

Chapter One

innocence

i

A tall blondish beauty comes barreling down the hall of her high school with her shoulders high and her sneakers squeaking every other step. Carelessly brushing the shoulders of anybody she would or wouldn't care about towards a slightly taller, dark-haired, and slender boy. He looks at her confused, but in his head he can only hope she would do so much as slap him across the face.

SMACK!

The boy's face flew to his right as his left cheek caved into the palm of Ocea's hand.

"What the-!" He looks back up at her only to see tears run down her bitter expression. He holds the left side of his face and stares back into her eyes.

"Ossy, you liar!"... "You're a liar! A liar Ossy!" The blondish beauty hurls her words quicker than Oslo can get the chance to speak.

Every time he tries, "Y O U, LIAR!"

He can only stare deeper and deeper into her sad, tortured eyes. Until they start melting. Her hair turns from her stunning yellow to black. Her shoulders grow broader, her mouth no longer making sound, and the hall of the school around him vanishes into nothingness.

He blinks, and she's gone.

"LIAR!" Echoes through the empty space.

Oslo Fujitani wakes in a cold sweat to his phone glaring '5:55 AM'. "*Good God*" he sighs with relief, still collecting himself from his nightmare. It's always something new. He's grown accustomed to these dreams for better or worse. But face melting? that's a new one.

He rubs his eyes and glugs the glass of water on his side table as a chill shakes down his spine. He hated waking up early, it usually left him feeling nauseous, but he

decided he'd shake it off and get a head start. His days as a high schooler are coming to a close, and he's just trying to have a calm, quiet exit to the year.

He picks up a pair of jeans and a t-shirt lying next to his bed, gives them a sniff check, and throw them on along with some sneakers and his school bag. Picking up his phone, he puts in his earbuds and plays *Teira Jinsoku*, and silently shuffles his feet down the steps to the front door. Stepping outside, he looks to his right at Ocea's house and up towards her window, seeing the light just now come on.

On Oslo's walks to school, he'd often fantasize about having the same conversation with her. How he wanted her. Like, when he leaves for college she'll grab his arm and spill everything. Confess her true love for him, and they'd become rich and live happily ever after. He knew this was never going to happen, but he had some irrational voice in his head telling him that she might feel the same way.

As Oslo turned the corner and across the street to the school grounds, he takes a deep breath, letting it all sink in that his days as a high schooler or coming to a close.

He walked into the school building, entered the cafeteria, and took a seat at his usual table. He sits—music in ears and pencil in hand—and starts to draw. He looks to his right as a chill goes down his spine. The dream he had last night returned to his memory as he stares down the same hall Ocea slapped him in. He could hear the squeaky sneakers and feel the collision of her palm just looking at it.

'She's always in my dreams. I can't escape it. Passing by in a crowd, Eating at a restaurant, Hanging out at the park... Sometimes I AM her. Those one's don't sit right with me.'

He tries to think back to when these 'nightmares' started happening. But the truth is, he's always had them. He just didn't think about it until later when it made less sense. He stops mid-drawing with his lead still sitting at the end of his last line as his mouth hangs open with a concentrated look in his eyes.

SMACK!

"ahhhHHHH-WW!" Oslo screams.

He turns to see a short blonde goofy swoop-y-haired kid with a cackle on his face and a hoodie that was way too big for him, "NECKED!"

He stares back at him with disgust, “What was that?!”, while rubbing the back of his neck.

“Sorry Ossy, I had to take advantage of you drooling into space. Can’t leave your neck hanging out like that.”

He hasn’t told his friends about Ocea, not in detail anyway. They know he grew up with her, but he’d be far too embarrassed to give any further details about how he feels about her.

Two more boys approach the table side by side. A tall and rather dashing boy with bushy curls and a messy fade named Jay and a stockier kid with brown swoop-y hair named Destin.

“Hey, fellas” Destin mumbled.

“Hey man.” Ossy said reluctantly, still rubbing his neck.

“What’s up with you?” Said Jay, concerned.

“Peter’s wrong with me.”

“Peter when’re you gonna not do that neck stuff.”

Destin turned to Peter with his hand rhythmically pointing to Ossy, “Don’t. Mess. With this guy. Don’t you know he could end your life with one drop kick?”

Peter could be heard in the background, “I’d like to see him try.”

Oslo rolled his eyes, “I took Karate for like a week in Middle School.” He quickly changed the subject, “Last few weeks. What’re we gonna do?”

Peter replies, “Wouldn’t be asking us that if we were all going to the same college, isn’t that right Oslo?”

