

Pull Me Out to Sea
by Shannon Robb

The waves breathed around my body. They inhaled, pulled me out to sea a bit further. Exhaled, blew me back toward shore. I tried to make each of my breaths match those of the ocean. Sometimes I could time it correctly, but I didn't have the same stamina or power. I was smaller. Weaker.

Lucky for me, the ocean didn't care. It wrapped me in its waves nevertheless, enveloped me and carried me, in and back out with heavy sighs.

I was on my back, my eyes closed. Every so often I would open them and blink back the tears that welled from the sun, magnified by the reflection off the water, glaring into them. I would turn my head just slightly, catch the shore in my sight, and close them again, quick.

I had to make sure land was close by for my mother's sake; she would insist I be smart and that I not drift too far out, but I wasn't really worried. I might be smaller and weaker than the water that surrounded me, but it wouldn't use that against me. It never had before.

So much of our lives, my brother's and mine, had been spent in the water, *this* water. It had always kept us safe. I didn't doubt that it would now, once more, in and out as constant as the rise and fall of my chest.

I heard splashes around me. I let my legs drop and stopped floating on my back just in time to see my brother come barreling toward me. His girlfriend, a cute

strawberry blonde who was nice enough, hesitated on the shore and looked out at us. She was doing an awkward dance from foot to foot, debating whether she should follow Jack before deciding to sit at the border where the wet sand met the dry.

Marissa had been with us at the beach house all summer; she'd driven out immediately after Jack called to tell her about our parents' accident. She and Jack had been dating since December, but it was the first time I'd met her in person. And now, after two months of living in the same house, it was obvious she still felt uncomfortable around me. There was always something uncomfortable in our exchanges even when we weren't speaking, but I couldn't blame her. I knew I hadn't been making it easy.

"Willy!" my brother yelled, calling me by the nickname that only he was allowed. "What are ya doin' out here? You've been out here all morning!"

"Just floating."

"We finally decided to come see what you were up to. Figured it must have been pretty damn great to keep you from us for so long."

I laid my head back in the water and let my legs rise to the surface, assuming my earlier position but I kept my eyes on him this time.

Jack smiled at me then. He was my best friend. Had been forever, but even more so since our parents died. He was pretty much all I had left. We were almost complete opposites, but he never really held my faults against me. I couldn't make friends the way he could. And I was pretty much crap at showing the ones I did have, or anyone for that matter, that I cared even a little. No one had to guess with him, though. He knew how to make people feel special. Especially me.

He stood in the water, silent and watching the horizon for a while, while I just floated.

“Do you think about them when you’re out here?” he asked quietly. He wasn’t looking at me when he asked. I didn’t say anything. But I did think about them. I *was* right now. It was almost harder not to.

Every summer of my life had been spent in this house. Even though most of our year was spent in Philadelphia, the beach house was home. Not surrounded by people who expected me to be sociable in the city, but near the quiet of the water and the three people with whom I never had to do awkward dances or have uncomfortable exchanges.

When Jack realized I wasn’t going to carry the conversation any further, or when he’d been recharged by the moments of silence and needed to return to Marissa’s side, he finally spoke again.

“I’m gonna head back now,” he said, nodding toward the shore. “You should come over in a minute. Hang out with us for a while.” The water in my ears muffled his voice.

“OK, I might.” The words were mumbled. Hardly a promise.

Jack moved back toward the shallower water.

As he got closer to her, Marissa loosened up. A smile spread across her pretty face, and she let her arms drop from where they had been folded across her chest. Jack said something that made her laugh, tossing her head back endearingly, but I was out of earshot.

He was always able to make girls do that. Make them happy. Jack made everyone happy. I never learned how.

He convinced her to come into the water, but I never moved closer to them. I closed my eyes again and let the water fill my ears, seeping into my brain, quieting it.

I heard Jack's voice call my name again, just barely. Something about them going inside. I should come. They didn't want to go back in without me.

I waved my hand toward the shore, grunting a barely audible, "Mmmhmm, inna minute," that only I could hear.

Marissa had already started up the dune toward the house. She turned her head every couple of steps to look back at my brother who lingered at the shoreline, watching me.

He desperately wanted me to come with them. I knew he did. Part of me wanted to, wished I could. But I couldn't make it work, no matter how much I willed. I just didn't fit in. Jack tried to pull me into their world. And Marissa seemed to want to engage me in conversation, but neither of us could figure out how to make it work naturally.

Even though Jack and I fit together flawlessly in spite of how different we were, it wasn't the same with other people. It had always been this difficult, but it had gotten worse since our parents' deaths. I'd retreated even more inside myself. This house, this spot on the beach, was the only place I felt anything remotely close to happy, and Jack was the only one I felt comfortable around. Unfortunately, I

hadn't had him to myself. I knew having Marissa there was good for him. It was helping him. His whole body relaxed when she was near. But it wasn't helping me.

And so I just kept floating, until finally, Jack sighed, his shoulders heaving, and turned around. He jogged a bit to catch up with Marissa, but he looked back once more when he reached the top of the dune before disappearing into the house.

Every childhood summer memory I could recall took place in this house or on the beach just out the back door or on the boardwalk in town. Learning to swim in my father's strong arms while he taught me how to love the water; I never felt scared of it with him nearby, showing me how to be part of it, fluid. Falling asleep with the window open to the sound of the ocean and my mother's gentle laugh as she and my father sat on the back porch just a little longer.

Now Jack and I were here again, but it was a very different situation than all those summers. It was almost fall now, way past the time of the season when we usually left, having already covered the furniture and locked the windows, to head back to the city.

As always, we had come down at the beginning of May. Jack picked my single bag and me up at school immediately after my last final of the semester, and we drove toward the coast. It had been decided that we would head to the house and get everything ready for the season: water turned on, slipcovers off, windows open to let in the salt air and the sound of the waves. Our parents would join us a week later when mom's classes were finished.

But my parents never came. They had tried, but they were indefinitely delayed.

As the sun began to set, I knew I couldn't avoid going inside any longer. I had spent all day outside. Eventually I had left the water to sit on the hot sand. Then around the time I knew Jack would come outside to persuade me to join him and Marissa for lunch, I started walking in the opposite direction toward the boardwalk.

But now I was hungry and my skin had turned slightly red. Not badly burned. I was used to the sun—my whole family was made for life on the shore. Yet even for my tanned skin, a whole day in the water with only the sunscreen I had slathered on that morning was too much.

Plus, we had two more guests coming, a fact I had been trying to forget all day. I already knew Owen, who had been friends with my brother since high school. My brother loved him, but I'd always thought he was too much of a blockhead. As for Kristen, I had only heard her name—one of Jack's newer friends through Marissa, and apparently the girl Owen was now convinced he would marry after meeting her a few months earlier. Judging by Owen's usual taste in girls, I couldn't imagine I would have an easier time getting along with her than any of our other guests. But for Jack, as always, I would try; they were driving to the coast for his birthday weekend and a final weekend at the beach house before the slipcovers returned to the furniture and the doors locked behind us.

I snuck around the house and slipped in the front door, which we typically only used as we unlocked it on the first day at the beach and as we shut up the house

just before the drive home. Managing to enter the house without Jack hearing, I paused briefly at the bureau by the front door and gently touched a sculpture of a crane, made by my mom for my dad to celebrate their 30th anniversary a few years before. They always celebrated their anniversary here, and he always said she reminded him of the graceful birds. When tears threatened at the back of my eyes, I ran up the stairs on light feet and closed the door to my bedroom, then turned on the water in the shower.

