

# Being 20 Something

by Ivy Guerrero



## *Lighthouse point*

There's something unsettling about entering your twenties. You think everything will change immediately, but the truth is, it takes time. And when you're stuck in a small beach town, that waiting can feel endless.

Every summer in Lighthouse Point had felt the same, but this year was different. I turned twenty in March, and after finishing my sophomore year of college, I was looking forward to a summer of relaxing — home, with my family and friends, after a grueling semester.

At school, I poured myself into everything. I was studying for my BFA in Film and Television Production, and thanks to a full scholarship, I could give it my all. Films were my calling, writing was in my blood — directing felt like destiny. My upcoming third year meant my biggest project yet: directing my own short film. When it was done, I planned to submit it to festivals up and down the East Coast.

It was a monumental leap. I'd never shown my work publicly beyond campus screenings or the safety of friends. Festivals felt daunting, terrifying even. But I was determined. Who knew what could come of it? Maybe an internship before graduation. Maybe doors I didn't even know existed.

I'd already called up local friends to act, scheduled filming dates, cut the budget, rented equipment. But with May looming, half a script written, and no locations locked down, I was starting to panic.

"Thirteen pages down, okay... okay. But where is it going? Ugh."

I stared out the cottage window at a pair of pre-teen girls pedaling by on beach cruisers, envious of their carefree laughter. Why couldn't that be me again? But fifteen was long gone. All I could do now was try to enjoy the brief happiness that was summer.

From downstairs came the smell of turkey chili — Pop Pop’s favorite — wafting from the kitchen. It reminded me of high school nights, working through homework while Nana cooked.

“Come on, Izzy. THINK.” My laptop screen stayed blank. “Well, this is eventful.”

I caught my reflection in the mirror: the same wide-eyed little girl, but older now. Sharper cheekbones, no more buck teeth, freckles still dusting my nose, dark curls bouncing past my shoulders.

My eyes turned back to the laptop. *Time Stands Still* by Iris Wheeler. I read the title aloud in a mocking voice.

“Ugh, this is pointless.”

I slammed the laptop shut and let my gaze drift to the Indiana Jones poster on my wall.

“What?!” I snapped at it. “It’ll get written.”

“I’m just having a little writer’s block... that’s all.”

If Spielberg could have writer’s block, then so could I.

“My god, Izzy. Get it together, dude — you’re talking to a poster.” I laughed, then groaned. Worse, I was comparing myself to Spielberg. “Maybe I just need a breather.”

And I knew exactly who to call. Abby Melas — my best friend since birth, practically my sister, and the one person guaranteed to kickstart my summer. I often called her my “Second,” film-set lingo for an assistant director. Abby was definitely mine in life.

## *Late May showers, bring strange encounters*

Despite the last two weeks of May pouring down inevitable rain, the South Shore of Long Island was alive again. Tourists trickled in, locals came home, spring was blooming, and the town began to bustle. Abby and I still frolicked around despite the weather—riding our cruisers everywhere, just like when we were seventeen. Alitalia's for pizza, frozen custard at Abbott's, beers at Calhoun's. Same old spots, same old magic.

As much as I loved the city and college, the memories here always came rushing back with summer. There was nowhere like this place, and I treasured it.

Sitting outside Captain Calhoun's, perched at a barreled hightop beneath the dented green tin awning, I let myself soak it all in. Abby went to grab us a bucket of beers. I reveled in the slow-turning ceiling fans, wooden shaped like palm leaves, the ocean breeze swirling through, the first sip of ice-cold beer with just a hint of lime, and the salty air filling my lungs as if I were swallowing the ocean whole. Oh yeah—this was home.

Even the sound of dune grass swaying in the breeze was something I'd missed during those dreadful, endless winter months away at school. I missed the boardwalk echoes, footsteps rattling over planks, the feel of soft sand beneath my toes as I walked home past cottage after cottage.

Abby and I spent hours at Cal's, talking about my film, tossing around ideas.

"Okay, so it's a coming-of-age story then?" she asked.

"Essentially, yes. But there's more to it, Abbs—"

"Well, hit me with the logline."

I slid the summary across the table. "I submitted this to my professor back in January. Tell me what you think."



She skimmed it, muttering as she read the pitch about seven friends, heartbreak, a love triangle, my father's diagnosis.

"Oooh. Heavy. I like it."

"You do?"

"Yeah! Logline here—'Over six turbulent months, a young woman caught in a love triangle within her tight-knit group of friends must confront heartbreak, hidden desires, and her father's cancer diagnosis—only to realize her greatest love story is the one she writes with herself.'"

"Yes, I love it," Abby said, eyes alight. "This is the role I've been waiting for."

I laughed. "Love how you already think I'm casting you!"

"Oh please Izz, You know I can't resist the drama!" I snorted a laugh.

Abby always assumed she'd be my leading lady. She wasn't wrong that she'd kill it—Abby was multi-talented. Acting, writing, music. It ran in her blood. I envied her sometimes, but mostly I just felt lucky to call her my best friend.

She scribbled on the draft. "Okay, maybe your summary's a little... wordy. Here—'Set against the backdrop of seven friends navigating their twenties, this drama centers on a young woman torn between two companions: her longtime boyfriend and her best friend harboring unspoken love. When her relationship crumbles, a secret romance ignites, threatening the group. Amid emotional chaos and her father's illness, she begins a journey of identity and independence, realizing fulfillment comes not from love gained or lost, but from finding strength within herself.'"

I rolled my eyes. "Wordy?"

"You're lucky I love you." But damn it, her version *was* good.

“Relax, Izz. You’re still the genius director here.” I looked down, a little deflated, but Abby leaned in, serious for once. “This is *your* story. You’re going to make it amazing. You bring images to life. Stop being such a shoobie....”

“You’re bumming me out” she joked.

I laughed, the weight lifting again. Abby had always been my right hand, my biggest cheerleader. By the time we left Cal’s, it was nearly nine.

We hugged goodbye.

“Catch you tomorrow? Maybe finally sign up for that surf lesson with a certain *someone*?” I teased.

“Yeah, and maybe pottery class too,” she smirked, flipping me off.

“Bite me.”

“Later, loser. Love you.”

“Love you back, assface.”

I pedaled away, the paths thinning until I had to walk the bike beside me. Passing colorful bungalows, I wondered if I was really ready to direct my first short. Silly reels were one thing. But this—This was real.

Halfway home, I stopped, closing my eyes to listen to the waves rolling in. Then—

THUD.

A volleyball slammed against my head.

“Shit—sorry! I’m so freaking sorry!” A tall guy hovered over me, rambling apologies.

Another jogged up, light-brown hair messy, pale eyes cutting through the dusk. He smirked.

“Ya know, cutie, you walked through our game.”

“Cutie? Excuse me?” I brushed sand off my jeans.

“Hey, I’m just making a point— you’re cute and you walked—” I cut in.

“Yeah, well, luckily I don’t care about your points. Because my head might need medical attention now.”

“Dramatic much? quite the actress I see.”

“Try director, dipshit.”

“Oh yeah? Any movies I’d know?” he grinned

“Yeah. It’s called, *Bite Me*?” I shot back.

He chuckled. “Spicy. I like it.”

I stormed off, muttering “asshole,” “stupid tourists, never fails” but his voice trailed after me:

“For the record—I’m not a tourist. I live here now. Twenty-two Shore Walk.”

“Drop by anytime, cutie.”

Later that night, I replayed the encounter. The nerve, the audacity infuriated me. But those eyes... golden, flecked with green and blue. My favorite colors. Damn.

I needed a distraction—I called Abby:

“Well, was he cute at least?” she teased.

“I don’t know...Maybe. A little.”

I shook myself out of it. “Anyway Back to the point”

“Right—so plans for tomorrow,” she said.

“Yeah, you said you’ve got a shift?” I added.

“Ugh, yeah I picked it up last minute, sorry” she replied.

“ eh, no worries... well just meet up when you’re done?”

“Definitely, I’m down” she said, “Moms, been houndin’ me about the shop’s organization, so I’ll definitely need a beer”. We laughed.

It would be Friday night—the first with everyone finally back in town (most of us anyway). As I hung up the phone and let my eyes drift shut, the image returned: a blur of sand, the echo of laughter, and those sea-glass eyes I couldn't shake. Something told me they would find me again—whether I was ready or not.

Friday morning arrived and I decided to kill the hours with some writing until it was time to see Abby. I still had a script to complete after all. Before I knew it my mind was racing with inspiration, my fingers flying across the keyboard typing and pouring out everything I'd be feeling in that moment. I glanced over at the clock and to my disbelief and it was time to head out. Feeling productive and Saving what I had, I closed the laptop shut for another day of writing. I quickly threw on some clothes and my favorite hoodie. I headed out the door, yelling goodbye to Nana and Pop pop.

Rosie's Shack stood at the far west end of the boardwalk. *The spot on weekends.* Easy beer without getting carded. Best beach view in town. But it came with cons: running into old classmates you didn't like or—worse—exes. And tourists, always the shoobies.

Nonetheless, there we were, Abby and I catching up with old friends over beers. The band 'Iraitions' reggae tunes, happily swinging in the night air on someone's bluetooth speaker, beer pong splashing off the plastic folded tables nearby.

"Izzy, what up!" shouted Conner, an old highschool classmate; one of the jocks..

"Hey conner, how's BU treatin ya?" I replied back, dreading the small talk as Abby drifted off in Jessica Mackey's direction, one of our old Theatre buddies from highschool. Completely deserting me, I muttered "*Judas*" at Abby under my breath as she whispered back "*Suckerrr*". She smiled back, escaping the clutches of Conner Graves.

"So how's film school Izz!" asked Conner,

"Uh, it's great, the usual. ya know" faking a cheerful voice.

"You're lookin' fine girl!" cutting me off mid sentence,

"Thanks." I awkwardly smiled back,



“Ya know what? I think Abby needs me for a second Conn.” I smiled, fleeing the scene. Once I caught up to Abby again, she was chatting it up with our old high school buddy, a drama enthusiast like us, Jessica Mackey. We talked about recent movies playing at the Beacon, our local movie theater.

I nearly spit out my beer when I spotted *him* on the driftwood logs by the fire—the volleyball guy, the so-called “not-a-tourist.” Blue-green eyes catching the flames.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I muttered.

Abby followed my gaze. “Wait, wait—*that’s* the guy?!”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Oh my god, Izzy, he’s hot.”

“Abby!” “What? He is!” she laughed, nudging me. “And judging by the way he keeps glancing over here, you’re about to be hot girl summer material.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please. He called me cutie. Like, ew. Who even does that dude?”

“Guys who look like *that*,” she teased.

“Ey, Cutie! I was hoping I’d see you here” he said, happy to see me,

“Interesting. And why *are* you here shoobie?”

“I told you” he chuckled, “I live here?” a teasing smile;

It was charming— but definitely annoying—his arrogance and confidence— I couldn’t deny that.

“Right.”

I bypassed him, rolling my eyes. I walked straight towards the beer coolers, vanishing into the crowd. He kept an eye on me the rest of the night—It was unnerving to say the least.

The college crowd would come rolling into Rosies taking it over on weekend nights, after working their day shift summer jobs. Everyone had one, Mine? At The Beacon and Abby's? at her moms cozy bookshop up the street, called The Salty Quill.

Locals brought their own coolers to Rosie's once it past about 9:45 pm. That was usually the time when the shack stopped serving but allowed us the west end beach area for bonfires; so long as the crowd was well behaved and of age. Well, most of us anyway.

Rosies, being a staple in Lighthouse Point, had remained standing there since the early 70s. The sixteen-by-eighteen-foot shack, painted a weathered red with simple white trim, still stood as a local fixture. The red-and-white outlined lettering of "*ROSIE'S SHACK*" marked its ongoing presence. A small, hand-painted rose graced one end. A large service window hinted at its daily function, and a few bright, multi-colored wooden tables sat outside, ready for customers. These tables, a temporary splash of color would be neatly stowed away at closing time. It was clearly still the hub it had always been, a right of passage for locals each summer. So when tourists occasionally came trekking in, it boiled my blood to say the least.

My favorite ritual was reading Rosie's plaque on the side of the shack with Abby.

*"If YA DON'T BEHAVE BY THE RULES A' THE SHACK, YA NEVA COMIN' BACK, SHOOBIE."*

- Rosie "shacklife" Torrence, 1974"

She'd been gone years now, but her spirit lingered, woven into the boards of the shack, into the nights that belonged to us. For so many, it was just a weekend hangout. For me, it was the place for family, where stories began, and sometimes where they ended.

And tonight, as the fire cracked and the tide whispered against the shore, I couldn't shake the sense that one of those stories had just started.

*Flashback: Delilah. What's it like in New York City?*

I loved hanging out at the Salty Quill after those dreamy morning shifts at the Beacon. Whatever films had flickered across the screen that day followed me like ghosts, and it always felt right to end up in that little bookshop down the boardwalk. If the silver screen was my escape, then the Quill was the place that gave that escape a voice.

At fourteen, I had this habit—if a film script really hooked me, I'd race down to the shop, scan the screenplay, print it out, and study it word for word. Dialogue, structure, rhythm—I plastered them across my bedroom walls like talismans. Between Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* and Curtiz's *Casablanca*, there they were: pages curling at the edges, a shrine to my obsession.

Delilah Melas, Abby's mother, was the one who fed that fire. She made me believe the world stretched farther than Lighthouse Point, that dreams didn't have to die here in the salt air. She'd once chased her own ambitions beyond the shoreline—followed a musician to the city, followed the idea that stories could save her. For a while, she even believed they had.

But the city took more than it gave. Abby's father never came home from a gig one night in '96, lost to an alleyway and the opioids that swallowed so many of that era. And though Delilah stayed in New York a little longer, it wasn't love for him that rooted her there—it was what came next.

It was the call.

I've imagined it so many times, even though I wasn't there—the sound of Delilah's voice cracking down the line, the coil of the phone cord twisting in her hand.

"Hello? Hi, who is this?" Her voice light, unknowing.

"Yes... this is she." A pause. Then the silence lengthened, and with it came the grief.

"What? Are you sure?" she whispered, shrinking into the receiver.

"And... the baby?" Her voice faltered. "She's... okay?"

Her tears came like waves, the soundless kind that hollows you out from the inside. She pressed her hand against her chest, the floor beneath her turning foreign. Her baby cried from the bassinet by the kitchen, but Delilah could barely breathe.

“To lose a sister...” she thought. “To lose a soulmate?”

That was the night something inside her cracked. Not just the loss of Abby’s father, but the loss of her childhood best friend—Helen Wheeler, my mother.

When she came home with Abby in her arms, it wasn’t just to return. It was to atone.

From then on, our lives became knotted together in ways no one else could understand. Delilah and I were two anchors on the same rusted boat, each dragged down by different weights. Hers was the guilt of leaving, of not being here when Helen needed her. Mine was the hollow absence of a father who had vanished long before I could remember his face.

Our anchors were different, but the chain was the same. And though we never said all of it aloud, we always knew. There were times I caught her looking at me with a shadow in her eyes—as if she saw Helen in me, and all the ways she had failed her. Times I couldn’t look in the mirror without wondering if my father was still out there, living as though we never existed.

We carried those silences like salt in our blood. Abby was Delilah’s light, her flame—but it was me she shared that shadow with. Two lives tethered to the same boat, drifting, haunted, always circling back to the same loss.

In the fall of 1998, Delilah put down the pen and opened the Salty Quill. She built it for the outcasts, the misfits, the ones who felt the world tilted against them. She said it was for Abby, but I knew it was also for me—for Helen’s daughter, who needed another kind of mother.

My mom’s death was called a tragedy, an unsolved case, a home invasion gone wrong. Some said it was a drifter, others whispered about an escaped patient from a city psych ward. The papers buried it as an accident of proximity, but none of them knew her. None of them knew that she was more than the girl who died alone in a beach shack.

Delilah knew. And in her knowing, she carried the weight.

Her silence, my father's absence, my mother's ghost—we were bound by the same thread of loss, two anchors dragging from the same battered boat. Each of us carried our own weight, our own secrets, yet the tide always seemed to pull us back to Lighthouse Point. Maybe it was guilt, maybe it was love. Maybe both.

What I know is this: Delilah stayed. She stayed for Abby. She stayed for me. And in staying, she kept Helen alive in ways the rest of us couldn't. That was her anchor, and in time, it became mine too.

*Shoobie, don't bother me.*

The memory ebbed, leaving only the pull of the present.

Back on the beach, the night swelled with laughter, clinking cans, and reggae drifting from someone's Bluetooth speaker. A group nearby sang off-key, but Abby and I didn't care—we danced, arms thrown around each other, shouting choruses until our throats burned.

Somewhere between pong matches and bad karaoke, the shine wore off. I'd done the rounds—caught up with old classmates, listened to stories of majors and semesters away, and even had my fill of cheap beer. Now I was restless. Bored, maybe. Abby was busy chatting with an ex who looked smug and she looked anything but, so I slipped away, climbing the sandy mounds to my usual hiding spot.

From up there, I could watch without being seen. Abby knew my habit well enough; over the years she'd grown used to me peeling off from big crowds. Sometimes I blamed anxiety, sometimes just exhaustion from being “the sad story.” The girl with the dead mom. The cautionary tale.

Not that Abby ever treated me like that. She was a true extrovert, radiant even when she didn't try to be. An actress, through and through. She sauntered into rooms like she owned them, and people—especially boys—always noticed her first. I'd learned not to mind. She was sunshine, I was shade. Yin and Yang. And yet, our dark humor stitched us together tighter than anything else. That was our balance.

The only other person who ever understood me like that was Hunter Mariner, but he was still out west in San Diego. He wouldn't be home for a few weeks. For now, it was just me, Abby, and this town that never quite stopped whispering our histories back at us.

I lay back in the sand, eyes tracing the stars, letting my mind wander to movies I wanted to make, scenes I wanted to write. That's when the voice came.

"Ahhh, there you are!"

I froze. Then groaned.

"...Been looking for you all night."

He dropped down beside me, brushing sand off his jeans like he owned the spot.

"I was curious where you'd run off to, girlie." He smirked.

I sat up, staring at him in disbelief. "Oh. My. God. You again?"

"Me again." His grin was infuriating.

"Tell me, Shoobie—am I stuck in a *Groundhog Day* remake? Because it feels like it."

"Great movie," he said, dead serious. "Why do you ask?"

I slapped my lips together, already annoyed. "Because this? This is my nightmare."

He laughed, unbothered. "Wait—come on, we got off on the wrong foot. I love teasing you, but let's start over." He held out a hand.



I just stared at it. “Why? What is your damage? What do you actually want? Because if it’s a hookup—you’re wasting your time. I don’t do tourists. And I *definitely* don’t do transplants.”

“Transplants?” He chuckled. “That’s a new one.”

“Not new. Just true.” I said,

He shook his head, smiling like I was some puzzle he was determined to solve. “I told you, I’m not a tourist. Moved here not too long ago. Permanent.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

“Come on, just sit,” he said, patting the sand beside him. “I swear I’m harmless. Promise I’m not a bad guy.”

That cheesy grin—too big, too bright—was both convincing and insufferable.

“Pfft, fine,” I said, finally caving.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, the hush of the waves filling the dark. The night smelled like bonfire smoke and salt, the sky stretched wide with stars. I could feel the grit of sand under my palms, the coolness seeping through my jeans.

“A transplant is... kinda like a shoobie,” I admitted at last, cutting him a break.

He tilted his head. “Hmph. So, care to explain what exactly a shoobie is?”

I smirked despite myself. His persistence was ridiculous, but there was something almost disarmingly sincere about it.

“A shoobie is...” I crossed my arms, stalling, shaking my head as if the word embarrassed me. “It’s what we call tourists. Day-trippers, weekenders, renters.” I glanced down pointedly at his sneakers. “Non-flip-flop wearers.”

He followed my eyes, then chuckled.

"It's an insult, really," I went on. "Meant for people who don't respect the community. People whose real home is somewhere else." I paused, eyes drifting back to the black stretch of ocean. "Out loud, it sounds kinda silly. But here? It's the biggest insult you can throw."

"Well..." he leaned back, grinning, "thank you for enlightening me. I like it. Sounds... endearing."

I laughed, caught off guard.

"Ah, there it is!" he said, standing suddenly, throwing his arms out as if addressing an invisible crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, she *does* laugh! Hope is not lost!"

"Yeah, yeah, shut it." I rolled my eyes but couldn't hide my smile as he flopped back down beside me. A quiet moment stretched between us, this one not uncomfortable.

"So," I asked at last, "why are you here? If you're not a shoobie?"

He shot me a playful look. "Wouldn't you like to know, Snoopy?"

"Just curious." I stuck out my tongue. "We don't usually get people moving here. Most locals are trying to get out."

The breeze lifted, tugging strands of my hair across my face. For the first time, he didn't crack a joke right away. He picked up a pebble, tossed it lazily over the dune.

"Let's just say... everything out there isn't as great as you think," he said finally. "I needed somewhere quiet. Somewhere new to start over."

"Ah, so you're like a nomad. A gypsy soul wandering the world," I said, mock-dramatic, flinging my hand across my forehead.

He smirked but didn't rise to the bait. "Something like that." Then he shifted, glancing sideways at me. "So—you're a writer, huh?"

"Something like that," I echoed, deliberately coy.

“She says, voice dripping with mystery,” he teased, grinning.

“Yes,” I laughed, giving in. “If you must know, I’m a writer. One of my many hats.”

“Last night you mentioned ‘director,’ too. That true? Cause if so, that’s—”

I cut him off, springing to my feet. “Uh—look, I gotta go.”

He blinked up at me. “What? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, it’s just—” I fumbled, brushing sand from my jeans, reaching for my flip-flops. “It’s late. My family doesn’t like me out past a certain hour.”

What I didn’t say: Nana’s voice always in my head, warning that nothing good happened on the beach after one a.m. That the same town my mom had loved hadn’t saved her. “Strict parents, huh?” he asked gently.

“Something like that.” I smirked quickly, not clarifying.

“Wait!” He leaned forward, a little desperate. “At least tell me your name. Or I’ll just have to keep calling you cute girl. Unless, y’know... you *like* that.”

I groaned but gave in. “It’s Iris.”

He smiled at the sound, repeating it under his breath as if testing how it felt on his tongue.

“Iris,” he whispered. “Nice. I like that.”

I was already jogging down the dune, the night wind tugging at my hair, when his voice carried after me—strong, certain, impossible to ignore:

“...Emerson!” His name trailed across the shore like the last note of a song, following me until the waves swallowed it whole.

### *Izzy Wizzy and The wild Iris*

By morning, the party was only a rumor left behind in the sand—crushed cans, a half-buried shoe, and the faint echo of laughter carried off by the tide. I woke to sunlight leaking through the curtains of Nana’s cottage, my head heavy, my body still buzzing from too many drinks and too many thoughts I didn’t ask for. Especially one thought—his name—that refused to leave me alone.

“Goooooooood morning, Nana.”

“Well, you’re awfully chipper this morning, sweetie,” she said, setting down a plate of her famous Saturday breakfast on the teal-painted farm table. Its edges and corners were still alive with random bursts of hand-painted florals—brushstrokes from when I was little. I loved that table. It used to belong to my mom, the only thing we’d taken from her cottage. It didn’t feel haunted by her absence; instead, it felt like a piece of her was always there with us, sharing breakfast. I plopped into my chair beside Pop Pop, who sat hidden behind his folded newspaper.

“Yeah, I guess I am feeling rather chipper,” I said, grinning as I stared down at my giant pancake, arranged with a crispy bacon smile and strawberry-blueberry eyes.

“Morning, Pop Pop!” I leaned over, kissed his cheek, and dropped back into my seat.

“Morning, Izzy-Wizzy,” he said warmly, still peeking over the paper.

“Can you pass the syrup?” I asked.

“Sure.” He slid it across. “Anything good showing today for the matinee?”

“Eh... uhh...” I rubbed my eyes, still waking up. Then it hit me. “Actually, I think we’re playing... Sabrina!” I announced, a little too excitedly.

“Oh? One of my favorites!” His eyes twinkled as he folded the paper. “Tell you what, I’ll grab my coat and give you a ride after breakfast.”

“Surely,” I mumbled around a mouthful of pancake.

“You know I can’t pass up a chance to see my other lady on the silver screen.” He winked at me, then at Nana, whose spatula hand instantly went rigid.

“Oy vey. I’ll never understand why you love that woman so much,” Nana sighed, giving the pan of fried eggs a scolding look. Then she turned, pointing the spatula at us like it was a weapon. “Audrey was far too thin! If you ask me, she needed some meat on her bones.”

Pop Pop smirked, clearly enjoying winding her up.

“Yes, but Nana...” I chewed, trying to find the words. “She was just so... so—”

“Graceful. I mean... effortlessly, you know?” I said, enamored.

“A real unique quality about her presence on the screen,” I added passionately, looking to Pop Pop for agreement.

“Atta girl—she knows a leading lady when she sees one! That’s my granddaughter, folks!”

Pop Pop declared, throwing his hands up like he was announcing to a crowd.

Nana shot him a glare sharp enough to cut glass, which only made me burst out laughing.

“A genuine artist,” he went on, softening, “a real directahh—just like her mother.” He reached across, tipping my chin up with his fingers, smiling with a kind of pride that made my chest warm.

Moments later, I was grabbing my light spring jacket. “Alright, you ready, kid? Got your things for the day?” Pop Pop asked.

“Yup!” I said, sliding my arms through the sleeves.

“Did you grab a sandwich for lunch?”

“Nah, I’ll probably grab a bite with Abby when I stop by the shop,” I reassured him. “I’m still pretty full from breakfast anyway.” I patted my stomach, grinning.

Nana, arms folded with her spatula, gave me a knowing look.

“I swear!” I laughed, shaking my head.

She always knew I was sneaking junk food behind the projector booth at work. My theory? Nana had spies scattered all over Lighthouse Point, catching me red-handed at the early bird matinees. Still, nothing compared to my preferred contraband snack: popcorn drenched in salted butter with melted Buncha Crunch mixed in—cinema heaven.

When I stepped onto the porch, I spotted it right away — a scrap of paper tucked under the railing, held in place by a single white iris. The note read:

*“In the wet season, the white iris welcomes all comers.*

*She is like that perpetual virgin who, for religious or sentimental reasons, gives a place to men who, even out of principle, only reluctantly sit down together.”*

— Louise Glück

I turned the words over in my head, tracing the flower’s delicate petals between my fingers.

Louise Glück. Seriously? Not exactly what I expected from him. I knew enough to recognize the name — one of those American poets people whispered about with reverence. But what did he mean by choosing *this*? Was he the iris, inviting me closer, stubborn as a bloom in the rain? Or was I the flower, unknowingly offering him a seat at my table? The thought made me roll my eyes and smirk at the same time.

*What a clever little boy.* Too clever.

Still... I couldn’t help the way it landed. The irony of it. The unexpected softness behind the joke of “shoobie.” I stuffed the note and flower quickly into my jacket pocket, as if hiding it could hide how much it had gotten to me. I told myself not to overthink it, but



the truth was harder to admit: it had left me a little flattered, a little curious. Intrigued in a way I didn't want to be. And I carried that feeling with me the whole ride to work with Pop pop, the flower pressing against my leg like a secret.