“You know it’s no hard feelings... I just don’t wanna go to some dried-up state University that’s all.”

“Whoa whoa! *Dried up?* So what’s that make us then?” Jay inquires jokingly.

“Nothing—I didn’t mean it like that. I just wanna see something new that’s all.” As the last word slowly dissolves from his mouth, he sees out of the corner of his eye, Ocea walking through the cafeteria. He freezes. The dream flashes through his mind again as she turns down the hallway to his right. He could feel his cheek throbbing.

Peter caught on to where Ossy’s eyes were looking, “It’s Ocea isn’t it?”

Oslo startles, “huh?”

“You wanna go where Ocea goes, don’t you? Only makes sense—”

“Why would I—No, why would I care?”

The bell rang, and not a moment was wasted, Oslo grabbed his bag as he jumped up to walk to class, “Ocea’s going to State anyways. See you guys at lunch!”

The following weeks of school looked the same. Nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary. Just how he liked it. Though, somewhere inside Oslo, he’s longing for more. More adventure. More purpose.

On the night before the last day of school Oslo felt a rumbling in his sleep. The rain invades his consciousness as he drifts in and out of sleep. He sees wild colors and feels tingling all over his body.

Upon his wake, he finds himself walking out the front door, turning to look up at Ocea’s window. Despite the calm he’d asked for, the thought of her still haunts him. If the door to mending things with Ocea was closed before, it’s getting locked today.

His eyes meet with her window, the light’s already on. He squints as he curiously walks toward the side of her house, staying on his side of the fence. Absolute silence fills the air when suddenly, the window bursts open as the blondish beauty is jetting her upper body out of it. Tears stream down her face as she locks eyes with Oslo.

“I can’t believe you, Ossy!” She screams.

Oslo stands speechless. Not a word drops from his loose drooping lips.

Ocea points over to the Oak Tree continuing to sniffle. Oslo turns his head slowly, with his eyes lagging behind. He sees the Oak tree, in a sea of darkness. Silence fills the air. “LIAR!” The tree suddenly stretches wide and rises higher and higher into the sky. He tries to look back at Ocea but he can’t, his neck is locked. He attempts to pull his eyes back toward her, but if he stretched them much more they were gonna rip out of socket. He clenches his teeth, so hard he feels them shake loose until they crumble like sand gritting across his gums. His eyes instead of popping, begin to bubble up and enlarge until he sees a dark flying beast in the air. Distant, but coming straight for him.

A burst of flame, a snap and crack, and Oslo wakes in a panic.

With sweat dripping down his face he whimpers, “*Good. God!*”

He rolls out of bed, dazed, finding himself at the sink splashing water in his face. He quickly packs his things and walks out the door with a piece of toast in hand.

“You’re up early.” His father says packing his car for work.

“Yeah, didn’t sleep too well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He shuts the car door and walks over to Oslo, “Glad we caught each other. I hope your last day is good.” His father pats him on his shoulders as he stands a few inches under his son.

Oslo looks back over his right shoulder to Ocea’s unlit house and quickly turns back to his dad, “Thanks Dad, I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Oslo’s caught off guard. Why now? He hasn’t talked about anything school related in months. He hasn’t talked about much else either.

“Oh, one more thing—”

When Oslo was born his mother insisted on the name Oslo from an old European story she loved called ‘*Oslo and the Deep Red Sea*’. A story told of a boy lost in the Ocean, fighting for his life not to drown in a sea filled with beautiful creatures who guide him through the violent waters back to where he belongs. She thought of this after Oslo’s close call as a newborn, nearly drowning by means of water birth. Regardless, his father still has difficulty saying his name, so in turn, his father shortens his name to,

“—Ossy.”

“Yeah?” Oslo turns as he reaches the end of the driveway.

“You and Ocea, have not seen her lately?”

Oslo was confused, acknowledging his father didn’t normally ask these kinds of questions. However, he didn’t want to give the impression that he *might* be wandering about her too.

“They just came over for dinner didn’t they?” Oslo asks to clear suspicion.

“Yes, but *you* have not seen her. You were gone.”

“Well I see her at school a lot, we just don’t have any classes together so...”

“I see.” His father nods and stares off down the street in thought, or at least the illusion of it. The rising sun glares off his glasses and the wind ruffles up his bushy head. A few seconds later, he puts an arm up waving at his son, as he opens the door and folds into the car. The door shuts, the engine rolls, and he takes off.

