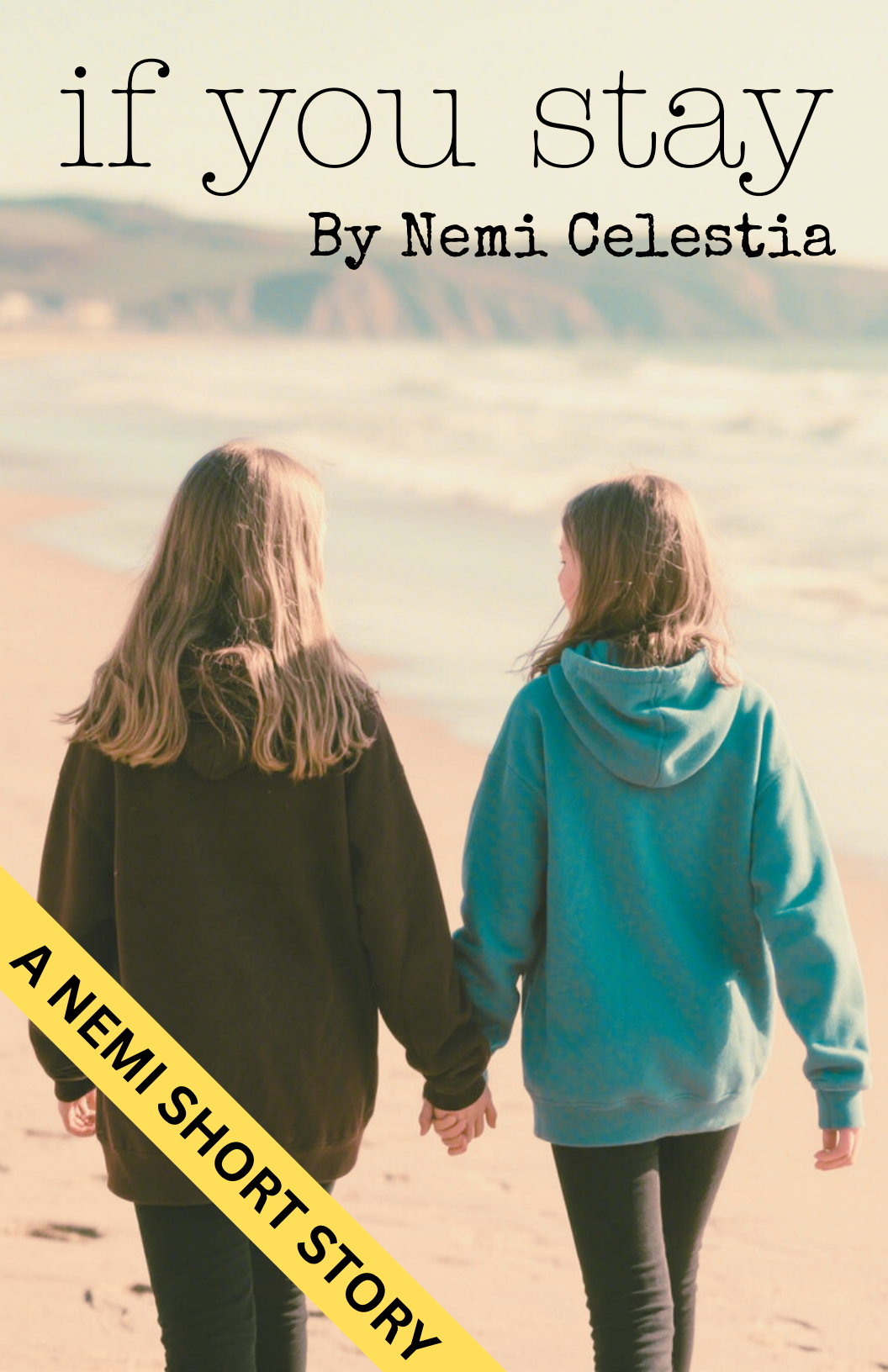


if you stay

By Nemi Celestia

A photograph of two young girls walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. The girl on the left has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a dark brown hoodie. The girl on the right has long, straight brown hair and is wearing a teal hoodie. They are holding hands and walking towards the ocean. The background shows the ocean waves and a hazy, distant shoreline under a warm, golden light.

A NEMI SHORT STORY

If You Stay

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Cover art by Nemi Celestia

Preface

If You Stay is a short story — a quiet glimpse into a small, fragile moment between two sisters. It's not a novel, but a little read, a whispered conversation carried on the sea breeze. My hope is that, in these pages, you will find a place to pause, feel the salty air, and settle into the tender, imperfect space where love and loss quietly meet.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Dedicated to

Anyone who has ever lost a parent — may you find moments of peace and love in the memories that remain.

Chapter One

The train had been rattling along the coastline for a while now, its wheels hissing softly over the old rails, the sea a steady shimmer just beyond the glass. Elowen watched it more than she watched her sister. But only just.

Fifer was curled up on the seat opposite, knees tucked under her hoodie, her trainers muddy and carelessly kicked onto the upholstery. Her hair fell forward in a dark curtain, a kind of armour she hadn't worn as a child. She hadn't said much since they left the station. Not since that awkward hug. Not since Elowen had tried too hard to say something that might matter and ended up saying nothing at all.

Now, the silence between them filled the carriage. Not angry or cold — just wide. Like the stretch of sea outside the window. Elowen let it be.

She noticed the new angles in Fifer's face. How her wrists were thinner, her hands more certain as they clutched her phone. She was fourteen now. Two years gone, and suddenly her little sister looked like someone Elowen might not recognise in a crowd. That realisation came with a soft ache, like salt stinging a cracked lip.

A cough echoed from further down the carriage, sharp and sudden. Fifer shifted, pulling her hoodie tighter. Still silent.

"You hungry?" Elowen asked, keeping her voice low. Nonchalant. The kind of question you ask after five minutes, not five hundred days.

Fifer shrugged. One shoulder only.

Elowen turned back to the sea. "We'll make something simple tonight. You still like pesto pasta?"

A beat passed. Then, almost too quiet to hear: "Yeah. Still."

It was something. A tiny thing. A seed pushing up through dry ground. Elowen breathed out, slowly.

The train curved inland for a moment, and the view was swallowed by trees. Their reflections overlapped on the window glass — the ghost of a girl and the ghost of her sister, side by side again. Almost.

The tannoy crackled overhead, announcing the next stop in a garbled voice that barely cut through the hum of the carriage. Elowen glanced up, then across at Fifer, who'd lowered her phone and was squinting out at the sea again. Her brow was furrowed — not quite scowling, but close enough.

“Nearly there,” Elowen said.

Fifer nodded without looking at her. Then, after a pause, “It’s smaller than I remember.”

Elowen glanced at her. “The town?”

“Yeah.” Fifer stretched her legs out, her trainers squeaking faintly on the seat. “I used to think it was huge.”

Elowen smiled, though she wasn’t sure Fifer could see it. “Everything feels bigger when you’re little.”

That earned her a glance — brief, sideways, but not cold. Fifer leaned back against the headrest, her arms folded tight across her chest.

“Did you bring your hoodie?” she asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Elowen raised an eyebrow. “I... yeah. Why?”

“It’s always colder near the sea. Mum used to say it ‘clings to your bones’. Like a ghost or something.” Fifer shrugged, trying for indifference, but her voice had softened. “You don’t remember?”

“I remember,” Elowen said quietly.

Fifer’s gaze dropped to her lap. She picked at a frayed bit of thread on her sleeve. “You packed sun cream, right? I didn’t. Thought you’d probably be the boring one who remembered.”

There was a glimmer of something in her voice now — almost a joke, almost fond. Elowen let out a tiny laugh.

“Yep. Factor 30 and aloe vera. My boring credentials remain intact.”

Fifer snorted. “Loser.”

But it came with the ghost of a smile.

The train began to slow, the brakes hissing softly, the rhythm of the tracks fading into silence. Elowen gathered their bags. She hesitated, watching Fifer’s hands as she shoved her phone into her pocket. Still small, those hands. But not a child’s anymore.

“Ready?” she asked.

Fifer didn't answer, just stood up and nudged her with an elbow — light, quick, and oddly deliberate. Elowen caught herself smiling again as they stepped off the train and into the gull-crowded air of the coast.

The space between them didn't feel quite so wide now.

Chapter Two

The train pulled away behind them with a long, reluctant sigh, leaving the platform still and strangely silent. Elowen adjusted the strap of her rucksack and glanced around. The station was little more than a shelter, all rusted gutters and peeling paint, with a handwritten notice in the window about replacement buses that no one had bothered to update since spring.

