



**The  
Nature  
of Sand**

**James Reynolds**

It was Thanksgiving day. Max Lockwood should have been hungry, but he wasn't. He was too excited and nervous to think much about eating. He glanced at his index finger, which was tapping on the steering wheel of his Toyota Corolla. He pulled his hand away, gave it a shake, and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He needed a drink.

The clouds outside the car window were thick and dark, and the dull gray color of the sky had bled into everything, including the grass and trees. A few flakes of snow dancing with the breezes in the street hinted at the precipitation to come. The forecast called for three to five inches overnight. A real snowfall, the first of the season. When the snow fell in Ohio it fell silent and heavy, an oppressive white blanket that smothered the whole world.

Max fought to control his nerves, which were working overtime. He pulled a flask from his pocket and took a long pull, willing himself to relax. From the curb outside his parents' house, Max looked up at his old bedroom window.

Glenbrook, a suburb of Columbus, had been his home all of his twenty four years. The houses in Glenbrook were all of similar, mid-quality construction, mostly brick and vinyl siding, and the streets and foliage were all carefully planned to feel comfortably unplanned. He glanced at the dining room window. The curtain was drawn, but he could see shadows pass across its surface as people came and went, preparing the table for the holiday feast. There would be the traditional bird, stuffing, potatoes, and pie, but this year, the meal would go a little different. With a deep exhale, he stepped out of the car and headed up the walk. His nose was numbed by the time he reached the house.

Opening the front door, the warm air from inside enveloped him, carrying with it the smell of fresh-baked breads and roast turkey. Any other year, Max's mouth would have been watering by now, but not this year. Now, despite the tantalizing aromas, Max didn't have an appetite, and wasn't sure he'd be able to eat at all.

In the living room, Max's older brother Kyle and their father Stephen were sitting on the couch watching the Dallas Cowboys game. They glanced in Max's direction, gave him a courtesy wave, then turned their attention back to the game.

Football had always been one of the walls between Max and his father and brother, mainly because it was the glue that formed the bond between the other two men. Kyle had followed in his father's footsteps, playing for OSU, and it had made his father extremely proud. Max, on the other hand, had gone to another school (any school but THE Ohio State University was 'another school') and had never cared for football. This made him different from them, a disappointment, and they never let him forget it.

From behind the couch, a little boy's head popped up. "Hey uncle Max!"

Despite his nerves, Max smiled. "Hey Jake." He walked over to his nephew and knelt down to the boy's level. "What are you reading today?"

Jake held up a book, careful to mark his page with his finger. "Book of World Records. Uncle Max, did you know there's a world record for the longest fingernails? Look, here's a picture. Gross, huh?"

"Yeah, kid. That is kind of gross." Max liked Jake more than he had thought he would. The boy reminded him of himself at times. He loved to read, and loved to learn. Jake was bright and perceptive for six, sometimes surprisingly so. Max knew that that was thanks to Kyle's wife, Miranda. "Where's your mom?"

“She’s in the kitchen with Grandma, cooking the turkey.” Max stood up and headed for the kitchen.

“Hello, ladies.”

Max’s mother, Charlotte, looked up from her mixing bowl only long enough to see who he was. “Max,” she said, giving him a quick smile and turning immediately back to her task. She had always loved him, he knew, but in recent years, his father’s disdain for him had affected her as well. She had grown more distant. Max and his father didn’t get along, and Charlotte stayed out of it. She tried not to take sides.

Miranda stood up from the oven and smiled broadly at him, a mitt on each hand.

“Hey Max! Happy Thanksgiving.”

He smiled back at his sister-in-law. “Hi, Miranda. Happy Thanksgiving.”

Miranda’s smile faded slightly, and her brow creased. She took off the oven mitts, walked toward him, leaned in, and whispered. “You okay, Max?”

He nodded, then turned and left the room before she could ask him anything else, and before she had a chance to smell the whiskey on his breath. Miranda always could see straight to his core. Neither his parents nor his own brother knew him as well as she did, and it didn’t surprise him that she noticed something was different, while everyone else glanced right past him as usual.