By the time I sat down in the ticket booth, I couldn't resist. I pulled out my phone and typed *Louise Glück The Wild Iris* into the search bar. Scrolling, I skimmed the poem's clipped lines, the stark beauty of it. *Okay, I thought. Maybe he's not all shoobie after all.*

I bit my lip, smirking despite myself. Not sure if I was more annoyed or impressed, I leaned back in the creaky chair, the scent of popcorn already drifting from the concession stand. *What a clever little boy*, I thought again. And for the first time, I wondered what it might mean that I wanted to know more.

If I was lucky and the theater was empty that day, I'd slip in one of the old reels and play one of my favorite movies—*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Sometimes, if I didn't have the whole afternoon, I'd fast-forward straight to the opening flashback, Indiana's origin story.

"God," I murmured, leaning back in my chair with a mouthful of chocolate-drenched popcorn. The projector hummed above me, the flickering light washing the booth in gold. "What a scene."

John Williams's score thundered through the room, and I sighed, half in awe, half in worship. "John Williams is a gift to the film world," I said to no one but myself.

"I mean—he single-handedly created some of the most recognizable, iconic scores in cinematic history." I shoveled more popcorn into my mouth, still ranting like I had an invisible audience. "And *River Phoenix*..." I whispered, my chest tightening.

"A talent taken far too young. What a tragedy... you beautiful, beautiful boy, you."

BOOM. BOOM. The door rattled with two heavy knocks. I jumped, nearly spilling my popcorn.

Mr. Cricket.

“IRIS!” His voice thundered through the wood. “I’m not gonna tell you again! You can’t just put on whatever you want in here—it’s not your living room!”

I scrambled to pause the reel, brushing crumbs from my lap.

“These film rolls are delicate!” he barked as the door creaked open. His wiry frame filled the doorway, grayer than ever, but still sharp-eyed. “This isn’t a *game*!”

“I know, Mr. Cricket. I’m aware.” My voice was sheepish but steady. “I’ll take care of it. I’m sorry.” He sighed, long and theatrical, like he’d been rehearsing it.

“Look, kid, I *get* it. You’re passionate. Fine. But this place is barely hanging on as it is—streaming, phones, the whole nonsense of today.” He waved his hands like he was swatting invisible flies. “If you scratch up the only reels we’ve got, we won’t have *anything* left to play. Do you get me?”

“Yes,” I said quickly.

He rubbed his temple, muttering, “If you weren’t the only student who knew how to handle these damn machines, God knows I’d have fired you years ago...” Then he trailed off, softening. “But since your mother was playhouse manager and director during the tourist season, and—” The name alone dropped like a stone in the room. My chest tightened. My smile faltered. He caught it instantly. For once, his voice lost all its bluster. “Hey,” he said quietly. “Let’s just... stick to the routine, okay?”

His eyes, usually sharp with frustration, softened with something almost paternal. “Alright?” I nodded. “Yeah... okay.”

He studied me for a long moment, his gaze lingering in a way that made me self-conscious. I knew why—everyone always said my face carried hers. The same dark hair. The same big brown eyes. My mother’s ghost, staring back at him every time he looked at me.

“And, I mean hey...” Mr. Cricket said, shifting his weight with a shrug.

“I suppose I can allow you to watch *The Last Crusade*—since no one around here really watches it as much as you do anyway.” He gave me a quick wink.

Absolutely ecstatic, I jumped up and hugged him. Beneath the gruffness, I knew he still felt bad. Even after all these years, Helen’s name could pull the air right out of the room. He’d known my mom in high school—same theatre program, same stage lights. He’d always said she was a gift. Sometimes I could see that memory soften him in the quiet moments.

By four o’clock, I’d clocked out. The air outside felt sweeter, touched with salt and spring sun. As I strolled toward the Salty Quill, I slipped the note from my pocket again, the edges already soft from handling. My eyes lingered on one line:

*“...the white iris welcomes all comers.”*

I looked up just in time to catch sight of someone unloading a vintage ’49 Ford Woody wagon at the far west end of the Nautical Mile— another name for the main boardwalk. A pile of freshly cut surfboards leaned against the car. My chest tightened. Hunter Mariner.

Home. *Finally.*

His olive skin gleamed under the sun, shoulders broad, back bent as he hefted a board. Gray eyes like storm clouds, hair black as midnight. UC San Diego had kept him the last few years, but here he was again—back to run Mariner’s Board & Beach. My heart flipped. Once, freshman year, I had a tiny crush. But Abby had been in love with him since we were nine, so mine dissolved instantly. Sisters before crushes—always.

Still, I couldn’t stop grinning as I bolted toward him. “AHM. Still beautiful as ever, I see.” I called out, then smirked. “—Oh. I meant the car.” He spun around, face breaking into that huge, ridiculous smile. “Izzy!!! YOU BUM! Get over here!” He scooped me up so hard I thought I might crack a rib. “How ya been, girl?! Missed you like hell!”

“Missed you too! When’d you get back, loser?!”

“Before yesterday,” he said, setting me down.

“No shit! How’s La Jolla treatin’ ya, poser?” I said.

“Not bad. Still hangin’ with those shoobies in the *big city*, cool girl?” He shot back.

I rolled my eyes but dodged any mention of school. “Man, you’ve been back this long and didn’t see me or Ab’s yet? Ohhh you’re so dead. You know she can’t LIVE without you!”

“Where’s she at?!” He flung his arms wide like a stage actor.

“She’s still on shift, dork. Not sure what they do in *La Jolla*, but people work here.”

I shoved his hands down. Being near him again felt like no time had passed. Hunter was family. We’d weathered everything together—his mom’s funeral, Fourth of July fireworks on the sand every summer, with sandwiches, cheap beer, and the waves pulling in like they knew our secrets. It wasn’t always just the three of us though. There was *Jamie* too—James Matherson. Hunter’s shadow, his partner-in-crime.

I was thirteen the summer he kissed me on the beach—clumsily. It was fleeting, it felt bigger than the whole sky, like a scene torn straight from a movie. And then he was gone, carried off with a goodbye I wasn’t ready for. I guess some *firsts belong to the tide; you keep their shells tucked away in a drawer, half-forgotten but never gone*. Jamie was one of those.

We all grew up together—beach days, Fourth of July nights, the kind of youth that feels endless— *he* taught me how to longboard, how to properly body surf, how to laugh at myself when life got too serious. The Mathersons moved west when he was sixteen. I never ask Hunter about him— even when I know they keep in touch. He was just a secret that I would have to keep forever.

I shook myself back to now. “Listen, we gotta hang later! And I’m not taking no for an answer,” I demanded. “Alright, cool. Rosie’s or Cal’s?”

“Cal’s. Be there at 8:30,” I said, walking backward toward the Quill.

He saluted me with a grin. “Later, Izz!”

The bell above the Salty Quill jingled as I pushed the door open. The musty-sweet scent of old pages met me like an embrace. “Hey, Izz! Be right there!” Abby’s voice floated from the back. The shop closed at five on weekends, so we had the night wide open.

“Ahem,” I called, grinning. “Guess who I just saw unloading boards at Mariner’s?”

Abby popped her head around a shelf. Her eyes went wide. “You didn’t. He’s back?!”

“Yes indeedy. Been back a whole day, apparently.”

Her mouth fell open. “And he hasn’t—”

“Yup. But! We’re meeting him at Cal’s tonight at 8:30. How much do you love me?”

“Oh my *god*. I’m obsessed with you.” She squealed, practically vibrating.

“Relax, Ab’s. It’s just Calhoun’s.”

“I don’t care. It’s HUNTER.” She said his name like it carried its own gravity.

“Maybe he ditched the college girlfriend,” I teased, waggling my brows.

She bit her lip. “We’ll find out.”

I pedaled Abby’s bike back to Nana’s, tossed on a fresh top, and splashed cold water over my face until I looked halfway alive again. The ride back carried me through the familiar hush of the cottages, where windows glowed warm and the air smelled like sea salt and pine. Dusk had settled low, wrapping everything in that hazy, golden blur of a summer evening.

The shortcut curved past the abandoned Mathersons cottage and into the pitch pines, shadows pooling between the trees. It was the kind of path you had to know by heart, the kind that felt like it might keep secrets. My tires rattled over the rocks, when I heard it—strumming, soft and steady, like a soundtrack bleeding into real life.

He was perched on a fallen beechwood log, ukulele balanced on his lap. The dappled light flickered over him in pieces, like some director had staged it. I should've rolled my eyes and pedaled faster, but instead I slowed, watching him as if I'd stumbled into someone else's scene.

"So, what," I called, forcing nonchalance, "are you stalking me now?"

"Maybe." He tilted his face up, grinning, green eyes catching the light like sea glass. "Or maybe my bungalow's nearby. You'll never know."

I smirked. "Actually, I do know. Twenty-two Shore Walk, right?"

"Well, well, well." He clapped once, mock applause. "*You were* paying attention."

His hair fell long and unruly across his forehead, and for a beat I just watched him, the way he seemed both misplaced and exactly right here. It felt like the kind of moment I'd freeze-frame if I could. My whole life I'd lived in movie reels—Fourth of July fireworks with Hunter, Abby, and Jamie stretched out on the sand beside me, our laughter rolling louder than the waves. The four of us once thought we owned this town. Now here I was, caught in a brand-new scene with someone I barely knew.

"Quite the poet, aren't you?" I said.

He plucked at the strings, cocky smile tugging his lips. "So—you liked my note?"

"It was... interesting." My cheeks warmed, traitorous.

"Writer? Poet?" I teased quickly. "Here to escape the pressures of big city life?"

"Ha. You could say that." He leaned back, still strumming, enjoying this way too much.



“Oh, come on already,” I pressed, wanting more.

“I told you. Just a guy starting over.”

“A guy who plays ukulele?” I shot back.

“Impressed?”

“Surprised.” I let a grin slip. “What else can you do?”

His gaze lingered, steady enough to make me flinch. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

My face burned hotter. Silence stretched between us, the kind that makes you too aware of your own pulse.

Then, suddenly: “Hang out with me tonight.”

I laughed, startled. “I can’t. I— I have plans.” My fingers tightened on Abby’s bike handles.

“Doing what?”

I mirrored his tone. “Well, wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Oh, I *very much* would, missy.” He leaned forward, eyes alight.

“If you must know, I’ll be at Calhoun’s. With some old friends.”

“Funny. Maybe I’ll be there too.”

“Do you even know what Calhoun’s is?” I challenged.

“Of course I do.” The grin gave him away instantly—he didn’t have a clue.

“Chyeah, okay, poser. Well, I’ll be there around eight-thirty.”

“Perfect.” He strummed one last lazy chord. “Keep a lookout—I’ll be the dangerously distracting hottie in the corner.”

“Sure.” I rolled my eyes, though my smile betrayed me. “Later, stalker.”

“Later, Iris.”

I pushed off, the bike wobbling under me, but my grin didn't fade. If anything, it grew, stretching wider until I thought it might burst. The whole ride home, it felt like I was carrying a secret reel of film inside me, one too precious to show anyone else—not even Abby. By the time Nana's house came into view, I forced the grin down, locking it away. Tonight was about Hunter being home, about Abby glowing like a firework the second she saw him. That was the scene everyone knew. Emerson? That was mine alone, a quiet B-roll playing underneath the main feature.

### *Better, Together.*

Walking up Nana's front porch steps, I suddenly understood Abby's earlier panic. Clothes suddenly mattered—like tonight might be judged on the weight of fabric alone. I settled on a long, flowy beach skirt, a cropped tube top, my favorite sea-glass pendant swinging lightly against my chest, and flip-flops that slapped the floorboards as I hurried down.

Borrowing Abby's bike, I coasted through the humid dusk until her cottage came into view—faded blue siding, lilacs spilling perfume onto the street, and the hammock swaying lazily on the porch. It looked like it had soaked up every storm and secret the South Shore ever hurled its way. I could almost hear echoes of my mom and Delilah in their wild years, barefoot and laughing across these very planks.

Inside, the seashell chimes Abby and I strung together as kids still clinked softly in the entryway where Delilah insisted they stay. The smell of chocolate chip cookies drifted

from the kitchen like a memory on cue. Before I could set my bag down, Delilah was already peeling off oven mitts and pulling me into one of her signature squeezes. She pressed her palms against my cheeks like she always did and kissed me noisily.

“Score! You are the *best* Aunt Delilah.”

“Anything for my sweet girly,” she said, slipping a cookie into my hand.

The first bite melted on my tongue, and for a second I was thirteen again—Friday nights tangled in pillow forts, giggling through movies, the world feeling both infinite and safe inside these walls.

“Man, I’ve missed your cookies since Christmas,” I mumbled through crumbs. “She almost ready?” I asked, nodding toward the stairs.

Delilah just laughed. “If you don’t drag her down, you’ll be here another hour—”

“ABBS! I’m leaving without you!” I shouted, crumbs dotting my hoodie.

“COMING—chill!” came the reply.

A dramatic entrance later, Abby was on the stairs, spinning in a flourish. “Ta-dah!”

“Lovely,” I deadpanned, snatching her arm before she could argue. With one more cookie in hand, I called back, “Love you, Delilah!”

“Yeah, love you, Mom!” Abby added.

“Love you both!” Delilah’s voice followed us out into the night.

By the time we reached Calhoun’s, the boardwalk lights had winked on, throwing gold onto the weathered planks. I pushed open the heavy wooden door and was hit with a familiar wave—salt air, fried seafood (tonight was clam strips, no question), and the faint musk of beer-soaked wood.

Cal's wasn't a bar that held you in—it breathed with the ocean. The wide windows flung open to the boardwalk blurred the line between inside and out; gull cries and the hiss of surf floated in on the breeze, blending with bursts of laughter and the low thrum of voices. Somewhere in the corner, a guitar riffed under a husky blues voice, each note stretching through the amber-lit space.

My eyes swept the walls, dim but alive. Newspaper clippings yellowed with time whispered stories of the lighthouse rising from rock, of storms survived and fishermen lost and found. Tangled nets draped like ghosts, painted buoys swung gently from the beams, and by the entrance, a brass plaque gleamed beneath a pair of crossed swords: *Captain Calhoun's*.

Stepping inside felt like sinking into a film reel—the colors warmer, the sounds sharper, the kind of setting that dared you to believe anything could happen once the night unfolded.

Everyone knew the lore. Captain Calhoun—a pirate said to haunt these waters—was either lost chasing treasure in the Carolinas or cut down in a Wilmington bar brawl with Blackbeard. No one knew which. But the bar that carried his name lived on, less because of pirates and more because it was stitched into the fabric of Lighthouse Point.

As I wove through the crowd, the floorboards creaked in that old, familiar way, and the salty air drifted through the windows like a chorus I'd grown up with. Even the sticky bar top felt like a relic of my own past. Calhoun's wasn't just a bar. It was a stage I'd stepped onto a hundred times before.

Abbys, long dark-blond hair shimmered against her shoulders, her tall frame outlined in the glow of Cal's old lanterns. That Greek skin of hers, kissed bronze, lit up beneath the dim light. Standing next to her, I felt small, forgettable, but also strangely proud.

We found Hunter in the corner, waving like he'd been waiting for us.

"Abb's!" he shouted, grinning ear to ear.

“Hey!!” Abby squeaked, suddenly sounding fourteen again.

“Wow, you look... great, Abs.” His eyes widened, caught off guard by how much she’d grown into herself since last summer.

They hadn’t seen each other in over a year—she’d been away at her theatre program in Rhode Island. Abby was born for the stage, but what her mother didn’t know was how alive she became with a guitar in her lap, her voice carrying across the sand by Rosie’s Shack. Sometimes she’d hush a whole bar if the band called her up for a song. Cosmic, raw, tinged with ache—it was like hearing Stevie Nicks sing through Billie Eilish’s ghost. She never believed me when I said so.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t stop checking the door. 9:33. No Emerson. My pulse sank with the clock. The longer I sat there, the more I felt like an extra in somebody else’s film.

“So... you still with that girl, Hunter?” Abby asked, her tone wobbling between casual and too eager.

“Actually...” He half-smiled. “It didn’t work out.”

“Oh,” Abby said, but her eyes gave her away—lit up like a spotlight.

“She wanted me to move to La Jolla,” he went on. “But I realized I didn’t want to leave... certain things behind.” His gaze lingered on Abby just long enough to mark the cue.

Her bright blue eyes widened, shimmering in the low amber glow, and suddenly the scene changed—two leads caught in that silent beat before the swell of the score.

Hunter shook himself free, like he’d missed his line. “I mean, who would help Dad run the surf shop? It’s been here since ’72! It’s part of this place. Part of me. I can’t just walk away.”

We nodded, but I could feel the whole bar fade out around them, like the camera lens narrowing on just those two.

"I guess I felt like I was giving up more than she was," he said. "This is home. The shop, the people..." His eyes flicked to Abby again, unspoken.

I reached over, breaking the shot with a pat to his shoulder. "We get it, Hunt."

He exhaled. "I don't think I'll ever leave. Maybe that's why I studied Liberal Arts. No plan. Just... here."

"I *do* know," Abby rushed in. "That's how I feel with acting. It's not practical, but it's mine. I love it. I just... want to be."

Hunter grinned, eyes locked on hers. "Exactly. For what? Money? For some dream that isn't yours?"

And there it was—the perfect scene. Boy meets girl again, the air charged, the whole world fading out around them. If this were a movie, the camera would've already cut me from the frame.

"—To be like the rest of 'em out there, who can't even recognize a perfect beach night when they see one?" Abby asked.

"Truly. If I could act at the playhouse forever and raise a family here—with someone to grow old with—I think I'd be..." She let the words drift, her half-smile glowing in the firelight. "I'd be complete."

"Exactly," Hunter said, grinning. "Why is that so bad? Why do we always HAVE to want more?"

Their voices blurred as they sank deeper into each other. I tried to listen, but Abby's words—just... be—kept bouncing around in my head. Emerson had said something like that too. Why couldn't I ever just be? Why did I feel so restless, half-ashamed that I loved this town, yet terrified that staying meant becoming like my father—forever waiting for something better that never came?

The thought twisted inside me, so I tried to leave.

"Hey guys, you know what? I'm suddenly kinda beat, I think—"

“Nooo, Izzy!” Hunter groaned.

“Yeah, no, Izz! The night’s just beginning!” Abby chimed, but her eyes told me the truth: she wanted alone time.

Before I could slip away, Hunter leaned in with a grin. “C’mon, at least walk over to Rosie’s. Like old times.”

I sighed, pretending to resist, but his puppy-dog look cracked me. “Alright, but don’t ever call us *your girls* again.”

We laughed, and the three of us headed toward the glow of Rosie’s Shack.

By the bonfire, Abby sang. Hunter’s jacket draped around her shoulders, her voice carrying like saltwater over driftwood. She was radiant, like she was made for this moment. Her hair caught the firelight, her skin glowing like moonlit. Watching her, I couldn’t help but think she belonged in the center of every frame, the kind of girl the world couldn’t look away from. *Like the sun.*

When someone passed her a guitar, she sang “Better Together,” her voice winding through the salt air like something otherworldly. She looked like she belonged on a stage far bigger than this beach, but here she was, glowing like a siren, Hunter watching her as though no one else existed. I sat back, beer warming in my hand, letting her voice sweep through the crowd like a tide. Everyone jeered and hollered when she finished, and I caught the quick way she reached for Hunter’s hand, after that they slipped away, down the shoreline.

I climbed my dune, a new beer in hand, letting the fire fade behind me. Giving Abby and Hunter the time they well deserved. Emerson hadn’t shown at Calhoun’s. Maybe he wasn’t coming. Maybe I was a fool for thinking he would. The thought stung more than I wanted to admit.

That’s when I heard it—

“Hey.”

I jumped, sloshing beer straight into Emerson's face.

"Oh my god—" I started to apologize, then caught myself. "What is the matter with you?!" He laughed, spitting out beer, wiping his face with his sleeve.

"I'm sorry, I swear I didn't mean to scare you." I narrowed my eyes, heart racing.

"What are you even doing here?" My voice, a bit drunk now. "Missed you at Calhoun's." His shrug carried a grin. "Had a sneaky suspicion you'd be up here."

I rolled my eyes, trying not to show how flattered I was. "News flash, shoobie: you don't sneak up on drunk girls alone on a beach at eleven o'clock."

"Alone? Where's your friend—the blonde one?"

My brow shot up. "busy—How do you know she's my friend?"

He smirked. "Because I always see you two together. And maybe..." he leaned in,

"I asked around." Before I could fire back, his jacket was settling over my shoulders.

His voice softened. "You're a good friend, you know that?"

Swaying a bit, I suddenly froze. His eyes were darker now, starlit blue.

"Do your eyes... change color?" I blurted.

He laughed. "they do. Some days green, some days blue."

"Well. Must be nice." I snickered, heat rising in my cheeks.

When he noticed my necklace, his tone shifted.

"It's pretty." he points, "Suits you."

"My mom's," I murmured, rubbing the sea glass between my fingers.

"Teal was her favorite color." Talking about her came easier in the dark, with waves covering my voice. Emerson just listened, letting me unravel my thoughts. And when I glanced at him, I noticed shavings of wood caught in his hair, my eyes squinted to get a better look.

"You have... wood in your hair," I said, laughing.

"Oh? Yeah. From earlier."



“You work with wood?” I slurred a bit.

He hesitated, then nodded.

“I bought a shop in town. I—I make things from driftwood, mostly. Nothing fancy. Just... whatever feels like it could become something more.”

Something in me shifted then. The image of him in a wood workshop began taking form. Emerson wasn’t just a cocky boy who quoted poetry. He was unexpected—quietly creative, a little rough-edged but sincere. Different from anyone else in this town. I smiled without meaning to.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just... happily surprised.” He chuckled, standing, offering me his hand.

“Alright, enough surprises for one night. Let’s get you home, Iris.” I took his hand, steadying my drunken self. My name lingered in the salt air after he said it.

Iris.

Not Izz. Not Izzy.

Just Iris.

And God, I loved the way it sounded.

*Good things come to those who wait.*

After last night with Emerson, morning brought a whirlwind of questions I couldn’t quiet. Where was this going? And seriously—where was his shop?

I called Abby early, needing to unload everything. She gushed back, telling me about her and Hunter—how after years of missed chances, they’d finally tipped into something real.

They were officially together now. I lay there, listening to the birds outside my window, realizing it felt like we were all stepping into a new era. My heart pounded, excitement humming through me. Good for them, I thought. Really, good for them.

The sun was too bright to waste. With Abby at work, I hopped on my cruiser and rode toward the south end beach. Spreading my towel out on the sand, I tried not to think of Emerson—but of course, failed. Unlocking my phone for the first time in weeks, I noticed a surprise: a new contact. It must've been last night when he dropped me off.

**Contact: Shoobie**

**Mobile: 516-804-5676**

How drunk was I? I laughed to myself, then, on impulse, I called.

Ring... ring...

“Hey. You’ve reached Emerson’s Driftwood Haven. I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave a message—”

Voicemail. I sighed, hanging up. I preferred hearing a voice anyway; texting never felt the same. Maybe that’s why Abby and I had always resisted burying ourselves in screens. Summer here wasn’t for scrolling—it was for living. Still... maybe I could break my own rule, just this once.

I Googled his shop. **14 Pearl Street**. Should I? Would it be too much? Before I could overthink it, Delilah called, inviting me to dinner at Serafina’s, the new Italian spot in town. Abby was busy with Hunter, but I didn’t mind—time with Delilah always steadied me. And Serafina’s happened to be only a few blocks from Driftwood Haven. The idea started clicking together like fate.

Halfway there, I walked my bike along the busy street. The smell of fresh bread from Seaside Sweets drifted over, reminding me of cherry danishes. Shops glowed with light, families and tourists weaving past with shopping bags, laughter spilling from open-air cafés. I counted storefronts.

“Okay, eleven...” I murmured, passing the corner café, then the boutique spilling coastal dresses out front. “Twelve...” A record store I sometimes ducked into—Black Bird Records. “Thirteen...”

And there it was. **Fourteen.**

How had I never noticed this place before? The sign above the wide front window read *Driftwood Haven*. On the door, a small carved plaque repeated the name, a wave etched deep into its grain.

The door stood slightly open. Inside, music floated—melancholy guitar, The Smiths. My favorite.

I pushed it open and stepped into the scent of oak, cedar, and salt-touched beechwood. Sunlight slanted through the window, lighting shelves of driftwood—each piece different, some jagged and raw, others smoothed by years at sea. Smaller ones seemed destined to become jewelry or figurines; larger beams leaned against the wall, their textures telling stories of storms and tides. Toward the back, finished sculptures sat waiting—whales, gulls, abstract curves painted or left bare.

A workbench glowed beneath a hanging bulb, crowded with tools, curls of shavings scattered like feathers. And there he was. Emerson.

Beige canvas apron, ivory sleeves pushed up, sawdust dusting his arms. He was bent over, goggles on, focused—until he looked up. Surprise lit his face, breaking instantly into a grin.

“Iris!” he shouted, pulling the goggles off and brushing his hands clean as he walked toward me.

“What are you doing here?”

I lifted my chin, feigning ease. “Just thought I’d say hi... to the shoobie I once called a tourist.”

His smile widened. “Lucky me. Finding you here, in my shop.”

I glanced around, still pretending casual. “I was on my way to dinner with some family. Figured I’d stop by.”

“Innocent enough,” he teased, still grinning. “And what were you hoping to find, Miss Wheeler?” he teased.

“Nothing,” I said with a coy smile—then froze. “Wait. Who told you my last name?”

“I told you,” he said boldly, that devilish grin spreading across his face. “When I like something... I ask around.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. I looked down at the worn plank floorboards, biting my lip before letting my fingers trail along the carved sculptures on the shelves. I moved slowly, keeping my eyes half on him, knowing exactly what I was doing. The tension between us crackled like electricity. If I wasn’t careful, sparks might catch.

He cleared his throat, snapping himself from the spell. “Ahem... you look very nice tonight,” he managed, his gaze sweeping over my black satin top, faded skin-tight jeans, and jute espadrilles.

Tilting my head, I flashed him a wicked grin. Who was this girl—this wild temptress—he managed to conjure out of me?

“You think so?” I teased, turning back to the shelves.

I felt him closing the space between us, the air tightening. His fingers brushed my curls from the nape of my neck, grazing my skin. A shiver ran down my spine. His breath warmed my ear, his voice husky.

“Yeah... you look gorgeous. But you knew that already. You knew exactly what you were doing when you walked through that door.”

His lips hovered at my neck, brushing just enough to make my pulse race. Desire tangled with anticipation, and then—buzz.

My phone lit up, Delilah's name flashing across the screen. The sound was a jarring reminder of the world outside this moment.

"Uh—hey, Delilah?!" I stammered.

"Hey, hun, you wanna tell me why I'm sitting here alone at dinner?" she teased.

"I'm so sorry! I'll be there in three minutes—"

"Where are you, anyway?" she cut in.

"Um... down the block! Got caught up."

"Alright, but hurry up or I'm ordering without you, kiddo."

"Sure thing! Love you—bye!" I said quickly, hanging up.

When I lifted my head, Emerson was right there, closer than before. Our eyes locked.

"So, I guess you've gotta go, huh?" he said softly, leaning in. His nose brushed my cheek, then mine.

