

# Driftwood

Sarah Mahl

Olive reached the abandoned lifeguard tower, the sand cool under her feet. She held her shoes in one hand and began to climb the ladder. Graffiti covered the walls, and she stepped over a broken beer bottle at the top. She sat down towards the edge and tucked her knees into her chest. With the beach spread out in front of her and the waves crashing onto the sand, she wrapped her arms around herself and rested her chin on her knees.

She hadn't been able to sleep, and this was always where she went when she needed to calm down. The salty sea air and the sounds of the ocean helped. Her mom would kill her if she knew she was out here at this time of night—the homeless sometimes slept on the beach, and her mother was terrified of them—but the beach was deserted.

She wasn't sure why she wasn't able to sleep. This happened sometimes, where she'd lay awake for hours, wait until she was tired, and hope that she would eventually fall asleep. If she was lucky, she might doze for a couple hours, but that didn't happen very often on nights like these. She appreciated being able to see the sunrise, though. She knew that many people weren't that lucky. Since it was still summer, the sky would be washed in muted oranges and pinks and purples most mornings. The world would be quiet for her to watch, and it was gorgeous.

She hadn't been sitting on the lifeguard tower for very long, but she could already feel the ocean calming her nerves. She felt more centered since sitting down, and more peaceful. At least, she didn't think that much time had passed, but she lost track sometimes.

Motion in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Someone was walking in the sand towards her. Sort of. They were struggling to get their footing. There were no lights on the beach, so she didn't see who it was until they were up close.

“Willow?” She called, confused. Willow was one of her closest friends. She was always happy to see her, but she wasn't usually up this late.

“Hi, Olive,” Willow said, slightly out of breath. “What are you doing out here so late?”

“How did you know I was here?” Olive responded, not answering the question.

“Snap Maps, duh,” she said, climbing the tower ladder.

“I didn’t say you could sit with me,” Olive said. She wasn’t actually mad, but she was enjoying the time to herself. She didn’t get to sit and just be very often.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Willow sat beside her and copied her position.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she shrugged. “Why are you up so late?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

She eyed her skeptically. She could never tell when Willow was bluffing.

“How’s the beach?” She asked. “The ocean still the same?”

She glared at her. Willow wasn’t the biggest fan of the beach, but she endured it most of the time.

Olive, however, loved the beach. She’d spend every minute of every day here if she could.

She responded, “You’re a dumbass.” Willow rolled her eyes and turned towards the ocean. Even though she had interrupted Olive’s makeshift meditation, she still felt calm.

“You know it’s, like, 4AM, right?” Willow asked after a long pause.

Olive tried not to show that that bothered her. She was used to pulling all-nighters, but she’d had trouble sleeping all week and had pulled a few more than normal. “Yeah.”

She checked the time on her phone. Willow was right.

The sun was supposed to be rising in the next hour. She knew she should go home and at least try to sleep, but she wanted to watch the sunrise from the lifeguard tower. In Olive’s opinion, sunrises on the beach were magical. Like taking a nap in the middle of the day.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and listened to the waves crashing. The stars that night were bright, and the light of the moon illuminated the sand on the beach.

“You don’t have to stay out here with me, you know.” Olive said softly. “I know.”

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” She asked, looking away from the ocean.

Willow shifted uncomfortably and sighed. “Dani broke up with me last night.”

Olive’s heart dropped. “Oh, Willow.” She reached an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a one-armed hug. She put her head on Olive’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s ok,” Willow responded. “It probably wasn’t going to work out much longer, anyways.” “Still,” she said.

“It’s ok,” she repeated. It wasn’t ok, but she knew Willow would talk about it in more detail later. Olive rubbed Willow’s arm through her tee shirt. She heard her sniff.

“Why didn’t you text me?” She asked gently, still rubbing her arm. “I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.” She whispered. “Still don’t.”

“That’s ok, take your time to process it.” Olive kissed the top of her head and lay her head on top of hers. She heard her sniff again. She couldn’t see her face, so she couldn’t see if she was crying or not, but she wouldn’t blame her. Willow and Dani had been dating for two years, and they were inseparable for most of it. Then, within the last few months, they started spending more time apart and the relationship seemed more strained. She didn’t know what had changed, but Willow didn’t talk about their relationship that much. Everything she knew was what she noticed from when all three of them would hang out together. She had tried to bring it up with Willow, but she would always brush it off.

Silence fell once again, and they sat there quietly until the sky began to lighten. Birds began to chirp from their nests in the bushes, and a few seagulls flew overhead. The sun appeared over the horizon, the first rays of sunlight stretching across the sky, and a light breeze began to blow. The world was beginning to wake up.

“You ready to go?” She whispered. They hadn’t moved from where they sat, Willow’s head on Olive’s shoulder, Olive’s head on Willow’s, and her arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“Yeah,” she responded quietly. Willow wiped her face and sniffed again. “Yeah,” she repeated in her normal tone of voice. They each grabbed the bar that

protected the edge of the tower and used it to stand up together before climbing down the ladder.

Olive gave Willow another hug. “It’s going to be ok,” she said into her shoulder. She felt her nod.

She let go so they could walk back to the parking lot. The sky turned light blue as they walked, and the sand was still cool under her feet. She felt herself getting sleepy, and her head was quiet.