The town unfolded slowly as they walked — not a proper seaside town with arcades and donkeys, but a working one, the kind where boats mattered more than bunting. The pavements were uneven, patched in places with chalky cement, and the air had a faint tang of salt and fish. A pair of seagulls bickered over a chip wrapper in the gutter, their cries sharp and wheeling overhead.

“Smells like low tide,” Fifer muttered, pulling her hoodie up despite the warmth.

Elowen smiled faintly. “As if you would know. But better than diesel fumes.”

“Debatable.”

They passed a row of cottages, all low-roofed and hunched together like old women whispering secrets. Lobster pots and faded plastic buckets sat by the doors, and one house had a line of socks fluttering above the street like prayer flags. A shop on the corner — *H.E. Rowntree & Sons: Fishmongers and General Supplies* — had a blackboard sign in the window advertising fresh cockles and loose milk.

“I don’t think anything’s changed here in a hundred years,” Elowen said, half to herself.

Fifer didn’t reply, just adjusted her bag and kept walking.

There weren’t many people about. A man in a flat cap nodded at them from across the street, but otherwise the place felt half-asleep — as though the town had taken one long breath and forgotten to exhale.

After a while, Fifer kicked a stone out of her path and asked, “You sure you remember the way?”

“Mostly,” Elowen said, and that was true enough. She recognised the crooked postbox near the lane, and the

turning by the low stone wall that ran toward the sea. Her feet seemed to know where to go, even if her heart lagged a step behind.

They fell quiet again.

Eventually, Fifer spoke. Her voice was low, almost too casual. “It was getting too much at home. I think Mum’s friends kept popping round to be seen caring.”

Elowen glanced at her, but didn’t interrupt.

“It just made it worse. Like, you’re supposed to say thank you for the flowers and the lasagne when what you really want is to scream into the fridge or sleep for fourteen hours.”

Elowen swallowed. “Yeah.”

“She thought getting away might help. Fresh air and all that.”

“You mean *you* thought that,” Elowen said gently.

Fifer didn’t answer straight away. Then, “Whatever. Doesn’t matter.”

But it did. Elowen knew it, and Fifer knew she knew.

The road dipped slightly, giving them a glimpse of the sea at last — flat and grey-blue, stretched out like an

old postcard. The sky above it was pale and washed out, as if the colour had been left too long in the sun. In the distance, gulls wheeled, their calls echoing off the stone.

“There,” Elowen said, pointing ahead. “Just past the boat shed.”

They rounded the final bend, and the cottage came into view. It sat low against the hill, whitewashed with green shutters and a roof the colour of storm clouds. The gate hung slightly askew, and the paint on the door had blistered from the salt air — but there was something solid in the way it sat, something unchanged.

“Looks... alright,” Fifer offered.

“Bit neglected,” Elowen admitted. “But not sad.”

Fifer nodded once. “That’s something, I guess.”

Elowen reached for the key in her pocket, her fingers brushing against the cool metal. A seagull cried above them, and somewhere in the distance, a bell rang out the hour.

Elowen pushed open the gate, the wood groaning as if waking from a long sleep. The narrow path was tufted with grass and dry moss, the paving stones uneven but familiar beneath her shoes. To their right, a low garden

wall marked the end of the lane — beyond it, the land dropped away to the sea.

The girls stood there for a while without speaking, shoulder to shoulder, eyes cast outward.

The cottage looked like something from a photograph someone meant to frame but never got around to. A place suspended in time — not abandoned, not loved either, just waiting. The whitewash had faded in streaks where storms had blown in off the water, and a rusted watering can lay tipped on its side beneath the front window. Ivy curled round the downpipe like it had nowhere better to be.

The sea beyond was quieter than it looked — not the crash-and-foam kind, but something steadier. It lapped the shingle shore in long, slow sighs. Gulls called out above them, their cries carried on the salt wind, which brought with it a smell of seaweed, damp stone, and something faintly metallic — like coins kept too long in the pocket.

The sky was heavy with midsummer haze. Not golden, not quite grey. That washed-out in-between that made everything feel older, like the world was being remembered rather than lived.

“This is it, then,” Fifer said at last.

Elowen nodded. “Yeah.”

They didn’t move for a while. Just stood there, arms nearly touching but not quite, each feeling the other’s presence in that quiet, taut way siblings sometimes do. Not touching, but tethered.

A break, not a holiday.

A place where silence wouldn’t press quite so hard on the lungs.

Fifer shifted her weight slightly. “Alright. Let’s see inside, then.”

Elowen reached for the key in her pocket. It was cold and unfamiliar in her palm, though she’d held it before. She stepped forward and turned it in the lock. The door clicked open — stiff, then yielding.

Behind them, the sea murmured on. Ahead, the hush of an untouched room.

And in between: two girls, half-grown and half-raw, about to cross into something neither of them could name.

Chapter Three

The cottage opened like a held breath.

Fifer stepped in first, her trainers scuffing over the threshold. Elowen followed behind, dragging her suitcase over the worn floorboards. The moment the door clicked shut behind them, the air changed. It was cooler inside, with that particular old-house scent: dust, wood polish gone sharp, the faint must of sea salt that had settled in and made itself part of the furniture.

No one had stayed here in years. A decade, maybe more.

The front room looked as though it had paused sometime in the mid-2000s and never quite started again. A crocheted blanket lay folded over the back of the sofa, one of the arms slightly sunken from use. On the small mantelpiece above the fireplace, a dried posy sat in a vase—now brittle, colourless. The air held

something both tender and uneasy, like memory and forgetting wrapped up together.

Fifer hovered, backpack still slung over her shoulders. Her eyes flicked over the room—recognition and strangeness knotted together.

“Looks smaller,” she said.

Elowen gave a soft snort. “You got taller.”

Fifer shrugged, as if conceding the point but not ready to smile yet.

They moved through the house slowly, room by room. In the kitchen, the clock had stopped at 11:17. A bowl still rested on the draining rack, long since cleaned and dried but never put away. Mum’s old apron still hung on the hook by the door, faded from the sun.

No one had cleared it out. It wasn’t abandoned, not exactly—just... paused.

When they reached the hallway, Elowen automatically turned towards the bedroom at the end—the master—but her hand hesitated on the door. She didn’t want to open it. Not because of what might be inside, but because of what wouldn’t be.

She glanced at Fifer. “We’re not sleeping in there.”

Fifer had already turned away. “Didn’t plan to.”

They opened the door to their old bedroom together.

The light from the hallway spilled across a floor covered in scattered patches of carpet, worn smooth by years of play and arguments and tiptoeing. Their beds sat on either side of the room, still dressed in mismatched duvets. Elowen’s had stripes. Fifer’s was blue with faded stars.

The air in here was thicker somehow, warmer with long-held stillness. A bookshelf lined with old paperbacks. A faded poster of a horse peeling from the wall. On the window ledge, a pair of toy binoculars sat next to a glass jar filled with dried sea glass.

Fifer stepped inside and looked around slowly. Her fingers trailed the edge of the desk they used to share—one side covered in glittery stickers, the other in pencilled song lyrics from bands neither of them liked anymore.

“I don’t remember it being this quiet,” she said.

“It wasn’t.” Elowen dropped her bag onto the bed she used to sleep in, then sat down gently, as if afraid it might collapse under her. “We made a lot of noise.”

Fifer turned to the wardrobe and opened it. A couple of old jackets still hung inside, limp with time. She closed it again, quietly.

Without speaking, she sat on her own bed, pulled off her trainers, and lay back with a quiet sigh.

“We’re not going to clean this place, are we?” she asked, looking up at the ceiling.

Elowen smiled faintly. “Nope. We’re just passing through.”

She stood, picked up her towel, and padded towards the bathroom. “I’m gonna shower. You okay here?”

Fifer made a non-committal noise. Not quite yes, not quite no. Just... here.

The bathroom was just as Elowen remembered it. The same mint-green tiles, a bit more cracked now. The same cold floor. She turned on the tap and waited for the pipes to cough into life and the water turning clear, before stepping under the stream.

She stayed there longer than necessary. Not for the warmth, but for the privacy of it—the white noise, the steam, the brief illusion of being alone in a world that hadn’t shifted.

When she came back into the bedroom, hair wrapped in a towel, she found Fifer curled sideways on the bed, scrolling her phone. She looked small like that, despite the jeans and hoodie and too-long limbs. Still that same girl, somewhere inside it all.

Neither of them spoke. There was no need. They were here now, in this house that smelled of long summers and quiet endings, in the room they hadn't shared in ten years.

The light outside was beginning to fade. The sea, just beyond the lane, hummed softly behind the silence.

Chapter Four

Elowen flicked on the kitchen light, and it buzzed overhead before flooding the room with its pale yellow glow. The kitchen hadn't changed much. Same dusty shelves, same crooked cupboard door hanging open slightly, as if in welcome. The small wooden table still bore the marks of past meals — paint flecks, faint water rings, a pale ring near the corner where someone had once set down a warm pot, the wood slightly darkened in the centre.

