And I couldn't do it.

I couldn't watch the life leave her eyes one more time, couldn't feel the weight of her body in my arms, knowing I was powerless to stop it. I could feel time coiling around me like a trap again, waiting. I knew that midnight toll was coming - and it was for her. Every single time.

The clock had been there for as long as I could remember, its rhythm woven into the fabric of our lives. A constant. A fixture. I stared at it, and it stared back.

“Not again,” I whispered to myself. “Not again.”

I walked towards the wall, and reached up, my fingers wrapping around its edges. The ticking seemed louder, fighting me. But I pulled anyway. The nails gave way with a groan, and the clock came free from the wall. I smashed it, the glass and metal spreading on the floor where they belonged.

“What the fuck, Ben?” Nellie looked at me, in pure shock. “I loved that clock.”

“Maybe we can get a new one someday,” I said.

Her shock wore off. She didn’t ask why. She didn’t press me for answers. She just sat there, like she always had.

I walked back towards the sofa and sat next to her. Something inside me told me that was the end. That was the last time I would ever see her. But it was just us now, in this quiet fleeting moment.

“Hey, Nellie,” I said.

“Yeah?” she said.

“I love you,” I said, my voice steady, certain. “And I’ll miss you. I’m sorry I haven’t said that earlier.”

She didn't flinch. She didn't tease. She only smiled, softly and knowingly. She held my hand.

"I'll come back," she said. "I promise."

The room felt lighter. The silence no longer pressed against me. I closed my eyes, just for a second, and when I opened them again, she was gone. Yet, I didn't feel that weight pressing against my chest. I didn't hear that ringing sound taunting me. I just smiled. I stood up and placed the locket on the mantle, along with all of the other gifts I'd gotten her over the years. My parents said it was a waste of money, but they were wrong.

My sister always kept her promise.