Years ago, when Kyle had first brought Miranda home from college to meet the family, Max had also fallen in love with her, in the way that a teenage boy falls in love. He had been a sophomore in high school then, and had fallen in love with the *idea* of her, a beautiful, intelligent, sensitive woman. He had never known a girl like Miranda, and hadn’t even been sure girls like her existed until then. She seemed to get Max, and he

appreciated that about her. He had developed a crush.

In the years since, he had grown out of his boyhood infatuation with Miranda, and had grown to love her as a sister and a friend. It was often Miranda's council and advice that had gotten him through the tougher times in his life. When the rest of his family was too busy to worry about his 'childish' behavior, Miranda had been there for him.

Max headed for the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the bathtub and rested his elbows on his knees. This was going to be more difficult than he had first thought. He had looked forward to it, playing the possible reactions and scenarios over and over in his head, relishing the idea of what might happen and how it could go down. Now, though, with the big meal only minutes away, he didn't want to be here anymore. Seeing his parents and older brother, and feeling their cold indifference, was filling him with a dull dread. And Miranda's knowledge that something was going on made him even more nervous. He now began to worry what she would think of him. He didn't care what his family would think, he only wanted to see their reactions. Miranda was another story. He looked at his hands, and saw that they were shaking again. He pulled out the flask and took another long pull. Then he unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it into his mouth, chewing vigorously.

From the kitchen, he heard his mother call out, "Dinner's ready."

He focused on deep breathing for a few seconds, then spit his gum into the trash. "Here we go." He headed for the dining room.

As they found their seats and filled their plates, Miranda stole a few glances at Max, but he carefully avoided her gaze. If she suspected something was going on, he was giving her no clues. He met her eyes only once, flashed her a quick smile, and turned away. Through the corner of his eye, he saw her looking around the table to see if anyone else was concerned. They were not. Miranda made a plate of food for Jake, who was still studying his book of world records.

“Jake, time to eat, sweetie. Put the book away for now.”

“Okay, mom.” Jake refused to call his mother mommy, like most kids his age, and hadn’t addressed her as such for more than a year. He placed his bookmark and dropped the book onto the hardwood floor with a bang. Max jumped in his seat. Miranda noticed this and turned toward him again.

He flashed another smile. “Guess I’m a little jumpy.”

“I guess you are,” she replied, searching his eyes again for a hint as to what was going on. He picked up a bowl of stuffing and began spooning it onto his plate.

Jake tugged on Miranda’s shirt sleeve. “Mom, do I have to eat green beans?”

“Yes you do. They’ll help you grow up big and strong.”

“Will I be able to lift a Volkswagen?”

She turned and blinked at him. “What?”

“Will I be able to lift a Volkswagen? In that book, the world’s strongest man can lift a Volkswagen.” There were chuckles from around the table.

“That’s my grandson,” Stephen laughed from the head of the table. “Gonna be a star athlete, just like his daddy. Strong enough to lift a Volkswagen.”

“You know it,” Kyle said, ruffling his son’s hair with one hand, “he’s gonna play

left tackle just like his daddy and grandpa, wear the old scarlet and grey. Right, squirt?”

“Ow,” Jake answered, rubbing the top of his head. “That hurt, dad.”

“Come on now,” Kyle replied, his voice stern. “That didn’t hurt. You need to toughen up, boy. That’s the only way you’re going to make it playing football.”

“But I don’t want to play football, dad.”

“You will, son. You’ll learn. You’ll learn, and you’ll play.”

Max watched this exchange, replaying memories of similar scenes from his own childhood. A cowardly weakling in a football family, that’s how he had always been made to feel. Like he was a second-class citizen. Well, not any more. He felt his anxiety fade away. He was going to enjoy this after all. He was even beginning to feel like he could eat something. He turned his head and saw Miranda watching him, a quizzical expression on her face.

“Alright, let me say grace before we eat,” Stephen said, lumbering back up to his feet. “Let’s bow our heads.” He paused for a few seconds before continuing. “Dear Lord, thanks for all this. Thanks for the food, and the family, and everything else you’ve given us. Amen.”

*Wow, dad, that was beautiful,* Max thought to himself. *You write that all by yourself, or did T.S. Eliot lend a hand?* Before he could stop himself, a snorting chuckle snuck out. Max clamped his mouth shut, but it was too late. He looked up to see his father’s gaze upon him, and coughed into his napkin.