Oslo was taken back, not expecting him to bring up Ocea. All he really wants to tell his dad is how scared he is to be on his own. He wants to ask him questions like,

what was it like leaving home for the first time? What was college like in Japan? Was it hard finding work? With a curious mind and tight lips, Oslo remains aloof to what relationship could exist had he approached his father more. Like Ocea, it's starting to feel too late to begin again.

Ryu, Oslo's father, has done well for his family since Koji, Ocea's father, moved them out to America. Their business has grown into a Fortune 500 company within the past couple of years with Ryu rising the ranks to Director of his department and Koji being the VP.

Regardless of bountiful success, they've lived in the same houses neighboring each other all this time. They prefer the closeness of family over living lavishly, but who's to say that won't change? As he and Ocea have grown apart, couldn't that happen between their parent's friendship?

He slowly continues to make his way down the sidewalk. Reminiscing about family and friendship takes Oslo back to the good old days in the summers when him and Ocea's families would take a trip together. Oslo had missed the last two summers as he filled them with bootcamps and conferences on anything art and animation.

He kicks a rock down the walkway, "*maybe it's my fault we're not friends anymore.*"

He's wrestled with this idea more often than he wants to admit, but as time goes on the stronger this feeling gets. He's not good enough for her. But it's not just her, it's anyone.

Oslo rubs his eyes and turns the final corner leading up to the school. His arm hairs stood up with goosebumps trailing to his bicep. The air was slightly crisp for the start of Summer, but not enough of a chill to where his nose would freeze up. He stepped through the doors of his school one more time to feel a warmth he hadn't felt much before. The halls lit up in a haze. He didn't know why, but he felt at ease, a drastic change from moments ago.

Within the hour he and his friends all gathered around their usual table chatting about nothing nostalgic or reminiscent, but having the same conversations they would always have. The day went on smoothly. He found he was content. Joyous even. Some

ominous force lifted him high into cloud nine and he felt his whole future was within an arms reach and nothing could stop him.

He took his last exit through the school doors at the end of the day with his head up high, thinking about his bright future. More eager than ever to get started and move on from this town he's called home since a child.

“Little did I know then—just how difficult that would be.”

Oslo sits in the deep, dark space around him wearing nothing but a hospital gown. Feeling the cold tile under his bare feet, he contemplates the decisions he's made up to this point, filled with nothing more than regret.

The beautiful, yet ominous doctor glowed in the luminescence of the grim and dingy doctor's office, "...Truth be told this is extremely common to see these similarities in children within his age bracket. While Oslo could still be diagnosed in years to come especially due to the family history, as I said before, these are all symptoms of his prior ADHD diagnosis."

"I understand. Thank you so much. You have cleared my concern" Sachiko, Oslo's mother, quickly and softly nods her head.

"If you have any further concerns, don't hesitate to bring him in. Okay?" She smiles and shakes Sachiko's hand as he looks up at the much taller adults in confusion.

Ocea is back home waiting for him at their tree,

"Mom we have to go now."

"One moment Ossy."

Oslo shakes his body left and right, then angrily sits back down in the chair, when a pack of fruit candies is dropped into his lap. He stops in curiosity and proceeds to open the packet. As soon as one candy hits his tongue, he sees his mother continuing to talk.

"Mom we have to go." He tugs at her shirt.

"Mom!"

"Ossy, enough!" She turns back to the doctor, "He has a little friend waiting on him at home I'm sorry." She says with some humor and a gentle smirk.

"She's not my friend!"

"You want me to tell her that or you going to tell her you' self?"

After what felt like hours to Oslo, him and his mother finally head to their families crumbling green SUV to go home.

"Your father should know, this was Doctor Makita, okay?" His mother said firmly.

"Okay." Oslo didn't pay much mind to this comment at the time.

"Are you ready to celebrate your big day this weekend?"

Oslo puts up one finger after another until all but four are accounted for.

"I don't wanna be old like Dad!"

“What do you mean get old?” She looks back at him in the mirror, “HA HA!” Oslo jumps in his seat. “Get old? What you know about *get old*? You have a long way to go before you old like Dad!”

“I’m not that little...”

“Not little or old?” She stares, looking at his smug face through the mirror as his eyes glare out the car window behind her. “Maybe you and Ocea can do something. Since you too big for everything else.”

“Okay.” He lets the conversation go, remembering Ocea has probably left the tree by now. “How much longer until we’re home?”

What felt like an hour was fifteen minutes until they turned onto their street. As soon as they pulled into the driveway Oslo hopped out of the car and ran to the backyard where the big Oak Tree sits. He turns the corner of his house looking quickly at the tree, then up to his left at her window, then back at the tree seeing no sign of her. He slows his pace as he walks up to the trunk of the tree sulking.

