

PROLOGUE

I'm Watching You

By K. E. Ward

Gray clouds moved swiftly across a black sky, riding with the anxious winds. The sky was ready to rip apart at any moment, and the trees were tossing and swaying as the temperatures plummeted. A storm was coming, that was for sure: the town of Early Winter hadn't seen an inch of rain for two months. The air was misty and the tree frogs were humming in a cacophonous symphony, and the moon, a half-crescent of radiant light, was casting an eerie glow on the streets of the town.

Leah's stepmother stood behind her in the mirror as she tried on a new dress.

"That one looks beautiful on you," she said.

Leah squinted into the dirty full-length mirror, examining her twelve-year-old figure with disdain.

"I don't like it," she said.

Connie brushed her soot-black hair back gently behind her shoulder as Leah adjusted the straps.

"You're just going out with Mona," she said. "She doesn't care what you look like."

Leah was slight of figure and had big, angular bones. Her skin was yellow and when she was born, all the nurses thought she was jaundiced. Her lips were lush and full and red, and her eyes were the color of mint gumdrops. Her skin, though yellow, was flawless: she possessed a certain glow that was unmatched by any of the girls her age.

From outside, a branch of pine needles brushed against the window.

"It looks like a storm is coming," Connie said. "You might need to take your umbrella."

That night Leah was going to go to a party with her best friend, Mona Child. They had been best friends since the second grade, ever since a bully had taken one of Leah's drawings and ripped it up. Later, Mona found it in the trash and taped it together with scotch tape and gave it back to her, saw the tears on her face, and offered to give her the French vanilla pudding from her lunch.

Connie was a wonderful stepmother. When her mother Danielle had been alive, Connie was a friend of the family through the Methodist church. When Danielle died seven years ago from breast cancer, she was an immense support to the female members of the family. Five years ago, when her

father came to her with the news that he wanted to remarry, Leah was happy.

Leah finally found the right dress. "I think this one will work," she said.

Connie smiled at her with love in her eyes. "You look stunning."

Connie left the room and Leah turned back to the mirror. She examined her eyes and saw two bright jewels shining back at her.

She picked up a silver charm bracelet from the top of the bureau and gingerly fastened it to her wrist. She owned several charms from the various cities she had traveled to during to her life—Seattle, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia—although so far, she had never been out of the country.

Around her neck she fastened the ruby necklace that had once belonged to her grandmother. "Grammy" didn't have a lot of money, but she liked having nice jewelry, and in particular she liked rubies, which were her birthstone.

Leah noticed how her collarbone jutted out from her creamy flesh. Even if she weren't so thin it would have still done that; but the recent weight loss certainly accentuated her prominent bones.

The dress she chose was black, short, and sleeveless. Her long legs exposed, Leah could have passed for a few years older than she was. Satisfied, she twirled around in the mirror, smooching at the seventeen-year-old who stared back at her.

She left her long hair down, and she wore no make-up. She didn't need any. She was already seductive in her own right.

But leaving the room, she felt the oddest sensation, like the rush of wind against moist skin. She stopped dead in her tracks, her delicate fingers still on the light switch. "Mama?" she called.

There was no answer. Leah felt a shiver run through her body. "Mama!"

She began to run. Fear overcame her; all her other senses were dulled. Thoughts of murder and blood and horror flashed before her eyes in a fit of panic.

But in climbing down the stairs, her heel caught in the wooden railing, and she fell. Tumbling awkwardly down the carpeted steps, Leah felt the wind knocked out of her as she went blind from confusion.

At the bottom, she landed with a loud *kerplunk!*

"Leah, I'm right here."

Connie was standing over her, looking very concerned. Leah felt childish and stupid sitting there in a heap, a rug burn on her knee.

"Need some help up?"

But Leah was relieved. "Yes, thank you."

As Connie helped her up, Leah noticed a tear on her dress. "Oh, no."

Connie dusted her off and examined the tear. "Oh, it's nothing. I've got a sewing kit and I can fix you up in no time."