“Sorry,” he managed, but couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. He didn’t care. He could feel the tingling warmth of the whiskey spreading through his body, like a comforting fire in the hearth of his abdomen.

His own family didn't like him. They never had, but he knew that their disdain was stronger at this point in his life more than ever. Max, their *other* son... The one who didn't play football and didn't get a scholarship. Max, who was nothing like his father or brother, who was one whole year out of college and still didn't know what the hell he wanted to do with his life. Max, who was still working at some second-hand bookstore while his brother was close to making partner at his law firm and his father was a successful accountant. What the neighbors and the old folks at church must think!

Max ate, relishing each bite as he slowly began to realize that after all these years, he just didn't care anymore. Something *had* happened to him, something *was* very different, and soon, they would all know about it. And it would change his life, and maybe their lives, forever.

Max finished the last of his turkey, tossed back his second glass of wine, and stood up from the table.

"I, um... I have something I need to tell everyone."

Miranda was the first to look at him. The rest of the family was slower to react. Jake munched on his dinner roll as he watched his uncle Max to see what would happen next.

"Something has happened that I need to tell you all about, but I wanted to wait until everything was taken care of. It's all done now, so I've decided that this is the right time." He paused to let the magnitude of his pending announcement sink in.

His father continued to chew slowly, gesturing with the fork in his hand. "Well,

what is it?”

Max took a deep breath before continuing. “I won the lottery.”

For a moment, everything in the room stopped. Max heard the grandfather clock in the living room tick off three thunderous seconds.

Jake was the first to react. “How much did you win, uncle Max?”

“Well,” Max chose his words carefully, not wanting to let the whiskey and wine affect his plans. “Quite a bit, actually.”

“What do you mean, you won the lottery? Like a scratch off ticket or something?” Stephen still seemed more irritated than anything else at this intrusion into his family’s meal.

“No, dad, like the *lottery* lottery.”

“How much is quite a bit, uncle Max, like a million dollars?” Jake asked. Everyone looked at Max.

“Sort of like that, yeah.”

“What are you talking about?” Kyle asked, as he served himself more stuffing. “You don’t even play the lottery. You always talk about how only stupid people play the lottery. You used to call it a tax on the poor.” Kyle looked up at his little brother with a sarcastic smile. “You making stuff up for attention again, like that time your teacher was out to get you in high school? Is this another ‘cry for help’ thing?”

“I thought you might believe that, Kyle, but that’s fine. I would be skeptical too.” Max reached into his back pocket, pulling out two heavy envelopes. He handed one to his father and one to his brother. “These are for you.”

“What’s this?” Kyle asked, opening the envelope and pulling out a thick stack of

paperwork.

“These are trust funds I’ve set up for each of you. I’m leaving town, but I wanted to give you some money before I left.”

Stephen opened the packet and began to look over the cover letter. “This is from Jacobs and Smith, a law firm in New York.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them, they’re big time,” Kyle added through a mouthful of food, as he thumbed through his own envelope.

“Max,” his mother asked, “What is this all about? How much did you win?”

“Enough to set up trust funds for both of your families and leave town.”

“Well, what are these trust fund things all about?” she continued, gesturing at the paperwork.

“These trust funds will pay out five thousand dollars a month to both of you, after taxes, to spend on whatever you want or need.”

Charlotte’s hand went to her chest, and she looked as pale as her freshly starched tablecloth. “What? For how long, Max?”

“Well... forever.”

Kyle was still not convinced. “This is a joke. This isn’t real. People don’t just win the lottery, mom. And even if they do, it’s not enough to set up some kind of a ridiculous trust fund like this. That would take millions and millions...”

“Wait a minute,” his father said, looking up from the paperwork. “What lottery are you talking about? The Power Pick?”

Max nodded.

“And when did you supposedly win?”

“A few weeks ago.”

His father laughed. “Yeah, right, you won a few weeks ago. And you didn’t tell us until now. What kind of crap are you trying to pull here, Max?” His tone had changed, and now he was beginning to sound more angry than annoyed.

“I’m not trying to pull anything, dad. I won the lottery three weeks ago, and I’ve been working with attorneys and financial planners since then, getting things in order. That’s why I haven’t really been around much for the past month.” He realized they hadn’t really noticed his absence. *That figures*, he thought.