“RAAAHHH!!” A small blonde girl jumps from the back of the tree at Oslo with as much intimidation as she can harness, wounding up more adorable than anything. But not to Oslo, as he jumps backward almost falling over.

“H-Hey!” Oslo screams, trying to play off the fact he just jumped out of his skin.

Ocea points laughing at Oslo, “It worked! You got scared!”

“No, I didn’t! I was just yelling too!”

“Why’d ya jump back then?” She swivels back and forth with her hands in her light blue dress pockets.

Without hesitation, Oslo looks up to the sky, “Ocea, Look out!”

A large Black spot in the sky comes soaring closer and closer towards them as they hear a high-pitched screech trailing behind it, all while Oslo hides the whistle coming from his puckered lips behind his hands.

Ocea rolls her eyes, “Ah, yes. That darn Dragon again.”

Oslo returns a scowl, “C’mon it’s supposed to be scary!”

Ocea pauses for a moment then turns up to the sky, “AAAAH!”

A fiery heat radiates towards the both of them, knocking Oslo down to his feet as Ocea gets swept away by the wind.

He looks up at her and screams, "OCEA!!"

He can barely see around the blinding light of the sun, a large mass of a dragon carrying Ocea away in his claws. Oslo gets up putting a pair of sunglasses from his pocket over his eyes, "My helmet will protect me from any fire!". He runs behind the tree and within the base of the trunk is an opening from which he pulls a great Steel Blade from, extending the same height as himself. He runs into the forest where the dragon flew with Ocea, braving any enemy that comes his way.

Crossing into the great wood he leaps and lunges, knowing the land well. He dips down into a creek, avoiding any water by stepping gracefully across stones; one sitting loose on the surface causes him to slip. He falls forward toward land, leaving only his legs to splash into the grungy stream. With no hesitation, he resiliently picks himself up and continues to run forward. Between the trees, he can see a dark looming mass and a bright light shining behind it.

"OCEA!!" He screams to hear her call back to him, fearing that she's already dead.

Moments pass and a muffled "OSSY!!" Emerges through the trees. He presses forward, finding pieces of grocery bags that he insists are chunks of fabric from her dress. Pieces of aluminum and glass from bottles stick out of the ground, as though the Dragon had shed its scales.

Oslo comes to a clearing, a great field stands in front of him filled with what looks like golden locks of wheat glistening in the sun and flowing in the wind like strands of hair. The brush stands tall, but he moves forward in it, seeing a black lump in the center. "Ocea!! I'm coming through now!!" He holds his sword high, swinging left and right to make a path.

Suddenly, the ominous dark mass covers the sky and blots out the sun. Like a solar eclipse, a great beast arches over the field staring into the eyes of little Oslo. Without fear, Oslo raises his right hand which starts to glow a light blue, turning darker as he continues to charge his fist.

A bubbly sound emits from his hand, "NEEeeEERHh"

The sound beams from his skin until he throws his fist to the dark sky, unable to make sense of where the beast's head is. He takes aim, and a bright blue beam shoots

from his palm. *SPOOSH!* A direct hit! Yet, a short-lived celebration as Oslo lifts his sword to the sky in victory, he is whacked by the end of the dragon's tail. He's sent flying across the field, losing grip on his sword as it ends up lost in the brush.

"Ossy!" He hears Ocea cry from the distance. He hears a loud thud, like a comet striking the earth. And another. And another. The dragon steps towards Oslo, extending its neck towards the soil he lays on, turning his head so one eye glares down upon the helpless child.

cough* *cough

Oslo's vision is blurred from his squinting. He tightens his chest for dramatic effect as though he was on his final breaths. The dragon lifts its neck until the sun is completely blotted out. While he can see nothing but a shadow before him, a terrifying roar sounds as the beast is charging his fiery breath to put one final blow on the rescuer. He hears the most disgusting shriek he could imagine—he draws a final word—with his final breath,

"ocea...".

Suddenly, he hears Ocea scream in a fiery rage, followed by the sound of metal meeting metal. Steel to scale. The dragon plummets to the ground as a small puff of fire poofs from his snout.

"*Ossy MOVE!!*" Ocea cries.

Oslo rolls to his right as fast as he can, when a giant Dragon head falls to his left, only to look up and see a tattered and muddied Ocea holding the hilt of Oslo's Steel Sword lodged in the back of a large, black painted hay bale that holds a wooden stick hanging out the front of it carved like a horn.

"Leave it to me, Ossy." Ocea smirks as she pulls a long wooden stake as tall as she is out of the back of the hay bale.