"I've..." I breathed, The Smiths playing behind us—

*So please, please, please... let me, let me, let me... let me get what I want this time.*

"...gotta go," I whispered.

But then his lips found mine, and whatever words I thought I had unraveled. My body melted into his. When he pulled away, still holding my face, he studied me like I was something to be memorized. "I'll see you, Iris," he said smoothly, tucking a curl behind my ear before biting his lip.

I cleared my throat, shaking my hair loose again to hide my nerves, then backed out of the shop—happily breathless, off to dinner.

The warm lights of Serafina cast a glow on Delilah's face, her eyes locked on me as she dove into her favorite topic—my future. "So! How's the short film coming along? Still aiming for the festivals we talked about? Any internship responses yet?"

"It's coming along, but—" my phone buzzed again, cutting me off.

I glanced down. A smile tugged at my lips.

*Meet me tonight?*

My eyes lingered on Emerson's text, thumbs hovering over the keyboard, eager to respond. But Delilah's voice, laced with concern, pulled me back to the present.

"Iris? Are you alright?" Her brows rose, sharp with curiosity.

"Uh—yes. Sorry, I just got distracted by a text." I said quickly.

Delilah gave a disbelieving laugh. "Since when did you get all 'texty-text'?" she teased, studying me like I'd grown two heads.

"It's just Abby—about the script," I lied, my laugh brittle. "You know how forgetful I can be." I prayed she wouldn't catch the guilt flickering in my eyes. Relief washed through me when she let it slide, but the weight of the lie sat heavy. I never lied to Delilah. Maybe I was afraid she'd disapprove of this... new distraction, this pull away from my goals.

The appetizers came—crispy calamari, lemon-kissed baked clams oreganata—and the conversation slipped into easier rhythms. By the time our entrées arrived, Delilah was glowing with her favorite topic: my future. Her grilled branzino shimmered beneath roasted potatoes, while my bucatini carbonara smelled rich and comforting, though suddenly too heavy for my nerves.

"Okay," she began, eyes bright. "I have amazing news. I couldn't wait to tell you—I spoke with an old friend at the Great South Bay Film Festival. I told him about you. About your

work. And guess what? They'll take a look at your short once it's finished. Maybe even line up internships." She clapped her hands together like she could will it all into being.

My fork froze mid-air. "Wow... that's... amazing." The word came out flatter than it should have, because just then, a second text from Emerson lit my phone.

*I can't stop thinking about you.*

The pressure of expectations drained away in an instant, replaced with a fluttering that made me feel sixteen again.

"I know, right!?" Delilah beamed, oblivious. "Izzy, it's all happening—you're going to get everything you deserve. You'll get out of this little town. People will be lining up to work with you before you even graduate." She pointed at me with her butter knife, radiant with pride.

I nodded and smiled, but my mind drifted far from festivals and résumés. For years I thought that was all I wanted. Lately, I wasn't so sure.

Staring down at the creamy tangle of carbonara, words tumbled from my lips before I could stop them. "Ya know what, Delilah? I think those baked clams didn't sit right with me." I rubbed my stomach, faking a wince.

"Uh-oh!" Concern softened her face. "The carbonara's probably not helping either. Tell you what—go home, make some ginger tea, maybe a little Pepto. I'll finish up here."

"Are you sure?" I asked, guilt knotting my throat.

"Of course," she said warmly. "I just needed to tell you the good news."

"Thanks again, Delilah," I murmured as I stood. I leaned in to hug her, whispering, "Love you."

"Love you more than all the stars in the sky, kiddo," she whispered back. Her smile made me feel wicked for lying, but I couldn't turn back now.

Outside, I pulled out my phone, Emerson's words glowing like a beacon. My pulse skipped as I typed, finally free to answer:

*Meet me at Marty's Ice Cream Parlor.*

*Ice cream?* he replied.

*Yes. It's safe there.*

*Yeah... you might be right,* he joked.

I laughed softly to myself. Maybe he felt it too—that being completely alone together was dangerous. That the current between us was too strong to resist, at least not yet.

Marty's was glowing like it always did, neon lights buzzing faintly against the summer night. The sweet scent of waffle cones and hot fudge hung in the air, instantly pulling me back to childhood summers spent here with Abby and Delilah, quarters clutched in sweaty palms. It was the kind of place where nothing bad could happen—too bright, too crowded, too sticky with spilled sprinkles to ever feel dangerous.

And yet, when I spotted Emerson leaning against the striped awning outside, arms folded, head tilted with that half-smile, the whole place shifted. The air grew heavier, sweeter, like the sugar in the air had melted into my veins.

"You weren't kidding," he said, straightening as I walked up. "Safe, huh?"

"As safe as it gets," I teased, brushing past him toward the door.

Inside, the parlor was alive with chatter and clinking spoons. Kids darted around with dripping cones, parents called after them, and the jukebox in the corner warbled an old Beach Boys tune. Emerson followed close behind, his presence unmistakable even in the chaos.



We ordered—him a double scoop of rocky road, me my usual cherry vanilla—and slid into one of the red vinyl booths along the back wall. The overhead lights gleamed off the checkered floor, reflecting in his dark eyes when he leaned across the table, spoon in hand.

“So this is your idea of dangerous?” he teased, taking a slow bite.

I rolled my eyes, though my heart thudded harder than it should. “Don’t flatter yourself. It’s just ice cream.”

But the way his gaze lingered—longer than it should have, softer than I expected—made the air between us hum with something I didn’t want to name. Around us, kids laughed, the bell over the door jingled, someone dropped a milkshake. Everything about this place screamed safe. Still, under the glow of neon and the taste of cherry vanilla on my tongue, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was standing at the edge of something I couldn’t undo.

Stepping into Marty’s, I grabbed a hightop for two. When Emerson walked in, my heart jumped—I smiled, and he smiled back.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he said, his grin boyish, almost goofy.

“So... how was dinner?” he asked, sliding onto the stool across from me.

“It was good, delicious even—just...” I hesitated.

His expression softened, concern flickering in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“No, no, nothing bad. Actually... great news, really.” I snapped myself out of it.

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking—what’s the news?” His curiosity was genuine, and it made me nervous in a good way.

I took a breath. “Delilah—basically my aunt—she still has connections from her writing days. Some with the Great South Bay Film Festival and...”

Emerson set his chocolate ice cream down, giving me his full attention now.

“And, well, I’ve got this short film project, and she said her friend would take a look at it once it’s finished.”

His face lit up. “Iris, that’s incredible.” His voice carried admiration, warm and steady.

I poked my spoon at my vanilla swirl, suddenly self-conscious. “So why don’t I feel happy about it?”

His brows knitted. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t even started filming yet. And the pressure—what if I blow it? What if I don’t want it the way I thought I did? What if I’m not as talented as I hoped?” My words tumbled out fast, the weight of every insecurity clattering onto the table between us. “What if I just turn into another wannabe director from a small town? Look at Mr. Cricket. Same dreams, same high school, same town—”

“Iris.” His tone cut through my spiral. His eyes locked on mine.

“That’s not going to happen,” he said firmly. “It’s impossible.”

I gave a shaky laugh. “Impossible?”

He leaned forward, voice low but sure. “Because you’re single-handedly the most interesting girl I’ve ever met.” A smirk tugged at his lips. “And trust me—I’ve met plenty of girls.”

I shot him a playful glare, feigning jealousy. He chuckled.

“You sell yourself short, Wheeler,” he said softly, and the way he used my last name made my stomach flip. His thumb brushed gently over the back of my hand, and the sincerity in his touch disarmed me.

Blushing, I exhaled and smiled. “Come on, I wanna show you something.”

I tugged him off the stool, lacing my fingers with his as I led him outside.

“Where are we going?” he asked, his curiosity almost childlike.

“You’ll see.”

He grinned, shaking his head. “This feels like the start of a horror movie. You dragging me down the street at night.”

“Shut up and just close your eyes,” I teased, giggling.

“You know, Wheeler, this is kinda sexy—not gonna lie,” he said, but he obeyed, eyes shut.

“Okay. Open ‘em, shoobie.”

We stood before the Beacon Movie Theater, its marquee dark after hours.

“Ta-daaaaah!” I spread my arms dramatically.

“You wanna... watch a movie?” he asked, brows lifted.

“Not just any movie,” I said, lowering my voice with reverence. “The movie that made me fall in love with movies. *Indiana Jones*.”

He blinked, then laughed. “You’re gonna hate me, but—I don’t think I’ve ever seen it all the way through.”

I gasped. “Are you kidding me? Oh no, no, no... we’re fixing that right now.”

Pulling out my work key, I unlocked the side door and slipped inside, Emerson trailing behind. We raided the concession stand—popcorn and Buncha Crunch, my favorite—and made our way up to the little projector booth.

When the opening theme blasted through the speakers, I glanced over to see him watching, wide-eyed, grinning like a kid. The flickering light cut across his face, and in that moment, seeing the wonder in his eyes, I remembered exactly why I loved what I did.

Maybe Emerson wasn't the distraction in my story after all. Maybe he was becoming the inspiration.

Nearly two hours later, the credits rolled. Our fingers had twined together somewhere between the boulder chase and the snakes, and neither of us had let go. We didn't need to say much—the silence was enough, an unspoken acknowledgment of something shifting between us.

Not long after, he drove me home. We parted with a lingering goodnight, a look that promised more movie nights to come.

### *A little flower blooms in June*

The next day, I woke to a gusty June morning that felt alive with possibility. Inspired, I did what I knew best—I wrote. I wrote straight through breakfast and lunch until my phone buzzed with a message from Abby:

*Hey, I heard from Mom you weren't feeling well. Rest up, okay? I miss you... hopefully I'll see you later this week.*

I sent back a quick heart emoji and returned to the page, the words pouring out of me like I'd been waiting all season for this release. By eight o'clock, my short film screenplay was finished, the electricity still buzzing in my fingertips.

Another ping. This time, Emerson.

*How's the writing going?*

*Great. Just finished,* I replied.

*Perfect. We should celebrate.*

*What'd you have in mind?* I teased.

*Swing by my shop in an hour and I'll show you.*

I shot out of bed like a firework, flinging open my closet for something to wear. My hand landed on a short lilac satin dress with thin straps, paired with flat sandals. Probably not the smartest move, considering the tension simmering between us—but who was I kidding? Avoiding it forever wasn't an option. Grinning, I spritzed myself in vanilla-coconut perfume, let my hair fall loose, and dashed for the door.

"Going out into town, Nana—love you!" I called, already halfway outside.

"Okay, sweetheart. Love you too—be careful!" she answered from the kitchen.

Driftwood Haven looked transformed when I walked in. Tealight candles flickered everywhere, the curtains drawn, the *closed* sign flipped in the window. My heart caught in my throat.

There he was, sitting cross-legged on a checkered blanket spread across the floor in shades of yellow, purple, and green. Candles circled him, two glasses of red wine glinting in their glow.

"I figured you needed to unwind after staring at a screen all day," he said, eyes warm and mischievous. "So—what do we think?"

"It's perfect," I laughed softly.

"And should you get hungry, madame—ta-dah!" He revealed a makeshift charcuterie board: sliced ham, cheddar, and crackers. I couldn't help but giggle.

"Looks like a Lunchables for a seven-year-old."

"Yeah, yeah," he admitted, chuckling. "It was all I had lying around."

He rose, came to me, and slipped off my jacket. His hands lingered as he guided me toward the blanket. His eyes swept over me, and he let out a playful groan.

"Damn. You're beautiful. What are you doing to me, girl?" He clutched his chest

theatrically, pretending to be in pain. I smirked and shook my head, charmed despite myself.

We sat there for hours, candles flickering low as he shared pieces of his world with me. He told me about his childhood—an only child raised by two people deeply in love. His mother, a painter who adored poetry, and his father, an inventor with the worst dad jokes imaginable.

“Mom loved Monet,” he said, stretching out across the blanket. “She always said his paintings felt like stepping into a dream.”

“She sounds amazing,” I whispered.

“She was. She even took me and my dad once to the Art Institute of Chicago. That’s where I first saw *Water Lilies*. Changed my life.”

His voice softened, reverent, as he fidgeted with the corner of a napkin. “She could change the way I saw the world. She was... a beautiful breath of fresh air.”

He described their Chicago home, filled with paintings, collectibles, and a greenhouse overflowing with plants she treated like children. “We lived between Kenwood and Hyde Park,” he added, catching my blank look and laughing.

“And my dad,” he went on, “always cracking the cheesiest jokes while teaching me carpentry. *Why did the carpenter quit his job? He just didn’t want to get BOARD with it.*”

I groaned, laughing despite myself.

“Or—*why did the picture go to jail? Because it was FRAMED.*”

We both dissolved into laughter, and he shook his head. “I still don’t know how he landed my mom with lines like that. She was so beautiful... Audrey Hepburn beautiful.”

My face lit up. “You’re kidding me. I love Audrey. Something tells me I’d have loved your mom too. She sounds... sensational.”

He smiled, eyes faraway. “Her name was Adelaide. Adelaide Haven.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “That’s so glamorous—like something out of *The Great Gatsby*.”

“And your dad?” I asked.

“Conner. Conner Haven.”

I hesitated, then laughed softly. “So... were you kind of wealthy?”

He chuckled too, shaking his head, as if wealth had never been an important part of the story. And in that moment, sitting on a picnic blanket between melting candles and makeshift snacks, Emerson felt less like a mystery and more like a boy I was starting to know—layer by layer, joke by joke, memory by memory.

The mere idea was foreign to a girl like me, who came from humble beginnings in a run-down cottage by the beach, with nothing but the breeze and a few friends to keep me company. Maybe that’s what drew him to me. I didn’t need much—though I’d never known what it felt like to have more.

“We were definitely well off, yeah. So you can imagine—I took my inheritance for the next four years and used it to start my shop,” he admitted.

“Oh, that makes sense,” I giggled. “It all just sounds so very *Great Expectations*, you know? I had to ask!”

He laughed at my candor, shaking his head. “No, I get it. Honestly, it’s funny—I never realized how much it did sound like some Fitzgerald novel.” He gave a big chuckle. “I even went to prep school. They had a school coat of arms, if you can believe that.”

We both burst out laughing, the sound mingling with the candlelight glow. We were different—raised in opposite worlds—but our values beat the same, and our hearts had been broken young. I didn’t judge him for his privilege. The way he had grown in those four years was evident. Despite the prep schools and privilege, he was real. Genuine. Authentic.

Touched, he kept going, offering me pieces of himself.

“Some winters in Chi-Town were brutal,” he said with a wry smile.

“That’s where you’re from—Chicago?” I asked.

“Yeah. The only thing I hated was the water. Freshwater beaches, not like this.” He glanced around as if soaking in the salt air itself. “I loved the Midwest, but I always longed for the ocean. The first time I saw one was with my parents—we drove to California. A family road trip. We stopped in this little village in Monterey called Carmel-by-the-Sea. It was perfect—seafood, art galleries... My mom loved it.” His face softened. “Me? I loved the white beaches.”

“That sounds incredible,” I said, listening.

“Yeah. That was before they passed away.” His voice dimmed, the air between us pulling tight. I hesitated, careful. “How did it happen... if you don’t mind?”

He exhaled. “Car accident. Icy roads. New Year’s Eve. A drunk driver hit them. I was twenty—out partying with my friends.” He looked away, the shame still raw.

My chest ached.

“After that, I left college. Traveled for four years—sightseeing, chasing art, literature, culture. I wanted to experience everything my mom loved for myself.” His smile returned faintly. “I think I did. All but one.”

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket, sliding out a torn scrap of paper.

“Is that from her?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.” He unfolded it, eyes skimming the faded ink before reading aloud:

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,  
to front only the essential facts of life,  
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,  
and not, when I came to die,  
discover that I had not lived. —Henry David Thoreau*



A lump formed in my throat as I smiled at him. “That’s a good one. Living on purpose... choosing with intention, not just going through the motions.”

It was something I understood all too well. “It was one of her favorite quotes by Thoreau,” he said. “And look underneath it...”

He tilted the slip of paper toward me before I could read aloud.

*I love the beach,*

*I love the waves and the sand.*

*I want to live near the beach someday, with the people I love.*

“Did she write that?” I asked, smiling softly.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “See, that’s the thing. My mom didn’t *love* the beach.” His smirk widened, but his eyes stayed tender. “I wrote it.”

He let the note roll between his fingers, fragile with time. “I was eight. One day she asked me to write down something important—something I hoped to achieve one day.”

“And that’s what you wrote?” I asked, almost in awe.

“Yup. And here I am.” He gave a half-smile, one that looked like it carried both pride and ache.

I couldn’t help but return it, my chest full at his quiet sincerity.

“It’s the reason I’m here now,” he continued. “I found this note cleaning out some of her old things in the garage. And call me crazy, but... I felt like she was trying to tell me something.”

“Your mom?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said simply. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but it felt like a sign.”

“I don’t think that’s ridiculous at all,” I told him. “Guess I have your mom to thank.”

Something in me stirred then, a lurch I couldn't stop. Maybe it was the candles, or the music, or the way he held belief like a compass—but I knew at that moment my own mother would have liked him too. Nana always told me to trust in the universe, that my mom had lived that way too.

And before I could think better of it, I leaned in. My lips found his, urgent, hungry, full of everything unspoken. Passion surged through me, wild and unplanned, but also right. When I pulled back, his green eyes glowed in the candlelight, and for the first time in a long time, I felt something I had forgotten: belonging.

It was fragile, tender—like holding a seashell you're afraid to drop. I wondered fleetingly if this was how Abby felt with Hunter: safe, precious, and impossibly new.

We lay back on the blanket, fingers tangled, gazing up. My eyes caught on the hanging sculptures swaying overhead—wooden chimes in maple, cherry, bamboo, their clinks and clatters whispering into the air. Some were mobiles shaped like moons and stars, others carved sea creatures turning in lazy circles.

“Hey, Emerson?” I asked, my voice barely above the rustle of the chimes.

“Yeah?” “You think my mom loved me as much as yours loved you?”

He turned, studying me with that soft steadiness of his. “Oh yeah, Iris. I'm sure she did. I'm sure she loved you more than all the sea glass in the ocean.”

The corners of my mouth lifted, though my throat ached. “Hey, Iris?” he asked after a pause.

“Yeah?” “I'm sorry—about your mom.” I squeezed his hand tighter. “I know... I'm sorry too.”

It didn't bother me that he knew my story, the way everyone in town did. It just felt right, acknowledging it here with someone who understood the particular weight of losing a mother.

“I wish I could've really known her,” I whispered, “the way you knew yours.”

He didn't answer with words, but the silence between us was full—comforting, steady, like the tide. Mazzy Star played low in the background, the voice of Hope Sandoval lilting into the air:

*Fade into you, strange you never knew, fade into you...*

We stayed like that, hand in hand, until sleep found us.

When I woke, morning light bled through the curtains. I was still nestled against Emerson's arms, safe, cocooned. But panic struck as realization hit—I had fallen asleep here all night, without telling Nana where I was. My heart lurched as I shot up, scrambling to gather myself. "Oh my god, Nana's gonna flip!" I cried, nearly in tears. "She's probably worried sick and calling—Delilah and Abby, oh Jesus." My hands scrambled through the mess of blankets, searching frantically for my purse and shoes.

"It's okay, we'll sort it out. Let me drive you home. I'll explain everything," Emerson said gently, trying to steady me with his calm.

I jumped into his beaten-up, mint-blue '77 Ford truck, dialing Nana and Pop Pop again and again the whole way back.

Ring. Ring. Ring...

"Hello?" Pop Pop finally answered.

"Pop Pop! Hi—" I breathed, relief flooding through me at the sound of his voice.

"YOUNG LADY! YOUR NANA AND I HAVE BEEN WORRIED SICK!" he barked. "Where have you been?! No calls?! That's not like you, kiddo."

"I'm so sorry, Pop Pop, I really am. I can explain everything—"

"You can explain when you get here. For now I've gotta put your Nana at ease." He hung up before I could say more.

When we pulled up to the cottage, I leapt out of the truck and bolted up the porch steps.

“Nana? NANA!” My heart pounded, terrified I’d given her a stroke. They were all there: Delilah, Hunter, Nana, Abby, Pop Pop—faces tight with worry, half in tears.

“WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?” Delilah screamed before I could even reach Nana. “You nearly gave her a heart attack!”

“Yeah, Izz? I thought you were home sick?” Abby added, her voice breaking. “I was so scared, Izzy. I thought—” She stopped short, unable to finish. She pulled me into her arms, hugging me so tightly it almost hurt.

Nana sat quietly in her armchair, apron still on, staring at the floor. The sight made my stomach drop. “Izzy, you DON’T know what kind of people are out there,” Delilah went on, her voice sharp with panic disguised as anger. “It’s a scary world full of hateful people. People who just want to create havoc. I don’t know if this family can handle more heartache, but I don’t think we’d survive it.”

“I’m—sorry, Delilah,” I sniffled, tears spilling.

Nana finally spoke, her voice firm and cutting through the air. “I thought...” She pressed her hand to her chest. “Don’t. Ever. Do. That. Again. Do you hear me, Iris Josephine Wheeler?”

I nodded quickly, sobbing. “Nana, I’m so sorry. I truly am.”

“If you weren’t even home sick or working, then what were you doing?!” Delilah demanded.

I froze. Emerson stepped forward, reaching for my hand, steadying me with his presence. “Miss,” he nodded at Delilah. “Sir,” he said respectfully to Pop Pop. Then to Nana. “Mrs. Wheeler.” His voice was low but steady. “It’s my fault. Iris was with me. We...just lost track of time, talking.” He took the blame squarely.

The room went still. Delilah and Nana exchanged a look, then back at him.

“And who might you be, son?” Pop Pop asked gruffly. “I’m Emerson Haven. And I—” he paused, glancing at me, “I care about Iris. A lot.”

I met his gaze, and the truth in it. Abby smiled from the corner, blushing as she leaned against Hunter. For once, she looked relieved for me.

“Iris...is this true?” Delilah asked.

“Yes,” I whispered, ashamed for lying to her.

“Then why hide it?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was scared of what you’d say. I’m still figuring it out myself,” I admitted, eyes flicking to Emerson.

“I see. So we’re lying to each other now,” Delilah said bitterly, her disappointment stinging more than anger ever could. “All I ever do is talk about your future, Izzy, and you think—” She stopped herself, shaking her head. With that, she stormed out, slamming the screen door. Abby ran after her, Hunter close behind.

“Mom, wait! Give her a second to explain!” Abby pleaded.

“Delilah, WAIT!” I cried, but her car engine roared to life, and she was gone.

We stood in silence until Nana came to the doorway, composed as ever. “She’ll be fine,” she said gently. “She just needs time. The worry pulled old wounds back to the surface. That’s all.”

She ushered us toward the porch, and Pop Pop reappeared. “Why don’t us fellas head inside, talk sports over a few beers?” He clapped Hunter and Emerson on the shoulders.

“Beers? This early?” Hunter asked, bewildered.

“Best you learn early, kid. Stick with me—I’m a pro,” Pop Pop winked, grinning back at Nana as he corralled the boys inside. His voice drifted back as the door shut. “Now, about women...complicated creatures, ya know...”

Nana chuckled and went to fetch refreshments, leaving Abby and me swinging on the porch. She returned with a tray: two glasses of iced tea and a Bloody Mary for herself. Setting them on the mosaic-tiled table, she disappeared again.

Abby rubbed my back, reading the conflict written all over my face. “You really like him, don’t you, Izz?” she asked softly. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean...yeah. It’s still early but...”

“But it’s different,” Abby finished for me.

I looked at her. “How do you know it’s different?”

“Because,” she said, smiling, “I haven’t seen you lose track of time with a boy in years. And it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you like this.”

I let my head fall onto her shoulder, her hand stroking my hair gently. Abby always understood me in ways words couldn’t. Her friendship was the rarest gift, and I knew I’d never find anything like it again.

Nana plopped herself into the wooden blue rocking chair she’d dragged closer, her eyes fixed on me. “So,” she said, handing me the Bloody Mary with a little smile, “tell me about this boy, Iris.”

Her hand brushed my cheek with that rare tenderness only she had—an unspoken forgiveness that made my tears spill over. I hugged her, soaking in the safe, familiar warmth. Nana always knew how I felt before I even admitted it to myself.

“We Wheeler women don’t just open up to anyone,” she said with a sly grin. “Takes something real to stir our souls.”

As I told her what little there was to tell about Emerson, Nana chuckled to herself, rocking gently. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Child—the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” She smirked. “When your mother was about your age, she met a boy too. Parker, that was his name. Summer of ’94.”

Her eyes softened as she conjured the memory. “She was studying theatre at the community college. He was a painter with the Art Students League of New York. Every Saturday, there he was on the beach, painting away. Until one day, your mother just marched up and asked who he was. You know your mother—never a silent observer. She had those big brown eyes, fiery spirit. Just like her mother...just like you.” She winked at me.

Abby leaned forward, hooked. “So what happened?”

“Oh, they fell madly in love—for one summer. But all things run their course. He had his path. She had hers. He asked her to return to the city, but her dream was here—the playhouse, the stage. However small it was, it was hers. She chose it.”

The rocker creaked as Nana leaned closer. “The point is, girls—falling in love is part of living. It shows you who you are in a new light. It’s why we do it—some of us more than once. But never forget the dreams that light your fire. If love joins you along the way, then it’s meant to be.” She glanced toward the cottage, a smile flickering at the thought of Pop Pop. Her voice softened, a warning laced in wisdom. “Don’t sit on the sidelines, Iris. Play the game. Your mother lived with gumption. With intention. Don’t be afraid to do the same.”

I nodded, Nana’s words sinking deep. She leaned back, her eyes misty again. “Delilah’s still angry at the world. She has her demons, more complicated than you know. But you—sweetpea—you’re too young to close yourself off because of someone else’s past. Your mother’s story doesn’t have to be yours.”

Her gaze seemed to pierce right through me, as if she’d plucked my thoughts from the air. “Just because she stayed doesn’t mean you’re your father if you don’t.” She winked knowingly.

I wiped a tear, breathing in hard, feeling lighter somehow. Abby caught my eye.

“Ready to help me make a movie?” I smirked. “Yes! That’s my girl!” Abby grinned, already buzzing. “I’ll get the boys to move the gear upstairs!”

In no time, we were hauling equipment into Hunter’s and Emerson’s trucks, swinging by the playhouse for more. Abby set up her laptop in the passenger seat, building a spreadsheet calendar, whispering about schedules and shoot days.

An hour later, we were setting up our first shot—Rosie’s Shack against a blueberry-and-creamsicle dawn. Abby was my second-in-command, my AD, my leading lady. She wrangled actors, called in favors, and corralled her friends from acting class. Seven of them committed, all willing to give their summer to a little project that was quickly becoming my everything.

Emerson crafted props and set pieces in his shop, turning scraps into magic. Hunter ran grip and props on set. Lucas lit the world as gaffer. Noah caught every sound. Stacy and Herrick, two Tisch kids from the playhouse, handled camera and editing. I was DP and director—cinematography, music, vision. And Nana, of course, reigned over wardrobe, stitching life into every costume.

For the first time, I felt it—the pulse of something bigger than me. By the time I stood in front of our ragtag crew, coffee in hand, I was ready.