Water ran over my fingers and started to drip down my arm as I stuck it past the curtain to test the temperature. Too warm. A slight adjustment to the faucet and it was perfect. I let my swim trunks and the towel that had been thrown around my shoulders fall to the ground at my feet and stepped in, relishing the feeling of the cold water as it, first, stung my burn, then soothed and numbed it.

I spent as much time as possible in the shower, and when I couldn't stand under the water any longer, I spent more time than I needed getting ready. But eventually I had to make my way down the stairs. Jack would come up soon if I didn't. Plus hunger gnawed at my stomach, heightened since I'd denied it the relief of food all day. Doing so would have meant stealing away the solitude my mind had been cherishing.

"Hey-ey! Willy, man! There ya are!" Owen boomed.

"It's Will. Hi, Owen," I replied with an even tone, stating for the hundredth time the name I preferred everyone else call me before returning Owen's pleasantries.

Marissa and a brunette who had to be Kristen were at the kitchen island. Jack introduced her immediately, trying to make the enthusiasm from his voice transfer to me. I hardly made eye contact and mumbled a quick hello. Kristen's eyebrows lifted at my obvious distance, and I felt a little remorse for not trying harder to make a good first impression.

Marissa, in an attempt to smooth over the uncomfortable introduction, quickly set down her knife and grabbed a towel to wipe down her hands. A huge smile was plastered on her face that looked nearly genuine (but it couldn't possibly be; no one but Jack ever had a genuine smile for me anymore).

"Will, can I get you something to drink before we eat?" She was already walking toward the fridge. In my beach house. "We made a huge pitcher of sweet tea. Or I can mix up some lemonade and make you an Arnold Palmer. Jack said you like that sometimes. Or if you want something else, I can make that." She was talking too fast. Trying too hard.

"Marissa." She may have been talking too fast, but I was speaking too forcefully. At least she had stopped.

Jack caught my eye before I spoke again. His gaze was focused directly on me. I could feel him willing me to be nice. He really liked this girl. So, for him, I would try.

In the long pause, Marissa's smile had begun to falter, and she quickly looked toward Jack, slightly panicked.

"Tea would be great, Marissa. Thanks." A lighter tone. I even tried to smile a bit. Her own smile was back full force, making up for my surely lackluster one, and she pulled at the refrigerator door.

“Great! I think you’ll really like it. Perfect after a day in the sun!” She handed me my glass. “Just a few more minutes and dinner will be ready.”

“Sounds perfect, honey,” Jack chimed in. He looked relieved that, at least for now, I hadn’t ruined things with Marissa. “Let’s all grab a dish and we can head out to the deck.”

We were gathered around the circular table on the wooden deck at the back of the house. Nearly every summer meal of my life had been eaten at this table. Unless it was raining, our family was gathered around it, listening to the ocean just a few yards away, as we ate.

I chanced a glance at Jack. Since the near run-in in the kitchen, I’d been trying to avoid not only his gaze, for he was keeping a close eye on me, but also everyone else’s. Staring at my food or at the ocean was much safer. If I just sat quietly and stayed out of the way, as if I weren’t even there, it’d be better for us all.

Jack looked happy, at ease. More so than he had in a while. He was pleased with this new sort of family around the table, but I couldn’t be.

His three guests—*our* three guests, I suppose—were a lot like him in the ways that he and I were different: lively and extroverted, loose enough to laugh uncontrollably. But my differences were jagged against these people; the edges wouldn’t slide together, no matter how hard they or I pushed.

I had been positioned between Marissa and Owen, Jack almost directly across from me. Kristen, from her seat between Jack and Owen, gave me curious looks the

few times I had mumbled responses to their attempts at engaging me in conversation.

Finally she spoke up, deciding to make another effort at us finding some semblance of acquaintance.

“So, Will? Are you looking forward to heading back to school next week? It’ll be your junior year, right? That was my favorite year of college.”

She was trying. I guess I could, too.

“Uhh, yeah, it’ll be good to be back near the city, I suppose. Have something to keep my mind busy.” I was fumbling for nice words, or at least words that weren’t too offensive. Part of the problem, though, was that they weren’t true.

All summer, I’d been dreading the start of the new school year. I didn’t want to go back to the city or back to everything as it had been before the accident. Each passing day caused me to cringe. Incoming emails from the bookstore and professors made me wince. I’d been toying with an idea, and only this morning, out in the water, I had made up my mind.

I wasn’t going back to school. I wasn’t even going back to the city. I was going to stay out here for a while. By the water, close to the place where I’d had the happiest memories of my parents. But I hadn’t told Jack yet and I couldn’t tell him here. Maybe tonight, if I could get him alone.

“I can’t think of a better time to share the news,” Marissa’s voice interrupted my thoughts. After responding half-heartedly to Kristen, I’d gotten lost in my head once more. I looked quickly at the four other people around me, trying to figure out what I’d missed.

“When we get back to the city, Jack and I are going to be very busy, and we need all of your help.” Marissa was grinning as big as I’d ever seen her. “Because we’re getting married!”

I reeled. How could he do this, so soon after our parents’ deaths? Didn’t it bother him at all that they wouldn’t be there? That Mom wouldn’t get to help with the wedding, which he had to know would have made her giddy?

Jack was smiling at me, expectantly. I knew I had to respond, even if it was forced. I couldn’t get by with silence this time.

“Congratulations, Jack, that’s great news.” He was smiling but still looking at me as I turned my attention to Marissa. “I’m really happy for you. *Really.*” I emphasized the last word with an actual smile and a nod, glancing at Jack as I said it. When I really needed to get out of a situation, I could be a remarkably good actor.

I stuck around for a few minutes, so it wouldn’t seem so obvious, but excused myself once they were lost in sharing details and plans. I carried my plate inside, gently set it in the sink, then went out through the front door to loop around the house and head back toward the beach.

For twenty minutes, I sat on the sand alone, watching the water breathe in and out, draw closer to me and then retreat. All I wanted was to step in and let the waves pull me out to sea, where I didn’t have to worry about any of this. For twenty minutes, I sat alone letting the water calm my breaths as I tried again to match them to its motions. But I knew I wouldn’t be alone here forever; I could hear Jack approaching.

“Will?” I jumped a bit at the sound of a voice that wasn’t my brother’s. Looking over my shoulder, Kristen was a few feet from me. She gestured at the sand next to me, and I nodded, surprising myself a bit. She sat down, and I braced myself for something unpleasant, but she didn’t talk right away. She just stared out at the water, trying to see what I could, and let us sit in silence, a silence that was shockingly not uncomfortable.

“I thought you’d be Jack,” I said, finally breaking the minutes of silence.

“I volunteered to come down here before he could. I knew he’d try, and I’m sure he’ll check on you later, but he should stay up there for now. With Marissa.”

I nodded just once, indicating I’d heard her but not necessarily agreeing.

Kristen started to speak again, but her voice was soft and didn’t sound judgmental like I’d feared.

“You ok, Will? It’s just, you kind of shut down back there and then you left so suddenly.” She turned her head toward me, but I was still staring at the water, quietly.