Shakily, Leah walked over to the mirror and straightened her tousled hair.

Just then the phone rang. As Connie answered it, Leah checked her handbag. Ten dollars and a cell phone just in case she got stranded somewhere and needed to call home.

"It was Mona," Connie said. "She says she's running a little late. I still don't understand why you want to wear a dress for a girls' night in."

Leah was close with her stepmother. She confided in her about all the little things that happened to her, and over the years, a mutual trust had built up between the two of them. Which was why she felt a pang of guilt that she was lying to her about this party.

But why would she let her go to a high school party? Leah was only twelve, and in the seventh grade. She went to Harris Middle School and had only three friends to speak of: Mona, her best friend, Christie, and Hope.

But Mona's parents were not going to be home tonight. They were going to go to a company ball in downtown Minneapolis and weren't going to be back until the morning. Mona and Leah were going to sneak out of the house, walk across town, and mingle with high school boys as long as they wanted to.

"Remember, call me whenever you want to," Connie said. "Day or night, I don't care. Your father's not going to be home until next Thursday, but I have the number of his hotel if you really need to get in touch with him."

"I know," Leah said.

Together, they gathered Leah's overnight bag, sleeping bag, and pillow, and set them on the front porch. By the time Mona arrived, the sky was completely black and the humidity was so thick that it was sticky. Tree frogs or cicadas—Leah didn't know which—were loud and symphonious.

Mona grabbed her red-and-white Snoopy sleeping bag. Her normally subdued eyes had sparks of mischief in them as the two girls walked to the car.

"Did you get the address?"

"It's in Stony Hill."

"That's way across town."

Mona's aunt was waiting with the driver's side door open. "Shut up," Mona said.

Mona was a highly intelligent young woman, but an underachiever. She was placed in academically gifted classes but failed out after her first semester at the middle school. She was petite, rake-like, and with a head a short, mahogany-brown hair. Her eyes were tiny but wise, and her cheeks were pudgy.

Connie waved good-bye from the front door, but then changed her mind and decided to walk over to the car in order to give Leah a kiss on the forehead. "Have fun watching *Sixteen Candles*," she said.

"We will," Mona said.

Connie waved good-bye again and then Mona shut the door. "If this night goes well, we'll be looking at sixteen cans," Mona whispered.

Leah giggled.

"Quiet, you two," Aunt Becky said.

"Gee, I wonder if Brendan would like that movie? Do you think he's like that guy Molly Ringwald goes after?"

"Mona, come on."

"Well, one thing's different: he doesn't have a girlfriend."

Leah grew quiet. "Yeah, I know."

"Maybe it'll be just like the movie, Leah. Maybe you'll end up with him."

But there was a difference between the handsome rich boy in *Sixteen Candles* and Brendan: Brendan hated her.

For two years Brendan and his friends had been taunting her and teasing her.

She knew she wasn't popular. She had only three friends in the whole school, only three people she trusted enough to talk to and to open up to. These last couple of years had been hard to take, and her three friends had had a steady earful of her heartbreak and torment.

In grade school, they mimicked her and made fun of her at recess. They called her "rat face" and "vampire girl." They advised any new student to stay as far away from her as possible, with no good reason to do so.

And so, with no friends, she lived each day as though it were a lucid nightmare: hoping that it wasn't real, waiting for it to end.

But it didn't end. In the sixth grade, it got worse. With the heightened awareness of their sexuality, Brendan and the boys continued with their torments, but with added

emphasis. They scrutinized her body, the way she moved, and her physical attractiveness. As a result, Leah never received any offers for dates, and furthermore was insulted, made fun of, and even threatened by other girls.

But during all this, Leah kept a secret: deep inside, deep in that place in her heart where treasured emotions were kept, she longed for him.

And not just longed: she ached. For the first time in her life, she was beginning to feel sexual desire, even though it was in the most unlikely and dangerous place. Even though, if she really faced reality, her desire could never be satisfied.