"Come on I had him that time!!" Oslo whines from the ground.

"You're just mad you got saved by the Princess, *again!*" She remarks.

Oslo sits propped up on his knees, "The Prince is supposed to save the Princess, that's how it always works."

"Not if the Princess gets bored." Ocea brushes off the wooden stake of any hay that's clung to it.

“Well, that’s your fault if you get bored. You’re supposed to cry more or keep trying to use magic spells to get free.”

“I did use magic spells. And I did get free!”

“No, you’re supposed to use them, but not get free.”

“What’s the point in that?”

“I save you, that’s the point!” Oslo waves his arms dramatically and spins around while letting out a big sigh.

“You happen to be trying to save the most powerful Princess, in which case, she gets free and that’s that.”

“Then you don’t need me to save you!” Oslo stomps away into the tall grass that surrounds them. Without turning back, he expects Ocea to run crying after him, but she never does.

He ran inside his house through the back porch, bypassing his mother in the Living Room reading. He heard her ask if Ocea was at the tree when they got home, but he kept running. He didn’t talk much the rest of the day and paid no mind to Ocea or what she did.

Looking back, Oslo could recall something else that happened that day. Something new that she hadn’t done before, but would soon become a new norm.

She wrote him a letter, or maybe a poem, he can’t quite remember.

“Under the midnight moon, I had heard the occasional tacking at my window. I jumped out of bed and ran up to it, knowing exactly where to look. I saw Ocea staring back from the second-story window directly across from mine, with a clever look on her face, pointing towards our backyard tree. This tree stood directly in between our yards, disrupting the fence’s path. I slipped quietly out my door, tip-toeing as softly as I could down the creaky wooden staircase without my socks nearly sweeping me off my feet. I crept through the backdoor, clenching my teeth as I unlocked it. I ran through the yard as fast as I could, looking in our usual spot in the trunk of the tree, only to find an envelope resting there. I took it to my room and opened it under my blanket, tucking my lamp underneath it with me.”

“Every word, I know I took it to heart at that moment, forgiving the stupid thing I was upset about earlier that day. I’ll still obsess over the thought of it. But—I can’t remember for the life of me what it said.”

Outside in the schoolyard, after the final class of his High School career had let out, he stood waiting for his friends to step out. They came out one by one waiting a few minutes for the next until all four of them stood huddled up and had one final goodbye until graduation.

On Oslo's walk home his skin felt crisp in the summer heat as the sun radiates over him. He could smell the warmth off of the cement beneath him, taking him back to when he was a kid playing on the street. To when... they both would play in the street together. Rock soccer, hop scotch, badminton, you name it. They would throw together any two sticks and some string and make the most out of it.

In the midst of his reminiscing, he looked up and saw Ocea standing with her phone in hand on the street corner. Anxiety shot through his veins like it does drinking espresso. His stomach dropped like a rollercoaster. His feet felt lightweight and cold. With a rock in his stomach, he didn't know whether he should pretend to be on the phone, turn around, wait her out, or what. The anxiety moved to his beating heart like a swarm of tadpoles pushed through his veins, bursting into a hasty pulse. Her blonde hair blew in the wind almost covering her face until she tucked it behind her ear. He decided to go with the acting like he had forgotten something at school and turned around to walk up to the other side of the block. But after a few feet, he looked back and saw her start on were way home again. He sighed with relief as he looked at his phone, trying to play it off still. He slowly shifts back down the sidewalk to their street corner, hoping Ocea would make it inside her house before he could make it on to their street.

When Oslo made it home he walked into his mother on the phone. He overheard the words: '*our annual family vacation*' and '*everyone included*', and he knew exactly what that meant. The annual beach trip which he hasn't been in two Summers is back on. The excitement starts to form in the pit of his stomach, then after a few seconds anxiety bubble, bubble, bubbles up into his chest.

He started to run upstairs when about halfway his mother yelled, "Ossy?"

"Hai?"

"We just finished making our plans with the Takayamas."

“Plans?” He looks at her obliviously.

“Our Summer trip! We do every summer Ossy.”

“We haven’t in like two or three Summers mama.”

“*You* haven’t done it in two Summers. Get excited. We leave in one week!” She retorts as she walks away.

Oslo doesn’t know to feel excited or distraught. Being forced to be around Ocea, is it a dream or a nightmare?

Though soon enough, none of these childish feelings will matter.

The world fades. Oslo stands in a dark and empty space, wearing nothing but a hospital gown. “Don’t take me there. I don’t wanna know how I got here.” Tears fall on either cheek. Salty as the water that,

Drip... drip... drips.