“I get that the engagement was probably a shock—it shocked me, even, but I know it really must be for you. And I know it’s probably not really my place to say, but I think it’ll be a good thing. For both of them.

“Marissa’s been my best friend since middle school. She was there when my mom left and she hasn’t left my side since.”

That got my attention and I finally turned my head to look at Kristen instead of the water.

“She cares a lot about the people she loves, and she loves your brother. And I can tell she wants to be there for you, too, if you’d let her.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond, not to the engagement and not to the personal information this girl I’d only just met (and admittedly treated rather poorly up to this point) had decided to share with me. As inept as I was at being a good friend, though, I knew that this was the sort of moment that required something.

“I *am* happy for them. Because I’ve watched how much she’s helped Jack deal with everything this summer. I just can’t help but feel like I’m more alone now than I’ve ever been, which honestly is really saying something, and it’s hard not to feel like Marissa is part of the reason for that.”

She’d been honest with me, so I thought that might be a good place to start.

“How have you been dealing with everything this summer, Will?”

I shrugged and thought for a second.

“I swim.”

“Why? How has that helped?” Her question didn’t sound harsh or sarcastic, but purely curious and it seemed as if she might actually be concerned.

“Because it’s safer than anything or anywhere else. I don’t have to face anyone’s pity like I do in the main part of town. I don’t have to put on a brave face or break down or do or say whatever it is that people are expecting me to. I can just breathe and I can pretend like everything is the good and the same. I don’t have remember that there’s a ‘how things were’ and ‘how they are now.’ Because the water’s the same.”

I had been quick to judge Kristen and had hardly given her a chance from the second I met her, just hours before, but for some reason, sitting next to my ocean and talking, I didn't feel weird about opening up to her.

I could see her chewing on the inside of her lower lip as she weighed my words.

"Have you talked to Jack much about it?"

"Not really. Mostly because he can tell when I'm ready to talk, and I wasn't at first. Then when I was..." I trailed off.

"Marissa was here?"

I nodded, somewhat guiltily, feeling like I shouldn't put Kristen in this position.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but it sounds like the only reason you've been alone is because you're choosing to be. You know Jack would take the time to talk to you. And, like I said, Marissa wants to be there for you, too." She paused as if she were unsure whether she should say the next part. "And there's me. I know we just met and I sort of forced you to spend time with me here, but I'd be happy to talk whenever you want. You know, I actually came down here because, almost from the second I met you, it was like I was looking at myself right after my mom left. I've been there. So I'm here now, too, if you want it."

"Ok. Thanks, Kristen."

"Sure thing." She patted her hand twice on my knee in a friendly gesture, remarkably comforting for as quick as it was, before she stood up and brushed the

sand from her jeans and hands. "I'm headed back to the house now. You want to join?"

I craned my neck to look her directly in the eye, something I usually had trouble with. She was smiling softly, anticipating my answer.

"Not just yet. But you can tell the rest I'll be back in a few."

"Ok, see you there." She accepted my answer, without any hint of disappointment and without trying to convince me, and I appreciated that. Kristen had already made a few steps to leave, but she stopped and spun back around.

"You said you feel more alone than you've ever felt before? I get that, but just remember that there's a difference between being alone and being on your own. So, you know, maybe it's time to figure out exactly who you are on your own, but that doesn't mean you have to do it alone."

Spending some time on my own was definitely my plan. Now, I just had to figure out how to tell Jack.

Laying in bed that night, I came up with a plan. Jack's birthday was tomorrow, and everyone would be heading back to the city Sunday evening. I didn't want to ruin the celebration, so I'd tell him Sunday morning. In the meantime, I'd try to pretend like I didn't have something so important to share and hope that Jack would be distracted enough by our guests, his birthday, and the wedding announcement that he wouldn't notice there was something on my mind.

Early the next morning, I snuck quietly out of the house and headed toward town. Usually we were back in Philadelphia by this time, but we always had a special

birthday breakfast for Jack. It hadn't fully occurred to me until the quiet moments just before I was nearly asleep that carrying on this tradition was my responsibility now.

I hadn't spent much time in the main part of town this summer because I'd been avoiding everyone who would know what happened. The boardwalk had been safe for the most part, overcrowded with tourists who didn't know me and who provided a screen to disappear behind if I did happen to see someone I recognized. Now, it was late enough in the season that all of the summer regulars, the ones who made the three-month pilgrimage every summer, would be back in their full-time, real world homes.

I did, of course, have to worry about the townies, the dedicated few who held down the fort year-round, who kept their lights on and their store fronts open and who didn't mind the chill in the air as winter rolled in on the shore.

But I'd have to face them eventually anyway if I was planning on staying here longer.

I passed only one person, an older man I didn't recognize jogging slowly down the sidewalk, as I made my way toward Stella's. Every Saturday, my dad used to set off on his bike toward the bakery before any of us woke up. He'd buy a cup of coffee and drink it at a faded and splintering picnic table that had been sitting outside the shop my entire life. Then, when he finished, he'd walk back inside, buy six donuts—one of each of our favorites and two that he'd ask Stella or John to choose at random—and pedal back to the house, ringing a bell that gave off a tinny song the entire length of our street and up the driveway.

Because Jack's birthday fell so closely on the tail of summer, he always wanted his birthday breakfast to be from Stella's, and none of us were opposed. It was one last bit of that summer magic that could briefly break into our normal lives and carry us through the colder months. My mom and Stella had designed a breakfast birthday cake, a mountain of Jack's favorite donuts glued together with glaze and frosting, and every year, Stella would express deliver the package to our city address just in time for Jack's birthday.

Stella and John had to know my brother and I were still in town this year; Jack mentioned he'd run into John at the grocery store last week. So even though no one had called for Jack's birthday breakfast, I had a feeling Stella would have it ready and on the counter.

At the corner of the building, just before the brick turned into a wall of front windows, I paused with my eyes closed. John and Stella had known my parents well, and I hadn't spoken to them all summer aside from our brief conversation at the funeral. Even then, Jack had done most of the talking on my behalf. This was quite possibly going to be one of the more difficult of my encounters, and I hated that it had to be one of the first.

But it's Jack's birthday, I reminded myself. You have to do it for Jack.

I took a final deep breath and stepped into view of the windows, but I didn't look in just yet. I wouldn't have been surprised if John, or even more likely Stella, had seen me come into view from behind the front counter and was staring at me now, but I needed just a few more seconds to brace myself for whatever look of pity

or compassion or sadness their faces might show, so I stared straight ahead until I reached the door.

I pulled the front door open a little too forcefully, jangling the bell, and was surprised to find that no one was there to greet me immediately.

“Good morning! We’ll be right there.” Stella’s voice sounded like she’d just been laughing. It reminded me of all the nights they came over for dinner. She and my mom would have a little too much wine and start laughing uncontrollably at my dad’s jokes. Hearing her laugh sounded strange without my mother’s and I felt a twinge in my heart.

Suddenly, Stella was walking through the doorway from the kitchen. Her eyes were still turned toward the back as she finished saying something, probably to John. When she finally turned her head, she froze and her smile faded with surprise.

“Hi, Stella,” I said quietly.