To love the person who burns you is a strange thing: for Leah, it fueled the first flame of passion of her tender adolescence. And though he continued to hurt her, she loved him even more: burning with ever-growing intensity every time he uttered the words, "That girl is disgusting."

He was going to be there tonight. Brendan was a popular kid, and he had tons of friends: some of them were even in high school. Leah felt nervous, and yet excited: she felt in her heart that he wouldn't try to make fun of her, not tonight, but what could happen? Many things.

She wanted to make a good impression on the older kids. She was happy that she was going to have a chance to talk with some people who didn't know anything about her reputation as a "loser," and she was excited about the possibility that she could meet someone new.

And, above all, she was excited about seeing Brendan. Strange as it was, every time she saw him, even caught a fleeting glimpse of him, her heart sped up and her pulse raced.

Mona was holding her hand and she realized that she was biting her lip and her knee was bouncing up and down.

She could barely see Mona's face in the darkened car, and the moving shadows and passing lights as they drove past street lamps gave an eerie effect.

"It'll be alright," Mona said softly. Then she whispered, "You look sexy."

Leah squeezed her hand. She remembered what a classmate named Devon once told her. "Don't tell him you love him," he warned.

"Why not?" she said innocently, and yet defiantly.

"He wouldn't react well."

When they arrived at Mona's house, Aunt Becky saw them inside but then quickly left them alone. "I've got a hot

date," was all she said, and then she was all tires and rubber.

The house was dark, silent, and cool. The girls trudged inside with their bundles and flicked on the lights, then went into the den and called Christie and Hope three-way.

"We're almost there," Mona said.

"Oh, I wish I could come," said Christie.

"Me, too," said Hope.

"We'll tell you all about it. Remember, this is Leah's night. The whole reason—well, the main reason—we're going is to see Brendan. The rest is just a bonus."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Can you take pictures for us?"

Leah laughed. She put down the extension and wandered into the kitchen. Her eyes landed on a half-drunk bottle of red wine standing on the counter. She'd heard somewhere that Mona's father was an alcoholic, but she never asked Mona herself if the rumor was true. Personally, she chose not to drink or do drugs. It was a conviction, a value, and a belief that both her natural parents had instilled in her while she was very young.

Mona got off the phone and had stars in her eyes.
"I've got to get dressed! Hope told me Anthony is going to be there!"

Leah chuckled.

As she waited, the wind kicked up again. For a moment it was so wild that one of the trees looked like a head banger at a Guns 'N Roses concert.

When they left, the air was cool and both girls were wearing sweaters.

The walk was going to be a long one—about two miles. Leah opted to take her uncomfortable flats off and go barefoot instead, but Mona braved it, saying that she didn't want to risk stepping on something rusty.

The first half-mile was familiar territory—all within the boundaries of Mona's neighborhood since she was five. Beyond that, they came to the outskirts of the business section: gas stations, corner groceries, a few restaurants.

What they needed to do was loop around so that they could bypass the more dangerous streets (although in Early Winter, even the most dangerous street was highly safe).

They walked a little bit further, and then Mona got tired. "I have a pebble in my shoe," she said.

"But we haven't even walked a mile yet," Leah said.

Mona mumbled something.

They continued on, and after consulting the map, phoning Christie a couple of times, and back-tracking a couple of times, they arrived at the correct street.

The seedy split-level house was nestled between many layers of thick foliage at the end of a dark, winding gravel road. It was the nicest in the neighborhood—a run-down section of town that, ordinarily, Leah's stepmother would never let her come to. The houses were crumbling and deteriorating, and the trash buckets were strewn all along the road, their contents spilling out onto the ground, littering the withering grass and the broken pavement. Rednecks in tube tops and cutoffs (despite the fact that it was forty degrees outside) were sitting out on their porches, husking corn and smoking their cheap cigars. Strange, twangy music wafted from the open windows, and giddy laughter and the angry shouts of a couple fighting could be heard from the street.

But as the night masked its ugliness, its beauty was revealed. The moon above was a shining crescent in a deep black sky, and the neighborhood, set on a hill high above the rest of the town, gave a breathtaking view of the lights of downtown.