Elowen filled the kettle and set it to boil, then reached into one of the canvas shopping bags they'd brought up from the train. "Still up for pasta pesto?"

Fifer nodded, dropping her phone onto the table and stretching. "Yeah. I'm starving."

"Good. It'll be simple." Elowen pulled out a pack of pasta, a jar of green pesto, and a punnet of cherry

tomatoes. She set them down on the counter. “Want to help?”

Fifer shrugged, but came forward. “I’ll do the tomatoes.”

Elowen handed her a small knife and the chopping board. Fifer rolled up the sleeves of her hoodie and got to work, slicing the tomatoes cleanly in half, laying them out in neat rows like coins.

They moved around each other with quiet efficiency, the silence in the room beginning to feel less like distance and more like a rhythm. The water came to a boil, and Elowen tipped in the pasta. Steam rose in gentle clouds, fogging the window.

“Still smells like dust and old teabags in here,” Fifer muttered.

Elowen laughed, surprised. “Better than feet.”

“I don’t know. The sofa’s definitely got a feet smell.”

They both grinned at that — fleeting, but real.

When the pasta was done, Elowen drained it, stirred in the pesto, and scattered the tomatoes on top. She sprinkled salt and a bit of black pepper over both bowls, then passed one to Fifer.

They sat at the old wooden table, knees tucked up, the chairs still slightly too low for the table, just like when they were small. The food was simple but warm, comforting in its familiarity.

Fifer twirled a forkful and blew on it. “I forgot how quiet it is here.”

Elowen nodded, chewing thoughtfully. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Bit creepy.”

Elowen glanced at her. “Want to put music on?”

Fifer shook her head. “No... I like hearing the sea.”

They ate slowly, the quiet folding around them again like a blanket. Outside, the sky had turned a deep slate grey, and the kitchen felt like a small pocket of warmth in a wide, dark world.

When the bowls were scraped clean and the kettle re-boiled, they stood side by side at the sink, Fifer washing, Elowen drying. Their elbows bumped once in a while. Neither said anything.

And when they finally went to bed that night — to the room they used to share, with mismatched duvets and the faintest smell of salt and dust — it was with full

bellies and a small but growing sense that maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be so terrible after all.

The old bedroom smelled just the same — faintly musty, with a trace of salt and something sweet and faded that might've once been talc or mothballs. The room hadn't changed. Two beds, set at opposite ends, with the bookshelf between them still half-full of old paperbacks and forgotten toys.

Elowen's bed creaked as she turned onto her side, pulling the thick duvet up to her chin. The corridor light spilled in through the half-open door, casting a dull glow that made everything look a bit washed-out, like a photograph left in the sun.

Across the room, Fifer was lying on her back, hoodie still on, her arms crossed tightly over her stomach as if bracing herself against something invisible. Neither of them had spoken since lights out. There was nothing but the distant hush of the sea and the occasional sigh of the old house settling.

After a long stretch of quiet, Fifer whispered, “Are you still awake?”

“Yeah.”

Another pause. Then: “Do you mind if I come over?”

Elowen sat up slightly. “Course not.”

Fifer didn’t say anything else. She slipped out from under her own covers, her footsteps soft against the wooden floor. A moment later she climbed into Elowen’s bed, careful but not tentative, and curled herself into the space behind her sister. Not touching, not quite, but close enough that the mattress shifted beneath them both.

Elowen stayed still, giving her space to settle.

“I don’t know why,” Fifer murmured. “I just... it felt weird over there.”

“You don’t have to explain.”

“I’m not a baby.”

“I know.”

Fifer’s breathing was a bit shaky, like she’d just walked in from cold air. Elowen could feel the tension in her — not upset exactly, but a kind of worn-down restlessness.

She remembered that feeling. Like the world had tipped sideways and hadn't settled yet.

"Do you remember," Fifer said, voice quieter now, "that summer when we camped in the garden and Mum forgot we were out there and locked the back door?"

Elowen gave a soft laugh. "Yeah. We thought we were going to die of cold."

"You said if we huddled close we'd be fine. Like penguins."

"Well, it worked, didn't it?"

Fifer huffed something that might've been a laugh. "You always think you're right."

"Only when I am."

Elowen felt a shift in the mattress, the tiniest nudge — Fifer's foot brushing hers under the duvet.

"I missed you," Fifer said, so low it was nearly nothing.

Elowen's chest ached with the weight of it — the honesty, the hurt underneath. She didn't try to explain anything. Just reached out and gently, without a word, took her sister's hand under the covers.

Fifer didn't pull away.

They lay there in the old room, the sea beyond the walls whispering like it always had. The air felt cooler now, but not lonely. Fifer's breathing slowed. Sleep tugged at the edges.

Elowen stayed awake a little longer, staring at the low ceiling and listening to the soft creak of the house around them. The years between them weren't gone — but they were quieter tonight.

Chapter Five

Fifer woke to warmth and silence.

She didn't open her eyes straight away — just lay there, breathing in the soft cotton scent of old bedsheets, the faint trace of salt in the air, and Elowen's sleep-heavy warmth beside her. It was still early. The light hadn't fully claimed the room yet, but she could sense it shifting — a blue-grey wash filtering through the thin curtains, brushing the walls like watercolour.

Elowen's arm was draped loosely over her waist, the kind of closeness that felt natural and strange all at once. Fifer hadn't shared a bed with anyone in years, not like this. Not since... well, not since before everything had changed. Before Elowen left. Before Mum—

She shifted slightly, careful not to wake her. Elowen murmured something incomprehensible, barely stirring, and turned onto her back, one arm flung over her head.

Fifer slipped quietly out of bed, the cold air of the room licking at her skin like sea mist. She grabbed her hoodie from the floor and padded out into the hallway.

The bathroom was chilly and smelled faintly of mildew and salt — the kind of scent that lingered in old seaside houses, clinging to the walls like memory. She went for a wee, washed her hands, and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her hair was sticking up at one side, her face pale in the silver morning light. Not quite a child anymore. Not quite anything.

Outside, the front step was cool with dew. She sat down anyway, drawing her knees to her chest, hoodie sleeves tugged over her hands. The sea was right there, just past the dunes and low brush — endless and still in the early light. The horizon glowed faintly peach and gold, the sky layered with soft pastels. The kind of morning that made you feel like the world was holding its breath.

She didn't hear Elowen come out. Just felt the quiet shift beside her as her sister lowered herself to the step.

“Did I snore?” Elowen murmured.

“A bit.”

Elowen let out a breath, rubbed her eyes. “Didn’t mean to. I always do when I sleep on my back.”

Fifer shrugged, not looking at her. “It was sort of comforting. Like old times.”

That made Elowen glance sideways at her, but she didn’t say anything.

The gulls were starting to stir now, crying faintly overhead, their calls ragged and familiar. Somewhere down the lane, a dog barked. The sky was getting brighter by the second.

“We used to run down to the beach before breakfast,” Fifer said. “Mum hated it when we came back covered in sand.”

“She always made us stand on the mat and shake our legs before we were allowed inside.”

Fifer smiled faintly. “You used to cheat. Wipe your feet and run past.”

They fell quiet again, watching the sea together, shoulder to shoulder.

It wasn’t a happy summer morning — not really. But it wasn’t sad either. Just... in between. A soft sort of ache. A breath drawn in but not quite let go.

By the time Elowen wandered into the kitchen, now in her hoodie from yesterday and nothing else, Fifer was already there — barefoot, hair damp from the misty air outside, busying herself in small, deliberate movements.

The kettle was on. Two mugs sat ready beside it, each with a spoon and a modest scoop of instant coffee from the old red tin they'd refilled yesterday, still loyally perched on its high shelf. A faint smell of toast drifted through the room.

"Morning," Elowen said, blinking against the brightness. Fifer murmured something incomprehensible.

"Hmm," Elowen murmured, rubbing her eyes. "You're making coffee?"

"No tea in the cupboard," Fifer said, a little too casually. "Just the one tin."

Elowen raised an eyebrow, half amused. "Didn't think you drank coffee."

"I didn't," Fifer said. "But... I started. After you and Dad left. The smell sort of... reminded me of you."

That stopped Elowen mid-step. She looked at her sister properly for the first time that morning. Fifer was

watching the kettle now, pretending it mattered, but her ears had flushed pink.

“Oh,” Elowen said softly. “That’s—well. I missed it too.”

Fifer gave a tiny nod, still not meeting her eyes.

The kettle boiled, and she poured the water, stirring briskly. The sound of spoon against mug echoed in the quiet.

They sat down together, the toast popping behind them, slightly too dark but still welcome. Fifer fetched the butter and jam from the otherwise empty fridge and quietly set it on the table. They didn’t talk much, but the silence didn’t carry weight the way it had before. Something had shifted, even just a little.