My words hit play on a scene that had been momentarily paused because, before I could realize what she was doing, she was rushing around the counter, dusting off her hands on her apron, and wrapping me in a hug. The smell of flour and vanilla enveloped me, and I couldn’t help but relax a little in the comfortable embrace. This was the closest thing to my mother’s hug I’d received in months, and I was worried it might make me cry.

“Will, I was hoping we would see you today! It’s been months, but after John saw your brother last week and he mentioned you’d all still be here for a little while, we guessed you might be coming by.” She pulled away from me then but kept one

hand gently at my shoulder, as if she was scared I might run away if she didn't keep hold.

"John, we have someone here for a pickup," she called to the back. "Can you get the cake?"

"Will?!" John sounded more surprised than Stella had looked. His head popped around the corner of the doorway. His blue eyes were wide and excited behind his glasses and an eager grin spread across his entire face as he shook his head slightly in disbelief. "It really is you. I'll be right back." He disappeared just as quickly, but he was still talking, his words growing more mumbled as he walked further into the kitchen.

"We don't know what you're saying, John," Stella called back, but she was laughing again.

"Come here, come here," she said, turning back to me and pulling me further into the shop. "How are you doing, Will? Have you had a good summer?"

This could be tricky. I didn't know if I could talk about this here and right now, but I knew she'd never believe me if I insisted I was fine, and I didn't want to offend her by not opening up.

I stared at my feet while I tried to figure out what to say, and when I finally looked up, Stella just nodded with her lips pulled tight.

A piece of blonde hair fell onto her face and she accidentally smudged a tiny bit of flour on her forehead as she tucked it back into place in the messy pile on top of her head. I didn't tell her it was there because I remembered her looking like this

often, chocolate glaze painted across the front of her apron and a dusting of flour making her hair look slightly white.

It was one of the reasons I think she and my mom got along so well. Stella and my mom, who often had tiny splatters of paint on her jeans or traces of clay under her fingernails, both carried evidence of their respective arts around with them, but they never looked disheveled, just passionate and happy with the way they each were living their lives. It was the same reason life here felt more like home than anywhere else. You could go to dinner at a nice restaurant without going home first to shower after a day in the sand. If you were enjoying the life you were living, people here usually didn't question it or try to correct it. They let you live your life on the beach.

It was just a bit of flour, but it was familiar and a way to pretend briefly that everything was the same.

A voice in my head was quick to remind me, though, that if everything were the same, I wouldn't be standing here having this conversation with Stella now. I'd be in Philadelphia at the kitchen table with Jack and my dad. My mom would light the candles on the cake and start the first of the many renditions of "Happy Birthday" to be sung that day.

"I'm sorry we didn't have you and Jack over more this summer. We should have called, come around. But we didn't want to push too hard. We'd hoped you'd come when. . ." Before Stella could finish, John came striding back through the door with one of the shop's signature sea green boxes in hand. A card with Jack's name penned across the front was attached with a length of twine.

“Here it is! Just like usual. But I bet it’ll taste a helluva lot better here than it does in Philly,” John said “Philly” in a disgusted voice and with his nose crinkled as if he’d just smelled something rotten. He was one of a few people in town who’d been born here and stayed permanently. That is, with the exception of a brief period during college and a few years after when he’d lived in Philadelphia, too. John was notoriously against any city, especially for raising kids, and he had relentlessly tried every summer to convince my parents they should move here full-time. I wondered what he would think about my plan to stay.

“You know, we’re having Jack’s birthday dinner around seven tonight, if you want to come. I’m sure he’d love to see you there.” The words were out of my mouth before I fully realized I was speaking them. It was unlike me to offer invitations for more interaction with people, but Stella and John were different, and I was finding I was actually glad I had stopped in this morning, even though I’d been worried about it.

Stella smiled wide and I saw her chest and shoulders relax as she let out a breath I don’t think she even realized she’d been holding. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who had been nervous about this morning’s reunion.

“We’d love to be there, Will,” John confirmed, while Stella hugged me again. I breathed in the smell of flour and vanilla once more to get me through the rest of the day.

“Great. Well, I guess I’d better get back. Everyone’s probably starting to wake up.”

“Will?” Stella looked a little hesitant to say whatever it was she was about to. “Before you go, Marilyn called us the other day. From the art studio?” My chest tightened slightly. “She was going through the back room and found some of your mom’s things. I don’t think she knew you guys were still here, so she called us. She’s out of town this weekend, but she left us the key if you or Jack want to go before you leave town.”

She stepped behind the cash register and pulled a key ring from beneath the counter, then moved back to my side with it extended.

I didn’t manage to get any words out other than a quiet “Ok” as I opened my hand and felt the cool metal drop into my palm.

“We’ll see you tonight, Will. Seven you said?” John jumped in.

“Uh, yeah. Ok, thank you guys. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you then.” I felt dazed and was having trouble recovering, so I turned with the sea green box in one hand and the key, feeling far heavier, in the other.

Just before the door closed, I heard John quietly talking. “Stel, it’s alright. It’s better if they do it.”

I stopped at the corner of the building again and leaned against the cool brick, took a deep breath, and then started my walk.

Although I’d been planning on going home, I found my feet turning left at the next block instead of continuing straight on the main road. I stood across the street in front of Marilyn’s studio and was surprised that, from the outside, it looked exactly the same. I was nervous about going in, though, because then I might start seeing the holes left in my mother’s absence.

I turned the key in the lock and nudged the front door open. It was cool inside with all the lights off.

As much as my mom loved being at the water's edge, it was difficult to keep her out of the studio for too long. Even during her vacation, when she finally had a break from the classroom, she couldn't stay away from sharing her passion and she taught community courses and summer camp programs at Marilyn's. She could spend half her day sculpting castles out of sand with me and my brother, and the other half helping a group of older beachgoers paint landscapes or the elementary-aged kids sculpt small bowls from globs of clay.

A garland of paper cutout hands, made by the youngest members of Marilyn's summer camp classes, hung in the front window and cast gangly shadows on the floor. I remembered making one myself. We were supposed to bring in a photo of our families that day. They asked us about our favorite part of spending our summers here and wrote our answers on one side of our cutout hand. On the other side, we pasted the family photos before Marilyn strung them together and hung them in the front window for the summer.

Without a moment's pause, my answer had been, "Swimming with my brother," and I could still clearly remember the photo I'd chosen. Stella took it while the four of us stood knee deep in the water. My dad held a five-year-old me sideways because he had just scooped me up from the water. My mom was next to him, bent over slightly to hug her arms around Jack's shoulders. Just after Stella snapped the picture, Jack had lifted his foot and swiped at the water with it, splashing us all and starting a water war.

I glanced at some of the photos currently hanging in the window. I recognized many of the families but was shocked at how much they'd grown. A lot of the small children these hands belonged to were the grandchildren of the adults I had known growing up here, and I couldn't remember when that started happening. A new generation spending their summers on the beach that I loved.

I turned back toward the main room. It looked wrong in here, dark and empty. I'd been in here when it was empty before, helping my mom when she closed up after a late class. But even then, it was still full with the memory of the people who had been there that day, their creations drying on easels or hanging proudly on the walls. Plus my mother was there, usually singing along to whatever song was playing through the speaker system. Aside from the hands in the window, most of the creations that had been produced this summer had been taken back with the families when they left at the end of the season. The walls looked too bare and it was too quiet. The potter's wheel in the corner looked dejected without my mother sitting at it.