“Max,” his father said, fighting to control his temper, “Three weeks ago, the jackpot was up so high, everyone was driving here from Indiana and Pennsylvania to buy tickets. It was in the news. Is that what you’re talking about?”

Max nodded.

“So what you’re saying is that you won...”

Jake practically jumped up from his seat. “I know! I remember from the news!” he exclaimed. “Two hundred and twenty-eight million dollars! Is that how much you won, uncle Max?”

The room became still and silent again, reminding Max of the eye of a hurricane. He smiled and exhaled. “Yes, Jake. That’s how much I won.”

## Chapter Two

Ten minutes later, Max was outside on the sidewalk, facing the street, his coat collar up to shield him from the wind. Inside, all was chaos, as his mother, father, and brother debated loudly about the validity of the paperwork in the envelopes. He knew they still didn't believe him, but they would believe him well enough when the checks started coming in. He heard the front door open and close behind him. He didn't even have to turn around.

"You know, Miranda," he said, "when you first came here with my brother, back when I was in high school, I fell in love with you." He turned to face her.

"I know. I knew it back then, but I figured I would just let you deal with it in your own way. And you did." She was smiling, but she also looked sad. A chill wind swept dried leaves across the yard, and she crossed her arms against the cold. "Will we ever see you again, Max?"

"I don't really know," he answered, looking first one way down the street, then the other. "I haven't thought that far ahead yet."

"What about that scene in the dining room?" she asked, gesturing back toward the house, "did that go the way you hoped it would?"

Max smiled and shook his head. "Not exactly the way I had it planned out, but close enough."

"You know," she said, "I've heard the odds of winning the lottery are the same as the odds of getting struck by lightning."

"Three times," he added, still looking down the street.

“What’s that?”

“The odds of winning the lottery are the same as the odds of getting struck by lightning three times,”

“Oh.”

He took a step toward her, and looked into her eyes. “You know why I did it, right?”

“Why you did what?”

“Why I gave you each five thousand dollars a month?”

She thought about it. “I guess I do, because you wanted to give your family something, even though you’ve always thought they didn’t really love you, right?”

He winced at her cut-to-the-bone assessment of his feelings. When she said it that way, he felt a bit petty. “I guess that’s part of it. What I mean is, do you realize why I *only* gave them each five thousand a month?”

She shook her head. “I hadn’t really thought about it like that. Only five thousand a month? It’s a lot of money for us, and it’s very generous...”

“Well, that’s you, Miranda. That’s not them.” He pointed up at the house. “Sooner or later, probably sooner, they’ll start to wonder why that’s all they’re getting, if I won so much damn money.”

She shook her head. “I would never think like that, Max.”

“I know you wouldn’t, but I still want you to know why.” He was raising his voice at her now, and he didn’t know why. “It’s because too much money can change people, Miranda. It’s already changing me. I can feel it. It’s like... nothing is normal anymore. Nothing is the way it was. They can be angry at me if they want to, for not

giving them more, but I never want them to blame me for changing them into different people. The money I'm giving them, it's enough to make their lives better, if they want it to, but hopefully not enough to change who they are." He searched her eyes for approval. "Do you understand what I mean?"

"I think I do. And I want you to know, Max, that I appreciate the money, and I appreciate what you're doing with the trust funds. You're right. I think more money than that would change people. It would probably change me too. Thank you for that."

He still felt defensive and unsure of himself. "Sure, okay." He turned and headed for his car.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped once more. "I don't know, to tell you the truth."

"Well, wherever you go, be careful. And know that whether you believe it or not, you have family here in Ohio who love you and care about you. You always will."

"Thanks, Miranda. You take care of them, okay?"

"I'll try."

"And take care of Jake, he's a good kid."

"I will. And Max?" He opened the car door and looked back at her once more.

"I like who you are. You try like hell not to let that money change you."

He got in and drove away.