“Okay, everyone. You’ve read the script—it’s about seven best friends in their twenties, and a love triangle. Maybe someday it’ll be a feature. But for now—it’s our short film. We’ve got four weeks. Let’s make it happen.”

Abby jumped in, her voice loud and commanding. “Alright team! We’ve got until the end of June. Post-production by July. Festival season—here we come. Let’s make some magic!” Cheers erupted around us, and I felt a pride I couldn’t put into words.



Later that night, staring at my laptop screen, the title *Time Stands Still* blinked back at me. It didn't feel right anymore. These weren't perfect kids, frozen in nostalgia. They were messy, raw, aching for belonging.

I typed slowly, each letter deliberate: M... I.. S.. F.. .I ...T .....I-S-L-A-N-D.

I whispered it aloud. *Misfit Island*.

It fit.

It was ours.

### *Times stands still on Misfit Island*

A few days passed, and we entered our first full shoot week, all of us focused on the task at hand. With romances on pause, we worked as a collective unit—a well-oiled machine. There were a couple of bumps along the road, but nothing we couldn't handle. By Friday, we had completed the first seven days and were already halfway through the schedule.

Then, Friday morning, a looming storm stole our high spirits. Hurricane Jonas was on the rise, placing all production at a halt. We were on storm watch until early Monday morning. Of course this would happen just as we'd found our rhythm. On the brighter side, I thought, the storm gave us a weekend to reflect—film choices behind rainy window sills, gusty afternoons, a kind of forced pause.

After talking rescheduling with Abby, I left early to run errands for Nana. Rain had been thrashing against my window, but by the time I finished brushing my teeth, having coffee, and eating breakfast, it stopped just long enough for me to slip on sandals.

"Remember, just get the essentials! I need them for the soup tonight!" Nana shouted.

“Got it, Nana,” I murmured.

“And don’t forget batteries for the lanterns—in case the power goes out!”

“Okay, NANA! Geez.” I shut the door behind me.

The wind was fierce as I rode into town, my bike tires smacking against wet sand and dirt with every turn. Shops were already preparing to close, but not before locals and stranded tourists crowded the markets for groceries, water, and candles. Every TV in the restaurants and shops I passed played the same forecast: torrential downpour after 3 p.m., a brief pause around 2 a.m., then more rain.

I hustled through the aisles of the market with Nana’s long list in hand. One of the many perks of living in a tiny beach town, I thought sarcastically, was believing you’d never need a license. Now here I was, bags destined to weigh me down on my stupid bike. “If you’d just gotten it like Abby, you could be driving Pop Pop’s car,” I muttered to myself. Delilah had a car, but after our last fight, that was off the table. And I’d never ask Emerson or Hunter—not my style. Nope. I was stuck.

By the time I checked out—Oreos and kettle chips snuck into the cart for good measure—it was 1:10, and the rain came early. “Stupid weather people,” I muttered, tying the grocery bags tight, some in my basket, some on the back of my bike. The air was heavy with the smell of rain, citrus, and salt. Dark clouds rolled in impatiently.

That’s when I heard him.

“Iris!”

Emerson’s voice cut through the storm. I turned to see him jogging toward me, soaked, laughing as he scooped up an orange that had rolled free.

“Never a dull moment with you, Wheeler!” he called, his smile crinkling his storm-blue eyes.

I gave a frustrated sigh but couldn’t help laughing. “Thanks. Ugh.”

All week I'd managed to avoid him, burying myself in work. Now here he was, looking like the storm itself—shirt plastered to golden skin, hair dripping into his eyes, impossible to ignore.

"You've barely spoken to me," he said, half-teasing. "I'm starting to think you don't like me anymore. Or maybe you're avoiding me?"

"No, not at all!" I shouted awkwardly over the thunder. "I'm just... focused. On production."

He tilted his head, unconvinced. Then, firmly: "At least let me give you a ride home. I'm not taking no for an answer."

The rain hammered harder, thunder rolling in. Pride wouldn't save me now, and Nana would never forgive me for being reckless. I nodded.

We rushed to his shop, dragging my bike along, sidewalks too slick to ride. Inside, our clothes were drenched.

"Stay here, let me toss your bike in the truck," he said.

"Thanks."

Alone, I glanced around, memories of our last moment here—the night I'd overslept—curling at the edges of my mind. Anytime alone with him felt dangerous. My wet flip-flops squeaked against the floor, my jeans heavy, hair clinging in damp curls around my face.

He came back in, shaking off the rain. "You look like you could use a change of clothes," he teased.

"Well, so do you, buddy." I pointed at his soaked white tee, hugging his chest and lean frame. His hair clung to his forehead like a dark, wet mop. I chuckled.

"Hey, what's so funny?" he grinned, pretending offense.

"Nothing," I said, still smiling. "But yeah... I could use something dry. I'm freezing."

His gaze shifted, lingering. Thirsty eyes. Piercing.

“Well,” he murmured, stepping closer, “let me warm you up.”

Before I could protest, he scooped me up.

“Emerson! Put me down this instant, sir!” I squealed, laughing, legs instinctively wrapping around his waist.

He carried me to the workbench, setting me down gently. His gaze burned into mine.

“Relax. I wouldn’t take advantage... unless you wanted me to.” His fingers brushed wet curls from my face.

Thunder roared, the roof rattled, my pulse racing.

I lifted my shirt above my head. His eyes flickered—desire, reverence—as though he were studying something sacred. When he hesitated, I reached first, tugging his hair, pulling his lips to mine.

The storm outside mirrored the one within: wild, hungry, unstoppable. His hands traced my back; clothes slipped away like minutes.

We moved like waves breaking against the shore, gasping, clinging, devouring. The smell of salt, rain, his skin—all of it blurred into something fierce and unforgettable.

Afterward, I lay on his chest, listening to our hearts beat in rhythm.

“This changes everything, doesn’t it?” I whispered.

“Only if you want it to,” he murmured. “I know I do.”

He brushed tangled, dark curls from my eyes. I kissed him again, soft and lingering, while the storm raged on outside—like it belonged only to us.

## *The storm rages on*

We ran out into the rain, now coming down harder than ever. Emerson opened the truck door for me as I slid into the passenger seat. Every so often we'd glance at each other, tossing a grin or a smile — a silent acknowledgement of what had just happened. The rain hammered the roof of the truck like hail, and a heavy silence settled between us as he drove on; the rhythm of the wipers the only steady sound.

"Jesus! This is getting nuts now!" he said, gripping the steering wheel tighter, focused on the muddy path ahead. Water streamed down my window in every direction.

"I know! I didn't count on it getting like this when I rode out this afternoon!" I shouted above the thunder, a little concern in my voice, already thinking about him having to head back out alone. The clouds were darkening into deeper shades of gray and black, looming heavy over Lighthouse Point. *This is only getting worse*, I thought.

When we arrived, I hopped out of the truck, sprinting for the porch. Nana came running out. "Oh, thank goodness you're back!" she said gratefully. "I was getting a bit worried, but I remembered you said the lines would be long!" She waved us both inside. "Oh my God, get in here, you two!"

"Thank you for bringing her home!" Nana said to Emerson, wrapping him in a hug. Then, pulling back, she added, "You'd best stay here tonight, mister! I don't want to be responsible for sending you back out in this mess."

"Um—yeah, okay," he said, glancing between me and Nana. "You're right. Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler. I really appreciate it."

"Oh shush! And call me Nana! You brought my little Izzy Wizzy home safe, and that means more to me than you know."

“Yeah... Emerson ran into me at the market, actually,” I said, grinning at him. “So it worked out, thank God.”

Moments later, as darkness fell and the storm raged outside, Emerson and I were drawn to the fireplace. With no electricity, the fire’s soft glow lit the room, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Nana had left us to the warmth while she played cards with Pop-Pop in the kitchen. Later, she’d bring us bowls of her famous chicken noodle soup — special, reserved only for stormy nights like this.

I circled around the room, rifling through things.

“What are you doing?” Emerson asked, amused.

“I’m—looking—for—” I muttered, stretching for a high shelf.

“I can help you, you know?” he offered.

“Ughhhh—” I huffed, still searching.

“If you tell me what you’re looking for, I can help, weirdo.” He was laughing now.

“Shush! I don’t want Nana to hear me.” I turned, hushing him quickly.

“A-HA!” I cried, triumphant. From Nana’s knitting basket, tucked beside the coffee table, I pulled out a dusty bottle. “Nana’s secret stash of red wine.”

He blinked. “Wow. You’re such a badass. A real daredevil.”

“Oh, shut it. I usually replace it so she never notices it’s gone,” I teased, grabbing two crystal glasses from the shelf. Settling onto the rag rug, I felt myself sink into its worn jute texture. Its faded stripes — red, orange, yellow, and white — glowed softly in the firelight.

“So, I have this tradition,” I began, easing the cork free with a satisfying pop. “It started when we were seventeen. Abby and I had our first sleepover drunk — off this exact stash.” I grinned. “After that, it became our storm ritual. Wine by the fire. Secrets. Stories. Until the rain gave out.”

“Ah, I see. Interesting.” He smiled.

“Actually... this might be the first time I’m not doing it with her.” I stared into the fire.

“Weird.”

“So,” he said gently, “what kinda secrets?”

“Girl stuff. Boys we kissed. Things we’d be embarrassed to admit.” I giggled. “You’d be surprised how much you learn about someone that way.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Well, like—what’s your favorite scent? Maybe one that brings back a memory?”

He raised an eyebrow. “My favorite smell?”

“Yes! Just answer.” I punched his arm playfully.

“That’s easy. The smell of salt air. Reminds me of a vacation with my parents, at Carmel-by-the-Sea.”

“Okay. Acceptable answer.”

“What about you?”

“Clementines. And dune grass,” I replied.

“Dune grass?”

“Uh huh. On hot days, it smelled almost sweet. The salt in the air would sift through it... it’s hard to describe.” I smiled, lost in the memory. “And clementines... Nana used to bring them out for me while I played in the yard. The first bite, that burst of sunshine sweetness. Sticky fingers, orange oil clinging to my hands. Even now, every time I eat one, I feel like I’m seven again.”

Emerson chuckled. “That’s adorable.”

“What?!” I laughed, shoving him.

“Nothing! I just... love how passionate you are. You enjoy the little things. That’s rare.”

“Next question,” I said, smirking.

“First pet.”

“Oh that’s good.”

“My Russian tortoise, Michael Angelo,” he declared.

“You had a turtle?!”

“Tortoise, ma’am.”

“Okay, so what happened to said tortoise?”

“Well...” He grinned. “Turns out Michael was actually Michaela. But we didn’t figure that out until ten years later.”

I nearly spit out my soup laughing. “You didn’t know for ten years?!”

“She escaped, eventually. Burrowed right out of the garden box one summer. She’s probably still out there somewhere...” He gestured dramatically. “Wandering the deserts of Saguaro National Park.”

“Wait, deserts?”

“Yeah, Tucson. Before Chicago.”

“Ohhh,” I nodded, realizing. “Makes sense now. Why you love the beach so much. You never really had it before.”

“I like that it helps you understand me,” he said softly. “I like it too.”



We fell quiet again, the fire crackling between us. "Next question," he said at last. "Ever been in love?"

"Answer the question, buddy. No dodging." He sighed. "I don't know. Honestly? Probably not."

"Well, if you have to think that hard, I'd say that's a no."

"Yeah, well, what about you, hot stuff?"

"Me? No. Never."

"Really? You've never had a real relationship?"

"Not long enough to know if it was love." I shrugged. "Nobody ever stuck around."

He looked at me seriously. "That's hard to believe. Look at you. You're funny, smart, cool. You're... mature, but still innocent. I've never met anyone like you."

I laughed softly. "So I'm amazing, huh?"

"Shut up," he muttered, leaning in and kissing me.

Silence followed, warm and a little awkward.

"Okay, so, never been in love. Check!" I grinned, trying to break the tension.

"Favorite quote," he shot back.

"Oscar Wilde. 'To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.'"

"Nice. Mine's Maya Angelou. People will forget what you said, forget what you did... but they'll never forget how you made them feel."

We stared at each other.

"Oh God, I love her," I said.

“She’s one of the best,” he agreed.

He leaned back on the rug, grinning. I laid my head against a pillow, reciting softly:

“Here is the deepest secret nobody knows,  
 here is the root of the root, and the bud of the bud,  
 and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
 higher than the soul can hope, or mind can hide—  
 and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart.

*I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart.”*

Emerson whispered the last line with me. We both smiled. Silence again. Comfortable this time. “Northwestern,” he admitted eventually. “I majored in English Lit, too.”

“No way.” “Yup. Short-lived, but yeah.”

We looked at each other. He leaned forward, touched my face, and kissed me again as the fire hissed. Nana’s voice cut through the moment: “Goodnight, you two! And behave!” Her footsteps faded upstairs. I turned to Emerson with a sly smile. “It’s getting late. We should get some sleep too.” I spread blankets on the couch for him. “Sure you don’t want to stay here?” His grin was teasing, but hopeful.

“Tempting. But I don’t trust us.” I tossed a pillow at him, laughing. “Besides, we’ve got an early morning. I wanna show you something tomorrow.”

“What? Where?”

“You’ll see. When you wake up, shoobie.” I winked, heading up the staircase. He bit his lip, then dashed over, sticking his head between the spindles like a prisoner.

“Don’t go yet. I was just about to challenge you to a staring contest. And fair warning—I’ve been practicing.” I shook my head, smiling, and left him there — a playful prisoner of my staircase, and maybe something more.

## *Hemlock cove*

After that crazy storm last night, I couldn't believe how beautiful the morning was. Sunlight streamed in through my curtains, warm and golden, spilling across the floorboards. From my half-open window came the sound of seagulls and terns cawing over the waves rolling steadily in. The combination made me smile. Today was the day—I had a surprise for Emerson, a secret spot I couldn't wait to share. He was going to love it.

I jumped out of bed, buzzing with anticipation, and slipped into a pair of washed-out overall shorts with a pastel yellow bikini underneath. Against my skin, the pale color made me look darker, like the sun had already been working overtime. I padded downstairs, practically skipping, and found Emerson at the breakfast table with Nana.

"Morning!—Where's Pop-pop?" I asked, sliding into my chair.

"Oh, he left earlier on the boat," Nana said with a smile. "Decided to go fishing on this surprisingly beautiful day."

"Oh really! Aw man," I sighed, a little disappointed.

"You guys have a boat?" Emerson asked, his eyes lighting up with enthusiasm.

"Yeah, it's nothing crazy—but it's my favorite thing to do around here." I took a sip of coffee just as Nana set down seconds. "Pop-pop taught me how to drive it when I was fifteen." I said it with pride, waiting for it to sink in.

"Really?" Emerson raised his brows, genuinely surprised.

"Yeah," I grinned, leaning back. "Impressed yet?"

“A little,” he admitted, smiling. “I’ve never been on a boat.”

“Well—there’s a first time for everything,” I teased, winking at him.

Nana shook her head with mock exasperation as she stirred her steel-cut oats. “Ugh, those two love that dinghy boat. Me? I’ve never set foot on it, nor do I intend to! I always said people are not meant for the ocean. I prefer my feet planted firmly on land, thank you very much.”

I laughed, shaking my head. Emerson chuckled too, though his eyes still flicked toward me with quiet intrigue.

“Maybe I’ll take you out there soon—if you deserve it, shoobie,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes and smiled, winking as he bit into his toast. “I wouldn’t mind that,” he muttered under his breath, just low enough that Nana wouldn’t hear.

He went on quickly, happy she hadn’t noticed our flirtation. “Pretty cool that you have a boat, though—not gonna lie.”

“Everyone who’s anyone here has one,” I said matter-of-factly. “It’s just a way of life. They call us ‘boaters’ paradise,’ you know?”

“I did not,” he admitted, grinning sheepishly.

I finished off my eggs, drained the last of my coffee, and sprang up from my chair.

“Well! Ready to go, shoobie?”

“Where are we going anyway?” he asked, curiosity etched across his face.

“I told you, I’m not telling. And Nana won’t either. Right, Nana?” I shot her a look.

She chuckled and gave a conspiratorial nod before returning to her crossword.

“So I’ll see you later then,” she said warmly from behind her oversized glasses. “But not too late, I hope.”

“Don’t worry, Nanski!” I reassured her.

I slipped on my flip-flops and grabbed the backpack I’d packed the night before with sunscreen, a blanket, and snacks. The air already felt heavy with heat when we headed toward the door. From the kitchen, Nana’s voice trailed after us:

“Don’t forget, there may be rain again tonight after all this heat! Grab an umbrella, sweetie!”

“Got it!” I hollered back, though in truth, I didn’t. My excitement left no room for umbrellas.

The humidity smacked me in the face as soon as we stepped outside. It had to be eighty-one degrees already. Summer had officially arrived in Lighthouse Point. I hopped on my bike, grinning.

“Can’t we just drive?” Emerson groaned.

“Nope!” I shot back, the smile stretching across my face. “Where we’re going, bikes only.”

He sighed but I pointed toward the garage. “Pop-pop’s old spare is in there. It still works.”

“You’re really gonna make me ride a bike?” He smirked, half-annoyed, half-amused.

“Come on, lazy bones. It’ll be worth it, I promise!” I pedaled off, shouting over my shoulder, “Carpe diem!”

He groaned dramatically, stretching like a cat forced from a nap. “Ugh, you’re definitely a morning person—gross. Fine, fine. But if I get sunburned, I’m blaming you.”

His first few pedals wobbled. “Are you sure these brakes work?” he called suspiciously.

“They’re mostly reliable,” I said, flashing a mischievous grin.

He tested them, and the squeal was awful. “See!? Mostly reliable?!”

“Okay, maybe not entirely reliable,” I admitted, giggling. “But they’ll get the job done... eventually!”

“Oh, that’s comforting,” he said with mock sarcasm.

The wind whipped through my curls as we pedaled, carrying the scent of salt and blooming honeysuckle. We passed rows of pastel-colored beach houses, fuchsia roses blooming against turquoise-washed fences. Children darted across front yards, seagulls squawked overhead, and the whole neighborhood seemed alive, humming in the heat.

The sandy paths sparkled under the sun, pale beige mixed with speckled gray. At one rocky patch, Emerson’s chain slipped off. He groaned in frustration while I doubled over laughing. His irked smile softened, and he crouched to fix it. As he worked, a monarch butterfly landed on nearby wildflowers, the honeysuckle filling the air with sweetness. By the time he got the chain back on, a streak of grease stretched across his cheek. I burst out laughing again, pointing at him until he cracked a smile.

We got back on the bikes, his playful complaints now more theatrical than real. The path dipped sharply and suddenly, sending us flying downhill with cool air rushing past. Emerson’s face split into a grin, boyish and wide, the kind you can’t fake.

Then the trees parted.

The cove opened before us like a secret. A crescent moon of pristine white sand cradled by cliffs, the water shimmering in the afternoon sun. Empty. Untouched. Perfect.

“Wow...” Emerson finally managed, jaw slack. “This is incredible.”

“Welcome to Hemlock Cove,” I said, unable to hide my pride. “Only the real locals know about this place. Best kept family secret.”

“Like it? I love it.” He looked at me with a softness that made my stomach flutter.

We spread the blanket, the sand warm and fine between our fingers. The sun lit the water like ribbons of gold, and the steady surf kept rhythm with our laughter.

“Come on,” I urged, stripping off my overalls. “Let’s swim, shoobie!”

We ran into the sea, the cool salt water washing away sweat and heat. We dove and laughed, floated on our backs, raced to the sandbar. The world shrank to just us, drifting in the sapphire water under the wide open sky.

At one point, as we floated, I began, “You know, there’s a story about this place...”

His eyes lit up. “Oh yeah?”

“Back in the late 1800s there was a shipwreck,” I said, pointing toward the lighthouse down the coast. “A young fisherman aimed for the light in a storm but missed, wrecking here instead. A woman found him washed up on this beach. She saved him, they fell in love, and he named the cove after her maiden name—Dorothy Hemlock.”

Emerson smiled softly. “That’s sweet. I mean, the least he could do, right?”

I laughed. “There aren’t records. A fire in ’44 destroyed almost everything. But I like to believe it happened. That they found each other.”

“I like to believe it too,” he said quietly, taking my hand.

Hours slipped by. We swam again, chased each other through shallow waves, hunted for seaglass and shells. His teasing about my freckles made me laugh until I threw sunscreen at him. We talked about family—my bisabuela Pilar, his Irish-Italian roots. The day was endless and golden, stretching on like a dream.

Then, just as Nana predicted, clouds rolled in. Fat drops hit the sand. Emerson grabbed the blanket, my backpack, and my hand. We sprinted, laughing breathlessly, until the dark arch at the far end of the cove swallowed us in its stony shelter.

The rain poured. Not violent like last night, but heavy, warm, insistent. It drummed on the sand around us. We kissed under the blanket, bodies pressed together, rain mingling with the heat of our skin.

Time melted.

Later, when the storm eased, we stayed wrapped in the blanket, our breaths slowing, hearts still racing. I whispered, "Should we wait it out?"

He smiled against my tangled curls. "Nah. Let's just stay here forever."

And so we did—at least for a little while.

## *Navigating New waters*

Riding back to Nanas through the rain, there was a comfortable silence that fell between us. When we finally approached the steps of the front porch, I parked my bike and turned around. As Emerson parked his in the garage again, I stood there waiting for him as he rushed over through the rain.

"So.... I guess, this is bye" I said reluctantly, "Well, tomorrows still sunday...." he said with a hopeful smile. "What are you doing tomorrow?" He asked sweetly. I Glanced up at him, the biggest smile splashed across my face, "Nothing." He chuckled, "Okay well. If it's okay with you..." Clearing his throat a bit nervous for my response, "Can I come back—and see you tomorrow, you think?" he asked, "Unless you're sick of me already," he joked quickly. I shook my head staring down at the steps, blood rushing to my cheeks, "Not even close." I grinned, "Okay!" he said grinning with a giant smile now, "SO—" he took in a deep breath of relief, "I'll see you tomorrow Wheeler."

He leaned down and inward to kiss me then turned towards his truck. I paused and my face lit up with the best idea, "Wait! You know what?!" I said as his body swooped around immediately to face me, "What?" he responded.

"How about I pick YOU up" I said confidently,  
 "But you don't—" he started, confused and I cut him off,  
 "Dont worry about it, I have my ways.." I bit my lip smiling,



"I'll swing by in the am, round 9:45ish?" I ask, then confirming further,  
 "22 Shore walk right?"

"Ah, so you STILL remember, then?" he devilishly smirked, "Oh shut up" I laughed. "You live right by the old cut, yeah? The one that slices through town a bit for the docks on the south end?" I asked finally, "yeah it runs all along, behind my bungalow—why? You gonna swim to me?" he chuckled, confused but also curious. "No reason!" I smiled, "See ya tomorrow!!" I jumped up to kiss his cheek and headed inside from the rain.

With a cool breeze drifting through my open window the next morning, I woke up refreshed and ready to seize the day. Today was definitely the perfect Sunday for boating with such calm waters. I tiptoed down the stairs, and out the house so as to not wake anyone. Packing a bag of sandwiches and a few beers from the garage Fridge, along with a hoodie; I left a note for Pop pop, grabbing the keys to his Cape Craft 17-foot center console. I headed to the dock behind the house. Emerson wouldn't know what hit him.

My phone rang and I answered, it was Abby finalizing the weather and times for tomorrow's shooting. "Okay so we're all set then girlie, and Back on sched for tomorrow!" She said, "Gonna be a good monday! What are you doing today anyways?" she added,

"Um, well I'm gonna take Emerson out on the boat" I admitted shyly.

"Aw really?! Wow" she teased, "gettin serious!" she said in a dramatic voice.

"Shush" I said back, as she giggled.

"Well I miss your face—It's been a few days... maybe I can hear all about it after work today?" she asked, "Umm...." I hesitated, "Please? We can all meet up at Cals or something for a little bit?" she finished, "Okay, okay, I'll see what time we get back," I said giving in. "YAY! You can tell me all about this weekend with you two, while the boys bond!" she said excitedly, "How is the beautiful Hunter Mariner?" I teased back, "He's fine. More than fine—We're *very* fine" she said gushingly, "Okay, okay I get it" I laughed at her insinuations, "I'll tell you later" she said happily, "hey by the way, how's your mom? I miss her— We've never gone this long without talking" I said, a little upset.

"She'll be okay Izz, I think she knows she overreacted but you know her, she's stubborn...." Abby continued, "I think she feels a little bad if you ask me" Abby finished. "Yeah?" I questioned, "yeah" she agreed.

"But okay I'll see you later then ugh! Can't wait to hug you! Feels like it's been a zillion years!" She finished and I laughed,

"Love you buttface" she said quickly,

"Love you too, psycho." I smiled, hanging up.

The morning air was still crisp, the sun a muted glow behind a veil of high, thin clouds. The water shrouded in a light, pearlescent fog, shimmered almost white, as I pulled out of the dock.

The drive took about twenty minutes by boat, but once I reached the canal I drove up to the cut behind Emerson's Bungalow. As I parked I looked at the clock on the boat's dashboard, now reading 9:39; I was early but who cared, I thought. I honked the horn at least twice to get his attention. A confused but happily surprised Guy stepped out onto the bulkhead,

"Iris?" he questioned, "Ha! wow" Emerson said to me with a huge smile.

Laughing and smiling back at him I said, "You weren't expecting this were you.

Admit it!" I shouted, "I mean I'm a little surprised but eh *no biggie*" He said jokingly acting unimpressed. "Did I surprise you —Then Mission accomplished" I sneered.

"Now get in, Your chariot awaits Princess" I smirked.

"Kay, gimme two minutes to grab the rest of my stuff" He shouted behind him, running back up the bulkhead dock.

The cool air was getting warmer by the minute, "Alright, hurry up!" I yelled, as he ran back towards the boat hopping in.

"So where are we off too jack sparrow" he uttered sarcastically; I made a face at him.

"I figured we could ride up the coast, visit a few spots I know—what do you think?" I said excitedly. "Lead the way, Driving Miss daisy—take me anywhere." He said with a familiar kiss, hello, "Ya know, A girl could get used to this kinda treatment" he said sitting down, extending his legs and crossing them. "Just don't expect me to put out later buddy—cuz im not that kinda gal" he finished joking, I rolled my eyes, giggling, "you are such a Doofus". I backed out, turning the boat around towards the open Bay and pulled out.

We flew down the shore line, driving up the coast most of the afternoon; along the Great south bay and towards Montauk. Spending the day together felt like something much out of a movie. I made us stop for lunch at one of my favorite Lobster roll spots in the south Hampton bay. Eventually, we grabbed freshly shucked oysters on the way back within the Moriches inlet, where we also decided to snag a few beers at this dingy outdoor dockside bar.

The atmosphere was relaxed, maybe because of the live music playing or the lively crowd. As we sat down at a white plastic table, with red checkered print; A young, pretty girl in a black apron approached us with a pad and pencil in hand.

“Hey y'all, so are we just here for drinks? or food too?” the waitress asked, “Uh, just drinks, thanks!” Emerson said quickly, wanting a moment alone with me. “Okay, so what will it be?” she asked, “Um” He looked at me to ask but quickly remembered I was still only twenty and outside the limits of Lighthouse point where carding was a minor concern for locals. “Ya know what, uh, we'll get two summer Ales! 16 ounces, please. Thanks.” he finished swiftly.