I was taking too long in here, lingering in thoughts that reminded me that this wasn't the same art studio it used to be. Not without her in it. I needed to get her things and get out of here as quickly as possible, so I rushed across the room and ducked into the back storage area.

On the worktable in the middle, there was a large file box with "Nolan" written across the side in Marilyn's handwriting. I knew my mom probably hadn't left all that much here from the previous year, but it seemed strange that something she loved could be packed so easily into a single box.

I lifted the lid slightly to peek inside. On the top was a photo that looked almost identical to the one I had just been remembering, the one I'd pasted to my construction paper hand. But in this one, we were further out in the water. I was hanging from my dad's shoulders while he swam; one of my arms caught in mid-swing as it propelled through the water to send a wave in the direction of my mom and brother. It was the water war my brother had started. My mom stood closest to the camera, her auburn hair hanging wet down her back and her head tossed back as she laughed at my flailing brother running toward me and my dad. Stella must have kept snapping pictures, even long after our attention had been diverted.

Something caught in my throat then, and I closed the lid on the box once more, quickly stacking Jack's cake on top and heading for the door. As I was locking it behind me, I heard someone calling my name. Kristen jogged over to my side.

"Morning, Will!"

"What are you doing here?" I was still caught in a haze of memory from the photo and hadn't been prepared to see anyone yet, but I was especially surprised to see her. Maybe everyone was awake, and Jack had thought I'd tried to escape. I was being retrieved.

"I'm an early riser, and I wanted to do a little exploring. Jack said you might be out this way, but I didn't think I'd find you so easily." She smiled at me.

"Is everyone else up?"

"Nah, neither Marissa or Owen have surfaced yet. Just Jack. What do you have there?" She nodded toward the boxes at my feet.

I picked them up from the ground as I responded, “Jack’s breakfast birthday cake—a mountain of donuts sure to put you on a sugar high to last the entire day.”

“That sounds perfect,” Kristen responded, drawing out the word for emphasis with a sort of mischievously delighted look in her eye, as if she was getting away with something. I couldn’t help but smile because that’s how I always felt about the cake, like a little kid who thought I surely must have learned how to brainwash my parents to allow me to eat something so terribly awful and delicious for breakfast. “I can’t think of a better way to start the day. Especially not a birthday.”

We’d started walking back toward the house then, slowly. As much as I hated being in large groups, because there was more opportunity for judgment or large-scale embarrassment, one-on-one was usually harder. No place to hide, more pressure to uphold normal conversation, and more potential for the interaction to instantly turn into a disaster. But once more it struck me that I didn’t feel uncomfortable like I usually would when it was just the two of us.

“So I’m assuming the cake is in the small box. Or I’m hoping so, at least. If it’s the big box, that’s enough sugar to scare even me.” Kristen’s eyes were wide with mock panic. “So what’s in the other one? A piñata for lunch?”

I looked away from Kristen, but I decided to talk. “It’s, uhhh, it’s some of my mom’s things actually. From the art studio here.”

“She was an artist?” Kristen sounded genuinely curious, and I glanced at her. She was looking at me enthusiastically.

“Yeah, she was really great.” I smiled as I actually turned my head toward Kristen once more. “Did you see the crane sculpture on the dresser near the front door? She made it for my dad.”

“She made that?! I noticed it last night. It’s *really* beautiful.”

I nodded. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Kristen smiled and we walked quietly for a minute before she spoke slowly.

“So did you look in the box?” I could tell she wasn’t trying to pry by the tone in her voice.

I bit my lip and shook my head. “Not really. I started to. But I don’t think I can just yet. I need to go through it slowly, I think.”

“Makes sense. You know, after my mom left, my dad packed up everything that was hers—all the photos, her clothes, everything—but he didn’t throw them away. He just stuck it all in a spare room and shut the door. Then we pretended like it wasn’t there for a long time.

“I didn’t get it at first, why he was keeping it all. Why he didn’t break anything angrily or just toss it all to the street. But I’m glad he didn’t because a few years ago, when I was home visiting him, I started to look through some of it.”

“Did it make you angry again?”

“Sometimes, yeah. But I remembered some of the good things, too. And I learned things I didn’t know. It didn’t make me forgive her or excuse what she did, and it was painful, but I’m glad it was there. It just took a while to get to the point where I could open that door.”

I didn't know what to say in response anymore, so instead I pointed toward a small jetty up ahead. "See there? That's the best place in town to catch fish. At least when you're eight and can't drive a boat and all you have is a net. Jack taught me how to wait for them, at night, near the lights on the side. They swim up to catch the bugs, and then you can scoop them right up."

Kristen sighed contentedly. "It's really great here. I wish I'd had someplace like this growing up. I can't imagine ever wanting to leave if I were a kid here. Going back to school would suck after this."

"I still don't ever want to leave," I said. I stopped for a second then and set the boxes down. We were close to the house, but I needed a little longer before we went back in. Kristen carried on for a few steps before she realized what I was doing.

"Do you want me to take one of those?"

"No, it's not that." I paused, wondering if this was a bad decision. Usually, the only second opinions I trusted were my parents' and Jack's, but now the first choice wasn't an option and the other was exactly what I needed a second opinion about. "I just— I've been thinking about something, and I think you might be able to help me."

"Ok?" Kristen looked a little worried. Like I had the night before, I thought I might be putting her in an awkward position, but I moved ahead anyway.

"I've been thinking of staying here. Not going back to school this semester and living at the beach house instead." Kristen raised her head slightly and her eyes widened as she took in what I was saying.

"The thing is, I want to go through that box," I continued, pointing toward my mother's things, "and I want to do it here, but I need a little more time. This summer

I've been pretending like the door didn't exist, like you and your dad, but I know it's there. I just need more time before I can open it."

"Have you told Jack?"

I pulled my lips tight and moved my head side to side. I felt a little relief when I told her, but I could also feel a new anxiety setting in. Telling Jack was a step closer now; it had to happen and that terrified me. "I was planning on doing it tomorrow morning."

Kristen let out a low whistle.

"Way to wait until the last minute, buddy." Her tone was light and joking again. I'd been looking away, fearful she would tell me it was stupid, which was only a fraction of the response I was expecting from Jack, but I lifted my eyes to her face. She was smiling.

"It might not be what he wants to hear and I obviously don't know you that well, but I don't necessarily think it's a terrible idea. Just don't tell Jack I said that if he flies off the handle."

"You don't?"

"No, like I said, I get needing time. It could be good. But how do you think he'll take it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I only decided for sure yesterday, and I've been trying not to think about it too much. Mostly I've been trying to figure out how to tell him without focusing on what he'll do after."

"Well, I don't envy you that conversation. You guys are close, though. Hopefully he'll see that it's what you need. Just like he needed Marissa here this

summer, and you allowed him that.” She grabbed the donut box then. “Come on, we’d better get back. Everyone’s probably up now.”

I sighed, resigning myself to fact that she was right, and picked up the file box.

“Let’s go, dropout,” she joked as she grabbed my elbow and we started toward the house again.

Owen was bounding down the stairs as Kristen and I walked through the front door.

He spotted the donut box in Kristen’s hand and pumped his fist in the air like a teenage boy in the end zone of a football field.