Leah's legs were covered with goose pimples, and as the two girls walked down the long driveway, she braced herself against the chilly breeze that blew by.

Walking by, no one could tell that there was a party going on in the house that night. It looked vacant and neglected, with no light coming out from the front windows. The gate was open, but one couldn't see any cars in the driveway.

As they neared the house, she began to see the shadowy shapes of people hovering on the porch and in the balcony and the orange glows of lit cigarettes. She began to hear soft music coming from the interior of the house and to feel the vibrations of the base.

Beside the front porch, some beer cans had been thrown and left.

Leah immediately felt pangs of anticipation. She wanted to see Brendan badly. She had wanted to catch a glimpse of him all week, but he hadn't been at Harris—something about a family ski trip. She knew that he was going to be here tonight because Devon—her only male friend—had guaranteed it.

They walked through the front door and it was mostly dark. People were dancing, lounging on the sofas, talking in groups, and standing around. She smelled a strange odor

and saw clouds of smoke rising through the partially illuminated air. Girls and boys were partying raucously as beer spilled out from their solo cups.

She saw a light and decided to follow it, grabbing Mona's arm as she did so. The light was very faint. She heard the sound of music thumping loudly, and decided that it was coming from downstairs, as was the light. She reached the darkened kitchen and the door to the basement. An amber light came from underneath it.

She opened the door and descended the stairs.

As soon as she set foot on the floor, a boy handed her a solo cup of beer. She shook her head but the boy said, "What, you don't drink? Join the freak parade."

Leah had no choice but to keep the drink in her hands.

Someone handed Mona a drink, too. She had the same expression on her face. "Was this your idea of what this party would be like?" she said in Leah's ear.

The music thumped and more people were down here partying.

Not once did it go through her mind that she shouldn't be here. Her parents had trusted her, and she had lied.

Leah looked down at the cup in her hands. She had never tasted beer before. She smelled it, and it smelled vaguely like a sweaty sock.

"Where's Brendan?" she asked Mona.

"There's so many people here, and even though it's a small house, he could be anywhere," she said, looking around cautiously.

Leah looked around, picking at her clothes. She felt insecure and young here with all of the older kids, who all seemed to know each other and know what they were doing. She took a seat next to the window, and cradled her beer.

She saw him across the room after several minutes. As he came in, several friends were surrounding him. She lifted her eyes to him, feeling her heart lurch and then speed up, strumming at an unbelievably fast pace. She was unable to pull her gaze from him, yet at the same time, she was terrified. "He's going to humiliate me," Leah said to Mona.

"No, he won't," Mona said. "Look, he's having a good time. We've been over this."

Brendan blended in easily with the high school crowd. He was only twelve, but he looked seventeen: tall, broad-shouldered, muscular. He was an athlete. He played for the Harris football team and he was sure to make Varsity in his freshman year at the high. His hair was dark and straight, and he had a habit of flicking it back with his head when it got into his eyes—his dark, probing eyes.

Leah thought that his eyes most closely matched the color of a stormy sky above a restless sea. His features were sharp and looked sculpted, his nose straight and defined, his jaw prominent and jutting. And his lips—pouty and sultry for a boy—were all that Leah could do not to stare at.

Her heart quickened even more as she looked up shyly in his direction. She felt the coolness of the silver locket against her breast as her chest heaved slightly. She stared at the plastic cup in her hands and before she even thought about it, she took a huge gulp.

Strangely, she did not become dizzy. She was exhilarated. She stroked the cup and turned away from Brendan when she saw that he was beginning to look back at her.

He was talking with some people. He was laughing. She felt blood rush to her face when she looked back at him and saw that, again, he was looking at her.

Embarrassed, she decided to go upstairs. "Where are you going?" Mona asked.

Leah could barely speak. "I need to get some air." She took another swig of her beer. Swarming through her head were doubts and pangs of guilt about lying to her parents about what she was doing tonight. She felt bad

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