“Whew—smooth shoobie” I chuckled, “Yeah, my bad. I guess I forgot we're not in lighthouse point, anymore” He chuckled back. “Ha Yeah—I mean we know everyone that works at the bars so” I said, about to apologize, “Dont worry about it” He reassured me. It was the first time my age really called attention and I had to admit I felt a tinge of embarrassment, In that moment the waitress came rushing back,

“Hey again folks, Sorry about that but we're all outta Summer Ale—” She said, “We do have a wheat beer, that's pretty refreshing—I can bring a sample for you and your ‘girlfriend’, if you'd like?” She said sneakily at Emerson, trying to decipher what we meant to one another. The whole exchange caught us both off guard. I looked at him, scared for his immediate response. What was the longest pause of my life, or so it felt like it.

“Yeah, You know what? She loves clementines. So, That's perfect. Thank you.” He calmly smiled at me as if nothing had just happened. The waitress smiled back at us and nodded, acknowledging his actions. “Did that really just happen?” I

questioned in disbelief, “What?? Oh you mean the waitress totally trying to mack it with me?” he joked, “YUP” He teased.

“NO—Am I your—your girlfriend?” I grinned curiously, “Do you want to be?” He smiled back, suggesting it was up to me. “I mean.... I don't know. I thought we were just like, hangin out—” I paused, a little nervous.

“I mean we are ‘hangin out’. Isn't that what boyfriends and girlfriends do? essentially” He smirked, acting like a smart alec, while I was still processing the magnitude and weight his words carried.

“Shoobie, don't you mess—that's not funny” I lectured on, “I mean, I'm a little freaked. It's only been like 2 weeks, maybe one? Since I met you” I finished quickly. He grabbed my hands from across the checkered table, “Iris....I don't care. Look at me, not a single fuck given...” he continued, “I like you, alot. And I'm not worried—cause I've never met anyone like you. I just know I want to spend whatever time of this summer that's left—with you” He finished staring into my brown eyes, “Okay but—I have a lot of baggage and it's not going away in two sec—” I said, “So do I, but that what I love about you—I don't feel like some sad story when I'm with you.” He confessed and I paused, taking a moment before speaking, “I've...never met anyone like you either. I mean, No one's ever made me—feel like this”. I let out a smile that seemed hidden away. He held my hands tighter in agreement and just like that, we were suddenly ‘together’, readily deciding to take a chance on whatever this was. In one singular moment he made it feel so easy. Emerson made *everything* feel easy, like breathing.

We held hands heading back onto the boat and he hugged me from behind the whole way back as I steered. Kissing my neck, my hair and then my forehead he gave me reassurance that nothing could shake what we have, there could be nothing worse than what we'd already been through; he never once let me go, the whole ride back—He was mine.

## *Holding Hands, Holding On*

The orange and pink of the setting sun painted the sky as Emerson and I walked back to Calhoun's. I was still buzzing from our amazing day on the boat, a smile glued to my face. Abby and Hunter were already at the bar, and Abby's eyes widened the moment she saw our intertwined hands. 'Ooh! What's this? Finally official?' she teased, pointing. I grinned, squeezing Emerson's hand as he squeezed back, a thrill running through me."

"'Yeah,' we said together."

"Ahh! Oh my god! Double date time! Exciting!" Abby squealed, Hunter chuckling beside her.

I laughed. 'Ugh, I'm so glad it's out in the open,' Abby continued, glancing at Hunter. 'Yeah, you two just make sense,' Hunter agreed. Then, his tone shifted playfully, 'But Shoobie, break her heart, and I break your neck.' His mock threat fell flat on Emerson, who simply tightened his grip on my hand. 'Man, I haven't seen Iris this happy over a guy in ages,' Hunter added, smiling. 'Good for you, shoobie. She's a keeper.'"

The arrival of McKenzie, the bartender, drew Abby's attention. "Oh hey, Kenzie!" Abby called. I recognized McKenzie from high school—an older junior who'd left to pursue modeling. Apparently, that hadn't panned out. Abby, always popular and friendly with everyone, had a minor friendship with McKenzie Carlisle. Let's just say I wasn't Kenzie's biggest fan and our opinions and attitudes often clashed.

"Hey Girl! What can I get for you tonight?" Kenzie asked, still strikingly pretty at twenty-three, though with a hint of weariness around her blue eyes, a telltale sign of too many late nights.

"Kenzie, guess what?!" Abby exclaimed. "What?" McKenzie replied with a light giggle. "My Izzy girl has an actual boyfriend!" Abby announced proudly.

"Abb's," I murmured, wanting to keep my personal life out of McKenzie Carlisle's likely gossipy hands.

"Really? Aw, congrats, sweetie!" McKenzie said, her smile sweet but her tone a touch condescending. A familiar wave of annoyance and self-consciousness washed over me—Kenzie had a knack for making me feel insignificant. "So, who's the lucky guy?" Her gaze swept over to Emerson. "Oh my, well hello there. Nice to meet you," she said, her tone flirtatious. Without looking at her, Emerson replied sharply, "You too," his grip on my hand firm.

Despite the awkward exchange—not the first time a woman had fawned over Emerson in front of me—I decided to let it go. Today was too good to let anything spoil it.

Moments later, Abby pulled me aside while the guys talked sports, eager to dissect the beginning of my "boyfriend" status.

"SO! How did it happen? Tell me everything!" Abby asked, grabbing our beers as we moved away from the bar. "Did you find that weird? You know, with Kenzie and Emerson?" I asked, glancing at Abby.

"Wha-huh?" she asked, "Oh, Izz, don't worry about Kenzie. Flirting's just her default setting," Abby said calmly.

"Clearly, she's still stuck in that popular mean girl phase," I muttered wryly.

"I know you two are friendly when I'm not around, but honestly, she was so annoying in high school. We couldn't stand each other," I complained. "Plus, she always had this weird thing for any guy I was even remotely interested in," I added, venting my long-held frustrations. "Honestly, she's a big reason I don't really do 'girlfriends,'" I finished, rolling my eyes.

"Oh, stop. Don't worry about her; she's harmless now...actually, she's grown up a lot," Abby reassured me. "Besides, Emerson's crazy about you!" she giggled. "He hasn't taken his eyes off you, girl!" she added, still giddy.

"Yeah, you're right," I smiled, taking a deep breath and glancing at Emerson before quickly changing the subject.

"Okay so—" I said as I began recanting how it all happened to Abby and eventually we laughed so hard the rest of the night, I'd forgotten all about Kenzie Carlise.

The beginning of summer with Emerson felt like a dream. With June ending and July just ahead, I was almost in disbelief at how seamlessly things were going between us. Even working on the film together felt effortless; we just clicked.

Every break from filming became a cherished moment of quiet conversations and stolen kisses. I'd mentally committed to focusing solely on the film until post-production wrapped. It was as if Emerson sensed this unspoken vow, his unwavering patience and support of constant reassurance.

The three weeks of post-production blurred into late nights fueled by lukewarm coffee and a shared drive. Abby, Hunter, Emerson, and I, along with the rest of the team, pushed through the editing process. Finally, with a rough cut assembled, we all agreed on a much-needed night off. Emerson suggested a movie date for just the two of us, and when he mentioned *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, my answer was immediate.

We settled into the hushed projector booth, a shared bucket of popcorn between us. As the opening credits rolled, Audrey Hepburn's elegant silhouette filled the screen, the melancholic melody of 'Moon River' washing over the audience below. Leaning back, I let out a comfortable sigh. After weeks of constant motion, simply being still, absorbing the film's beauty and Emerson's quiet presence beside me, felt incredibly good."

As Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly moved through the dazzling New York world on screen, a familiar warmth spread through me. It wasn't just the movie, though its timeless charm held me. It was the occasional brush of Emerson's knee against mine, the soft screen light tracing the curve of his profile. A quiet understanding had grown between us over these past few weeks, a comfortable intimacy that deepened with each shared moment.

During the film's final scene, rain lashed against the windows of a taxi. Inside, Holly Golightly sat huddled and pale. 'Holly, I'm in love with you,' Paul Varjak declared.

"So *what?*" Holly replied."

"So *what*, So *plenty!* I love you. You belong to me,' Paul insisted."

"No! People don't belong to people,' Holly stated."

"Of course they do," Paul countered.

"I'm not going to let anyone put me in a cage." She cried,

"I don't want to put you in a cage. I want to love you!" he yells back,

"It's the same thing," she claims,

"No it's not. Holly—" he tries to speak,

"I'm not Holly. I'm not Lula Mae, either. I don't know who I am! I'm like Cat here, a couple of no-name slob. We belong to nobody and nobody belongs to us....We don't even belong to each other!"

Paul Varjak watched her, his own expression a mixture of concern and frustration.

"You know what's wrong with you, Miss Whoever- you- are?" Pauls says in a tight voice, *You're chicken, that's what's wrong with you...You haven't got any guts. You're afraid to stick out your chin and say, 'Okay, life's a fact, people do fall in love, people belong to each other, because that's the only chance anybody's got for real happiness'. You call yourself a free spirit, "a wild thing", and you're terrified somebody's gonna stick you in a cage. Well baby, you're already in that cage. You built it yourself, and it's not bounded on the west by tulip, texas, or on the east by Somali-land. It's wherever you go. Because no matter where you run, you just end up running into yourself"* he finished.

Hollys eyes flashed with a wounded defiance as Paul tossed her the ring he'd been carrying around all day. She was left alone with the vulnerability in her eyes, as it intensified. She trembled now, placing the tossed ring onto her finger. At that moment it seemed she might shatter into a million little pieces on the floor of the cab. Her Vulnerability mirrored something I was beginning to acknowledge within my own heart. I glance at Emerson. He was completely absorbed in the movie, his expression soft. Taking a deep breath, a feeling both terrifying and exhilarating bubbled up inside me. It was a truth that had been growing, unspoken, over weeks of shared laughter, whispered secrets and the quiet intensity of working on the set.

"Hey, Emerson?" I began, my voice a little softer than I intended. He leaned in slightly, his full attention on me. I met his eyes, and the nervousness melted away, replaced by a wave of undeniable affection.

"Yeah?" he whispered as the credits rolled.



The lights raised a bit and the spell of the movie lingered. People stirred below gathering their belongings, their voices hushed.

“I...I think I might be—I know, I'm falling in love with you.” I whispered back, I stared at Emerson, my heart pounding a little faster than usual. He looked at me, with a warm gaze. There, I had said the words, they fell off the tip of my tongue and there was no going back. Now hanging in the air; those words being a culmination of everything we had shared. The grand, slightly faded elegance of the Beacon Theater, the emotion of Breakfast at tiffanys, the quiet certainty of what I felt- it all created the perfect, unexpected moment to say ‘I love you’.

Emersons expression softened even further, his eyes reflecting the emotion I felt. He reached for my hand, his gaze holding mine. The silence wasn't awkward; it was charged with a beautiful anticipation.

“Hey, Iris?” he said, his voice a low murmur filled with a tenderness that made my heart flutter. “Yeah?” I answered,

“I think...” he paused smirking, then shook his head,

“I *know* I'm falling in love with you too.” he proclaimed.

The weight of unspoken feelings lifted, replaced by a lightness, a joy that seemed to shimmer in the dim light of the theater. The movie had ended but our story, it felt, was just beginning another beautiful chapter.

## *Love & fireworks*

We quickly settled into our own little world, filled with traditions that felt like they'd always been there. Weeknights were for cozy movie-nights at the beacon, the old velvet seats and the smell of popcorn creating the perfect atmosphere for romance. Other days, we'd kayak out to Bamboo island, the sun warm on our now tanned skin, the water a clear blue that sparkled like scattered jewels. Or we'd take the boat out at sunset, the sky exploding in colors as we cruised down the coast, the salty air thick with the scent of plumeria. My favorite intimate moments were the dinners we'd share with Nana and Pop after coming back in from a day on the boat. We'd eat crab or fish, or whatever it was we caught that day. I loved watching Emerson bond with them, it was tender and sweet.

And of course, there were the weekend nights at Rosies shack, the bonfire crackling merrily as we shared stories and laughter with Abby, Hunter, and the other locals. It all felt so effortless, so right, like we stepped into some perfect summer romance novel.

Once July came, we wandered through the town's colorful streets. Fourth of July decorations hanging on each block. It was high peak tourist season, a mix of quaint shops and bustling stalls appearing. The air was filled with the scent of sunscreen, hotdogs, boardwalk popcorn and the sweet aroma of homemade fudge.

"So, any plans for the fourth of July?!" I asked, "Hm, let me think—Just hangin with you" Emerson responded with a devilish grin, grabbing my waist and pulling me closer, "Well then!" I blushed, "I guess, I don't mind that." I giggled.

"But instead—How about you join in on our long standing tradition. Me, Hunter and Abbs—at the beach—watching fireworks with a few beers" I confessed.

"Hmmm sounds awful— im in!" he said sarcastically, teasing. Kissing my forehead and smiling he said, "Long as i'm with you kid, count me in."

He hugged me from behind as we walked past a cart vendor full of local spices. We stopped by a salt water taffy cart, after that which displayed a rainbow of pastel colors.

"Have you ever tried salt water taffy?" I asked Emerson.

"Actually, I don't remember ever having it?" He said curiously.

"Oh I have an idea!" I shouted,

"Let's guess the flavors.... I'll pick one first and you guess." I said all giddy, picking up a pale yellow one. Emerson grinned, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight.

"Okay, you're on." he said, grabbing the yellow one.

We spent the next few minutes laughing, our fingers sticky with sugar as we each took turns to decipher flavors.

"Hm, I'm thinking, Banana or ....Coconut?" he asked chewing thoughtfully,

"Coconut indeed, shoobie." I laughed,

"Ha, Okay try ...this one." He picked up a light blue.

"Um, hints of blueberry? No wait! definitely Blue Raspberry!" I shouted in excitement,

"Nice save!" he chuckled.

Now popped a green one in his mouth, that I handed him.

"Bleh, ugh And that's lime fer sure." he declared, as I laughed.

My Phone rang in my pocket while we chuckled like two children.

I reached for it to answer,

"Hello? Oh Hey Abbs!" I said, Happy to hear from her, I smiled at Emerson.

"Yeah! Oh ya know, we're just shootin' the breeze around town." I said,

"I got Emerson into the idea of joining us for the fourth by the way!" I added,

"...Wait, really?! Oh my god, dude that is amazing news. So, I'll be over to grab it once it's done!" I finished hanging up.

"What was that about?" Emerson asked curiously,

"That was Abby saying the Editing is almost done and completed." I said,

"Really?" He said excited for me,

"Yup!!" I jumped into his arms and as he wrapped his tightly around me, we hugged for what felt like forever. I pulled away and asked him,

"Do you think you can gimme a ride to Abbys on friday to pick it up?" I asked sweetly, He smiled, "Of course Izzy."

".....Yeah no, I'm not a fan of that" I said wrinkling my nose playfully,

“Yeah, me neither...figured I'd give it a try” we both chuckled, walking towards his parked truck.

“You're the only one who calls me Iris actually... It's kinda nice ha.” I confessed blushing.

We continued our conversation now as Emerson drove me up the sandy residential pathways back to Nanas in time for Dinner.

“SO, what do you think the final scene cut is gonna be like?” I looked over at him from the passengers side, my hand out the window moving against the breeze.

“I don't know, but I can't wait to see it, whatever Abby decided...” He said.

“It feels like we've been working on this forever now.” I finished.

“It's kind of bittersweet, you know?” I continued again,

“Like I'm so excited to see the final cut, but it also means this whole amazing chapter is over...” I said, looking out the window.

“We had so much fun filming this, didnt we?” I looked over at him.

“Well it's not ALL over” He smiled,

“...but yeah, we really did.” He finished.

Parking the truck, I ran out to tell Nana the great news.

“Well, that is just wonderful news sweetheart!” she screamed, while hugging me.

“Now, You head inside and get washed up. Emerson, will you be staying hunny?” She asked now used to his presence,

“I'm afraid not. I have to head back to the shop, finish some furniture that needs to get shipped out by tomorrow.” he said.

The day was over and Emerson had to leave but with a kiss goodbye, he uttered

“I'll see you tomorrow though?” And with that My heart fluttered, I bit my lip and stretched my arms out around his neck. Reaching his lips on my tip toes, I kissed him back as an answer to his question.

The early summer air hung warm and sweet, carrying the faint, familiar scent of salt from the nearby Great South Bay. Things with Emerson felt easy, like sinking into a comfortable chair you didn't know you needed. We'd been spending more time together, the initial awkwardness melting away with each shared laugh and late-night text.

"Hey," he'd texted that afternoon, "Spur of the moment idea - there's this spot near the marina... Bayvue. By my place. They usually have live music. I wanna take you there, I think you'll like it." My fingers had flown across the keyboard:

"Definitely. Pick you up?"

"Nah, I'll get you. Be there in twenty?"

And just like that, plans were made.

I ran upstairs, excited after telling Nana. I rapidly slapped on some makeup and let my hair down from its Ponytail, throwing on a red button down dress. When I came down in red lipstick and black eyeliner, Emerson let out a low,

"Woah...you look..." he slapped his right palm against his chest over his heart as if trying to find the words. I giggled, Nana did as well.

"Excited?" Emerson asked as we drove, his hand resting casually on my knee.

"Yeah," I smiled, looking out the window. "I've heard of Bayvue, but I've never actually been."

"Man, nothing gets by you in this town huh?" he teased, echoing something he'd say later, under different circumstances.

"Sorry! Nope!" I chuckled.

"Well they always have a live band, so I thought that could be fun," he admitted, turning onto the road that led towards the water.

When we got to Bayvue, the Sun was a perfect hue of gold setting along the docks and over the water. It was the kind of view that made you just want to stop and stare. The place itself was exactly what a "sweet spot" should be - relaxed and charming. The Dock lights were strung with bistro style light bulbs, already glowing like fairy lights against the fading sky. The great south bay Bridge was a grand sight setting the scene in the distance, its structure becoming more prominent as the light drained from the sky.

The music reached us before we even stepped fully out of the car - a live romantic hum of reggae playing in the background, mellow and inviting. It felt like the perfect soundtrack for a spontaneous escape.

We found a small table outside, the worn wood smooth under my fingertips. We ordered drinks and something to share, the conversation flowing effortlessly between us. We talked about everything and nothing - dreams, funny stories from our day, silly hypotheticals. I found myself watching the way he laughed, the crinkle at the corners of his

eyes. He seemed just as comfortable, just as happy to be there, sharing that moment with me. The atmosphere of Bayvue, the gentle lapping of the water, the soft music, the golden light – it all wrapped around us, making the world outside feel a million miles away. It was easy to feel like we were the only two people there.

“This is adorable!” I giggled,

“You like it?” he asked,

I took in the scenery, the ambiance.

“Like it? Are you kidding? It's so beautiful, so cute!”

We stayed until the bistro lights were fully dominant against the dark sky and the reggae band was playing their last set. The night felt warm and full of possibility. The kind of possibility that hinted at wanting the evening to last just a little longer.

We drove back to his place, his small, cozy bungalow that I was starting to find incredibly endearing. The one with the slightly peeling paint and the touch of Polynesian charm on the porch. The night didn't end at the front door. The warm feeling from that night at Bayvue lingered through the following weeks. It was a bookmark in the story of us falling in love, a quiet promise of more moments like that to come.

By the time the Fourth of July rolled around, things with Emerson felt even more solid, more real. The national celebration felt like a personal one, a chance to share another special day together. The air on the beach hummed with a different kind of energy than the quiet romance of Bayvue. Here, it was loud, vibrant, and buzzing with anticipation. Families had staked out their territory with blankets and chairs since early afternoon, coolers were overflowing, and the smell of sunscreen mixed with charcoal grills and the ever-present salt of the ocean. It was the Fourth of July, beach style, the way it was meant to be.

We found a spot that Abby, the expert beach-goer, had claimed for us earlier – a patch of sand just far enough from the rowdy crowds but close enough to feel the communal excitement. Our setup was classic: a couple of worn beach chairs, a large, slightly sandy blanket spread out, and a cooler packed with drinks and snacks that would constitute our dinner.

Emerson was already helping Hunter wrestle with setting up a small, portable grill.

While they kept themselves busy, Abby sparked up conversation as we folded open our chairs,

"So you two are getting pretty serious huh?" she said with a large grin,

"What do you mean?" I smiled, "I heard both of you say I love you on the phone earlier, little lady" she smirked insightfully. I looked away, a bit nervous of where the conversation might go. "Well I'm just saying it's sweet and I love this for you—But have you guys thought about what you'll do when you go back to school?" And *There it was*, I thought, the inevitable question I'd been avoiding. I kept telling myself we were keeping it light, the way I always had but deep down I knew the truth.

"I don't know Abbs, I hadn't thought about it really— I mean—" she cut me off,

"Izzy, it's okay to let someone in for the very first time you know? just cuz your leaving doesn't make it doomed to end." she reassured, "I know that I just—I've been thinking of where it could go and I don't know if there's really any point to drag it out after the summer Abbs" I said, "It just feels like inevitably we're both gonna get hurt the longer we keep this up." She looked up at me with sad eyes at that moment and tried to give me the best advice she could think of, "Just— let it run its course, but don't cut off the possibilities" She could tell she hit a nerve as I stared at the waves breaking but continued "I'm just saying don't close yourself off like you do, just because you think it *can't* be done, is all" she added, as I took a deep breathe.

"...He's a good one Izz, I can tell" she winked. I smiled back but looking in Emersons direction, I didn't want to think about the future, not while it was going so well now; it never ended well for me whenever I did.

Emerson shot me a warm smile as I dropped our bag onto the blanket. Since our Bayvue date, things between us had settled into a comfortable rhythm, a quiet understanding that felt incredibly solid. Being here, surrounded by the festive chaos but anchored by his presence and Abby and Hunter's familiar banter, felt perfectly balanced. "Need a hand?" I asked, kicking off my sandals.

"Nah, almost got it," Hunter grunted, adjusting a shaky leg on the grill. He was tall, with a perpetually amused look in his eyes. Abby nudged him with her elbow.

"Says the man who nearly dropped the burgers in the sand," she laughed. Abby, ever practical, was already sorting through the cooler, pulling out buns and condiments.

The late afternoon sun was beginning its slow descent, casting long shadows across the sand. Kids ran by, shrieking with laughter, chasing seagulls or tossing frisbees. Portable

speakers dotted the beach, each playing different music that blended into a chaotic, happy symphony of summer hits.

“Play that one I love by the Elovators Izzy!” Abby requested, as I connected our small speaker. We settled into our beach chairs, the conversations easy and light. We talked about the best beach snacks (Abby was firmly pro-watermelon, Hunter argued for chips), debated which cloud looks most like an animal, and watched as more and more people arrived, their laughter and chatter adding to the growing din. Emerson's knee brushed mine occasionally, a simple physical touch that spoke volumes in the casual setting.

As dusk began to paint the sky in shades of orange and purple, the first rogue firecrackers started popping in the distance – sharp, premature bursts that made everyone jump but also heightened the anticipation for the main event. Someone nearby lit a bonfire, sending a plume of smoky, sweet-smelling wood into the air. The local Stoners contributed their scents to the beach as well, filling the air with that unmistakable slightly skunky smell. We wafted the familiar pungent aroma, the breeze carrying it from different nearby groups.

We grilled burgers and hot dogs, the simple act of cooking together on the beach feeling incredibly satisfying. Eating off paper plates, with sandy hands and the taste of salt on our lips, felt like the epitome of summer freedom.

As the sky turned completely black, the real show began. Fireworks exploded over the water, painting the darkness with impossible colors and patterns. The boom vibrated in our chests, followed by the collective "oohs" and "aahs" from the crowds around us. Reds, whites, and blues lit up the faces around me – Abby and Hunter watching with their heads tilted back, arms wrapped around one another; Emerson, his face illuminated by the brilliant bursts, glancing over at me with an expression of pure joy that mirrored my own.

“I get it, now” he said to me,

“You get what?” I smiled,

“This— this tradition—It must have been magical growing up here every summer,” he said, pulling my chair in a bit closer and looking back at the explosions above us.

We didn't need grand gestures tonight. The grandness was in the shared experience – the salty air, the noisy crowd, the simple food, and the spectacular display in the sky. It was traditional, it was simple, and with these people by my side, it felt like everything I needed.



## *Reel Trouble in Framing the truth*

Later that week I finally got the call from Abby that the film's editing was completed and we decided to pop over to take a look at it with Emerson. The entire ride over, we spoke excitedly over it, sharing our thoughts, "Can you believe it's finally about to be completed?" I said as I looked over at Emerson from the passenger's seat, "It's so bittersweet, ya know? I just— I can't believe it's over" I said now staring out the window a bit melancholy now.

"I wouldn't say it's over," he said winking back, as I blushed, "But yeah, I know what you mean, it's been a wild ride— a great experience for me too. I loved working with you each day" He said, reaching for my left hand and then squeezing it tightly in his.

We decided to have ourselves a little viewing party if you will, with snacks and soft drinks. But When we pulled up to the driveway, Seeing Delilah on the hammock gazing out at the ocean, my stomach churned. Emerson gave my forehead a kiss, 'Maybe I'll grab some more snacks from the market, yeah?' I nodded, a knot of unease tightening in my stomach as I watched him go. Delilah looked up at me as I approached, her expression a mixture of sadness and something else I couldn't quite place.

'Izzy? Is that you?' she asked softly.

"Hey" I replied quietly,

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you sweetie..." she said, relieved, grabbing me and holding me so tight in her arms. "I ....I was so scared I'd lost you, Izzy. I shouldn't have reacted like that, that was wrong" she cried, "Shush— hey, hey" I said looking at her,

"It's okay delilah—I forgive you," I whispered calmly, hugging her.

"No but— you don't understand, I messed everything up," she choked out,

"I don't even know why I was—Jealous?" she questioned, the word hanging in the air,

"Yeah... I guess that's what it was— jealous" Delilah confessed,

"Why on earth would you be jealous?" I said chuckled, confused.

"Well, Seeing you two—Getting so close I— I panicked," she said.

A cold knot tightened in my chest as I slowly pulled away from her embrace.

“Seeing us? You saw us?” I asked slightly, trying to read her expression.

“You just looked so happy—like your mom; the day she met your dad” Delilah said softly, staring down now; a wistful smile touching her lips at the fond brief memory of simpler times. A strange sensation shot straight through me.

‘But— Dad left us,’ I replied in confusion and a flicker of anger stirred within me. Why would she mention him now, at a moment like this.

“No one ever loved her the way I did—until HE came along,’ Delilah confessed, her voice thick with emotion and resentment.

A wave of understanding washed over me. That was it—that was why Delilah left Lighthouse point; she couldn’t bear to watch the woman she loved with someone else. Her resentment towards my Dad, the blame she carried for mom’s death... it all clicked into place for me.

A cold fury simmered and tightened in my chest. My voice trembled as I spoke further, shaking my head from side to side in disbelief.

“Oh my god—It wasn’t dad who had the other woman was it— it was you?” I said suspiciously, “You *were* the other woman” I stated. She stood there, mortified, statuesque, her silence speaking volumes.