Elowen took a sip of the coffee and made a face. “God, this is awful.”

Fifer laughed — a real one, surprised and breathy. “It is. It always was.”

They shared a smile, the kind that lingered.

After a moment, Elowen leaned back in her chair. “You really should have a shower.”

Fifer gave her a warning look.

“I’m not judging,” Elowen said, holding up her hands.

“Just... gently suggesting.”

“I was thinking,” Fifer said, plucking at a toast crumb,
“we could swim in the sea later instead.”

Elowen tilted her head, considering. “Bracing.”

“You always said cold water was good for your soul.”

“I was quoting Dad.”

“Well,” Fifer said, smirking, “for once he might’ve been right.”

Elowen smiled. “All right. No shower, then. Sea it is.”

Outside, the gulls cried overhead and the tide crept closer. The cottage, still full of shadows and old dust, had begun to feel a little less empty.

Chapter Six

The afternoon sun was warm, softening the sharp edges of the day. The sea wrapped around them, cool and bracing, washing away the weight they'd been carrying.

They waded deeper, knickers soaked and clinging, skin tingling from the cold saltwater. No one was watching. No voices telling them to be careful, to keep modest, to behave. Just the two of them — free, messy, and unguarded.

Fifer held the frisbee they'd found tucked away in the cottage's dusty basket, flicking it lazily between her hands. When she finally threw it, it spun unevenly, dipping toward the waves. Elowen lunged, catching it midair with a triumphant laugh.

“You catch like a granny!” Fifer teased, grinning wide.

Elowen shot back, “This frisbee’s older than both of us. Cut me some slack.”

The water rose to their chests as they moved further out, feet no longer touching the sandy bottom. The sky stretched pale and endless above them, and gulls drifted on slow currents of air, their cries distant and timeless.

Fifer dove after the frisbee, flailing in the waves with the carefree abandon of a child. Elowen followed, splashing and laughing, the chill of the water biting sharp but exhilarating.

When Elowen surfaced, coughing out a mouthful of seawater, Fifer was waiting, eyes bright and full of mischief.

“That was freezing,” Elowen gasped.

“Freezing,” Fifer agreed, tugging her wet hair away from her face, “but perfect.”

They swam until their fingers and toes turned prune, then turned toward the shore. The wet sand squished between their toes as they walked back to where they had left their towels and clothes, breathless and dripping, the frisbee tucked under Fifer’s arm like a treasured prize.

Fifer sat on the towel with her back to Elowen, bare skin still damp from the sea. Elowen's hands moved gently through the tangled curls, careful not to pull too hard. The salty breeze lifted stray strands as she worked, but neither of them spoke at first—only the sound of the waves and distant gulls filled the space.

Elowen swallowed the lump in her throat and tried again. "Leaving was... harder than I thought it would be. Going to the States with Dad, leaving you and Mum behind."

Her fingers paused for a moment, then continued the slow rhythm of drying.

"I missed you both every day. I missed Mum's laugh, the way you'd roll your eyes when she told those terrible jokes. I missed the little things, the way the house felt when we were all together."

Fifer didn't turn around, but Elowen could feel the tension in her shoulders, the way she hugged herself a little tighter, covering her breasts from the breeze.

It wasn't that I wanted to leave you," Elowen said quietly. "I just... I couldn't bear the thought of Dad being all alone.

There was a long silence, filled with unspoken things neither of them could say yet. The sea kept whispering, endless and steady.

Fifer kept her back turned, shoulders hunched like a small fortress. She'd been small then—so small compared to Elowen, who was always grown-up, always someone to look up to. But even though Elowen was older, it didn't make the leaving any easier.

It wasn't just that Dad had taken Elowen overseas. It was that they had both left, and everything else changed around them. Mum and Fifer moved to a smaller house—not out of choice, but because the old one felt too big, too hollow. Sometimes, in the quiet moments, Fifer thought she could still hear footsteps on the stairs, or laughter down the hall. But it was only memory, curling around the silence.

She'd told herself it wasn't Elowen's fault, not really. But the ache of being left behind stayed, thick and stubborn, like a shadow she couldn't shake.

And now, here they were again, in this old, dusty cottage, trying to pretend everything could go back to

how it was—or maybe just trying to find a way forward.

Elowen's hands paused for a second in drying Fifer's hair. Then, with a teasing smile, she said, "You know, you've definitely grown breasts since I last saw you. No hiding that anymore."

Fifer's cheeks warmed, a little embarrassed under Elowen's gentle gaze. She was sitting there, still undressed, feeling vulnerable in the quiet afternoon light, but also safe—because Elowen's teasing wasn't cruel, it was kind, like an old sisterly ritual they'd never quite outgrown.

"Well, it's not like you've stayed the same either," Fifer shot back with a small grin, shifting just a little so Elowen could reach the back of her hair.

Elowen laughed softly. "Touché."

After a brief pause, Fifer sat up straighter and said, "Shall we head back and get dressed? I want to go into town before it gets too late."

Elowen nodded, folding the towel with care. "Sounds good. Let's go."

Chapter Seven

The town didn't have a high street so much as a crooked spine of buildings leaning into one another, their windows clouded with age, their signs faded by sun and salt. A newsagent with a bell that didn't ring anymore. A chemist's that still displayed wartime cough syrup in the front window. A butcher's with brown paper folded neatly in the windowpane corners to block out the sun. Nothing glossy. Nothing fast. It all looked as if it had been standing still for years, and had no particular urge to catch up.

The girls walked slowly, the click of Elowen's sandals and the hush of Fifer's trainers softened by the worn cobbles beneath their feet. A lazy breeze caught the smell of engine oil and old ropes from the harbour and carried it through the narrow lanes, where washing lines still criss-crossed between upstairs windows like bunting in a forgotten parade.

Children's laughter echoed somewhere in the distance, not the shrill beach kind but the grounded, feral noise of locals playing out past their mothers' voices. A dog barked, unseen, and a cat darted under a parked van, its tail flicking like it was late for something important.

There were flowers, too—little outbursts of them. Nasturtiums spilling out of cracked ceramic pots, sea-pink and valerian sprouting from stone walls as if they'd always been there, which they probably had. The town had that look: of being lived in, not polished. Like a jumper passed down too many times, wool thinning in the elbows, but still the one you reached for on colder evenings.

Somewhere nearby, a clock chimed the hour. Neither of them counted how many.

The grocer's was cool and dim inside, a welcome change from the warm stickiness of the afternoon. It smelled faintly of cardboard and aging onions. The shelves were a mismatch of necessity—cereal, tinned beans, tea bags, and biscuits stacked without much order. A small fridge buzzed with effort at the back, its contents a limited but serviceable collection of milk, ham, and butter wrapped in waxy paper.

Elowen pushed a small wire basket into Fifer's hands.

"Essentials," she said, reaching for a box of pasta and

scanning the dusty tins for chopped tomatoes.

“Crisps are essential,” Fifer said, deadpan, already halfway down another aisle.

Elowen didn’t argue.

They moved slowly through the shop, pausing often, neither of them quite sure what they wanted. Fifer weighed a tomato in her hand, frowned at it, then put it back. Elowen debated over two different kinds of instant noodles before picking neither. It was domestic in the softest way, like trying to remember how to live alongside someone.

Outside, the late sun had turned the street golden. The light clung to windowpanes and puddled on shopfronts. They passed a bakery with its blinds half-drawn and trays of leftover pastries stacked behind the glass like small, tired soldiers.

Just beyond, tucked between a shuttered ice cream parlour and a barber’s with a striped pole that didn’t spin, was the kiosk. A wire rack of postcards stood lopsided on the pavement, each card bleached and curling slightly at the corners. Most had pictures of boats or seagulls or windswept beaches with names scrawled across in cheerful fonts that didn’t quite suit the town.

“Bit optimistic, this place,” Elowen murmured.

Fifer didn’t reply. She was already turning one of the metal racks, watching the bracelets twirl with it—plaited cord ones in pastel colours, plastic charms shaped like shells and dolphins and stars.

She picked one up, ran her fingers over the beads.

“This one’s actually kind of cute,” she said after a moment, then caught herself. “Too childish, though.”

Elowen looked at her. “Didn’t stop you from buying a bag of crisps shaped like space rockets.”

Fifer gave a one-shouldered shrug. “That’s different. That’s ironic.”

She placed the bracelet back with careful indifference. The rack gave a half-hearted creak as it spun back into place.

They moved on without buying anything, the soft clink of glass bottles in their shopping bag marking their steps as they wandered back toward the cottage, the town slowly falling behind them.