~

One week briskly passes. They packed up two cars and hit the road for a three-hour drive to the nearest beach called Silver Cove, close to the Outer Banks. It had been a while since Oslo spent time with Ocea’s parents. The whole drive Oslo was haunted by the interaction he and Ocea had packing the cars. Saying ‘*Hey*’ and ‘*How’s it going?*’ was short but not sweet. He knew that she knew it had been a while, and he knew she knew he knew the same. This was an awkward set up for an already awkward situation. Is this how the whole trip was going to be? He wanted to imagine them rekindling their friendship. Being forced into each other’s atmospheres. But he couldn’t help imagining nothingness. A lost connection. The final nail in the coffin.

Three hours later they pull into a beachside cottage hidden between some trees from neighboring cottages. Everyone unpacks right away and gets started on a late dinner while the sun is setting. A Sukiyaki hotpot wasn’t the ideal summer dish but was quick and easy enough to throw together, and as it turned out, the moonlit air was cool enough that they would only sweat a few drops that night.

The Cabin was old and not the most well-kept, but the amenities made it feel like home. It was a simple structure standing only one story high but had four rooms; enough for everyone to sleep comfortably. They sat on the back porch to eat, which extended more wide than long but could fit a pale wooded table with six chairs around it and four rocking chairs to the side. The wood of the table and chairs matched the wood of the house, making it all blend together in a fairly tacky manner, but the porch rugs and chimes helped break up the bland coloring. The run-down nature of the home with the steaming Sukiyaki broth of sugary soy sauce brushing against their faces made it all feel like their home away from home.

The whole evening Oslo was on edge over Ocea. Oslo was bitter and sad, but for all Ocea knew they had just gone their separate ways. No bitterness, nothing. However, she started to believe he didn't care for her anymore. That maybe she did something wrong and he was repulsed by her. Was it school? Her friend group? Something she herself was constantly uncertain of.

She picks up her phone to a text from her friend, Esty.

"Any luck?"

She raises her brow in suspicion and types, "L u c k ?"

The three dotted bubble appears on her phone screen, but just as she is about to receive a response Ocea locks her phone and puts it down. She stands up while grabbing her bowl and runs inside to put it in the sink. She grabs a bottle of water from the countertop and steps quickly but softly back out the door,

"I'm gonna go down by the water."

She points off down a dark sandy pathway sitting in between the trees.

All the parents quietly chant "Ay ay" with a nod to her as she steps off the back porch.

"The sake!!" Koji cries as he jumps up to run inside.

Ocea steps out beyond the cabin expecting soft sand beneath her feet, having a few yards to go before she's at the cove but ends up regretting not wearing her sandals as she steps on rock after rock and twig after twig from the old trees surrounding them. She rose to the tips of her toes to take minimal risk in getting splinters on her feet, carefully feeling out each step before moving forward.

She's relieved as she feels her left foot slip into cold grainy sand and hears gentle waves of the cove right in front of her. As she drops her heels to the ground and steps closer to the water she feels the sand only get more cold and compact. She looks left and right to the all too familiar coastline. She acknowledges the long dock a couple of miles out to her left and a small lighthouse about a half mile to her right.

She sighs with relief, "a sweet escape."

As soon as the words come out of her mouth, she can't help but think about Oslo. She can get away from *most* everything, but there's still him. In retrospect, she feels awful.

'*What am I doing?*' She asks herself.

She tried to let him off easy in middle school, but he never got the picture. He would still sit next to her on the bus everyday, as if he couldn't read into how she really felt about him.

She was growing up. And he wasn't.

"But that wasn't true."

She opens her phone to an app labeled "Papers". Multiple files were listed with various titles. *Airlight*, *Summer Memory*, *Ethesia*, and *Meadow*. On the other end of the file names were dates. The first three were from as much as five years ago, and none of them had surpassed thirty pages.

Meadow on the other hand was created almost exactly one year ago. She clicks into it.

"I hope he likes it. I hope he does." She pulls her phone from her face and down to her chest, "Who am I kidding I'm never handing those pages over to him."

She stares down at the water that stretches to her feet one wave at a time, "If only there was some way out. Some way to get out of this life. Some way to go back in time and never push him away."

She backs further away from the water and squats low to the ground until her butt sinks into the sand. She cringes, not expecting the cold, moist, and mushy sensation the ground gives. Regardless, she opens her phone again trying to pay no mind to her damp behind. She goes into a different app this time, her Notes, where there are several folders for various specific things but ends up clicking into 'Writing Stuff'.

