

Montauk Sunset

By Lindy Jacobs

The sea grass cast long shadows on the sand beyond the patio. The light was perfect, the kind that happens only a few days of the year. On their last afternoon here in the Hamptons before returning to the city, Emily was tempted to get her camera from her room and head down the beach, but it was only an hour before dinner, and if she went, she would need to take Megan, her 12-year-old sister. Their absence would be noticed.

Megan now sat with a group of teenagers huddled around a table by the pool waiting for her chance to play backgammon. They were all still wearing swimsuits, and Emily noticed a red bloom of sunburn across her sister's shoulders. She should have made sure Megan reapplied sunscreen after lunch.

When they were here at their father's business partner's beach house a year ago, their mother had been with them. Everything was different then. It wasn't just that her mother fit in—she made everyone else feel as if they fit in. Grace McCann was equally at ease in a lecture hall at Columbia University as she was around a patio table with other lawyers' wives in Southampton, her honey blonde hair tucked under a cap, sipping an iced tea.

It has been eight months now, long enough for Emily to accept her mother's death. She should be stronger.

Her father sat on the porch talking with a group of clients—the real reason they were here this weekend.

Her older sister Charlotte and the other tennis players were taking a break between sets. Charlotte leaned against the fence, tennis racket underneath her arm, talking to Oliver Woods, the nephew of their father's partner Grant Woods, visiting from San Francisco.

Though it's been years since any of them have seen Oliver Woods, their father frequently shares news he's heard about the young man's promising pre-law academic success during family dinners.

"What has been your experience at Stanford so far?" Charlotte smiles up at Oliver. "I don't know if your uncle told you, but I'm heading there myself in a few weeks."

Emily can't hear the young man's reply as the two head back onto the court. She knows her sister is hoping to see him when she gets to California.

The backgammon game is close, and Megan leans forward watching every move. If Emily's going to go, now was the time, but not without telling Megan.

"Hey." She kept her voice low as she knelt beside her sister's chair. "I'm heading down the beach to take some photos. Want to come along?"

Megan turned to her and seemed to be considering. At home in the city, her sister wouldn't let her go to Central Park without tagging along but she's next in line to play the winner, a classmate at Megan's academy.

"It's okay," she said finally. "If you see any nice shells, bring them back."

Emily grabbed her camera from her room and began the two miles run down the beach. It was a good thing Megan wanted to stay and play backgammon. She would be faster on her own. The soft *thwop-thwop* of the tennis balls on the court and the poolside chatter faded as she ran past the other beach houses farther and farther until she rounded the point.

Was she too late? Sometimes the boats came in early after a good day of fishing. When she turned into the small cove, her heart sank at the sight of the empty docks. The wooden boards had been washed down and mounds of dumped ice meant the boats had already come in and gone. She breathed in the briny salt air.

She turned to walk back when the faint hum of a motor caused her to stop. She ran to a high point on the dunes. There! A boat in the distance. But the boat could be heading somewhere farther along the coast. At this distance she couldn't tell if it was even a fishing boat, so she waited as the great hulking shape grew larger through her lens. After a few minutes, she could make out the tall outrigger poles of a fishing boat, and it was heading straight toward the dock.

She walked out in the water, crushed oyster shells and sand beneath her feet, but the angle wasn't right. The proportion with the water and sky was off. She ran back to the stand of grass and stretched out on her stomach and looked through her lens again. Now she could capture the fishermen's rhythmic, almost synchronized movements as they passed the fish down the line to the waiting crates of ice.

"When it's as right as it can be," her grandfather had said, *"you can feel it here."* As he spoke, he'd tapped his chest. *"Then you just take the photo."*

And that's how it was when she took pictures. For seconds or minutes, she was lost in capturing the image. There was only the lapping of water against the side of the fishing boat as she concentrated on the world through her lens.

Then she heard muffled footsteps in the sand and turned to see a young man running on the beach. *Oliver Woods*. She pressed herself flatter to the sand. Maybe he wouldn't notice her.

But he paused, hands on his hips, standing above her. “Hello?” She couldn’t see his face. Was he laughing at her?

“Aren’t you . . .” he began. “Aren’t you a long way from the party?”

How did he know who she was? They’d scarcely exchanged more than a few words in the last ten years.

“I’ve been waiting for this.” She gestured toward the boat and the men. The scene now seemed ordinary.

He dropped down beside her, resting his arms on his bent knees, and looked in the direction of the boat. He was so close she could smell Coppertone and aftershave. He was as handsome as a young John Kennedy. No wonder Charlotte had a crush on him.

“So, you’re a photographer.”

Emily hesitated. It sounded more like a statement than a question. There was no mocking irony in his voice. Was she? There were hundreds of real photographers in New York, if not thousands. To her family, photography was an interesting hobby at best. Her father reminded her that, while her grandfather had been a photographer at a smalltown newspaper in upstate New York, he wasn’t exactly a model of success. Emily felt the weight of her grandfather’s Nikon in her hands.

“Having a good camera doesn’t make you a good photographer,” her high school photography teacher had announced the first day of class.

“A beginner,” Emily said.

Oliver framed the view of the boat with his hands, then pushed to his feet.

“You’ve got something there.”

In that moment, she saw she did. The light was silvery gold on the water, the shape of the men's huge, muscled arms passing the crates of black seabass along the line. She snapped the photo.

She looked up in time to see Oliver glance at his watch, then take off running back in the direction of the beach house.

The light was beginning to fade, the tide coming in, as Emily gathered a few shells before making her way back to the beach house. On the patio, the tables had been set for dinner and candles lit. She arrived in time to see a taxi heading out of the driveway, headlights beaming. She shook the sand from her feet before entering the house.

"Look at you. You're covered in sand. Where have you been?" Charlotte leaned close to the mirror to apply lip gloss. "Dinner is in ten minutes. You better shower quick."

Megan sat on the bed wearing her best navy sundress, pretending to read a book.

"Dad was looking for you," Megan said. "He wants us to sit with him at our hosts' table tonight. With Grant Woods."

"Now that he's gone, it doesn't matter." Charlotte sank onto the bed.

"Who's gone?" Emily asked.

"Oliver," Megan whispered. "He's flying back to San Francisco tonight."

Emily dug the seashells from her shirt pocket and dropped them into the jelly jar on the dresser.

Megan dropped her book and crossed to the dresser, holding the pearlescent shells up to the lamp light. "Cool."

"And Dad said *do not* wear that camera around your neck to dinner." Charlotte said.

At dinner, a plain white envelope waited by Emily's place setting.

Her father and sisters looked on with curiosity. She carefully pried the flap of the envelope open with a butter knife.

“Consider this an order for an 8 X 10 black and white print of your photo of the fishing boat. See attached check and card with my address. Wishing you success with your photography career. Oliver Woods.”