“You were in love with mom” I accused, and she nodded her head yes, in response. “ I don’t know how I never realized it before!” I thought aloud.

“You lied to me Delilah—My whole life is a lie” I said, A single, hot tear escaped and traced a path down my cheek. “Did Nana never even know?” The question tore from my throat, raw with disbelief.

Delilah’s silence was a heavy weight in the air. Slowly, disjointed memories and snippets of conversations with her and Nana began to blend together in my mind. Dad’s deep and unwavering love for Mom, the unusual dynamic of the three of them since high school, his growing frustration and weariness of their relationship, his secret desire to leave this town and start anew with Mom... the pieces clicked into a devastating picture. A terrible realization that dawned over me, as my voice barely a whisper said, “Dad left because he was tired of competing for her love—with you” I stated.

“You don’t understand—She told me she loved me too, Izzy. But she was afraid of what people would think, what they would do— she knew they wouldn’t understand”

Delilah explained, her voice heavy. “So when she chose the traditional route, of staying with dad—you left” I said curtly, thinning my eyes in her direction.

“And even after all the sacrifice, after she chose to stay with him—dad still left” I said disappointingly.

“She never really *chose* anyone— in truth she chose herself and *this place* and your father couldn't do it anymore. I think he grew weary of always trying to gain her love; never knowing where he stood with her. To be honest she didn't want to obligate him into staying either— especially if she didn't love him back the way he deserved. So— she let him go.”

I heard Delilah's words as they swirled in my mind. I came to a full circle of understanding the wise woman my mother actually was. She was selfless and aware, empathic of others. My heart now felt heavy in my chest.

“I... I was so young, so angry at the world— at her; I didn't see the bigger picture” she paused, and went on softly, “But After she found out she was pregnant with you, something changed in her” Delilah said looking down feeling ashamed of her own decisions.

“Helen found peace; no longer at war with herself or her choices. I envied her for that— All that mattered was you. And your future. Rightfully so.”

“So she hid who she was— because of me?” I asked,

“No—don't you see. You helped her find her truth, to find out what was most important above everything, including herself. Despite everything else. She chose YOU.”

“For all my talk—I still pretended—I wasn't brave like her—I still tried to stay with someone I didn't love, pregnant and unhappy, unaccepted, in a place I didn't know” she sighed, “When Abby's dad overdosed, I knew it was my second chance to go home, to be with your mom even if it wasn't as openly as I wanted to be.... And then I got the call” she teared up.

“Your mother was the most selfless woman I ever met— and it wasn't until her death that I finally understood her reasons” she admitted,

“I was so naive, Izzy. Entitled and stubborn— hot headed” she voiced, “I thought the world *owed me* something— but it didn't. In this life—you're not just given things simply because life is a little harder for you, or you're a bit different. Your mom showed me best— if they don't accept you or understand who you are, then you make them. You Show them and they just might love you forever” She chuckled a bit through her

tears, “I figured New York City was the place to be, ya know? to find that acceptance I longed for and although it's a wonderful place— I was still wrong” she shook her head, “You can't go looking for acceptance, kiddo, or validation; if you never had it within yourself to begin with” she reflected.

“It's funny, I always thought I was the strong one. That Helen was being the phony, but in reality I was the weak one” she admitted.

“So What *did* you find in New york?” I asked,

“I found like minds— accolades, and intelligent, artistic people to pass the time— but never a true home...” Delilah continued,

“She didn't want that for you Izz— She wanted to give you this place. And it's only now that I get it, she was right.”

“I don't know what to say—” I stood there, my mind racing.

“When we had you and Abby around the same time” she took a deep breath, “It was no longer just about us anymore” She admitted aloud.

“And your father desperately tried to change her heart but—”

"Izzy. You need to know....I'm sorry. That I wasn't strong enough to stay by your mom's side— I'm sorry I ran away,' Delilah continued, her voice laced with regret. 'I threw myself into writing, met Abby's dad in the city; got pregnant. I thought I could escape it all. But I never imagined... what would happen—” she said gulping through a few tears.

"And now look at me,' I said laughing at myself, the demand in my voice sharp with pain. “What good did any of it do, Delilah? All the lies—” Tears welled in my eyes, blurring my vision.

“What am I now?” I choked out, the bitterness rising in my throat, “Still a product of a broken home and small town tragedy. Everyone in this town looks at me like some sad story.” I blurted, in frustration.

“That's not true izzy!” Delilah shouted passionately back at me, now trying to hold me, to console me but I couldn't let her.

“People here love you! not only because of who your mother was, but *because* of who you are.” she said sweetly, “And who is that?” I snapped back, “Because honestly Delilah, I don't know” I asked looking up at her through my tears.

"You're The girl who writes stories and brings them to life— just like her mother" she finished smiling. "You are so much more to these people, these kids and this community than you think. Since you were little, you took up the torch—You gave them purpose, and a place to feel welcomed with your stories and plays— You inspire people.... the way Helen did. You inspire me everyday" she finished.

I looked at her taking in every word and absorbing it, appreciating her kind words. I wondered at that moment if she was right? if my mom would have been proud of me.

But then A fresh wave of anger washed over me again, sharp and fierce it boiled to the surface, "...was it even a random accident? A hitchhiker like they said?" My voice trembled with rage, "Or was it something else— Some kind of hate crime." The thought sent a violent tremor through me. Delilah just shook her head, her shoulders lifting in a helpless shrug, her kind eyes clearly unaware of the dark places my mind was going.

"I don't know sweetie— But I can promise you, When she died I never saw a town so distraught for one person. Your mom was truly loved here" she said reassuring me,

"Whatever monster that took her away from us, was a thing beyond our control and far beyond lighthouse point."

Tears blurred my vision, each drop a testament to the shattered reality Delilah had unveiled. "It took me a long time to finally let go and accept that" she said.

It felt as though everything I had ever known, every foundation of my life, imploded in minutes. My legs felt weak, and I leaned heavily against the weathered porch fence, struggling to hold myself upright. The rhythmic sloshing of the waves against the shore and the distant cries of seagulls seemed indifferent to the chaos within me. So many questions clawed at my mind, a frantic, overwhelming explosion of confusion and disbelief had exploded and now just simmered at the surface.

A wave of reluctant sympathy washed over me, warring with my anger. "I—im sorry, you had to carry this alone for the past 20 years" I said, though the words felt inadequate. As she reached for my hand, a primal instinct made me pull away.

"But you still lied to me, Delilah," I stated, the accusation hanging heavy in the air. "You built our entire family together on a lie."

"Gave me a world woven from false truths," I added, a single tear tracing a cold path down my cheek"...Did Nana know?" I asked, the question barely audible.

"No," she whispered, her voice filled with a fragile certainty. "...I don't think so."

A heavy silence descended, the only sound the gentle rhythm of the waves. Delilah watched me, her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and sorrow as I paced the length of the porch, trying to process the enormity of everything we exchanged. Finally, she spoke, her voice now steady,

"The thought of losing you, Izzy... the way I lost her... of losing the family we had built, however flawed... it was unbearable and I knew you would never forgive me if you knew the truth" she said.

"That night you went missing... it brought back everything I had lost," she admitted, a wave of shame washing over her. She lowered her head, cradling her face in her hands, as if trying to contain her anguish. Slowly, I approached her. Kneeling down, I gently cupped her trembling hands in mine, a sudden rush of sorrow for her pain and the weight of the lie she had carried flooding my heart.

"I can't keep being this constant reminder for you, Delilah," I said gently, wiping the tears from her face. "A living echo of what you might or might not have done wrong by my mom." Delilah nodded slowly, her eyes filled with a weary understanding.

"And I don't want to be that reminder anymore," I continued, my voice firm but soft. "It wasn't your fault that she loved you both" I stood up, still holding onto her hand, offering a gentle tug.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, her grip on my hand tightening.

"You need to tell Abby the truth, Delilah. She deserves to know who you really are," I said, my voice filled with affection and conviction.

Just then, Emerson's truck pulled into the driveway.

"I'm gonna go," I said, releasing her hand. "I'll come back after you two have talked."

She nodded, a flicker of something akin to hope in her eyes. "Are you sure? I thought the film was finished." Her tone held a fragile lightness.

"Yeah," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "...I think I just need some time alone anyway... you know, to process everything." I backed away slowly, stepping off the porch. "I'll be okay..." I offered her a small, reassuring smirk, waving again until her voice called out, "Iris!"

"Yeah?" I replied turning back to her,

..she would be so proud of you." A small, genuine smile finally touched my lips. I ran back into her arms and gave her a final hug.

"I love you, Delilah—"

"—More than all the stars in the sky, kiddo. More than all the stars," she finished, her own eyes brimming with tears.

As I hurried back to the truck, a wave of dizziness washed over me, and my breath hitched in my throat. Emerson, carrying a bag overflowing with snacks, looked at me, his brow furrowed with concern. "What's wrong, Iris?" he asked immediately. But all I could manage to gasp out was,

"Take me to Rosie's... to my hilltop, please?" I begged, forcing myself to maintain a semblance of composure.

We sat in silence on the hilltop for what felt like an eternity, the vast expanse mirroring the turmoil within me. I had to accept everything for what it was, like Delilah said but the truth was It was so heavy on my heart.

Finally, after about thirty minutes, the lump in my throat eased enough for me to speak, and I poured out everything to Emerson.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

"I will be," I admitted, a small, unsteady smirk twisting my lips. "It feels like my whole world has been ripped apart, turned inside out— and then placed back together only, different, you know?" My voice caught, and tears threatened to spill over. "Like I don't even know who I am anymore, or what I truly believe in— I don't know what to do with all of this" I signaled with my hand over my heart, a Sign that I was completely overwhelmed with emotions.

"Yes, you do, Iris Wheeler," he said with unwavering confidence, his hand finding mine and squeezing it gently. "You are the fiercely talented director and writer of an extraordinary short film, a coming-of-age story the world doesn't even realize it desperately needs" He looked directly into my eyes, his thumb softly wiping away the tears that finally escaped.

"What if I'm not good enough Em?" I whispered, the insecurity gnawing at me. "What if everything my mom sacrificed for me... what if it was all for nothing?"

"That's impossible, Iris. You are it. Look at me," he insisted, gently tilting my chin so our eyes met. "You possess a wit, a talent; a raw moxy that rivals Spielberg, and anyone out there" he smiled, "You are an inspiration and one of the strongest people I've ever met. And I love you, because of that ...for your passion and your enthusiasm and the way you see people" I sniffed and wiped my nose on my hoodie sleeve, "You *saw* me" he finished.

"This film...It's just so heavy now" I said, a new understanding dawning within me, "...it means so much more to me, now."

"It's a love letter," I stated, my voice gaining a touch more strength, "to all the young people trying to find their way, navigating their youth despite feeling different, despite not fitting in" I teared.

"It's for The basket cases; the outcasts..." I continued, as overwhelming pride took over me, "Knowing my mom never truly belonged here, but that she carved out a place for herself anyway, despite all the people in this world who weren't *ready* for her." Tears welled up again, blurring my face "she made them love her Emerson..." I choked out, looking at him. "She was brave and amazing... and this whole town *adored* her."

"I want to honor that," I finished, my voice thick with emotion.

"Hey, and you will" he murmured, pulling me into a tight embrace, holding me closer than ever before. He pressed a tender kiss to the top of my head as we sat there in the growing chill of the night, the sky above us bleeding into breathtaking gradients of pink, purple, and blue as the sun dipped below the horizon. In that moment, Emerson felt like the only anchor keeping me from drifting completely out to sea.

## *Final Cut, First Doubts*

Days passed and Abby called me telling me everything her and Delilah discussed.

"Hey, Are you okay?" she asked worriedly,

"Yeah..... I think I'll be alright."I said, pausing.

"What about You?" I asked back, "I mean it's not hard to believe that we technically could have been raised as sisters..." she laughed,



“But sure, I’m okay. So, my moms a little gay...who isn’t?” she said, we both burst with laughter. Abby always knew what to say, she was my saving grace. I never understood how she was so forgiving, so selfless, checking in on me first but then again maybe we were also a reflection of Delilah and my mom— the kind of friendship that represented unwavering, unconditional love.

“Look I know it’s not my place but, despite everything. We’re still a family, however weird or different... our lives intertwined for a reason...” she said as I remained quiet on the line, “you’re always gonna be my family Izz. You are my sister And I don’t care how it happened but you’re stuck with me.” I laughed.

“On a lighter note I have some amazing news, but I don’t want you to be mad at me okay?” she said,

“Why would I be mad at you, dummy? What’s up?” I asked.

“Well, do to recent events and how much this film means to you. I went forward and submitted it, in time for the Great South Bay Film Festival, just like you planned.” she said quietly,

“You what?” I said,

“My mom said she can talk to her friend on the side about future plans for it but yeah ...I submitted it at the beginning of last week” she finished.

“ABBY, I haven’t even seen the final edited scene. Are you insane?” I shouted.

“Look I know you didn’t see the final cut, but you knew the entirety and i’m telling you Izz, it’s great. And I didnt want you to miss the deadline from being sidetracked, with what happened..” She explained, “I know you’ve been mentally checked out a bit so—” she said, “So you took my work and decided to enter it without my permission?!” I asked,

“You know it’s my work too and yes, You know I wouldn’t lie to you.... I’ve been working with you since we were what? nine for christ sakes! It’s good. Your best yet! Believe me!” said Abby.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

“Abby, I could kill you right now....but” I went on,

“I do love you with every fucking fiber of my being and you are so lucky that I trust you with my life.” I admitted,

“Good.....so then you're not mad anymore? Perfect! because there's more good news!” she exclaimed. “There is? how?” I ask confused,

“Yes..... Well, it's been two weeks since the deadline. And they reviewed the top 20.” she said.

“Yeah And??” I ask,

“WE MADE THE CUT GIRL.” she shouted through the phone.

“Are you kidding me?!” I hollered,

“You can't be serious?!” I said.

“Yup! They sent a letter back, stating:

“Dear Iris Wheeler,

*We are thrilled to announce Your short film “Misfit Island” has placed in the top twenty of the Great South Bay Film Festival this year. Placing 4th, out of our finalists; Your film demonstrated integrity and vulnerability throughout a coming of age narration, bringing unique and modern creative twists to viewers. We hope you will be in attendance on July 31st, to receive your Recognition award And are looking forward to your future work! Please accept this letter as further recognition for your hard work in the filmmaking community.”*

“Oh my god” I said in disbelief.

“I KNOW!” Said Abby, “And you have ME to thank!” she added jokingly.

“Abby, I don't know what to say....I mean. Wow.” I said holding the phone barely to my face now in shock.

“Well say We're celebrating at Cals with the whole crew... TONIGHT!” she shouted.

“I don't want you to worry about anything. I'll text everyone in the group chat!” she finished.

“Okay, What time?” I asked,

“Tell Emerson to pick you up around.... 7:30!” she demanded,

“Ya know since he's the ONLY one of us you've been seeing these two weeks” She groaned.

I chuckled, “OKAY, okay! Well be there!”

After I hung up the phone with Abby I texted Emerson,

“Hey! So, amazing news. Guess what?!”

“Hey cutie, what?”

“Well, first I thought I was gonna kill Abby because apparently

She submitted Misfit Island without my knowledge ....”

“Uh oh, Really?”

“Yup! But it's a good thing she did because I missed the deadline and I didn't realize, given everything going on—”

“Well, that's good. That was a great judgement call by her I guess...

After all she's always looking out for your best interest—”

“No wait Emerson, but that's not even the best part, get this—”

“It's not? —What??”

“We placed 4th in the GSB film festival....

“Youre shittin' me. Get outta here!”

“I am not sir, we will be expected to come down on July 31st for the screening!”

“Iris, that is sick news. I knew you could do it. I'm so proud of you!!!”

“Yeah, well I couldn't have done it without you... So, thank you.”

“This has quickly become the best summer of life despite ya know”

Lol you deserve every bit of this recognition.

we have to celebrate with everyone tonight at Cals,

so get changed. Pick me up round 7:30 kay? Abby's orders lol

“Cals?”

“Yeah, Abby said Mckenzie is bartending tonight... So free Drinks!

“Still.... I just figured Rosies... ya know?”

“...Not really a fan of Cals.”

“Well apparently it's supposed to rain tonight so Rosies was vetoed.

I stared at the words “*not really a fan of Cals*” a new found paranoia grew within my stomach. It was bizarre how quickly his texts felt a little....distant all of the sudden, Especially considering the amazing news.

.....Is that not okay with you?” I texted once more,

“Np. see you at 7:30” he replied back.

“Np” for no problem? Since when did we abbreviate no problem?

As the Conversation ended through text, I wasn't really sure if something was wrong with Emerson but I didn't have time to find out. I got ready within the hour, throwing on a black lace sundress and wedges. When Emerson got here I hopped into his truck expecting

a kiss hello, but instead he began driving us off into town without a word; I felt Something shift between us in the silence, something felt unsettlingly different.

“You okay?” I say, concerned.

“Yeah. I'm fine, why?” he replied sharply.

“Oh, um I don't know you just seem.... Oddly cold all of the sudden.” I said.

“Yeah, I just have some things on my mind, work stuff, sorry.” he said quickly.

“Oh, okay.” I said, staring out the window as the radio played out.

The day was a bit cloudy, mirroring my current unsettling emotions  
With emerson. As we arrived he pulled over in front of Calhouns,  
“Why don't you just walk in, while I park over by the shop” he said,  
“Oh um, sure” I jumped out of the truck and walked in heading for the bar where the whole  
crew had collected. I made my way over to Abby who always managed to squeeze her way  
through crowds in front of the bar.

“IZZY! HEY! Over here!” she shouted excitedly,

“Hey!” I yelled back, she handed me a cold beer.

“Cheers! TO THE BEST DAMN DIRECTOR THIS TOWNS EVER SEEN!” she happily toasted.

“Where's Em?” She asked confused,

“Oh he's just parking—” I said quickly hiding my emotions,

“Oh! There he is!” Abby said pointing to the other side of the bar; it was packed to the Gil's  
tonight in Cals. As I looked over to where she pointed I could see him speaking with  
Mckenzie. “Um Am I seeing things right, Izzy? look!” she said above the crowd.

Emerson looked very serious and before I could process what was happening, I saw  
Mckenzie's hand playing with his hair, tenderly brushing it away from his face. My hands  
began shaking with a combination of emotions ranging from anger to sadness to fear.

He quickly grabbed her hand, removing it from his face. It was then that Abby was  
just as confused as I was,

“Wait, What the hell— why is Kenzie touching him like that dude!” She said,

“—She knows you're together!” Abby said now infuriated.

Still confused and a bit shocked, I only answered her back with an,

“I don't know—I don't get it either,” I said in disbelief.

“Well, if you don't go over there, I will Izz. That's hella inappropriate! That bitch!” she said.

Emerson in that moment grabbed Kenzie and dragged her to a more secluded area of the bar; away from prying eyes. Immediately, I followed them discreetly to the back kitchen pantry, in a hallway near the bathrooms. I could hear them speaking to each other, before I tippytoe against the porthole windows of the old pantry doors.

Abby curiously followed behind me; I should have known she would. Rolling my eyes as she stepped on my toes a few times to get a clear view of what was going on in the pantry, “Oouch! Damnit Abbs move over!” I muttered, “Sorry!” she whispered back.

Mckenzie was now trying to wrap her arms around Emersons neck, making sensual gestures with her index finger over his lips.

“Cut it out Kenzie Jesus!” He seemed frustrated with her, removing her hands at every turn. “Why?! What is your damage with that little film geek anyways, we had something that was so fun!” said Mckenzie, “And now you're gonna tell me you dont wanna hookup anymore?” she finished.

“No— we had something that was short lived and Superficial— And now it's done.” He said sternly, “I'm with Iris now and I mean it, kenzie—you need to stop texting me or trying to meet up— it's over dude” He stated.

“You're telling me you're done with me, because of some 20 year old toddler?” She said annoyed, “No, no, I'm telling you I'm done with you because—you are an immature, self obsessive, entitled, privileged little bitch” he smirked,

Abby and I high fived quietly to ourselves, outside the doors,

“Yas Emerson! Get it!” Abby whispered, silently snapping to herself.

“Oh fuck you shoobie, what you think youre so cool cuz youre the new kid in town? Some little rich boy from midwest Suburbia?” Kenzie snapped back continuing,

“You think Izzy's gonna give two shits about you when she goes back to her “Big City” Film school in the fall— You are a meaningless blip on the radar in this town. You're never gonna fit in, you'll never be *one of us*” she said in a harsh tone.

“Funny; so why do you give a shit so much that I'm done with you, if I'm so meaningless?” He said sarcastically.

She took a step back, peeved, but now trying hard to keep his attention; her hands moved slowly down his left leg, “You weren't saying all this bullshit two weeks ago—” She said playfully with a devilish smile, then attempting to kiss him she leaned in. I saw his hand

caress her neck, then her cheeks and finally he grabbed her chin with his whole hand pulling her inward,

“I have literally met chicks like you all my life Kenzie— insecure, fake and void of anything real. So why don't you quit playing your little games on me and find a new toy, because frankly —you bore me.” He tossed her face to the side and turned around to walk out the doors.

Abby And I were frozen where we stood, unable to move out of the hallway fast enough to be undetected. I looked at him square in the face, my mind unable to avoid the obvious question: had he been cheating on me with Mckenzie this whole time? Was I a fool?

I ran out of the hallway and out of the bar, to where I had no Idea for now I just had to settle with standing on the sidewalk, attempting to breathe.

“Izzy!” Abby yelled after me as I ran. My mind raced, I knew it, I had trusted someone far too quickly with the deepest parts of myself for the very first time. I felt as though I would vomit right there, on the street in front of Calhouns. I thought about everything we shared this summer, everything we had accomplished and overcome together. I sensed the lingering, gut wrenching stab of betrayal sitting in the pit of my stomach and soon I couldn't breathe, Hyperventilating. The air became Thin and my breath, shaky. I was having a panic attack.

“I have to—I have to get out of here” I whispered to myself.

All I could think to do at that moment was run—So I did. I ran so fast. I could hear his voice echoing behind me on the nautical mile.

“Iris!! IRIS!” he shouted,

I leaned up against the brick wall of Mariners B&B in a crouched position trying to breathe calmly, slowly. Finally Emerson caught up to me,

“Iris! I can completely explain—Its not what you think” he proclaimed,

“—Did you sleep with her?” I asked, abruptly,

“What?” he asked nervously,

“Did you. Sleep with her, Emerson.” I asked a second time more aggressively.

“You don't understand—it was before we were really together,” he confessed.

As soon as the words left his lips, I started walking further past Mariners B&B ignoring him. He then began following me, explaining himself further.

“Iris. We weren’t together yet—I was new in town!!” he continued,

“Look—Please, you gotta believe me. We were hooking up for a VERY small period of time—But I ended it with her once things got serious with us.” he begged,

“I swear,” he promised.

“When?” I asked,

“Huh?” he asked confused,

“When did you end it? After we had sex the first time? Or the second time?” I asked in an angry condescending tone. He shifted, pressing his tongue into his cheek and looking away,

“I ended it the first time we took the boat out; that day along the coast..” he said, a bit defeated, knowing how bad it sounded. Silence fell for about a minute or so as I shook my head disappointed, “I can’t believe you. I trusted you” I said,

“It meant nothing Iris, it was just sex—” he said,

“Oh, really, so sex means nothing to you now?” I asked,

“What? No! I’m just saying— You’re only 20— you don’t understand—”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, so now I’m too young and inexperienced to understand the inner workings of casual Sex?” I said Bitterly, snarling at him.

“I can’t do this, you won’t gimme a chance to even explain. You’re just going to use this as a reason—” he stated,

“A reason?” I questioned in annoyance.

“To push me away,” he said, a bit defensive, “just admit it, you were waiting for this.”

“Excuse me— I’m sorry, I was Waiting for you to sleep with another woman?” I said,

“You were waiting for me to fuck it up” I said,

“I think we need to stop seeing each other, Emerson.” I said coldly, stepping away from him.

“I think that: I trusted you way too much. Way too fast.” I said through sniffles of small tears.

“This is what im talking about—you are looking for reasons to put up a wall Iris! you know you don’t actually mean that!” he shouted,

“Yeah—I think I do, and I think we’re done here” I said turning around.

“—I love you,” He confessed, whispering under a low breath, as I began slowly walking away. “I was trying to tell her to stop— That it was over” he voice shouted out behind me.

“I want you.....

And only you” he said through an unsteady voice.

It was quiet until I turned back around to say,

“Then why did you lie?”

With that, I walked on, not really knowing where, but only knowing that I had too. He continued to holler after me, “Don't end it like this! Iris—”

But I was gone in the Salty mist of the boardwalk air.

Hours later, Abby found me crashed out on the porch, against her front door. When I never showed up at Cals again tonight or answered my phone; she went looking for me and with some ideas of where I might be, this was her last stop. Hovering over me she said, “Hey. stay here tonight okay?” she asked.

I looked at her with big sad eyes, defeated,

“Yeah..... okay” I said, crushed, curled up in a ball on the floor planks of her weathered porch.

Laying on the Lavender purple loveseat in Abby's room the rest of the night, I kept trying to wrap my head around it all; How could he not understand my hurt, my pain? The thought of his lips on Mckenzie's or her Twenty Three year old Model body under his; It was more than I could bear, “I can't take this anymore— I'm going insane.” I shouted, “I just can't shake the thought of them together.” I confessed to Abby.

“I know. I know, Izz—Shush, it's okay” Abby said, petting my head in her lap now.

“Look I know this is gonna sound bad or it might be something you don't wanna hear right now but....” She took a deep breath.

“Do you think there's a slight chance that— I mean maybe you might be— I don't know, Holding on to this a little too much?” she asked,

“I mean he said he loves you. Who cares if he was with mckenzie first. You heard what he said to her, she meant nothing.” She stated.



"I see what you guys have and it's the real deal Izz ...I'm just saying, Don't throw it away over something meaningless—some Technicality." She finished.

"He was seeing both of us, Abby. You're telling me you'd forgive Hunter?" I said furiously.

"Yes, but the moment you became something truly real in his life, he ended things! That's what matters!" she said,

"Well I don't know about you but sex isn't just a meaningless thing to me—" I said, "Well, I don't know Iris, for some people it's different. Especially if they're older. I mean you said it yourself, he'd been with a lot of women—Maybe he experienced something so much deeper with you—" She explained.

I remained quiet, zoning out at the periwinkle blue ceiling of Abby's room.

"You know what I think?" she said, "What?" I asked with an attitude, my back now facing her as I turned over on the loveseat.

"I think you're deflecting. I think you never intended it to get this far, Like all your short lived relationships." She continued,

"And I think it scares the shit outta you. You're scared of how much you like him—love him and you ARE only twenty, so the thought of finding this so early in life? it freaks you out." she said,

"Ha! Okay Abs, you got me" I gave a sarcastic chuckle, and snarled.

"And I think, the possibilities of having a reason for a future, here, like your mom is wiggling you out too." She quipped back, "You're using this as a defense mechanism to end it, and you know it." She finished.

"OH, really? You think so, *Freud*?" I said condescending.

"You know, this all coming from the girl who took 13 years to finally make a move on the guy she loves" I said as a low blow attempt to hurt her feelings regarding Hunter.