Several more folders of categories such as ‘poetry’, ‘poetry ideas’, ‘short stories’, ‘songs’, ‘story ideas’, and so on are revealed. She clicks into ‘story ideas’ revealing several notes that ramble about various ideas. She starts a new note and types,

*I don't want to change. I Want to grow up.
He wants to change. Refuses to grow up.'*

She shakes her head thinking it's not right. Corny. Cringe. If there's anything she hates, it's a pretentious artist. But whatever. It's just an idea anyway.

~

Oslo knew what he was doing when he decided to stay on the porch and read after the parents went inside. He was nervous and even a little embarrassed. He maybe shouldn't try and talk to her at all. *'What's the worst that can happen?'* He's only half reading—if you can call it that—with his eyes continuously glaring upward towards the path Ocea went down, expecting her back any minute.

His stomach sinks, *'What if she's talking with some guy? She could have a boyfriend for all I know.'*

Just then he saw a small glimmer of light in the distance swaying back and forth facing the ground.

He panicked. *'She knows exactly why I'd be here. Nobody reads in the dark!'*

He starts to hear the crunching of twigs and leaves coming closer. His body shifts forward and back in his chair trying to look as natural as he can, but before he can settle, she steps up the wooden stairs with a low creek in each step. He looks up out of the corner of his eye.

'I don't wanna bother him while he's reading—Who reads in the dark anyways?'

'She didn't even glance at me.' He shifts forward, confident and ready to say something when he chokes and changes his movement into crossing his legs.

Ocea opens the door slowly, hoping for a peep out of Oslo, but not a word comes through.

A week, full of interactions like these. Several opportunities for them to talk to each other but would always end up with nothing. All in all, it *did* help them both feel at ease. Especially on the last night when the family gathered around to play Poker at a table between the Kitchen and the back door. Emily, Ocea's mom, was playing an old jazz record from the living room record player. The house comes with several vinyl records that are nothing of interest, but the unnamed jazz music was nice.

Somewhere mid-poker game on the table is an Ace of Clubs, a Queen of Spades, a Jack of Hearts, a Two of Clubs, and a Nine of Clubs. This left several options for payout, but could only leave one victor. Ocea and Oslo have a stare-down with both their cards in hand, their parents folded, and a value of 458 chips on the table.

"I raise you..." Ocea pushes four Black Chips to the middle of the table, "*Two Hundred.*" She says cleverly.

Oslo stares with little confidence in the hand he was dealt. He looks to the table at the money he's put in, his dwindling pile to his left, and one final look at the cards on the table. His voice shakes, "I'll call." Pushing forward all but one Black Chip to meet the 200.

"Ocea! Reveal your hand!" Her father, Koji, excitedly summons.

She dramatically lays down a King of Spades and a Ten of Hearts looking firmly into Oslo's eyes. He feels the tension and tries to take advantage by pulling any amount of attention from Ocea as he can.

He throws a Jack of Clubs on the table.

"Pair of Jacks? HAHA—Sooo SORRY this one's mine!" Ocea hollers, when a second later Oslo throws a Four of Clubs down.

"Flush!"

"AHHHHH" The table yells up in arms, Ryu's arm wrapped around Oslo's neck and Ocea's mom patting her on the back.

Unfortunately, Ocea and Oslo still ended up being the first two out of the game, leaving their parents behind to play. They step away from the table after a little while and go out to the porch. "You wanna walk out?" Oslo points to the pathway leading to the cove.

Ocea nods her head, “Yeah sure.”

But she stops just before the door, “Oh! Let me grab my bag real quick.”

They walked out to the shore together after the sun had fully set. Both regretting not wearing shoes as they gingerly step over those rocks and twigs. The sand was still warm as the grains rubbed between their toes and the wind occasionally brushing it across their calves. Ocea points out the lighthouse in the distance and they decide to try and make their way out there.

It was a long and quiet walk with not much to say other than talk about the trip and how beautiful the Ocean is. Continuous awkward remarks were made from Oslo like ‘*You were named after that*’ (pointing to the ocean), and ‘*Wish I hadn’t forgotten my shoes.*’ Soon enough they approach the lighthouse as the calm ocean laps up to its edges. It was a smaller lighthouse, about three stories tall, and seemed to have served more aesthetic purposes.

“Doesn’t look like it’s open.” Oslo says while slapping the side of the structure.

“That’s okay, it’s cool just to see up close.” Ocea says staring straight up to the top with her arms crossed tight.

