

SECOND
STAR

ALYSSA B. SHEINMEL

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I CAN SMELL THE BONFIRE BEFORE I EVEN GET out of the car. It's dusk, and the sun is low on the water. According to my watch, it's been exactly four hours since I officially graduated high school. But I don't feel any more grown-up now than I did this morning.

I leave my shoes in the car and step onto the beach. "Congratulations," I say to no one in particular, to whichever of my classmates are close enough to hear. I've never heard the same word so many times in one day.

"Wendy!"

Fiona's voice rings above the crowd as she runs toward me. Fiona has always had the loudest voice, the loudest laugh. Even in kindergarten, it got us into trouble sometimes. Her arms fly around my waist and we both go crashing to the ground.

I sit up quickly, crossing my legs beneath me, and Fiona rests her chin on my shoulder. The brush of her strawberry blond

hair raises goose bumps on my bare arm. My own dark hair is pulled into a tight ponytail at the nape of my neck.

“Where’s Dax?”

Fiona shrugs with the ease of a girl who knows her boyfriend won’t stay away long. “Around.”

I remember how they looked at graduation this afternoon. I was sitting on the stage, in the section for those graduating with honors, so it was easy to look down on the crowd and pick out Fiona. Dax kept his arm around her shoulder the entire time, even though it was sweltering hot underneath our caps and gowns.

Fiona grabs my hand with a laugh and pulls me to stand. “Your fingers are icy.”

From behind us a voice says, “Let me see.”

I can feel Dax’s touch before I see him. I try not to shiver when he takes both my hands in his, brings them to his mouth, and blows.

“Man,” he says, “you are ice-cold, girl.”

Yes, I think, *that’s me*. The ice princess who lives in the glass house on the hill. The girl who closes her door to write her college essays while her parents are talking to the police in the living room.

“I’m okay.” I pull my hands away and fold my arms across my chest. “Really.”

“Let’s get you close to the fire,” he says, ignoring my protests.

“I’m really not cold,” I argue as he tries to pull me away, making a path among the kids gathered around the bonfire. Instead of following, I turn to face the water, my back to my friends. A group of boys are paddling out among the waves.

“Surfers,” I whisper without meaning to. My brothers started surfing when they were ten years old, the two littlest surfers on the beach. And the two most determined. Now I watch the strangers surf, boys who remind me of John and Michael, bobbing up and down between the waves, shouting to each other, pointing to the spaces where the water breaks, paddling out and then drifting back.

“Wendy,” Fiona says gently, “you know they’re not out there, right?”

I try to ignore the shiver of anger that runs down my spine at her words. *They’re out there, I think, somewhere.*

“You okay?” Fiona puts her arm around me, and I fight the urge to shrug it off. She is just trying to find the right thing to say; everyone always tries to find the right thing to say. As if there were any words that could make it better.

My brothers disappeared nine months ago, just as the school year was beginning. The police searched for them, but even I could see that it was a halfhearted investigation. They didn’t think much of a couple kids running off to the beach for a few days, a few weeks, a few months.

At first, my parents called the station every day, insisting on talking to the detective in charge, trying to explain that their boys were different from all the other teenage runaways. But the police had seen this story play out too many times. They had murder suspects to hunt, thieves to catch. Two sixteen-year-olds on a joyride up the coast was hardly enough to hold their attention.

I still remember the last time I saw Michael and John. They had packed up their favorite surfboards and their wet suits for

some early waves, just like they did every other morning. There was still sand glinting in their hair from the previous day's surf. They never got it all out, no matter how many times they washed their hair. John had been driving, and I imagined I could hear Michael urging him to hurry as they pulled out of the driveway without a backward glance.

I close my eyes at the memory and take a deep breath. I feel closest to them when I'm near the water.

Dax moves to stand between me and Fiona, putting an arm around my shoulders and taking Fiona's hand. I've tried to figure out how Dax automatically became my friend the minute he started dating Fiona, but I have no idea. Maybe there's some unspoken rule about best friends' boyfriends that I don't know about because I've never had a real boyfriend myself. The heat that radiates from Dax's body makes me uncomfortable.

"I left my phone in the car," I lie. "I'll be right back."

But I don't even bother walking to the parking lot. Once I'm sure Fiona and Dax are no longer watching, I make my way to the water's edge, the waves lapping against my toes, higher and higher as the tide comes in. The sun has set completely now.

In the distance I can just make out the silhouette of a boy on a surfboard. He floats between the waves, patient while he waits to take a ride. It's dark now, and he's the only surfer left on the water. But he doesn't look scared. The air around him is bright, like the stars are following him, his very own spotlight.

He makes it look easy, paddling in between the waves and shifting into a crouch. I inhale sharply when he jumps up to stand. It looks like he's floating over the water. It looks like he's flying.

Without thinking, I take another step, even though the hem of my dress is growing heavy with salt water. I move deeper and deeper, closer and closer. The water rises with a gentle touch, the sea wrapping its cool arms around me. I close my eyes and just listen to the waves: rising and crashing, rising and crashing.

But then there is the sound of someone splashing into the water and the feel of a strong hand encircling my arm.

“Are you okay?”

I blink. The surfer is in the water next to me, his board bobbing a few feet away.

“What were you thinking?” he shouts. He puts an arm around me and starts pulling me to shore, letting go only when we’ve reached the shallows. Water drips from the ends of his dark hair down his face. Even in the darkness I can see that his skin is covered with freckles.

I shake my head in confusion. I *wasn’t* thinking. I didn’t even realize how deep I’d gone in. I just wanted to get a closer look. I’m surprised to feel that the tips of my hair, my shoulders, even the underside of my chin, are wet.

“My board could have hit your head,” he says, just loudly enough to be heard over the waves. “It’s a good thing I saw you.”

“I’m sorry,” I reply.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he says, shaking his head. “Just be more careful next time.” He’s so tall that water from his shaking head falls down on me like raindrops.

“Next time,” I repeat, but he’s already released my arm from his light grasp.

And then he’s gone.