Chapter Eight

The dishes were done, the kitchen wiped down with the casual efficiency of people used to clearing up after themselves. The smell of Elowen's tomato sauce still clung faintly to the air, mingling with the salt drifting in through the open window. Fifer had insisted on scraping the plates clean herself, claiming Elowen always missed the corners.

Now, they each pulled on jumpers from their weekend bags, both just a little too thin for the evening chill. Elowen wrapped a scarf round her neck and found a pair of old boots in the cupboard by the door—cracked leather and worn laces, but they still fit.

Fifer had swapped her shorts for jeans and tugged on a navy hoodie. The sleeves were slightly too long, hiding her hands until she pushed them up with a huff.

“Ready,” she said, already halfway out the door.

The path along the cliffs was narrow and overgrown in places, the gorse bushes reaching out like they wanted to keep hold of someone. The light was strange—slanted and golden, but already thinning. Here on the eastern coast, the sun slipped behind the hills instead of into the sea, turning the grass bronze and the shadows long.

They didn't speak much at first. The wind took care of the silence, rushing in from the open water, lifting strands of Fifer's hair and tugging at the hem of Elowen's jumper. They walked close, shoulders brushing, and when the path narrowed further, Fifer reached for Elowen's hand without saying anything.

Elowen didn't let go.

Below, the sea moved gently, like someone breathing in their sleep. A few fishing boats rocked at anchor, their lights starting to blink against the dusk. The air smelled of brine and wild thyme and distant woodsmoke from someone's chimney inland.

"It's weird, isn't it," Fifer said at last. "Being here again. With you."

Elowen glanced at her. "Weird in a good way?"

Fifer kicked at a stone, watching it skitter down the path. “Sort of. I keep expecting Mum to shout at us for walking too close to the edge.”

Elowen didn’t answer at first. The cliffs stretched out ahead of them, lonely and pale in the fading light. She gave Fifer’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“I still feel like she might,” Elowen said quietly. “Like she’s just back at the cottage, folding laundry or something.”

Fifer nodded. “Yeah.”

There was a pause. Not awkward—just the kind that held too many things neither of them could say yet.

“Do you think she’d like that we came back?” Fifer asked. “Here, I mean. To this place.”

Elowen took a breath, held it, let it go.

“I think she’d want us to be together,” she said, and it was as much as she could manage without her voice breaking.

The wind tugged at them again, and they stopped to look out at the sea—now deepening into blue, the kind that came just before true night. Somewhere behind them, a bird called once and was answered.

Neither of them let go of the other's hand.

The wind had picked up by the time they made their way back along the cliffs, brushing against their faces with cool, salt-tinged fingers. The first stars had come out—faint, scattered pinpricks above the land. Fifer shivered once, and Elowen tugged her closer, wordlessly guiding her along the narrow path until the cottage came into view.

Its squat shape looked almost cosy in the dusk, with one warm square of lamplight glowing from the window. The sight of it brought a strange tightness to Elowen's chest, but not in a bad way. Just... full.

Inside, the air held a muted warmth, the stone walls reluctant to release the heat they'd soaked up during the day. Fifer kicked off her boots with a sigh and made straight for the little stove, crouching to flick it on. Elowen watched her in the half-light, the familiar shape of her sister kneeling in too-long sleeves somehow older and younger all at once.

"I'll do cocoa," Elowen said gently, heading for the kettle. "You warm up."

Fifer nodded without turning, rubbing her hands together in front of the flickering orange glow.

Elowen reached for an old, empty tin she'd found tucked behind a box of dusty rice, and carefully filled it with the cocoa they'd picked up at the grocer that morning. Two mismatched mugs waited on the counter beside it—the one with the faded bee and the one shaped like a cow's face. She didn't comment. It was the kind of detail that hurt and helped all at once.

The kettle began to rumble. She stirred the powder slowly, steam rising and curling around her fingers. The sweet, rich smell of cocoa filled the kitchen.

“Here.” She passed one mug to Fifer and sat down beside her on the worn rug, their backs to the stove, legs stretched out in front.

Fifer cupped the mug in both hands and blew softly on the surface. Her cheeks were still a little pink from the wind. “Thanks.”

“Course.”

They drank in silence for a moment, the only sounds the soft hiss of the stove and the occasional creak of the old beams above. Outside, the night pressed gently at the windows—deep blue and velvet-thick.

Elowen leaned her shoulder against Fifer's, just enough to be felt.

“I like this part,” Fifer said, voice low. “The part after everything. When it’s just quiet.”

“Me too.”

Their mugs were half-empty now, cooling slowly. Fifer yawned, wide and unguarded, and let her head rest against Elowen’s shoulder for just a moment longer.

Eventually, Elowen gave a little nudge. “Come on, you. Let’s get warm properly.”

Fifer nodded and got to her feet, stretching her arms over her head, jumper riding up a little. She didn’t seem to notice—or didn’t care. Elowen stood too, collecting the mugs and setting them carefully in the sink.

They padded through to the bedroom together, shoulders brushing again in that quiet, familiar way.

The bedroom had settled into a hush so complete, Elowen could hear the sea.

It came in through the cracked window — not in crashing waves or wild winds, but soft and steady, a long breath out, then in again. A rhythm older than any memory she could name. Salt and seaweed and darkness. Now and then, the cry of a gull — distant and lonely — as the flock settled for the night, like something half-remembered from a dream.

The sheets were warm. Fifer's body, warmer still.

She had turned in her sleep, curling toward Elowen sometime after the light was switched off. One arm draped across Elowen's stomach, her fingers loose and warm. One leg slung over her sister's thigh. She was completely gone to the world, mouth slightly open, hair drying in soft curls against Elowen's shoulder. There was the faintest little snore, rhythmic and oddly comforting.

Elowen lay on her back, arms folded behind her head, staring up at the ceiling where shadows shifted gently with the moonlight. She hadn't moved in a while. Didn't want to wake her.

Outside, the tide breathed again.

She thought of Mum.

Not all at once, but in pieces — like someone laying down old photographs without warning. A mug on the table. A voice raised in the next room. That little line she used to get between her brows when she was holding in tears. The smell of her jumper. Lavender. Cheap shampoo. Burnt toast.

Elowen's throat ached.

She imagined Fifer coming home to that quiet house. The front door closed behind her. The odd stillness in the air. The kind of silence that pressed in from all sides. How small she must have felt in that moment. How impossibly alone.

And there Elowen had been — a whole ocean away.

She swallowed hard and blinked at the ceiling, brushing her thumb softly across Fifer's arm.

If she could go back, she'd never have let go.

She'd have stayed, somehow, even if it meant splitting herself in two.

Another wave rolled in, slow and silken. The cottage creaked gently with it, the way old places do when they've been reminded of the sea.

Fifer stirred a little in her sleep, pressing closer, her hand now curled against Elowen's side.

And though her eyes stung, Elowen didn't cry.

She just lay there in the dark, listening to the ocean, letting her sister's breathing and the sea's hush fill the hollow spaces.

Chapter Nine

The grey outside didn't shift. A thin mist hung just past the windows, softening the world to smudges of muted green and stone. Inside, the little living room felt warmer than it had any right to — thick with the low hum of the electric heater and the musty scent of old books, dust, and something like dried lavender that had lingered in the curtains for a decade.

They'd both ended up on the floor, not really by choice but by slow degrees — blankets pooled around them, a half-eaten bag of salt and vinegar crisps between two mugs of lukewarm coffee. Elowen had an old paperback open across her knees, its spine warped and pages yellowed, but she hadn't turned a page in at least twenty minutes. Fifer was curled into one corner of the sofa, legs tucked tight, holding another book she wasn't reading either.

Time was shapeless in the cottage. The ticking of the wall clock had become a steady background drone, like rain that hadn't started yet.

"Do you remember when we used to make those terrible dens in here?" Elowen asked suddenly, her voice soft, like it didn't quite want to break the quiet.

Fifer glanced up, one eyebrow arched. "The ones that always collapsed if you sneezed near them?"

Elowen smiled faintly. "Dad got so annoyed with us. He said we were turning the place into a hazard zone."

"You tripped over one and broke a mug."

"*You* broke the mug."

"I *defended* myself from your structurally unsound architecture," Fifer said, and the corner of her mouth tugged upward, but only for a moment.

The quiet returned, this time with a different shape. Elowen looked down at her book again. She flipped a page she hadn't read.

"You're not reading," Fifer said.

"Neither are you."

Another stretch of silence. The mist hadn't cleared. Somewhere out of sight, a gull called once, low and hoarse.

"Do you think you'll go back?" Fifer asked suddenly, voice steady but too deliberate.

Elowen blinked. "Go back where?"

"To America. To... everything. Dad. School. That life."

Elowen sat up straighter, the paperback sliding to the rug. "I haven't thought about it. I mean— I only just got home."

"That's not a no," Fifer said, not looking at her. She was twisting the corner of her sleeve between her fingers.