“Yes! Food’s here!” he boomed, as he grabbed the box and scurried into the kitchen, squeezing past Jack who was standing in the doorway. Jack walked toward us more slowly, more civilized, like a normal person, while I set the file box down near the foot of the stairs. He extended a cup of coffee toward me, and then hooked his arm around the back of my neck to pull me close.

“Thank you for going to get the cake, buddy. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes I did. Happy birthday, Jack!”

“I can’t believe John and Stella had it ready. “

“Of course they did. I wasn’t surprised at all.”

“I was just thinking, since we didn’t really talk to them much this summer, never had them over for dinner. I don’t know, maybe that’s stupid. What’s in the other box?”

“Some of mom’s things.” I didn’t hesitate when I said it, mostly because I just wanted to get it out there and move on. “They were at the studio; Stella gave me the key.” Jack looked taken aback, probably the same way I had when Stella mentioned it. It was weird to be confronted by memories of my mom and dad when we weren’t expecting them. Sort of like seeing someone in a different setting than you usually do; it takes a minute to place them on the street when you usually only see them at work. I was prepared to be sad when I’d look at things around the house, or when I was floating in the water, but the box had caught me off guard and it appeared to have done the same to Jack. I didn’t want to dwell on this right now.

“So, speaking of dinner, I invited them tonight. I thought they might like it since we never get to celebrate your birthday with them in person.”

Jack’s face transformed again, his mouth wide and his eyes bright. “Thank you. I’m really glad we’re still here. I never liked going back much, trading in the sand for school, but I think it’s going to be even harder to leave this year, don’t you?”

Kristen had already walked into the kitchen, but I could see her through the doorway. She glanced up at me when Jack spoke, her hand hovering at the coffee pot she was about to pick up, and she was just watching, waiting for my response.

Too much time was passing. Jack was going to know something was wrong if I didn’t agree soon, but I didn’t want to lie straight to his face. Not now that I’d decided for sure.

The sound of Marissa’s voice saved me then. I’d never been more thankful for her. “Jack. Will. Get in here! We’re lighting the candles.”

He hadn't seemed to notice I didn't respond. Instead, with his arm still across my shoulders, he directed us into the kitchen. Kristen and I exchanged another look before we both joined in singing.

Just before seven that night, the back door slid open and John appeared in the kitchen, his arms thrown wide above his head as he yelled, "Happy birthday, Jackie-boy!" Stella followed, carrying a present and smiling excitedly.

We were all in the kitchen making dinner. Everyone had been assigned a task except for Jack. He had insisted on helping but Marissa refused. He stood up from his stool at the island and walked over to John, who wrapped him in a hug and slapped him on the back a few times.

"My turn!" Stella said. She scooted around John and pushed him to the side, grabbing Jack from him. On tiptoes, she threw her arms around his neck and rocked a little side to side while she hugged him. Jack's eyes were closed, and I wasn't entirely sure, but I thought I could see him take a deep breath. Vanilla and flour.

"We're so happy to be here celebrating with you," she said, stepping back a little now and holding him at arm's length to get a good look.

"Me too." He was looking her straight in the eye and smiling. "Especially because there's someone I want you to meet."

I hadn't noticed, but Marissa had set down her knife and was now wiping her hands on her apron as she approached the gathering by the door.

“John, Stella? This is Marissa.” He was beaming while he looked from them to her and back. “And we technically have two things to celebrate tonight because she’s my fiancée now. We told the others last night.”

Stella’s eyes were wide but happy as she reached out her hands to grab Marissa’s. “It is so lovely to meet you, Marissa, and congratulations. What great news this is! I’ve seen you around town a bit this summer and was wondering who the gorgeous newcomer was.”

Marissa blushed. I felt Kristen nudge me with her elbow. She and I had been assigned to chop vegetables for the salad, but I’d stopped to watch the introductions.

“Remember, it’s a good thing,” she whispered. “Now stop slacking. I’m not carrying your load.” She pushed another handful of mushrooms toward me. I rolled my eyes and started chopping again, stopping briefly only to say hello to Stella and John once they’d made their way further into the kitchen and got settled. Mostly I chopped and stayed quiet while everyone talked, until there was nothing left to prepare.

The back door was open and we would surely migrate outside when the steaks went on the grill, but everyone was still lingering in the kitchen for now. I slipped away to stand on the deck for a bit.

“Lots going on in there, huh?” John said, suddenly beside me. I was kind of glad he’d followed, but I just nodded my response.

“Thanks again for inviting us, Will. It means a lot, especially to Stella. She feels really guilty that we didn’t do more for you guys this summer.”

“It’s really ok. I don’t want her to worry. We both have our ways of dealing with it, and I’m sure it won’t surprise you that I usually deal with things by myself.” John chuckled slightly. “And Jack— well, Jack had Marissa.”

John nodded. “I can’t believe they’re getting married, mostly because I sometimes still see you guys as kids, but Jack seems really happy. And I think your parents would like Marissa.”

“Mom would’ve loved her. But that’s what I’m having the hardest time with. They haven’t been—” I cleared my throat. “They haven’t been gone long, and this would have made Mom so happy, to have a daughter-in-law and to help plan the wedding. It’s too soon.” I’d always felt close to John and Stella, but John and I had never really talked much. My brother and I would just hang around with him and my dad. He’d mess around with us, just like my dad, yet I was always a little shy to talk around him. But now, without my dad here, I was finding it surprisingly easy to transfer my need to talk through things with my dad to John. And he seemed willing to reciprocate.

I remembered all those summers, sticking close to my dad and John out here on the deck while they grilled, John casually throwing in jabs at the city and not-so-subtle comments to try convincing my dad, once again, that we should pack up our apartment, leave the city behind, and move out here full-time like him and Stella.

“What are we going to do, John?” My dad always handled this conversation good-naturedly no matter how many times they had it. “The boys have to go to school, and we don’t want to make them leave. And Amanda has her classes.”

“There’s a school the next town over, and the boys will make new friends.” I could vaguely remember my dad casting a concerned glance in my direction at this point of the conversation. “And Amanda can still teach classes. There are plenty of places for her, and with her talent, she won’t have any trouble finding a new position.”

“And they’ll pay her considerably less.”

“It’s not as expensive out here.” They were quick to respond from years of practicing this same debate.

“Ok, John, what about me?” my dad said with a chuckle, starting in on his next counter argument. “Nobody needs a lawyer out here. If they do, they drive into the city.”

“Open your own practice!”

“Oh yeah, I can have my office right between the bike rentals and the ice cream shop near the boardwalk,” my dad responded dryly.

“I just think you guys are going to lose too much of yourselves there. You work too hard, you don’t get sunlight and fresh air, the boys can’t play like they can here. I care about you all too much to let that happen. The city does it to the best of people, no matter what.”

“It’s not *that* bad.”

John’s only response was a skeptical roll of his eyes while he took another drink of his beer.

Variations on the same conversation occurred a few times every single summer and continued by phone a couple of times throughout the year.

If anyone was going to understand not feeling happy in the city, it was John.

“I think I’m lost, John.”

John sympathetically nodded again. “You’ll find your way back, bud.”

“Not in Philadelphia I won’t. I’m afraid I’ll just get more lost there. I’ll get lost anywhere but here.”

He was looking at me now, and I could tell he knew I was referencing the words he’d used trying to win my dad over.