A peaceful silence fills the air as the waves continue to lap against the beach front. Ocea kicks her feet in the sand, gripping the straps of the bag on her back.

“Ossy, what made you decide to go out of state?”

“Oh— Mmmm... it’s the best fit for what I want I guess.”

She nods, “It’s gonna be weird not having you around; You’ve always been around, you know...”

Another silence falls upon them, both in speculation before Ocea clears her throat, “I... I haven’t been good about keeping up with you.”

Oslo is caught off guard. He shakes his head as they both look out to sea.

“No, It’s okay, I haven’t been good either. Guess we both got caught up with our own things.”

“I didn’t mean to push you out or anything like that.”

He looks at her and quickly turns away, “Oh—I know—I would never think that!” Lying through his teeth.

Ocea kicks her feet in the sand, arms crossed, looking down as the water washes up to her feet. “Have you ever considered... staying? Going to state?”

Oslo’s heart stopped. He didn’t know what to say; he started to believe this was another dream.

“I would—I *have* considered it.”

“Really?”

“I just don’t know if it’s the right call. I don’t want to stay for the wrong reasons.”

Stay for the wrong reasons? What’s that supposed to mean?

“You don’t want to *leave* for the wrong reasons either.”

What could she mean by that? *Leave* for the wrong reasons?

“That’s true. It’s a tough call. Nothing’s really jumping out at me to be honest. All I can really go off of is this animation program at the institute.” Oslo shrugs, “No answer feels like the completely right call to make to be honest.”

She laughs, “I understand! I mean, I felt the same way going to state. Felt kinda lame for staying in the same place.” Ocea returns the shrug.

“Oslo, whatever it is that you do—” She steps forward and looks directly at him, softly grabbing his arm. “I will wholeheartedly support you, like I always have.”

“Thank you, Ocea.” He looks at her hand on his arm and looks back up at her. “I’m supposed to move in two months. It would feel wrong to stay... at this point.”

She nods with confidence, “Of course, I’m proud of you for that. Stick to what you’ve committed to.” She looks up to the sky and takes a deep breath, then they both turn to walk back towards the cabin. “If you need any help with anything, just let me know I’d be happy to help.”

“Thank you, that means a lot.” Oslo returns a soft smile.

The next day Oslo and Ocea decide to get up early and surprise everyone with a big breakfast.

“It doesn’t look like we haaaave.. Eggs... Flour... Sugar... Salt, Pepper, Anything! How’ve they been cooking all weak?!” Ocea complains in a whisper as she stares into the empty refrigerator.

“We better run to the store really quick.” She concludes.

Oslo leans against the other side of the kitchen counter whispering back, “And take who’s car? My parents would kill me if I drove theirs.”

“We can take mine, they shouldn’t mind. And if they do it won’t be for long after they see this feast!”

“Fair enough.” Oslo shrugs with a smile.

They jump in the car together and take off quiet and slow as they make their way down the gravel path. They peer out of the woods and head up the road to the nearest grocery store. It’s about a ten-minute drive.

Ocea turns the stereo knob up, “You still listen to Teira?”

“Never stopped!”

Ocea laughs, “I should’ve known!”

“I’ve been having a hard time with some of her new stuff, but I gotta admit, it’s growing on me.”

“Oh, I LOVE it. It’s not the same so I understand but how is everything she does turn out so good??”

“It’s true—” Oslo laughs, “She’s got us all wrapped around her finger.”

They laugh together and sit, enjoying the music as Ocea turns it up louder. Ossy continues to look over at Ocea with a sudden yet intense feeling. He knows this feeling, it’s the same one he had when he read the Letter she left him under the Oak Tree.

He turns to look out the window but has a continuous urge to look at her. She rests her palm on the steering wheel, tapping to the beat, looking over and smiling at Oslo. He smiles back and turns to look out his window, resting his elbow against it and leaning his face into his palm. He taps his thigh with his left hand.

“Hey Ossy—“ Ocea reaches behind her, grabbing the same bag she brought with her the night before,

”I need to tell you something. And I wanna know what you think.”

Continuing to look out the window, “Oka-”

This was the last thing Oslo remembers before headlights glared out his passenger window with a horn blaring as the car caved in. Any emotion that was felt at that moment left his body as his consciousness was broken. Ocea, with the wind, knocked out of her, witnessed the car rolling over until it rested against an Oak Tree on

the side of the road. If you could think any thoughts in a matter of milliseconds, Ocea begged for more time. Looking at Oslo and seeing his precious face surrounded by light beams and shattered glass, she begged that this wouldn't be their last moment together.

Drip... drip... drip.