"I came back because I needed to," Elowen said gently.

"Needed to? Or because you felt guilty?"

Elowen frowned. "That's not fair."

Fifer stood abruptly. "You left. You and Dad packed up and went and didn't look back. I was *Twelve*. And then you just— disappeared. Letters at first, emails. But less and less."

"I didn't disappear," Elowen said, standing too now. "I was sixteen. I didn't have a choice."

“You didn’t *try*,” Fifer snapped, her voice rising. “You didn’t fight to stay. You just went. And I was stuck here with— with everything.”

Elowen’s face changed, softened with something like pain. “Fifer...”

“No. Don’t ‘Fifer’ me like that.” Her voice cracked. “You left and I thought maybe you’d come back. And then Mum got worse and you *still* weren’t here. And now you’re acting like we can just have this lovely seaside summer and— and it doesn’t fix anything, El.”

Elowen stepped forward but Fifer flinched, turning away.

“I don’t want you to leave again,” Fifer whispered, hugging her arms tight. “I just... I don’t think I can do it twice.”

Elowen reached for her then, gently, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I don’t want to leave you again,” she said. “That’s the truth.”

Fifer jerked away. “You always say the right thing,” she said, her voice thick now. “But you still left.”

Before Elowen could reply, Fifer grabbed her hoodie from the back of the chair and stormed out. The door banged behind her, the sound sharp in the quiet house.

Elowen stood there, breath held, fingers still half-curved from the touch that hadn't landed. The silence returned, deeper now, filled only with the faint hum of the heater and the soft tick of the clock on the wall.

She could have gone after her. Should have, maybe. But something stopped her.

Instead, she sat back down on the rug, the forgotten paperback still open on the floor. Her eyes drifted to the place where Fifer had been a moment ago.

Let her walk it off. Let the air meet her where I can't.

Elowen rested her chin on her knees and stared at the door, heart heavy but patient. If she'd learnt anything lately, it was that some things needed space to breathe before they could be spoken.

Outside, the mist blurred the hedge into softness. Somewhere down the lane, footsteps faded into the hush.

Fifer walked fast, faster than she meant to, hoodie sleeves pulled over her fists, jaw tight. The mist wrapped itself around everything — the hedgerows, the

dry stone walls, even the path beneath her feet. She didn't really know where she was going. Just away.

The air smelled of wet earth and salt. Somewhere in the distance, a gull shrieked, its cry warped by the fog. Fifer ignored it. Ignored the sting in her eyes, the lump at the back of her throat. Her breath came hard now, but she didn't slow down.

She reached the low dunes without thinking, half-scrambling up the slope where the sea breeze came through colder. The sand shifted treacherously beneath her trainers, but she kept going, brushing past the marram grass that tugged at her clothes.

Then — her foot twisted on a ridge of packed sand, and she fell.

A short cry escaped her lips before she hit the ground, hard, ankle folding under her weight.

She lay there for a moment, stunned.

Pain throbbed sharp and sudden through her right foot. She tried to sit up, hissed, and clutched at her ankle. It was already swelling, tightening in her sock like something angry.

“Brilliant,” she muttered, trying to blink back the tears. “Just bloody brilliant.”

The mist felt heavier now. The sound of the sea, once calming, seemed too far away. Too empty.

Fifer sat there, half-curved on her side in the sand, heart hammering. She was cold. Her foot hurt. And the stupid, shameful truth was — she didn't know how to get back on her own.

For a while, she tried to wait it out. Tried to tell herself she didn't need help. That she'd hobble back when she'd caught her breath. But every time she shifted, a fresh jolt of pain told her otherwise.

No one was coming.

And for a terrifying moment, she let herself feel it — that raw, scraping loneliness that came from more than just being stranded. It came from being left. From Mum, who wasn't there anymore. From Dad, who hadn't stayed. From Elowen, who might stay — or might disappear again before the week was out.

Fifer pressed her face into her sleeve. She hated crying. Hated needing anyone.

But she couldn't stay here.

"Elowen?" she called, voice thin against the mist. Then louder: "El!"

Nothing.

The wind rustled the grass like whispers. The ocean, distant and indifferent, kept its rhythm.

She waited. Then, with her voice cracking on it: “Ellie!”

Still nothing.

She shouted again. And again. The cold bit deeper, and her fingers began to tremble — from the pain, the fear, the humiliation of it all.

Then — soft and muffled through the mist, a reply.

“Fifer?”

Her heart jumped.

“Here!” she yelled, nearly sobbing. “I’m here!”

Footsteps. Running now. A shadow emerging through the fog — hair wild, eyes wide, Elowen’s voice high with worry.

“Oh God, are you—? What happened?”

“I tripped,” Fifer mumbled, trying not to cry again. “It’s my ankle. I can’t walk.”

Elowen dropped to her knees in the sand beside her, already checking the foot, gentle hands and urgent words. Fifer winced.

“Sorry,” Elowen whispered. “I’ve got you. We’re going home.”

And then — arms under her, lifting her as if she weighed nothing at all, Elowen cradling her close like she had when they were little and there were nightmares.

Fifer clung on, silent now, face pressed into the scratchy wool of Elowen’s jumper. The pain hadn’t gone anywhere, but the loneliness had softened.

She wasn’t alone in the mist anymore.

Chapter Ten

The cottage felt warmer that evening, though the windows rattled a little in their frames and the wind had picked up, brushing across the roof in restless waves.

Elowen had lit a few of the old lamps — the kind with soft bulbs that threw more gold than light — and placed a pillow beneath Fifer's foot, which was now wrapped in a cold tea towel and propped on the arm of the settee. They'd found the first-aid tin buried behind a drawer full of batteries and forgotten chargers, and now the room smelled faintly of antiseptic and dust.

Fifer was tucked under the old crocheted blanket, the green-and-orange one they used to fight over when they were small. Her cheeks were still blotchy from crying, but her jaw had softened and her hands were no longer clenched. She was flicking through an ancient magazine they'd found in the cupboard, mostly pictures of 90s

celebrities she barely recognised, but she wasn't really reading.

Elowen sat cross-legged on the floor by the little table, wrapping her hands around a mug of cocoa. She was watching Fifer in that quiet way she had — thoughtful, gentle, but with something behind her eyes like worry disguised as patience.

“You’ll need to see someone about that foot tomorrow,” she said eventually, tone low and careful.

Fifer groaned, dropping the magazine on her lap. “It’s just a sprain.”

“Still.” Elowen sipped her drink. “If it’s not better in the morning, I’m dragging you into town.”

Fifer didn’t argue — not properly. Just shrugged one shoulder, eyes sliding away.

A log in the burner cracked, sending a puff of sparks up the little chimney. Outside, the wind made the power lines hum, and somewhere far off, a gull cried out like it had lost something.

“I didn’t mean what I said earlier,” Fifer mumbled after a long pause.

Elowen didn't answer right away. She looked into her mug, swirled the cocoa like it might offer up wisdom.

"I know," she said gently. "But I still needed to hear it."

Fifer glanced over, something raw flickering across her face. "You're not going to go back, are you?"

Elowen looked up. "I haven't decided anything yet."

"That's not a no."

"No," Elowen said softly, setting her mug down. "It's not."

Silence settled between them again — not cold, but not quite comfortable either.

"I hate this foot," Fifer muttered, eyeing her ankle like it had betrayed her. "Useless lump."

"It's purple."

"It's a stupid colour."

Elowen chuckled. "You're a stupid colour."

That earned her the ghost of a smile.

"You're annoying," Fifer said.

"You're mean," Elowen replied.

Fifer paused, then looked across at her. “But you’re still my sister.”

Elowen met her eyes, nodded slowly. “Always.”

The fire popped. The wind shushed at the windows.

It wasn’t forgiveness, not yet — but it was something close.

The night had settled soft and dark over the cottage. The wind still whispered outside, but inside was calm and warm.

Fifer shifted restlessly in the big bed, her foot throbbing despite the ice pack and bandage. After a while, she sat up, biting her lip.

“Elowen...” she whispered.

Elowen, already half-asleep, blinked awake. “What is it?”

“I... I need to go to the loo.”

Elowen frowned gently. “But you can’t put weight on your foot.”

Fifer bit her lip again, then looked away. “I can’t hold it til the morning.”

Elowen thought for a moment, then slipped out of bed quietly.

A minute later she was back, holding a small enamel bowl from the kitchen, still warm from being rinsed out earlier.

“Here,” she said with a soft smile. “Pretend it’s a potty — I’ll hold it for you.”

Fifer’s eyes widened. “You’re joking.”

“Not at all. It’s ridiculous, I know.”

Carefully, Fifer lowered herself to the bowl, trying not to put pressure on her foot. Elowen sat beside her, holding the bowl steady under her bottom.