“What exactly are you thinking then, Will?”

“I’m staying here. I don’t know for how long, but I’m not going back tomorrow.”

“Yes, you are.” John and I both jumped at the sound of the firm voice behind us. Jack was standing in the doorway, holding a platter of steaks in his hand. Neither of us had heard him come outside.

Jack had never looked at me the way he was now. I wanted to turn my eyes away—to look at my feet, the ocean, anything—but I was scared that would only make him angrier. He wasn’t saying anything, and I figured he was waiting for me to start the conversation.

He stepped out onto the deck and set the platter down at the grill, but he kept looking at me expectantly the entire time.

“Ok, I’ll start,” he finally said. “What happened to Mom and Dad was really terrible, and I know you’re still grieving, but hiding out here is not the answer. You have to go back to school and you have to finish the education that Mom and Dad

were paying for. You'll go back to the city and we'll return to our normal lives, and it might not be easy, but eventually things will feel better."

"We can't return to our normal lives, Jack." My voice was quiet, but there was anger in it. He was trying to make me feel guilty and I hated that. He was ignoring the reality of our lives now and I hated that even more. "Nothing is normal anymore. And I'm not hiding out here. If anything, I'll be hiding in the city. I don't have friends there. Most of the time, I don't know where I fit in, but at least here feels like home."

His jaw was set and he was shaking his head back and forth slowly.

"We're closing up the house tomorrow, and when we all get in the car, so will you." His last three words were punctuated by him throwing the last three steaks on the grill.

Jack wouldn't look at me at all throughout dinner. This was the one time I actually might've welcomed the attention from a table full of people, only because it would've meant he wasn't angry. Marissa was trying hard to liven the mood, and while Jack was willing to talk to them, there was an edge in his voice and a tightness in his shoulders that was impossible to miss.

Jack headed to the bathroom when Marissa and Stella got up to get dessert ready. In their absence, John leaned over and spoke softly.

"I think it's a good idea, Will. Am I happy you're not going back to school? Not really, but there's time for that later. Right now, you just need to feel ok again, and I understand why staying here might be the key to doing that."

John kept glancing at the doorway to avoid another surprise confrontation, but his eyes were warm.

“I’ll talk to him after dinner. Calm him down a little. But then you should talk to him, too.”

I nodded. “I know, I will. Thanks, John.”

He turned back to the conversation between Owen and Kristen until the others returned.

For the second time that day, Marissa started singing and we all joined in. “Make a wish, love!” she said, beaming at Jack. With his head bent low over the cake and the light of the tiny flames flickering below him, his eyes looked hard as he finally made eye contact with me.

My heart constricted. Just two hours ago, everything had been fine. It had been a celebration. My brother had still been my single ally. Why did I have to tell anyone else about my plan? Usually I couldn’t even exchange everyday conversation with people, and I chose now to divulge the heavy stuff to practically everyone but my brother. I should have waited to talk to him. Or I should have ignored the idea when it started tugging at the back of my mind; I should have packed it away as I packed my bag and then sat quietly in the car while we pulled away from my favorite place in the world.

“Will, can I talk to you for a second?”

For the second time tonight, I jumped at the sound of Jack’s voice addressing me. I froze, mouth open slightly. I looked at his plate, empty, and then looked at mine, which still had food on it. Everyone else was finished, too. Kristen and Marissa

were starting to quietly stack the plates and silverware, but everyone was silent, waiting for my response and awkwardly hanging on the edges of the tension between my brother and me. I looked at my plate again. Why was this all I could do?

“Will?” Jack sounded impatient. Irritated.

I quickly nodded my response as I set my fork down on my plate and scooted my chair back from the table, the legs scraping against the wood planks.

My brother walked toward the stairs that led to the beach and I followed behind, feeling like a small child. I had never felt this way with Jack. He was older, but he’d never made me feel like the little brother.

He didn’t say anything for a long time. He just kept walking, first to the edge of the water, and then alongside it, until we could no longer hear the sounds of the conversation that had resumed on our deck. He didn’t stop walking until I finally spoke up, when I couldn’t handle this new feeling of tension between us any longer.

“Please say something, Jack.” My voice was practically a whisper.

“You have to go back tomorrow, Will.” There was nothing in his voice to make it sound like he was trying to convince me this was the logical decision. He was stating it as fact. Forcing it on me as the only option. “You know Mom and Dad would tell you the same thing.”

“You’re right.” He seemed surprised that I was agreeing with him without a fight. It was astonishing how quickly the dynamic between us had changed over just a couple of hours. We were almost always in agreement, and even when we weren’t, we could at least see the other’s side. Yet suddenly, just a few words out of his

mouth gave rise to anger in me, and he'd automatically been expecting me to fight back although I never had before.

"Good, I'm glad you think so," he started, but I wasn't finished.

"You're right that they'd tell me the same thing about going back if they were here, Jack, but the thing is, we wouldn't be in this situation if they were here. It wouldn't even be a question."

Jack looked stunned that I'd interrupted him.

"I'd be sad to leave like I always am," I continued, "but of course I'd go back with all of you, just like we always do, if they were here. But it doesn't make sense to go back now. I can't."

"*Why not?*" Jack was pushing now. I couldn't figure out why this was so hard for him to understand. He could usually sense exactly what I was feeling, even if he'd never actually felt that way himself. It's why he'd always been able to protect me so well from everything else. But now I had to try to make him get it. I had to protect what I thought was right for me from him this time.

"I'm not like you, Jack, you know that. You have something to go back to in Philadelphia: your job, your friends, Marissa. I just have a dorm and classrooms that are full of people but still feel empty to me."

He looked a little hurt. "You have me."

"You're right, I do. But you're part of this place, too. And if you're all I have there, I can't keep doing that to either of us. You can't be my only friend and the only thing that saves me there. And I know it doesn't really make sense because the last time I talked to mom and dad was in Philadelphia. I should feel closer to them there

because more of my memories with them are there. My *last* memories of them are there. But my *best* ones are here, and I don't want to leave that, Jack."

There wasn't anything more I could say. No other argument, nothing new, so I stared at him blankly, waiting, hoping this was enough for him to understand. He was silent again and I couldn't figure out what he was thinking.

"I'm sorry this evening wasn't what you were expecting, and I'm sorry I'm to blame. Happy birthday, Jack."

With that, I turned around and started walking toward the lanterns that were flickering on the deck.

As I climbed up the stairs, I immediately noticed that Kristen was watching me, but John got to me first.

"How'd it go?"

I shrugged with one shoulder. "I don't know if he gets it, really. But he can't make me leave tomorrow. I'm hoping I at least made that clear."

John started to open his mouth to say something more, but I cut him off.

"It's fine, John. It's over. Or nearly over," I amended my statement, realizing it wouldn't be officially over until I'd actually succeeded in managing to stand at the front door while the packed car drove away. "I'm going to bed."

Before I walked through the door, I looked once more at the shore. The sky was dark enough that it was difficult to see him clearly, but I could still make out Jack's figure where I'd left him behind. Tomorrow we'd switch roles; he'd leave me behind here, but instead of feeling sad about it, I felt relieved.

"Good night, Will," Kristen said, still watching.

I half-smiled and then headed for the stairs.