## Chapter Three

Max pulled up to the curb in front of the house, checked the address to make sure he was in the right place, and shut off the rental car. He climbed out, pulled a battered leather duffle bag from the back seat, and headed for the door. The air was warm for June in Ohio, but it was cooler and more humid than he was used to. It had been almost twelve years since he'd been in Glenbrook, and the town felt alien, like a long ago memory that might have been a dream, it was so faint. His brother's house was a large two story Victorian, impeccably maintained. Max thought the house was so picture-perfect, it was almost glossy. The landscaping was gorgeous and tasteful, and the lawn looked as though it had been just been mowed. It probably always looked like that. Large buckeye trees in the front yard and an OSU sticker on the Lexus SUV in the driveway. He really was back in Ohio. He rang the doorbell.

The front door opened, and Max and Kyle stood face to face for the first time since that Thanksgiving dinner more than a decade ago. For a moment, they simply studied each other, as though unsure about what to do next. It was Kyle who put his hand out first, and Max shook it.

“Good to see you again, Max. It's been a long time.”

“Yeah, I guess it has.”

“You look good,” Kyle said with a smile.

“Thanks.” Max knew his brother was lying. Max was thin and gaunt, and looked like a man fighting cancer, and he knew it. Kyle could not hide the shock Max saw beneath his pleasant expression. He smiled back, wishing he had a drink. “You look like

you've stayed in pretty good shape."

"I try to work out a few times a week, when I can." Kyle patted his gut, which was only slightly larger than it had been twelve years ago. "I should get more exercise and cut out the fast food, but you know how it is." He chuckled. "Come in." Kyle stepped aside to let Max pass, and gestured toward the living room couch. "Just put that anywhere and have a seat. You want a beer or something?"

"That sounds great." Max dropped the bag and looked around. If the outside of the house was a photograph, the inside was an issue of Better Homes and Gardens.

"Wow, nice place."

"Thanks. I mean... I guess I mean... Well, thanks for the house, you know? We might not have been able to..."

Max waved off the comment. "No, don't do that. I just mean... I'm just glad you guys are doing okay. I like your house, that's all." He managed a weak smile.

"Okay, I... Okay." As Kyle headed to the kitchen, he patted Max on the shoulder. "Let me go get those beers." Max looked around the room, studying the pictures on the mantle of the brick fireplace. His gaze fell to one particular frame, an old family portrait taken when Max was in junior high, and Kyle was in high school. It was the two brothers and their parents, and all four of them looked happy and content. The picture was from a time before they had all started drifting apart, before Max had begun to feel like an outcast. He studied the distant faces in the picture. That part of his life seemed like a movie he had seen many years ago, but had forgotten parts of the plot.

"Hello, Max." From the hallway opposite the kitchen, Miranda entered the room. Max turned toward her and stopped. He was startled at how beautiful she was. She had

always been a lovely girl when they were younger, but now, as a woman, she carried herself with an easy grace and elegance that most women strive for but never realize.

“Miranda, wow. You look... great.”

She laughed and gave him a hug. “It’s so good to see you. It’s been way too long, Max.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

She looked into his eyes and seemed suddenly different, more distant, as though she had caught a glimpse of something foul behind his sunken gaze. She took a step backward and crossed her arms without realizing she had done so, but Max noticed.

“Well, it’s good to see you again, even if it is under these circumstances,” she said, walking across the room.

“Good to see you too,” Max replied, turning away from her to look back at the pictures on the fireplace mantle. He could sense her unease behind him, and the awkwardness between them bothered him. Something was wrong with him, and he knew she could feel it.

Kyle came back with three bottles of Heineken. He passed them around, and the three of them sat down. Kyle looked Max over again, shaking his head.

“You look so different from the last time we saw you,” Kyle said. “It’s been a long time, I know, but I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Well, you know, a lot has happened since I saw you guys last.” Max downed half of his beer with one pull, and noticed as he did that his hand was shaking.

“I’ll bet it has,” Kyle said, looking at Miranda.

Max avoided the unasked questions. “You guys sure look great.”

“Well, the years have been pretty good to us, I guess. And to your mom and dad. The family’s all been pretty healthy, and happy, and we’ve had nothing to complain about, until... you know, this.”

“Yeah,” Max said, sighing at this reminder of why he was back in Glenbrook. “Where is dad?”

“He’s at home resting,” Kyle answered. “He hasn’t slept much in the last few days.”

“How’s he holding up?”

“Pretty good, I guess. Considering.” Kyle rubbed his eyes. He hadn’t slept much either, Max guessed. “We were at the funeral home this morning with him, um... making the arrangements.”