A few awkward moments passed, then Fifer’s shoulders shook and she burst into quiet giggles.

“Oh my God, this is so stupid,” she whispered.

Elowen laughed too, the sound light and warm in the still room. “You’re not wrong.”

When she was done, Elowen passed her the toilet roll and turned away, giving her privacy as she wiped and dropped the paper into the bowl. She slipped out to

empty it, then came back and quietly helped Fifer settle in again, tucking the blankets around her with care.

“Same bed?” Elowen asked quietly.

Fifer nodded, the corners of her mouth tugging up in a shy smile.

They settled side by side, Elowen’s arm draped protectively around Fifer’s shoulders. The quiet rhythm of their breathing filled the room.

Outside, the sea whispered beneath the stars.

Inside, something fragile and healing had begun.

Chapter Eleven

The pale light of early morning filtered softly through the curtains. Fifer lay curled under the duvet, her ankle still swollen and sore. Elowen sat beside her, her phone pressed gently to her ear as she spoke to the doctor's office.

“Yes, hello — I'd like to make an appointment for my sister, Fifer. She has a sprained ankle... Yes, as soon as possible, please. Thank you.”

She hung up and looked down at Fifer, who was watching her with a mix of stubbornness and vulnerability.

“We need to get you cleaned up before we go,” Elowen said gently. “You'll feel better, and it's important if the doctor is going to look at it.”

Fifer's lips pressed into a thin line. "I don't want to. It's embarrassing."

Elowen smiled softly, brushing a stray strand of hair from Fifer's face. "I'll help you. We'll do it right here, on the bed. Just a quick wash — your legs and feet. You're not alone."

Fifer hesitated, then nodded faintly, the trust shining through her guarded eyes.

Elowen gathered warm water in a basin, soft cloth in hand. She moved slowly and carefully, wiping the tired muscles and swollen ankle with soothing gentleness.

Fifer closed her eyes, leaning into the warmth and quiet care, the embarrassment melting into something quieter — safety, maybe, or relief.

When she opened her eyes again, she gave Elowen a small, grateful smile.

"We'll get through this," Elowen whispered.

Fifer nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. "Together."

Elowen called for a cab, and soon it rolled up the narrow lane, the afternoon sun spilling warmly across its faded paint. They climbed in carefully—Fifer easing

her weight onto the seat, mindful of her injured ankle, Elowen settling beside her with a quiet attentiveness.

The engine rumbled softly as the cab pulled away, taking them slowly through the winding streets of the town. Outside the window, the grocer's peeling green awning came into view, fluttering slightly in the gentle breeze. Beyond it, the little kiosk with its spinning racks of postcards and jangling bracelets stood quietly, still waiting for the summer visitors who rarely came.

Fifer's gaze drifted over the familiar sights, the sunlight turning peeling paint and cracked pavement golden. She shifted slightly, careful of her ankle, and her fingers curled lightly around Elowen's hand. The warmth of the touch settled like a small comfort against the lingering unease.

Elowen gave her hand a soft squeeze. "Almost there," she said gently.

Fifer looked up, a faint, tired smile tugging at her lips. The world outside the window carried on, but in the quiet of the cab, for a moment, everything felt a little less heavy.

The clinic was exactly as you would've expected it twenty years ago — a little faded, quiet, and full of small details that felt frozen in time. The linoleum floor creaked softly beneath their feet, its pale pattern dulled by years of footsteps. Sunlight streamed through the large windows, cutting through the dust motes that hung lazily in the warm air.

A cluttered bulletin board stood near the reception desk, crowded with faded notices: vaccination schedules from years past, faded posters urging handwashing, and a community flyer for a summer fete. The hum of an old radiator punctuated the stillness.

Elowen and Fifer settled into the worn vinyl chairs in the waiting area. The silence stretched between them, neither quite ready to fill it.

After a while, an elderly lady shuffled past, pausing briefly to offer a soft smile before disappearing into one of the consultation rooms.

Minutes later, a surprisingly young doctor appeared at the doorway, clipboard in hand. His face was calm and kindly as he called, "Fifer Melbourne? Come on in, please."

Fifer rose, wincing slightly, and followed him inside.

The office was modest — a wooden desk, a few anatomical charts on the walls, and a small window where the light caught the edges of a neatly stacked pile of medical journals.

The doctor examined Fifer's ankle carefully, his touch gentle but precise.

"It's a light sprain," he explained, "nothing serious. Rest it, keep it elevated, and avoid putting weight on it for a few days. Some ice packs will help with the swelling. You should be back to normal soon."

Relief seeped into Fifer's features as Elowen gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. Outside, through the window, the afternoon light softened the edges of the town — a quiet promise of healing in the days ahead.

Outside the clinic, the town felt oddly hushed. The air was warm, the kind that clung a little, and the gulls had quietened to the occasional distant cry. Fifer blinked against the light, her eyes adjusting from the soft gloom of the waiting room.

Elowen hovered beside her, still holding her elbow.

"Sit there a sec?" she said gently, nodding toward a worn wooden bench set just beside the gate. "I've just remembered something. Won't be long."

Fifer frowned. “What kind of something?”

“Just a thing. Nothing important.” Elowen gave her a quick smile. “Promise I’ll be right back. Don’t wander off.”

Fifer snorted and hobbled over to the bench. “Hardly planning a marathon,” she muttered, easing herself down with a quiet wince. The bench was warm from the sun, and the slats dug slightly into the backs of her thighs.

She watched Elowen disappear down the street without another word. Not hurried, exactly, but with a kind of quiet purpose in her step.

Left alone, Fifer leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Somewhere, a lawnmower started up. A dog barked once, then fell silent. A bee hovered too close and she batted it away half-heartedly.

She hated waiting. She hated this stupid ankle. She hated that Elowen still vanished sometimes, even if it was just around a corner.

But she stayed put, because Elowen had asked.

And because, in spite of everything, she still trusted her to come back.

Later that afternoon, the cottage felt quieter than usual — not silent, exactly, but softer, like it, too, was reluctant to let go of something.

They hadn't packed. The bags remained untouched in the bedroom, the little shelf in the bathroom still cluttered with their toothbrushes and shampoo bottles, as if by ignoring the clock, they might stop time altogether.

Instead, Elowen had dragged the duvets from their beds and piled them onto the old sofa in the living room, layering them until it felt like a nest. Fifer was tucked in beside her, socked feet pressed against Elowen's legs, a half-empty bowl of popcorn balanced precariously on the armrest.

The telly flickered with the slightly warped colours of an old DVD — something scratchy and low-budget, from the stack they'd found in the cabinet beneath. The remote was missing its back cover, held together with a bit of tape, and they had to jiggle the volume every so often when the dialogue dropped to a murmur.

Neither of them was really paying attention to the plot.

Outside, the sea was a dull smudge of blue-grey, and the sky hung low and heavy, holding the kind of stillness that made everything feel suspended.

“It’s our last day,” Fifer said quietly, not quite a question.

Elowen shifted beside her, tucking the duvet more tightly around them both. “Yeah.”

They didn’t speak for a while. The film played on — someone running through rain, dramatic music swelling.

Fifer reached for another piece of popcorn, found only unpopped kernels, and let her hand rest instead on Elowen’s arm. She didn’t say anything, and she didn’t have to.

They were warm, together, held gently by the quiet house and the weight of what had been — not just this week, but the years that had brought them here.

The film ended with a soft click as the old player returned to its menu screen, the same few bars of instrumental music looping over and over, slightly too cheerful for how they both felt.

Elowen didn’t move to turn it off. Fifer didn’t ask her to.

The light outside had shifted again, growing more golden now as the afternoon faded, stretching shadows across the rug. From somewhere beyond the windows

came the gentle hush of waves rolling in, steady and soft, like someone breathing in their sleep.

Elowen yawned, resting her chin against the top of Fifer's head. "I think that's the worst film I've ever seen."

Fifer gave a snort. "You say that about every one we've watched."

"It keeps being true."

Fifer picked at a thread in the duvet. "It's weird," she said, almost to herself. "Feels like we only just got here."

"I know."

"I thought it would feel longer. Or like... like I'd be more ready."

Elowen didn't answer straight away. She reached for the bowl, now abandoned, and set it carefully on the floor beside the sofa. Then she curled back under the duvet, shifting so their shoulders were pressed together again.

"You don't have to be ready," she said softly. "Not for anything."

The cottage creaked slightly as the wind stirred outside, the sound familiar now — the old beams shifting, the distant call of gulls, the ticking of the wall clock marking time they didn't want to lose.

"I'm glad we came," Fifer said after a while, voice muffled against Elowen's sleeve. "Even if it was all weird at first. Even if... everything."

Elowen tightened her arm around her. "Me too."