"If you really think im doing this on purpose, you're delusional" I finished.

"Yes! I do. And you can be mad at me all you want, and try to be a total bitch.... But newsflash Izz, I will always have your best interest at heart. And If you don't like that, then find another best friend" she clapped back, and quickly lay on her side, facing the wall of her bed. I huffed and we laid there in the quiet of early morning hours, with only the faint echoes of hooting night owls to keep us company. As I lay there I contemplated all the things said, wondering if *she had a point or Maybe, just maybe, she was right?*

The following day I woke up to find Abby downstairs eating breakfast, Delilah was watering the flowers outside.

“Hey” I said softly, ashamed at how I behaved towards her. Abby and I never really fought except for the time when we were 15 over concert tickets.

“Hey.” she replied.

“Look, I'm really sorry about how I acted towards you last night but—it's just all really fresh and right now I just need some time to cool off— I don't want to think about Emerson for now, okay?” I asked,

“Got it. And Apology accepted” She said forgivingly,

“Want some cereal?” she asked, “Sure” I took a deep breath and sat down with her.

The next two weeks passed quickly within July, as I hung out with Abby and Hunter, avoiding Emerson at every turn around town. He tried calling, texting, but I never responded. Messages were left on my machine, usually sounding apologetic, remorseful, or regretful.

**BEEP\*** “Look, I've been thinking alot....and I just dont think this is over.

*We deserve to give this another shot. Don't you think?”* he'd ask.

By the end of each voicemail, it often sounded the same, beeping out to a subtle cliffhanger.

**BEEP\*** “You're entitled to hate me. I get it.”

**BEEP\*** *Okay. I can take a hint. But Wheeler, I'm never gonna stop loving you. So you can avoid my messages all you want, but I still live here and we're bound to see each other eventually...*

Ultimately, one of his final attempts sounded much like desperation and it left my heart in pieces.

**BEEP\*** “ hi..... I just” He breathed heavily into the phone,

*“I miss you so much... I miss talking with you. I miss laughing with you...*

*God, I miss your laugh.”* The beep rang out.

I couldn't deny that I missed him more than I could say, but the fact of the matter was I couldn't bring myself to forgive him and maybe I *was* scared like Abby accused me to be; Scared that I forgave him the moment I found out because secretly I knew it didn't matter. But it was too late I thought, Too much time had passed now to run back to him like some sad puppy dog and what would I even say? I love you? I miss you too? It all felt so cliché. So what if I was stubborn or prideful, at least I had my dignity.

### *Holding separate 'lines'*

One Saturday morning Hunter had promised Abby and I some of those surf lessons we'd forever talked about having whenever he'd be back from college. I figured it was the perfect distraction during these dreadful past two weeks of my fairly new singledom.

The Saturday morning air at Hemlock Cove still clung to the cool, dewy whispers of dawn when Hunter led the way there, as he always did when we were kids. It wasn't a place you stumbled upon; the narrow, overgrown path that snaked down from the main road felt more like a deer trail, smelling of damp earth. As the trees gave way, the cove unfolded like a hushed promise the way it always did. The sun, still low and buttery, was just beginning to spill over the eastern cliffs, painting the undersides of a few scattered clouds in strokes of apricot and rose.

Hunter, already halfway to the water's edge with three boards under his arms as if they were extensions of his own limbs, had a relaxed, almost reverent look on his face. This was clearly his sanctuary. For Abby and me, a mix of nervous excitement and sheer awe at the cove's secluded beauty made our hearts thump a little faster. The air felt charged with the thrill of a shared secret and the promise of finally feeling the ocean's push beneath our feet after years wanting to give it a go.

Year after year, we'd watch Hunter from the shore, a dark silhouette against the glittering water, effortlessly dancing with the waves. Hemlock Cove had always been

Hunter's domain, a place we visited together to soak in the quiet beauty as locals, to listen to the rhythmic crash, and to witness his almost mystical connection to the ocean. Then, just about a month ago, it had become something else entirely. It was where I'd brought Emerson, the first time I'd truly shared my secret with an outsider, the salt-laced air thick with unspoken promises and the quiet thrill of new intimacy. It was supposed to be his initiation, a shared sacred space. Now, those fresh, tender memories felt like raw wounds overlaid on the comfortable tapestry of my childhood here with Abby and Hunter.

Today, though, was different. Hunter turned, his easy grin a familiar comfort, "Ready to stop watching and start riding?" he asked, his voice a low, encouraging murmur against the gentle rhythm of the waves. He led us through the dry land drills first: how to paddle, how to pop up, the crucial balance. The rough texture of the wax beneath my fingertips, the unexpected weight of the board as I tried to carry it, the cool kiss of the offshore breeze – every sensation was sharp, immediate. Abby, ever the methodical one, listened with intense focus, mimicking his movements with a serious concentration that bordered on competition.

For me, the past two weeks had been a blur of replaying conversations and fighting a persistent ache in my chest. Every time my mind tried to slip back to Emerson, to the hollowness of our breakup, Hunter's clear voice or the surprisingly heavy weight of the board would yank me back to the present moment. The physical awkwardness of learning how to surf, the unfamiliar stretch of muscles, was a strange, welcomed distraction. It was a blank slate, demanding all my focus, leaving no room for the ghosts of what-ifs.

Hunter's patient adjustments, his simple, clear instructions, were a welcome anchor. Each small movement, each awkward attempt, pushed everything else to the side, focusing me entirely on the here and now. The quiet anticipation of watching him surf had always been a pleasure; the thrilling, clumsy reality of trying it ourselves was something else entirely. It was about submerging myself in something totally new, letting the vastness of the ocean wash away the smaller, sharper pains of the shore, even the ones that had so recently taken root in this very sand.

After the dry land drills, Hunter deemed us ready for the water. I felt a thrill of nervous excitement mixed with a healthy dose of fear as I carried my board towards the

surf. The cool water nipped at my ankles, then rose to my knees as I waded in. The weight of the board was surprisingly heavy, and I wobbled a bit, feeling suddenly clumsy.

"Don't worry, everyone feels like a newborn giraffe the first time," Hunter called out with a reassuring grin. "Just take it slow Izzy."

He positioned us in the shallow water, demonstrating how to lay on the board, paddle, and eventually attempt to stand. I watched Abby with a mixture of amusement and admiration. Abby was already determined, practicing her pop-up, her brow furrowing in concentration.

"Alright, first, let's just get comfortable paddling," Hunter instructed. "Feel the rhythm of the waves. Don't fight them; work with them."

I lay on the board, the wax slightly rough against my stomach, and began paddling. It was harder than it looked, and I quickly realized that my arms were going to get a workout, not to mention the wicked rash I'd probably receive by the day's end.

*Should've worn a proper rash guard like he said ugh, way to go Izz,* I thought. The board wobbled beneath me, and I felt a surge of panic as a small wave washed over me trying to pull me under.

"Keep your weight centered!" Hunter shouted, his voice a helpful guide.

Gradually, I found a rhythm. I could feel the push and pull of the water, the gentle rise and fall of the board. It was exhilarating, a sense of connection to something larger than myself. After a while, Hunter instructed me to try popping up.

I watched Abby go first. With a grunt of effort, Abby managed a wobbly stand, arms flailing for balance. She only lasted a few seconds before toppling into the water with a large splash, but she surfaced with a triumphant grin. *Shocker,* I thought, there was Abby being awesome at something else. Envious but proud I gave her a giant high five.

"Your turn, Izzy!" Abby yelled, laughing.

Taking a deep breath, I positioned myself and waited for a wave. I could feel the water lifting the board, giving it momentum.

"Now Izzy Go!" Hunter yelled. I pushed myself up, trying to mimic the motion he'd shown me prior. For a fleeting moment, I was standing! The world tilted, the water surged by, and I felt an incredible rush of adrenaline. But then, my balance faltered, and I plunged down into the cool water.

I resurfaced, sputtering and laughing, My hair plastered to my face. It wasn't graceful, but it was amazing.

"I stood up! Did you see that?!" I shouted, my voice filled with pure joy.

"You sure did, girl!" Hunter yelled, beaming. "That was sick, Izzy!"

We spent the next hour or so paddling, attempting pop-ups, and falling into the water. Each time, I felt a little more confident, a little more connected to the rhythm of the waves. The sun climbed higher in the sky, warming my skin, and the salt spray tasted incredible on my lips.

Eventually, Hunter called a break and we dragged our boards back onto the sand, collapsing onto our towels, laughing and breathless. Hunter pulled out a small cooler packed with sandwiches, fruit, and cold drinks. We ate in comfortable silence for a while, just enjoying the moment, the sound of the waves, the warmth of the sun.

"This is exactly what I needed," I muttered, biting into a sandwich.

"Thank you guys" I said looking at Abby and Hunter, as she sat on his lap now.

"Anytime," he replied, giving me a genuine smile.

"I knew you would love it Izz" said Abby. She stretched, a contented sigh escaping her lips. "I'm definitely going to feel this tomorrow," she said, as Hunter chuckled, "But it was worth it."

As we wrapped up eating, I found myself looking out at the ocean, at the waves that still seemed to call to me. I realized that something had shifted within me that long morning. The pain of the breakup with Emerson was still here, a dull ache, but it no longer felt all-consuming. There was a space within me now, a space filled with the thrill of trying something new, the joy of being with old friends and the sense of connection to the vastness of the ocean.

I thought about Emerson, and a pang of sadness did strike, but it was gentler than before. It was accompanied by a sense of clarity, of knowing that I was strong and resilient, that I could find happiness and fulfillment on my own. The fact of the matter was it was freeing to know I didn't *need* him to accomplish all I had done, but the truth was I still *wanted* him.

After lunch, we swam in the cove, letting the waves carry us. Hunter and Abby challenged each other to see who could stay afloat the longest, while I, the third wheel

floated on my back, gazing up at the sky like I had not too long ago with Emerson. I felt a sense of peace however tinged by memories it was still a sense of belonging, as if I were part of something larger than myself.

As the afternoon sun died down, we packed up our things, our bodies pleasantly tired and sun-kissed, walking back up the overgrown path and back onto our bikes. The sounds of the ocean fading behind us, replaced by the chirping of insects and the rustling of leaves.

"That was amazing," I said, my voice filled with gratitude. "Thank you guys so much."

"Of course," Hunter replied. "We should do this more often again, I know we've been busy but..... It's nice, like old times" he finished. I smiled remembering those preteen kids in overalls and board shorts.

As we reached the main roads, I hugged Abby and Hunter tightly.

"I really needed this," she whispered.

"We know," Abby said, squeezing her back. "We're always here for you, Izzy."

As I rode on home from the halfway point of Hunter's little house, Abby stayed behind and we parted ways. The setting sun casting long shadows on the road, I felt a quiet sense of hope. The pain wasn't gone, but it was different, changed or transformed into something healing.

It was a part of my story, a chapter that had helped me grow a little stronger. And I knew, with a certainty that settled deep in my bones, that I would be okay. Even alone, I had my friends, my family and my passion for filmmaking and now? I had the memory of riding a wave, of feeling the ocean's power beneath my feet. And that, I knew, was enough for now.

## *Festival Bound*

The days kept passing and suddenly, time came for the screening of my short film at the GSB Film festival. I knew at this point, I would bring Delilah as my Plus one; Abby

bringing Hunter of course. We sat at our table number 4, my long black dress complimented by a single pearl necklace that was once my mothers. If only she could have lived to see *all of this*, I took a deep breath in, taking in the grandeur of the event.

A live pianist played out jazz music in the background ever so softly and gave a lightness to the evening; a classic vibe that made it felt much like the likes of Casablanca and I like Ingrid Bergman. I even spoke with a Few of Delilah's old writing buddies, including one in particular; I had to admit I was a bit starstruck.

Delilah's eyes were gleaming as she returned to the table with a glass of wine, tapping me on the shoulder from behind, "Iris, there is someone here I'd like you to meet"

"Hi, so wonderful to meet you," he said in a professional tone, extending his hand out and I did the same. It was an older man,

"Iris this is Mr.Harrison" she introduced, "A very well known Documentary filmmaker and old friend of mine..." Mr. Harrison had a kind face and eyes that seemed to hold a thousand stories.

"Delilah has told me much about your work Missy" he said.

"Hello Mr.Harrison, lovely to meet you! And She has, has she?" I said in response.

His grip was surprisingly firm for a man of his age.

"Yes," he smiled, "I Just saw the screening. 'Misfit Island'... quite a title. And quite a film young lady."

My heart skipped a beat as I smiled back. "What... What did you think, Sir? If you don't mind me asking." I took a large gulp, trying to keep my composure, my voice uneven with a tremor of anxiety slipping through.

"I thought," Mr. Harrison paused, drawing out the suspense,

"that you have a remarkable talent for capturing the quiet moments, the unspoken truths between people. It reminded me of some of Cassavetes' early work."

Cassavetes? I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

"That's... that's incredibly kind of you to say, sir" I responded.

As we continued to talk, I found myself loosening up a bit more. Mr. Harrison asked insightful questions about my creative process, my inspirations, and future plans. For a moment, the weight of everything else—Emerson, my mother's past, the uncertainty of my



own path—seemed to fade into the background. Right then and there I was just a filmmaker talking about my craft, and it felt strangely liberating.

But then, I caught a glimpse of something in the entrance, and my stomach tightened. Somehow, even though it was a long shot, I realized I was still waiting for my *Humfrey Bogart* to waltz back into my life.

Later in the night, I met Willow Macon, the owner of a Los Angeles-based production company that had relocated from New York.

"Oh my goodness, yes! Iris, I've heard so much about your work from Delilah," Willow replied enthusiastically, shaking my hand. She had a very 'time is money' allure about her, "Anyway! If this film gains more recognition, I'd be interested in developing it into a feature. I have potential investors... if you'd be open to it?" she rattled off quickly,

"Are you serious?" I asked, my eyes almost welling up. Willow chuckled at my youthful surprise. "Ha! You are adorable! Fresh and new, like Delilah was when I first discovered her back in the 90s!" Willow smiled.

"You discovered Delilah?!" I exclaimed, astonished.

"Oh yeah! But that was when I was a literary agent. I transitioned to film, leveraging my knowledge of authors and their book adaptation ideas... helping circulate manuscripts to various production companies and what not—" she spat out in one breathe,

"Wow," I murmured, impressed.

"It's all about connections in this business, hunny," Willow winked.

"I decided to expand my horizons. Ha!" she said,

"Anyway, back to your short film; it's a beautiful story, love it! capturing the raw vulnerability of being in your 20s—a more mature 'Dawson's Creek,' if you will," Willow continued. I, however, zoned out, stunned by Willow's directness and filled with a sudden bittersweet joy. It was happening; all my hard work was paying off, yet a sense of emptiness lingered in Emerson's absence. The moment didn't feel complete without him, the person who had believed in me from the beginning.

When the time came for Accepting the award, I felt conflicted to acknowledge the support I had received while wanting to believe in my individual talent. As they called my

name, my knees buckled together making my way up the stage, to the podium. The internal struggle was real.

“First and foremost, I'd just like to say thank you to all those in my life who helped me create such an impactful and beautiful piece of art. This film was the result of multiple basket cases, joining together for the same cause. I'd like to dedicate it to my late mother—Helen Wheeler.....my Aunt figure, Delilah Melas and my best friend Abby Melas, for being the driving forces in life and for this film. And to my Nana and pop pop, for graciously supporting me and providing a tender, loving safe space to grow artistically. You have all nurtured the artist you see here today and I would not have succeeded without you, so I just want to give Thanks and praise. I am forever grateful for all of you and this moment.”

After my speech and a few glasses of champagne later, the loneliness struck harder than ever while watching Abby and Hunter whispering sweet nothings from across the oval table. *It wasn't their fault that they were happy*, I thought, but suddenly *my night didn't feel quite mine* anymore.

I texted Emerson, the only person I truly wanted to speak to who would understand; I gazed out at the ballroom floor at Delilah mingling with old work friends, she looked happy too in her element again.

"I know we're not talking now but...

I wish you were here... to enjoy this with me."

His immediate reply read, "You deserve every bit of tonight."

Not A moment later I replied with, "I'm sorry... about how things ended," regretting all my stubbornness. "I am too—" he said, "I never meant to hurt you Iris...

For what it's worth, I know what we had... It was real."

Devastated by his words and the situation, I took one look up, out at Delilah who instantly recognized my pain. From across the ballroom she knew, the enchantment of the evening had vanished. The magic lifted, the spell broken and the glamor had come to an abrupt end. Grabbing my clutch purse like a white flag, it was time to take this 'Cinderella' back home.

## *Seashells and Second Chances*

August had arrived and with it came the thick swampy heat and the sting of jellyfish season. My third year of college was just around the corner and the thought of returning to campus while things with Emerson still hung in limbo twisted my stomach into knots. We felt so unfinished, I thought. I sorted through what to bring back to school, trying to shake the uneasiness I felt.

Back in January, I'd applied to a handful of internships across the country, hoping my film might gain some traction, once completed. But nothing came of it. So, here I was, packing for another school year, feeling a bit stuck but yet still hopeful for the future. The morning dawned hazy, the sun struggling to pierce through the thick coastal fog. It mirrored my own internal weather, a landscape of confusion and uncertainty. I went downstairs slowly, my body feeling heavy from the night before.

Nana was already in the kitchen, humming softly as she arranged a plate of blueberry muffins. The familiar scent of baking filled the air, a small comfort amidst the chaos in my mind.

"Morning, sweetheart," she said, her voice warm and cheerful, as always. She turned, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and her smile wide enough to reach them. Nana's smiles always did. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a log," I lied, forcing a smile in return. "Those muffins smell amazing." She chuckled, setting the plate on the table. "Fresh out the oven Izzy Whizzy, Help yourself!" I poured a cup of coffee, the strong, bitter aroma grounding me slightly. Nana chatted about the local news, the weather forecast, and the upcoming church bake sale she had in town. Her words were a gentle background hum, a comforting normalcy against the turbulent storm within me. I nodded and murmured in response, but my mind was elsewhere, still trapped in the emotional wreckage of the previous night.

After breakfast, Nana suggested we take a walk along the shore beside the house. The fog was beginning to lift, revealing a sliver of pale blue sky. The idea of the salty air and the rhythmic sound of the waves seemed an appealing way to clear my head. We bundled up in light sweaters; Nana pulled out a worn, knitted shawl around her shoulders. Her hands looked aged and frail, her knuckles slightly gnarled, as she fastened the shawl with a silver brooch.

We walked slowly, our steps leaving damp imprints in the wet morning sand. The beach was deserted, saved for a few early morning joggers and a lone fisherman casting his line into the grey waters. The waves whispered against the shore, a soothing melody that usually brought me peace but today, it couldn't quite reach me.

Nana talked about the old days, about summers long past when the beach was filled with children laughing and splashing in the surf during August, soaking up the last rays of summer. She told stories of her youth, her voice tinged with nostalgia, and for a moment, I let myself get lost in the memories she painted, a welcome distraction from my own troubles.

We reached a cluster of large, smooth rocks, their surfaces slick with the morning dew. Nana paused, leaning heavily on her walking stick. "Let's rest here for a bit," she said, a slight catch in her breath.

I helped her settle onto a rock, among the multiple they lay along the jetty. The damp cold seeping through my black leggings. The salt spray kissed our faces, and the wind tugged at Nana's silver hair. For a while, we sat in comfortable silence, watching the waves roll in, each one different, each one the same. I could feel the weight of my unresolved issues pressing down on me, but Nana's quiet presence was grounding, a reminder that even amidst the chaos, there was stability, there was love.

"You're quiet this morning hm?" she finally said, her voice gentle. "Anything you want to talk about?" I hesitated, the words catching in my throat. How could I explain the tangled mess of my emotions, the hurt, the confusion, the shame of my stubbornness? How could I tell her about Emerson, about Delilah's confession, about the nagging fear that I was somehow repeating my mother's mistakes? Or even Delilahs?

Before I could answer, Nana shifted slightly on the rock reaching for her walking stick but there was a sudden, sharp sound and then a sickening thud.

I turned and my heart lurched into my throat, seeing Nana suddenly, slowly, sliding down the rock face; Her head now striking the hard surface of the rocks beside her with a sickening crack.

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl. The sounds around me intensified, the waves roaring in my ears, the seagulls shrieking overhead. Nana lay still, her body crumpled at the base of the rock. Her eyes were closed, her face pale, and a thin trickle of blood seeped from a gash on her forehead.

"Nana!" I cried, my voice breaking. I scrambled down to her side, my hands trembling as I reached out. "Nana, please wake up!" I shook.

Kneeling beside her, my mind reeled in panic. I gently shook her shoulder, but she didn't respond. Her skin was cold to the touch, and her breathing was shallow, erratic. A wave of terror washed over me, a bone-chilling fear that squeezed the air from my lungs.

"Nana! Can you hear me? Please!" I frantically tried to assess the damage, noticing the blood still trickling down her face. Panicked, I looked around. We were completely alone on the stretch of the beach, the other joggers or fisherman were completely out of sight. How long ago had we passed anyone on the beach?

My hands fumbled for my phone, *how far offshore was Pop pop* I thought? My fingers were shaking so badly that I could barely dial 911.

"Yes! Please hurry!" I pleaded into the receiver, my voice choked with tears. "My grandmother... she's fallen... she's unconscious!" I cried.

The dispatcher's calm voice was a lifeline in the chaos. She asked questions, rapid-fire, and I tried my best to answer, my mind racing, my heart pounding. I gave them our location, described Nana's condition, tried to stay focused, and not to break down. While I waited for the ambulance, I knelt beside Nana, holding her hand, whispering words of comfort, though I wasn't sure if she could hear me.

"It's going to be okay, Nana," I murmured, stroking her hair. "Help is on the way. Just hold on, please." The minutes stretched into an eternity. Each second felt like a weight, heavy and suffocating. I kept checking her pulse, her breathing, desperate for any sign of improvement. But she remained still, her face pale and peaceful, as if she were simply asleep. I knew better, though.

Finally, I heard the distant wail of a siren, growing louder and louder. Relief washed over me, a wave so intense that it made my knees weak. The ambulance pulled up onto the sand, the paramedics rushing out with a stretcher and medical bags.

They worked quickly, efficiently, checking Nana's vitals, stabilizing her neck, and carefully lifting her onto the stretcher. I followed them, my heart pounding, as they loaded her into the ambulance. "Can I come with you?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper. "Of course, sweetheart, get in," one of the paramedics said, his voice kind. "We'll take good care of her."

Inside the ambulance, the ride was a blur of flashing lights and beeping machines. The paramedics worked tirelessly, monitoring Nana's condition, administering oxygen, and talking to each other in hushed, professional tones. I sat beside her, holding her hand, my eyes fixed on her face, praying for a sign, a movement, anything to break the terrifying stillness.

When we arrived at the hospital, Nana was rushed into the emergency room. I was left in the waiting area, a sterile, brightly lit space filled with the anxious murmurs of other families. I sat on a hard plastic chair, my hands clasped tightly in my lap, the weight of fear and uncertainty crushing me. Sending phone calls and messages to everyone, informing them quickly of what was happening.

The minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness. I replayed the fall over and over in my mind, blaming myself, wondering if I could have done something differently, if I could have prevented it. *Maybe if I wasn't so self involved*, I thought. Guilt gnawed at me, a sharp, relentless pain.

Finally, a doctor emerged from the emergency room. He had a tender face, but his eyes were serious. As he approached me, his expression was gentle but grave. "Are you Iris Wheeler?" he asked. I nodded, my voice catching in my throat. "Yes, that's me. How is she? Is she going to be okay?" I blurted out.

He sighed softly, and I knew, with a certainty that chilled me to the bone, that the news wasn't good.

"Miss Wheeler. It seems your Grandmother has suffered severe bruises along her skull, a significant gash possibly fracture line— We're still waiting on scans for any potential internal brain damage or bleeding she may have developed. I believe we're going to keep

her overnight to monitor any clotting or hemorrhaging, keeping a close eye really. At her age, quite frankly she is very lucky to have survived such a severe head injury.” said the doctor.

“We’ll let you know more, as soon as we know more,” the doctor reassured.

I took a heavy breath in, “Thank you Doctor.” I paused,  
 “My Pop pop is on his way now, so I’ll be sure to let him know” I said gratefully, choking back the tears.

The fluorescent lighting in the waiting room had been hurting my eyes for nearly two hours now. Starting to feel stir-crazy, I took in the bland beige of the walls and the unsettling salmon pink of the flooring. I sat back down alone with my thoughts, the weight of the situation pressing in as the fickle nature of time became starkly apparent.

One day you think you have it all figured out, you’re strolling the beach and then life throws you a curveball and you’re in the hospital. It was then that I realized nothing in this life is promised or guaranteed; we are all here on Borrowed time, so I had to make the most of it. What would my mother say? Would she be disappointed in my choices, in how quickly I shy away from scary situations? From love?

Nana was the closest thing I had to a mother, other than Delilah and now I couldn’t imagine life without her. A cold dread clenched in my chest. Losing her felt like losing a part of myself, a vital piece of my history and my future. She is the anchor in my storm, the person who understood me most without needing the words. The mere thought of her gone was a gaping void, I couldn’t begin to comprehend. How could this be happening? How could I have been so petty? I knew what I had done with Emerson but look at me, it felt as though everyone in my life was cursed. Maybe he was better off without me in his life. As my mind rapidly raced, blaming myself, thinking about everything my eyes shifted from left to right as if reading a whiteboard. Right then, Pop pop walked in with Abby and Delilah and soon after Hunter.

My frantic gaze snapped to Pop pop. His face was etched with worry, a deeper network of lines than I’d ever seen. Abby’s eyes were red-rimmed, and Delilah stood silently beside her, her hand resting on Abby’s arm.

“Any news?” she asked worriedly,

As I hugged Pop pop tightly, I managed to croak, my voice barely a whisper.

"They're still running tests, she may stay overnight while they monitor her head injuries" I said, my voice thick with emotion.

"We just have to wait." Pop pop said, shaking his head slowly.

The fluorescent lights seemed to buzz even louder now, amplifying the tension in the small room. "I shoulda been home with her" Pop pop said, and my heart wrenched.

"It's no one's fault John" Delilah grabbed his hand and held it in her grip tightly. Letting go of a few tears, I could hear him sniffle. I wasn't old enough when my mother passed, so I'd never seen anything honestly make Pop Pop cry, *never*. It seemed all it took was the woman he'd spent almost 60 plus years of marriage and life with, to do so.

I could see Delilah felt the weight of his regret, another reminder of what she went through with the loss of my mother. I knew she saw Nana, as her own mother after everything they endured together. As everyone sat there staring out into space, hoping for further updates on Nana, I got up.

"Anybody want coffee?" I asked softly, rubbing my eyes.

"No thank you sweetie." Delilah and Pop pop replied.

"I'm good Izz, thank you." Abby said with a weak smile, lying in Hunter's large arms. "Alright. I'm just gonna grab a cup, maybe stretch my legs a bit." I said, rubbing my eyes from exhaustion. I walked along the narrow white halls, pausing before large decorative paintings along the walls, depicting famous European sights. Their vibrant colors and the sights reminiscent of the Amalfi coast, Positano, Italy or Santorini, in Greece offered a brief escape. With my hot, black coffee in hand seeking a small distraction, I wandered past various areas—the gift shop, the hospital Cafe, and finally the Main Atrium.