In my room, I opened the windows, so I could fall asleep to the sound of the voices on the deck below. They weren't the same voices I used to fall asleep to, but once I closed my eyes and if I didn't tune in too closely, I could pretend a final time.

A soft knock on my door woke me the next morning, and I grunted my approval to come in as I wiped the sleep from my eyes. Marissa's face appeared in the widening sliver.

I'd expected Jack. And at this point, Kristen's face wouldn't have been all that surprising. From them, I knew what the conversation would likely hold, but I didn't know what to be prepared for from Marissa.

"Morning, Will." Her voice was soft—not warm exactly, but at least it didn't seem like she was about to berate me for ruining Jack's birthday. "Jack and I were talking last night, after you went to sleep. We're going to leave this morning, right after breakfast, instead of this evening. Kristen and Owen, too."

"So you don't have to deal with the weirdness any longer than necessary?"

"Well, no, just that there's less to do now since we don't have to close up the house, and Jack just wants to get settled back in, run through some work before he has to go into the office tomorrow."

"Wait, you said you don't have to close up the house. Does that mean he's alright with me staying?"

"I wouldn't say he's alright with it. He's been sulking around all morning. But both John and Kristen talked to him last night, and I think he realized how set on this

you are.” The small bit of hope I’d had that maybe he wasn’t angry anymore faded, and it must have showed in my face.

Marissa stepped a little further into the room.

“He doesn’t want to fight with you, Will. I think mostly he’s hurt about the way you chose to tell him.”

“That’s not the way I chose to tell him,” I said defensively. “I didn’t want him to find out like that.”

“Sorry, poor choice of words. He’s hurt that he happened to find out that way because you didn’t talk to him sooner.”

“So you think if I’d brought it up to him earlier, before I told anyone else, he would have been ok with it?”

As she thought about this, I realized this was the first semblance of a normal conversation I’d had with Marissa all summer.

“I don’t know that he’d be on board, but he might have reacted more calmly. I get where he’s coming from, because frankly, I can’t say I fully understand why you’d want to stay here alone. But I can’t say that one of you is wholly right and the other is wrong, either, so do what you need to do I guess. One of you will come around eventually and it’ll work out. I’ve never seen siblings as close as you two, Will. There’s no way it can’t work out eventually.”

I hoped that was true. I also, selfishly, hoped that he’d be the one to come around. Because if I were the one to “come around” it would mean that staying here was ultimately a mistake and I didn’t want to think that whatever I was getting myself into was a bad thing.

Marissa was obviously in Jack's corner, but I appreciated her efforts to momentarily venture to my side. And I didn't need her to understand why I was doing this; I was just happy to know that I would be staying here today without much more of a fight.

"I'm sorry for ruining yesterday, Marissa." She didn't seem like she was terribly angry about it, but I still felt like an apology was necessary. As bitter as I'd been all summer about her being here and as awkward as our interactions sometimes were, I didn't actually want to dislike her.

"I know, Will. It wasn't your fault. Just bad timing." She smiled softly and stepped toward the door. "I'll see you in a bit for breakfast, ok?"

I nodded as she left the room and then laid back in the sunshine slanting through the window, listening to the sound of the waves outside and the sound of dresser drawers opening and closing down the hall.

The front door was standing open, the two cars were nearly packed and I was hovering at the bottom of the stairs, trying to stay out of the way. I didn't really know what to do with myself while I waited for their departure. Finally, I heard the tailgate slam shut and Jack walked back through the front door.

"Ok, that's the last of it."

We made eye contact and I looked away nervously. I didn't know what this goodbye would entail.

Owen walked up from behind me, and slung one of his heavy arms over my shoulder. “Willy, it’s been great to hang out with you again, man. Always a good time.”

I cringed a little at the weight of his arm, that he was still calling me by the name I hated, and at his complete disregard for the fact that the weekend hadn’t exactly turned out to be a “good time.” After he walked out the door and Marissa said her goodbyes, I decided to suck it up and initiate the goodbye with my brother.

“I’m sorry again, Jack. I really didn’t want to ruin your birthday and I didn’t want to hurt you. I hope you’ll eventually understand why I need to do this.”

“Keep an eye on the pipes as it gets colder. Even though you’ll be using them, they could still freeze, especially in the guest bedrooms. John can help you if you need.” His failure to acknowledge my apology stung a little.

“Ok, yeah, I’ll give him a call.”

“Take the umbrella down from the deck soon.” He continued through his cold list. I suppose this was better than yelling.

“And take care of yourself, Will.” He finally looked me in the eye. Then he hugged me so quickly I couldn’t react and spoke under his breath. “Love you, little brother.”

I felt a sigh of relief escape as he walked out the front door; I hadn’t realized how tense I’d been as he’d stood in front of me until then. The goodbye wasn’t much, but I’d been expecting worse. At least he’d said he loved me. I didn’t think I would have been able to bear it if he’d set off on the same road that had taken the other people who loved me without saying that.

Kristen had been hanging around the edges of the room, looking busy rummaging through her purse, but she finally set it aside and walked over to me.

“Here, put your number in there,” she said, handing me her phone. “We’re friends now, whether you like it or not, and I’m going to be checking up on you.”

I laughed silently as I typed in my cell number and handed her phone back.

“And keep one of those spare bedrooms open for me. I just may make a surprise visit. I realized I like it here a lot, and, you know,” she said, assuming a voice of mock importance as if she were part of the inner circle of high-end coastal living, “I hear early winter is the best time to visit the beach. It’s really the new season for it.”

“Is that so? Well apparently, I’m ahead of the curve. Who knew I was so trendy?” It was easy to joke with her and it seemed strange that I’d only met her a couple of days ago. I realized that I was already hoping she would make one of those surprise visits.

“It’s been great getting to know you this weekend, Will.” Kristen wrapped me in a hug. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, but I know you’re going to be alright.”

I followed her to the front door and stopped in the doorway. She waved once more as she got in the car with Owen, and then the two cars pulled away. I turned around but stayed in the doorway, standing on the edge of this new version of my life, in which I was completely alone for the first time ever in the only place that felt like home.

I walked through each room of the main floor, taking in the silence. I stood on the deck and watched the water for a moment, but I didn't walk down the stairs. I wanted to do the same thing upstairs, too. It was like I had to convince myself I was actually here by myself, to prove to my brain that Jack wasn't going to jump out suddenly from his closet, his favorite spot when we used to play hide and seek on rainy days.

When I reached the stairs, I saw the box of my mom's things still sitting on the floor near the bureau. I picked it up and carried it to the coffee table, lifting the lid again and set to the side. Staring down into the box's contents, I remembered what Kristen had said about being glad her mom's things were still there for her to go through when she was ready.

I hadn't been ready to go through the contents yesterday morning and I still wasn't, but I decided to make this project. I needed something to do with my time here, so I decided I would slowly make my way through my parent's things.

The picture on top I could handle. It had already suddenly confronted me yesterday and I was ready for it this time. It was still a sad reminder that my parents were no longer here, but the punch in the gut of emotion that it'd given me the first time around didn't happen. It was a happier picture now. I'd make my way through the rest of the box this same way, then the rest of the house.

I carried the photo gingerly as I walked back toward the bureau and leaned it against the willowy legs of my mother's crane sculpture. Stepping back, I took in the landscape of the dresser's top, a little shrine to all that I'd lost.