They stayed like that, the two of them bundled up on the sagging old sofa, as the day slipped slowly towards evening — not rushing it, not fighting it, just holding on to the quiet as long as they could.

Chapter Twelve

The morning light spilled pale through the cottage windows, soft and quiet, brushing across the floorboards where Elowen crouched beside a half-packed bag. She folded a jumper carefully and laid it atop a pile of clothes, her movements slow, deliberate.

Fifer sat perched on the wooden stool by the small kitchen counter, cracking eggs into a bowl with a steady hand. The smell of fresh bread warmed the air, mingling with the faint salt tang drifting in from the open door.

Outside, seagulls called out, sharp and plaintive against the blue sky, but in the distance, heavy grey clouds gathered like slow, silent shadows on the horizon — a reminder that even the clearest days hold their moments of uncertainty.

The kitchen was quiet except for the soft clink of cutlery and the occasional scrape of a chair as they settled into their seats. Fifer stirred her coffee absently, eyes fixed on the rising steam rather than the breakfast spread before them.

Elowen watched her for a moment, then broke the silence. “You know, I always thought it was silly, liking things that felt childish.”

Fifer glanced up, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “I thought so too.”

They ate slowly, the words hanging gently between them, neither rushing to fill the quiet.

Once they’d cleared the plates but hadn’t yet moved from the table, Elowen reached into her pocket and pulled out two bracelets — simple, colorful bands with tiny charms that caught the light. The ones Fifer had admired at the kiosk.

Without speaking, she gently took Fifer’s wrist and fastened one of them around it.

Fifer looked at it for a long moment, her thumb brushing over the charm. Then Elowen held out the second one.

“For me,” she said, a little shyly.

Fifer took it, her movements careful, and secured it around Elowen's wrist.

Fifer looked down at her own wrist, the bracelet bright against her skin. "I thought this was too childish," she admitted softly.

Elowen's fingers brushed against Fifer's as they sat side by side, the quiet comfort between them growing stronger with each heartbeat. It was more than just bracelets; it was a silent promise that they could hold on to the pieces of themselves they thought they'd outgrown — together.

The last of the morning light filtered through the curtains as Elowen zipped up the final bag. The cottage felt emptier somehow, each corner holding a quiet memory they hadn't quite said goodbye to.

Fifer stood by the door, leaning on the frame to spare her ankle as she tugged on her jacket. Her eyes lingered on the worn floorboards, tracing the small marks they'd left over their stay. Outside, the sky was a patchwork of

blue and gathering clouds, the distant cry of seagulls carrying on the breeze.

They stepped out together, the cool air wrapping around them like a gentle farewell. The duffel bags thumped softly as they walked the familiar path toward the station, their footsteps slow and reluctant. Elowen paced herself carefully, mindful not to let Fifer strain her ankle.

The narrow lane opened up to the platform, where the same rusted shelter waited—faded, familiar, unchanged. The trains would come and go, carrying them back to the world beyond the cliffs and tides, but for now, they stood side by side, holding on to the last moments of a summer stretched between them.

The wind tugged lightly at their hair, and Fifer slipped her hand into Elowen's, a quiet promise carried in the simple clasp. The journey ahead was uncertain, but for this moment, they were together—finally, truly together.

Chapter Thirteen

Elowen stood quietly in the hallway of the house her mum and Fifer had moved into after she and Dad had left for overseas. She had never been inside before. It felt strange to know her mum had lived—and died—here. The silence hung gently in the air, heavy with absence but also reverence. Beneath her feet, the floorboards creaked softly, whispering stories of a life once lived within these walls.

She set down her bags slowly, deliberately, as if each movement was a promise to herself — and to Fifer. She had made her choice. Here, with her sister, they would build something new. Just the two of them.

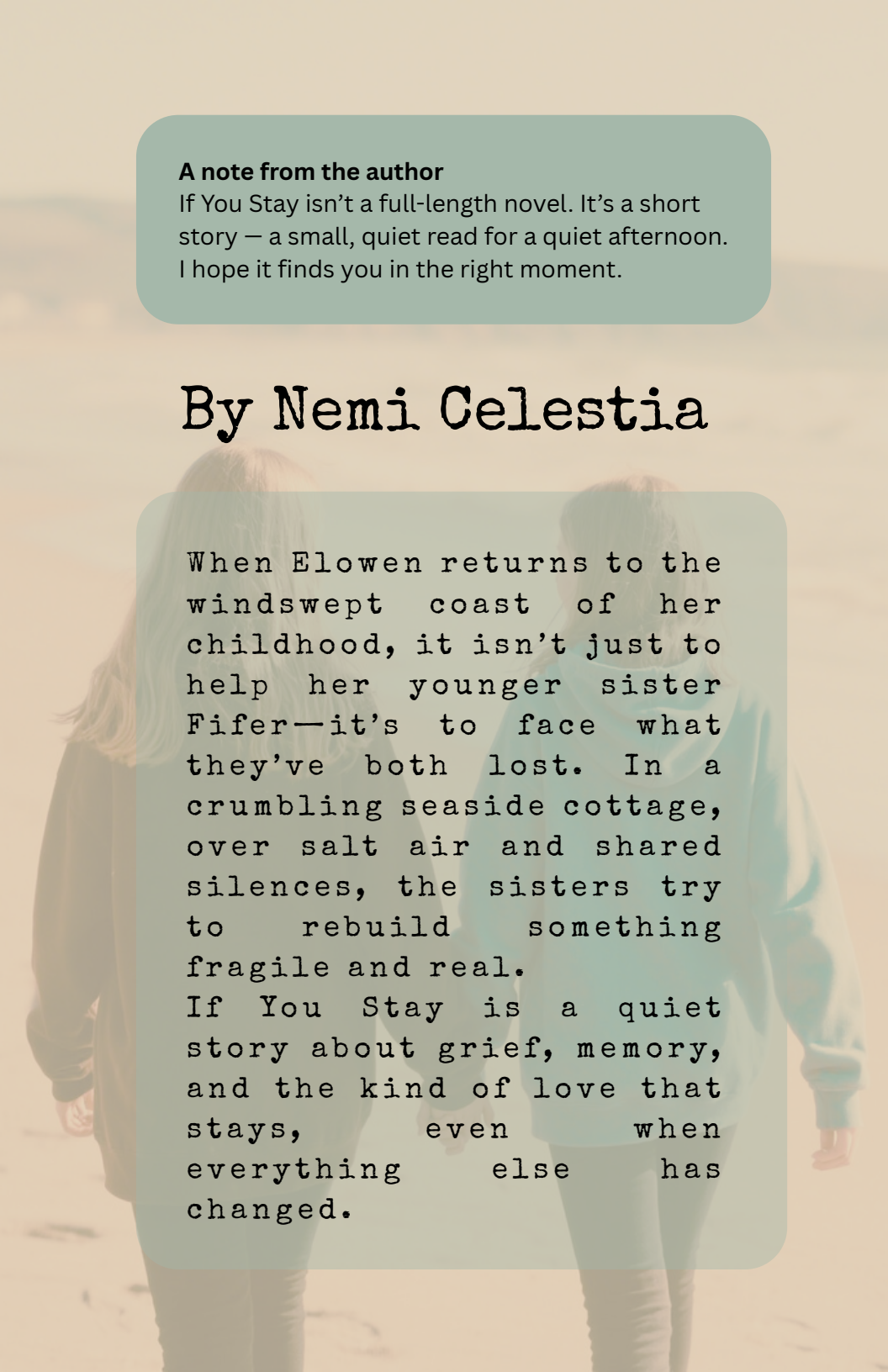
As she unzipped her bag, a folded piece of paper slipped out, catching her eye. She picked it up, the paper worn at the edges, the handwriting unmistakably Fifer's. The date in the corner made her heart catch: two years ago, just after she and Dad had left for the States.

Elowen unfolded the letter carefully, a smile tugging at her lips as she read. It was a small, quiet thing — a thread reaching across time, pulling them closer despite the distance.

“El, your favorite patient needs coffee,” Fifer shouted from the other room.

Elowen rolled her eyes playfully, “Already brewing the miracle cure.”

“You’re a lifesaver, you know that?”

A soft-focus background image of two people, likely a man and a woman, walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. They are wearing casual clothing, and the scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The image is slightly blurred, creating a dreamy and nostalgic atmosphere.

A note from the author

If *You Stay* isn't a full-length novel. It's a short story — a small, quiet read for a quiet afternoon. I hope it finds you in the right moment.

By Nemi Celestia

When Elowen returns to the windswept coast of her childhood, it isn't just to help her younger sister Fifer—it's to face what they've both lost. In a crumbling seaside cottage, over salt air and shared silences, the sisters try to rebuild something fragile and real.

If *You Stay* is a quiet story about grief, memory, and the kind of love that stays, even when everything else has changed.