Eventually, my gaze drifted to the Atrium's large windows, drawn by the steady drumming of the rain. The cloudy day had turned into rain within the hour, as I studied the rain drops against the glass. I watched the droplets race one another down, one by one, and the sound of their splatters against the glass provided a sense of calm.

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten, and I decided to glance through the gift shop for a candy bar or bag of chips to hold me over. It was then that I noticed a man shopping for what looked like a teddy bear holding a small balloon that read IT'S A GIRL! His smile was a blatant giveaway of being a newborn father. While another customer, a young woman behind him, carried flowers and a card that read *get well soon*.



And finally, an elderly woman holding a pair of fuzzy pajama pants, no doubt for a loved one staying here. It amazed me at how many different stories were being told within these hospital walls. Not long after buying my chips, I received a text from Abby, "She's back from testing and in a new room on the ICU floor. Room 422" she texted.

"Okay, heading there now. How is she? Did they say if she's awake?" I replied.

"She's tired, but lucid, they said." Abby replied,

"So that's good news," said Abby.

My heart jumped, that was great news. Thank god. I was surprised I didn't run to the room, at this point to be totally honest. With my heart hammering against my ribs, I hurried off the elevator to the fourth floor, scanning the numbers until I reached Room 422. The door was slightly ajar, and I pushed it open gently. The sterile scent of antiseptic hung in the air, mingling with the soft scent of fresh cut flowers set on the window sill. My breath caught in my throat.

There she was. Nana lay in the hospital bed, looking smaller and more frail than I'd ever seen her. Her eyes were closed at first, and a wave of fear washed over me. But then, her eyelids fluttered open, and her gaze, though tired, was clear and focused. A small, familiar smile touched her lips as she saw me.

"Hey, sweetheart" she said, her voice a little weak but undeniably Nana.

Relief flooded through me, so potent it almost buckled my knees.

"Nana!" I breathed, rushing to her bedside. Her hand, slightly bruised, reached out, and I gently took it in mine.

"Just a bit banged up," she murmured, a faint wince crossing her face.

"But they tell me I'm on the mend." She finished.

Her lucid gaze met mine, filled with a familiar warmth that chased away any remaining traces of my fears. She was tired, yes, and the healing would take time, but the most important thing was there – she was herself.

We stayed camped out around Nana's bed for what felt like hours, joking and playing card games together; mainly 500 rummy. Until a woman in purple scrubs, knocked on the door before coming in,

“Hi everyone, I’m Carol’s nurse for the evening, Maureen! I’m so glad to see her doing better” She said, glancing at me and Pop pop.

“Unfortunately, visiting hours are over and I can only permit one family member to stay with her overnight.” she said regretfully.

I looked at Delilah, and we knew exactly what each other was thinking, “He’ll stay.” I said signalling to Pop pop.

“Yes, you go home Izzy-Wizzy, get some rest. Today was a lot for you— I’ll be fine here with your Nana.” he said, reassuringly giving me a big kiss and squeeze. Delilah stood up, understanding her position in the family as the third Eldest.

“Right, Okay then—” Brushing herself off and gathering our things, she took command of the situation.

“Come on girls—Hunter you too, say goodbye to Nana and I’ll get us home.” She finished with, “You can stay with us tonight Izzy, better to be all together—should we need to come back.”

Holding her hand tightly, I kissed Nana Goodbye and as we drove back home through the mist of the humid night all I could think about was her hands. They remained soft though a bit weathered; I had glimpses of them handing me clementines and mending deep cuts on my shins after bike rides, cooking breakfast and dinner, or holding my face before bedtime, checking my head when I felt feverish as I stayed home from school. There were so many visions, memories I stored away from years of her tender, nurturing ways. She’ll be alright, *she needs to be* I, thought.

We stopped by my house before Abby and Delilah’s. Taking precaution, I wanted to gather some things I might need. There was a large chance that Pop pop would want to stay at the hospital until Nana was released. If so, he might be there for four or five days. I assumed Delilah would also grab him his clothes and other necessities while we stopped by.

As I stepped onto the porch with Delilah and Abby, a gasp escaped my lips. It wasn’t just decoration; it was breathtaking. Strings upon strings of sea glass, in every imaginable shade of blue and green, shimmering like captured starlight, a silent, luminous apology and a vibrant testament to a love that surrounded me, even in the midst of worry.

The familiar entryway had been transformed into something magical. My eyes widened at the sight of the countless strands. As I continued looking on, I could hear their

whisperings of the ocean and something more profound. I knew It was an unexpected heartfelt display by Emerson, *It had to be him*, I thought. Who else really knew what the seaglass meant to me, but him? It was a tangible expression of devotion that resonated deep within me. A wave of emotion crashed over me, the stunning spectrum of blues and greens adorned the space like a thousand tiny love notes. It was a tender, unspoken message – a beautiful reassurance that, despite everything—he was *still here for me*.

The cascades of sea glass caught the moonlight, scattering it like a thousand gentle promises. It felt like the grandest gesture I could think of, something straight out of a romance film or novel; a silent vow of unwavering support. He must have found out about Nana today, how? I didn't care, I just knew It was a beautiful apology and a powerful reminder of a love that was both steadfast and tender. Surly, something my mother would have loved. I slowly walked beneath them still in awe, taking in every minute.

Then, I turned to Delilah, it was like she knew as well who was behind it all. She smiled looking at the glass and holding out her car keys to me, she said, “He must really love you girlie.” Looking up, staring at the seaglass again, knowing she was right, I grinned, shaking my head side to side. She chuckled at my stubbornness as I hesitated looking down at the keys then back up at the glass.

“You're more like your mom than you think, you know that?” she smiled, rolling her eyes. “...Go! Tell him how you feel already, geez. Life is too short Izzy—look at Nana—your mom” she gave me a look I'd never seen before, behind those hazel eyes, a look of righting her wrongs. “I'll be fine here getting things together” She waved, chuckling.

“I'll see you back at the house and if not—I'm gonna assume it worked out for the best,” she said, smirking and now hugging me so tightly.

Abby giddily grabbed the keys from Delilah, cutting in at that moment, “I'm driving you— Now get in!” Abby ordered as I smiled from her continuous support. “So what's the address again?!” she said, as we rushed into Delilah's car. “22 Shore walk!” I shouted quickly.

“Ready?” Abby asked, her hand hovering over the ignition.

I nodded, my stomach doing nervous flips. The image of the shimmering sea glass entryway was burned into my mind, a silent question mark that now felt like a resounding declaration. “As I'll ever be.” I uttered.

The drive felt both too long and too short all at once. Abby kept the radio low, occasionally glancing over at me with a supportive smile.

"He really went all out, huh?" she commented, breaking the silence somewhere around Elm Street. "Yeah," I breathed, tracing the condensation on the window.

"It was... a lot. In the best possible way." I said.

We talked a little about Nana, a shared comfort in knowing she was okay, but mostly my mind was racing ahead to Emerson's house. I'd only been here a couple of times before, just quick visits, but the image I had of it was clear: a small, somewhat rundown bungalow that felt like it had settled comfortably into the earth. The roof had a low, inviting slope, the paint on the trim was a little faded, and the tiny front yard was more wild than manicured. But there was a definite charm to it, a cozy, slightly bohemian feel. He had a few large, leafy plants on the porch that hinted at something more tropical, maybe a nod to islands far away. Lived-in and personal, with just a touch of the exotic that felt uniquely him.

"Okay, here we are," Abby said, pulling up to the curb a few houses down from him.

My heart beat as loud as it ever had. Each step towards his front door felt momentous. I rehearsed my words in my head – The sea glass was beautiful... I understand... I forgive you... I love you too. Simple, direct. Terrifying.

I reached the porch, the familiar wood beneath my feet. The large leaves of the potted plants on his small porch rustled slightly in the breeze.

Raising my hand, I knocked, the sound echoing louder than I expected in the quiet night. Silence. Had he seen the car? Was he hesitating?

I waited, the seconds stretching into an eternity. Just as I was about to knock again, the porch light flicked on, illuminating the peeling paint on the doorframe, and the door opened. Emerson stood there, looking surprised to see me.

His hair, a little messy, wearing a faded t-shirt. In the soft glow of the light from inside the cozy little house, his bright green eyes widened slightly.

"Iris?" he said, his voice a low question.

The words I had rehearsed vanished. All that was left was the overwhelming feeling in my chest. I looked at him, at the face I had missed seeing clearly, and took another shaky breath.

"Emerson," I started, my voice a little steadier this time.

"I... the sea glass."

He looked at me, with sad puppy dog eyes, a mix of uncertainty and something hopeful in his expression. "It was... it was beautiful," I continued, stepping a little closer, stepping across the threshold into the warmth of his small home.

"And I... I understand. Whatever it was... I forgive you."

The words tumbled out of my mouth raw and real. There really were no words left to say except, "And I... I love you." I shrugged.

I watched his face as my confession hung in the air between us. His eyes searched mine for a long moment, and then a slow, relieved smile spread across his face.

"Iris," he breathed, shaking his head, grateful as ever to see me; reaching out, he pulled me into his arms. Holding me so tight, kissing the top of my head, his hands ran through my dark hair, holding my head so close against his chest as if he'd never let me go again. The door clicked shut behind us, leaving Abby and the rest of the world outside to wait. I could imagine Abby's smile as I heard her car drive off.

## *An Opportunity washes ashore*

After spending my final bits of summer with Emerson, heading back and forth to the hospital for Nana, I found myself sitting down tonight by the blue light of my laptop screen. As it flickered throughout my dim childhood bedroom, I thought about my next move. With summer coming to a close, I was scrolling through future film festival submission deadlines; a slightly depressing task after the rush of finishing my last one. The high had faded, leaving the familiar low-level anxiety of "what next?" humming beneath the surface.

Suddenly, My phone buzzed on the desk beside me. It was a text notification. The name that popped up was Willow – Delilah's agent. My heart gave a small, unexpected jolt. I hadn't heard back since I sent her My reel and resume weeks ago via email after the festival. It was a long shot, I thought, I barely dared to hope about it, connected only through Delilah's professional orbit. I swiped open the message. It was short, professional, to the point. "Iris - Following up regarding the intern position at Catalyst Productions in LA. They reviewed your materials and were very impressed! They would like to schedule a formal interview. A zoom. Expect an email from their HR department shortly with details. Looks very promising"

I stared at the screen, reading the words twice, then a third time. *Very impressed. Formal interview. Los Angeles.*

A breathless wave of excitement, sharp and pure, hit me. I sat back in my chair, the glow of the laptop forgotten. It was real. An actual, tangible opportunity in the city where the industry lived and breathed. It wasn't just a pipe dream anymore.

My first instinct was a jumble of names: Delilah, to thank her for the connection; Emerson, to share the incredible news; Abby, my best friend, who always cheered me on and supported me. But my finger hovered over the contacts list.

An unexpected wave of... something... washed over me. Not just excitement, but a fierce, almost protective urge to keep this to myself. What if I didn't nail the interview? What if I got my hopes up, told everyone, celebrated, and then it fell through? The thought of having to backtrack, to explain the disappointment to all of them, was suddenly unbearable. Beyond that practical fear, there was something else. A deeper feeling. This felt like my first step. A massive, terrifying, exhilarating step into a future I so craved. I wanted to hold onto this moment, process the sheer scale of the possibility in private. I needed to feel the weight of it, the potential, the fear, without anyone else's reaction muddying the waters.

So I wouldn't tell anyone yet. This wasn't news for group celebration or commiseration until it was certain. Not Delilah, whose connection had made it possible but who she felt a strange need to keep separate from this initial, raw hope. Not Emerson, even though things were good between us again. Not Abby.

This incredible, daunting, thrilling possibility was, for now, just mine. A secret held tight against my chest. Evidence, I thought, that I had talent; a small, private smile touching my lips. I took a deep, shaky breath, the image of Los Angeles, sunny and vast, flashing in my mind. A Place beyond Lighthouse point. The "what next?" anxiety hadn't disappeared entirely, but now it was mixed with a potent, secret anticipation.

A few days past, and the hospital room felt familiar now, a space defined by the hum of machines and the scent of disinfectant, softened by the get-well cards taped to the walls. The flowers given by Pop pop were a bit wilted now and a few new ones had appeared at Nana's bedside, more than likely from her Sunday church friends.

Nana was propped up in bed, looking a little stronger than she had the week before, though her movements were still slow and careful. I sat by her side, holding a plastic cup of ice chips for her. "These are a godsend, sweetheart," Nana murmured, taking one from the cup. "Plain water tastes like... well, hospital water."

I smiled. "Anything for you, Nana. How are ya feeling today?"

"Better. Aching less," Nana replied, her voice still a bit weak. "They say if I keep this up, I might be home before you know it" she winked at me. Relief warmed my chest. "That's the best news. The house misses you. I miss you, being in it" I said tenderly.

We talked for a while longer about Nana's recovery, the tedious physical therapy sessions that would follow and the bland food she'd have to settle for a little while longer. It was comfortable, easy conversation, a welcome break from the recent stresses I had been juggling.

"So— Delilah told me about a mister, Emerson" she winked and smirked at me. "Oh, Did she? already?! Geez, no one can keep a secret in this family, can they?" I laughed, "No— they really can't. At least not from me" she said with certainty. I didn't know *what* she meant by that, but it gave me the distinct feeling she knew more than she let on about *many things*. I then decided to share something else at that moment. Nana was the only person I knew that would know what to say. It felt significant enough to discuss with her of all people. I knew she would understand why I felt hesitant to tell everyone about it just yet. "Nana, something... kind of amazing happened the other day," I began, a spark of excitement lighting up her voice.

She looked at me, her eyes full of gentle encouragement. "Oh? Tell me."

"Remember how I've been looking into options after finishing the film? Networking, trying to figure out what's next?"

"Of course, dear. Chasing your dreams," Nana said.

"Well," I leaned forward slightly, lowering my voice, as if sharing a thrilling secret.

"Through a friend of Delilah's – apparently she knows someone who works at this indie film company out west – I got offered an internship opportunity."

Nana's eyebrows rose slightly. "An internship? Out west, you say?"

"Yeah! In Los Angeles." I took a big breath, I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

"It's not definite yet, I still have to go through a formal interview on zoom, but the initial offer came through. It sounds incredible. It's with a company that makes exactly the kind of unique, character-driven films I love. I'd get to see the whole process, maybe even help on set if I'm lucky" I finished.

I explained a bit more about the company, the potential duration of the internship, the sheer excitement of the possibility. Los Angeles felt like a different world, the heart of the industry I wanted to break into. It was daunting, but thrilling.

Nana listened attentively, her expression soft with pride.

"Los Angeles. My, my. That's a long way from home, Iris," she said.

"I know," I admitted. "It feels huge. A little scary too honestly. But... It's also such an incredible opportunity. Exactly the kind of experience I need, you know?" I said.

"And it came through a friend of Delilah's?" Nana mused, "Small world. Well, that girl always did have great connections."

A faint, fond smile touched Nana's lips at the mention of Delilah.

"Right?" Iris agreed. "I was so surprised when she contacted me. I have an interview next week....but no one knows yet, not even Delilah—And I guess I'll find out when it begins, once I'm back at school or in a few months, I don't know!" I said.

"You must be so nervous. But excited too," Nana said, her voice warm.

"It sounds perfect for you, Iris. Just the kind of thing you've been working towards. All that talent and hard work." She squeezed Iris's hand again. "My little izzy wizzy! You absolutely must go for it. Don't let fear hold you back from a chance like that sweetie."



My heart swelled at Nana's unwavering support. "My only question is, and I'm sure it's none of my business but: where will this leave you and Emerson?" she asked, "Well I— haven't told him anything yet." I said,

"I see, well it's just a thought but— Would you want to know if you were in his position?" she asked. I smiled because though it was difficult to admit— I knew she was right.

"Regardless, it's not my business— I'm just so proud of you sweet girl. Your Mother would be too." she added. Grinning, I said, "Thanks, Nana. That means a lot. I really hope I get it."

I rested my chin on her bedside while holding her hand in mine. We spent the rest of the visit talking about what life in Los Angeles might be like, the weather, the industry. Nana asked practical questions about living expenses and flights, showing her usual grounded concern despite the exciting topic.

There was no mention of the past, no hint of hidden family history. The conversation was simply about my future, a bright, promising path potentially leading me across the country to chase my film dreams ...The only problem was, where *would* this leave Emerson and I? The possibility of Los Angeles felt like a bold, exciting adventure waiting to happen— with complications of the heart.

### *The cats in the Cradle*

The following day, Pop pop made me an omelette for breakfast and an extra one for me to bring to Nana at the hospital. He claimed he had made it *special, just for her*.

"You know she's not gonna eat this right—she hates your cooking" I laughed, he smiled and chuckled back, "Well it's the gesture that counts kiddo".

Pop pop needed to run a few errands for Nana in town; mundane things around the house she would usually take care of herself. So, I returned to the hospital; Strolling through the lobby, past the security guard, that I grew to know well during Nana's stay here.

“Hey Sam!” I shouted cheerfully, “Hey Iris! Be sure to tell Carol I hope she's feeling better today” he said, “Aw, thank you. I will!”

By the time I walked into her room the air felt different, shifted. “Morning Nana! So I brought you a homemade omelet that Pop pop made you—”

“Ugh! Why does that man insist on trying to poison me? He knows he can't cook!” she rolled her eyes and huffed. I bursted out into belly laughter and so did she. Nana always knew how to get a good laugh especially before unloading any *world altering* information.

I opened the tupperware, looked up at her and saw her face,  
“Nana! what's the matter?”

She suddenly seemed so worried, so tense; her smile faded slightly, replaced by a look I couldn't quite read – a mixture of sadness and resolve.

“Come here sweetie, sit closer to me— I have to tell you something,” she confessed. She squeezed my hand again, more firmly this time, “Seeing you like this, Iris,” her voice lowered, losing some of its lightness.

“Happy, building your life, finding your way... it made me think. My little fall... It was a reminder that I won't be around forever. And there are some things... some truths... that shouldn't stay hidden” I felt a prickle of unease. Nana's gaze was steady, serious.

“This is difficult, sweetheart,” Nana continued, her eyes searching my face.

“It's about....your father.”

My breath deepened, “I know Nana. Delilah told me everything.....”

“She did, did she?” Nana said Raising her eyebrows.

“Yes, I mean, about mom and her and the way it panned out—” I said, but Nana cut me off,

“Oh child, I always knew that.” She smirked and chuckled, waving her hand at me, as if I were silly to think it a family secret. Surprised and taken back a bit, I laughed aloud, *leave it to Nana*, I thought, to be the first to know her daughter was secretly in love with a woman for years.

"I accepted my daughter for who she was, from the day she was born into this world until the day she left it. She carried so many burdens. And Poor Delilah suffered for them too... But I'm not talking about that, though I'm glad Delilah finally told you the truth" Nana admitted, ".....I'm talking about your father." She finished.

"My Dad? What about him?" I asked.

"Well— I've been thinking and— after my fall—  
I realized My time here is limited sweetie and—"

"Nana, stop talking like that, please—" I said, cutting her off.

"No-no shush, please let me finish" She said seriously continuing,  
—I know you are ready to hear the truth" she said,

"What other truths could there b—" I asked confused,  
"Where he is. *If you wanted to know. To find him.*  
Seek out what family you may have left...besides us" she said.

*My father?* A ghost in my life, a name rarely spoken and a void I now learned to live around had still kept in contact?

"I... I know you've always wondered," Nana said gently, "Why he left. Where he may have gone. If he was still alive?" She continued,

"Helen—your mother... She had her reasons for keeping it quiet, Delilah as well. For protecting you, she thought. And maybe she was right, back then." Nana paused, taking a shallow breath. "But—you're not a child anymore, and it's a different world Iris. You deserve to know. Especially now that you're finding your own path."

Nana leaned back slightly against the pillows, her eyes holding mine.

"And I believe to know *where you come from*, is to know *where you're going*," she said, tilting her head sincerely at me, "—He's in California sweetie."

The words landed like a physical blow. *California*. It was true.

"He... he never completely disappeared," Nana explained softly.

"He stayed in touch with me. Just... in case, for you. Delilah doesn't know. He... he has a life there now. A small family, living in the suburbs" She hesitated, then made the final offering.

"I have an address....*here*. A way to contact him, if you ever..." She paused, "if you ever *wanted to*." Nana released my hand and fumbled under her pillow, pulling out a folded

piece of paper; I'm sure Pop pop had brought it to her, upon her request, hidden from somewhere deep in the cottage. Her hand trembled slightly as she held it out.

"I kept this. Just in case."

I took the paper as she handed it to me, my fingers numb. It felt heavy, impossibly so. An address reading "2677 Antonio drive, Pasadena C.A". There it was, a link to the man who was half of me. My mind warped, a whirlwind of questions, old hurts, and a sudden fierce curiosity I hadn't allowed myself to feel in years.

He *was* out there, it wasn't just a rumor. And then I thought about the film internship, and the interview that I had my hopes set on. A sudden, sharp plan formed, cold and clear amidst the emotional chaos. I could go now. Knowing what I knew. The internship was the perfect cover. A legitimate reason to be in California. No one would suspect I was there for another reason entirely. I could find him. See him. *Meet him*.

But I couldn't tell Anyone, Not yet— I couldn't tell Emerson. This felt like something I had to do alone. A secret mission, hidden behind the guise of chasing my film dreams.

I looked at the paper in my hand, then at Nana's tired, knowing eyes. The weight of the secret, the possibility, settled deep in my chest. The comfortable lightness of the visit was gone, replaced by the thrilling, terrifying prospect of the unknown. My primary male role model had at last taken on the tangible form of a living, breathing, authentic human being. It was all a reality now. California wasn't just a place for dreams anymore, It was where I could find out *who* I was, in all aspects.

After the deep discussion we reverted back to normalcy and I was forced to talk about everyday chores around the cottage with Nana for the time we had left.

It wasn't until later that evening I sat alone in my bedroom, contemplating everything Nana and I had discussed. Now packing and thinking only days ago, my world had felt steady again, anchored by Emerson's presence. But now, a different kind of current pulled me, one I had to ride alone. The warmth of Emerson's hand in mine still lingered, but a cold knot was forming in my stomach – the shape of a lie I was about to live. After we had just reconciled how could I tell him I had to leave— and I had to go without him.

Our fragile relationship was still hanging in the balance of all this, recovering from its latest turmoil and now what would happen to it?

All the while, all I could think about was my Dad— Was he happy? Was he kind? Was he... *like me*? Would he tell me the truth of what *happened* with mom?

For years, My dad had been a ghost, a story Nana would never tell. Now he was real. Was I chasing a fantasy? A replacement for the father I never had? Or was I finally ready to confront the truth, to understand where I came from, who I was, separate from Lighthouse Point, separate even from the life I was building with Emerson.

The word 'internship' felt flimsy and fickle on my tongue now, in comparison, a fragile shield. No— I would just have to wait until I heard back after I did the interview, and then I would make my decision about going; I'd have to go *from there*. For now I would just have to think about returning to school, business as usual.

I wondered though, would Emerson be able to detect the lie through my words when I say them? Would I crack under the weight of his questions, or the simple sincerity of his goodbye before I'd leave for classes? It didn't matter, for now I had to just focus on the hardest task at hand which was saying goodbye.

I was walking into the unknown, armed with little more than a name and a secret. I studied film, looking for stories, for truth. Now, my own story was unfolding, a plot twist I never saw coming. The question was would I be able to follow through if the moment came?

*I carry your heart*

The air on the dune hilltop was exactly what you dreamed of when you thought of a perfect beach day in Lighthouse Point. Not a cloud dared to interrupt the vast, aching blue of the sky. The sun felt like a warm blanket this late-August afternoon, soothing after the recent storm in my heart. Tonight, I'd be headed off back to college and everything that happened here this summer would become a distant memory; I had to take it in while I still could.

The breeze smelled of salt and something wild – beach roses maybe, or just the sheer, clean scent of sun-baked sand and endless water. Emerson sat beside me, close but not touching, giving us both space after... Well, after everything we've been through this summer. The silence between us wasn't awkward anymore; it was comfortable, earned. He was tossing a smooth, sun-bleached piece of driftwood end over end in his hands, his eyes distant, watching the gulls wheel overhead. His profile, silhouetted against the bright sky, it was achingly familiar and suddenly, terrifyingly, something I was about to disrupt.

“Do you remember the first time we sat here?” I asked,

“Yup, I came looking for you—and here you were.” He said now hugging me. We both laughed, “God, you were such an annoying little shoobie.”

“Eh you loved it” he teased,

I looked at him thinking about what Nana said,

“Can I talk to you” I said seriously,

“everything okay??” He asked concerned,

“Yes. I mean, it's more than okay. I Just—” I couldn't get out the words.

“What's the matter?” he asked softly and confused.

“i'm leaving later today—”

My voice came out a little rougher than I intended. His eyes, the color of the sea on a cloudy day, meeting mine. A gentle question was in them.

“the long distance thing—” I said, making excuses to save him the truth but he cut me off, “Iris,” he said, soft but steady, “are you trying to end this?”

“I don't want to.” Truth, small and bare. “I just don't know how it works when I'm gone.”

“We figure it out,” he said. “I'm not going anywhere.” He kissed me, quick and careful, like you set something precious down.

The hilltop breathed. Every shared minute felt bright around the edges. I could have told him everything—the thing I was weighing that might pull me farther than school ever would—but the words stayed where the waves couldn't pry them loose.

"Do me a favor?" I said, pulling a folded note from my pocket. "Read this after I go." He looked at it, then at me. "Okay," he said, amused in that soft way he saves for me. "You want me at the station?"

I shook my head. "It'll be easier if you don't." "Got it." He tucked the note into his jacket and slid an arm around me. We watched the water turn honey and then copper and then that last dark blue that means day is choosing night.

When it was time, I stood. We hugged. The kiss we traded was quick and lasting.

"Later, Wheeler," he said. "Later, Haven," I said chuckling and walked down the sandy slope without looking back.... because if I did, I would never leave.

By the time I reached the boardwalk, he would open the note. It didn't explain. It didn't promise. It only said:

*I carry your heart; I carry it in my heart. —e.e. Cummings*

I swung onto my bike and pushed off, wheels humming over salt-stiff planks, the town lifting to meet me the way it always had.

I couldn't see the future from here. I didn't need to. The tide was steady. For now, that was enough.

#### *DEDICATION*

*To my husband —  
whose love challenges me to grow,*

*and whose belief in me strengthens every word I write.  
Our love endures like the waves: steady, strong, and without end.*

*To my family and closest of friends –  
thank you for lifting me, encouraging me,  
and standing beside me as I chased my dreams.  
Every one of us has an Abby, Hunter or Delilah –  
the rare souls who inspire, believe,  
and remind us we are capable of more.  
I am endlessly grateful for mine.*

*To my parents –  
my father, who ignited the writer within me,  
and my mother, who nourished the artist I became.  
This book is as much yours as it is mine.*

*And to the sea, to the South Shore of Long Island—  
This is my love letter to you.  
Thank you for giving me lifelong memories  
through every stage of my youth.  
I will cherish them always.*