Miranda’s eyes filled with tears. “She was a sweet woman, your mother, and they were always together. Always. He seems lost without her. Not at all like himself.”

“When did you last talk to mom?” Kyle asked.

“About six months ago, I guess,” Max said. “It was just the usual. She asked how I was, I asked how she was, and she told me how dad was.” Max hadn’t spoken to his father in more than five years, which had been okay with both of them. He had never been close to his father, and when their rift had finally grown into a chasm, he had not missed the old man’s company one bit. He replayed that final conversation with his mother. “You know, I don’t even know if I told her that I loved her the last time we talked.”

“It’s okay. She knew,” Miranda reassured him. “Whether you said it or not, she knew.”

“Yeah,” Max said, feeling a pang of regret nonetheless. “Anyway, I appreciate you guys getting in touch, and letting me stay with you.”

“No problem. We’re just glad you checked your email,” Kyle said. “We didn’t know how else to get a hold of you. And we wouldn’t let you stay at a hotel, of course. Our house is your house. I mean...” Max finished his beer and placed the empty bottle on the coffee table. “Well, you know what I mean. You’re more than welcome here.”

“I appreciate it. I’m going to get a few more things from the car.”

“Sure,” Kyle said, standing up, “I’ll call dad and let him know you’re here. If you want to head upstairs for anything, your room is the second door on the left.”

“Thanks.” Max went outside. The sun was shining, but a few fat, lazy clouds hovered in the distance. Might mean storms later, Max thought as he opened the car door. As he pulled out a briefcase and a garment bag, a beat up Honda Civic pulled into the driveway. Max looked over to see a tall, skinny young man step out of the car and walk in his direction. He blinked his eyes and looked again. The boy reminded Max of himself, from his lanky shape down to the wry, sarcastic half-smile he had perfected in his own youth.

“Hello uncle Max.”

Realization slapped him in the face. “Oh my god. Jake?”

“Mom called and said you were coming into town.” Jake held out his hand.

“Yeah, well, I came as soon as I could.” He shook his nephew’s hand, having to look up a little to meet his gaze. “Wow, Jake. You’re... a little bit bigger than I remember.”

“Well, you know, twelve years and all. Bummer about grandma, huh? Sorry you

couldn't be here, you know, before she went."

"Yeah." Max had handled seeing Kyle and Miranda without much difficulty, but now it was really hitting him. Twelve years had past. Jake had been a precocious little boy when Max had made his little scene at Thanksgiving dinner all those years ago.

Now, here he was a grown man.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. Just graduated from high school."

"Wow. That's hard to believe. You look good."

"Thanks, I guess." The boy scrunched up his eyebrows. "You look like shit."

"I... I've ... What?"

"I said you look like shit. You look sick or something," Jake said, looking him over. "But you look strong. You walk a lot?"

"Um, yeah. How did you..."

"I can tell." Max saw something strange behind the boy's eyes. Was it contempt? Hard to tell. "Hey, I have to get inside and take a shower. I just got off work, and I'm hanging out with some friends later. Don't want to smell like fries." He pointed at his nametag.

"You work at Billy Burger? I used to love that place." For the first time in a long while, a fond memory from Max's youth bubbled to the surface. "Do they still make those cherry lemon-limes?"

"Of course. One of our specialties. I'm working over there until this fall. You should come by while you're in town, maybe I'll treat you to one."

"That sounds pretty good."

Jake laughed and shook his head as he walked up to the house. “The rest of the grill jocks would get a kick out of that. Me buying you a cherry lemon-lime.”

Max followed Jake with his garment bag and briefcase in his hands. “What do you mean, they’d get a kick out of it?”

Jake stopped. He turned back to Max and fixed him with an exasperated smile. “Come on. You know what I mean.”

Max thought it over, then insisted again, “No, I don’t.”

“Uncle Max,” Jake explained, “practically everyone in Ohio knows your name. In this county, you’re like an urban legend or something. And here in Glenbrook, they remember you like some kind of freaking god. You’re the dude that won the lottery. Come on, you knew that.”

Max was dumbstruck. It had been years since he had even considered what people thought of him here, if they thought of him at all. “Really?”

Jake rolled his eyes. “And of course, everyone knows we’re related to you, even though we don’t talk much about you.”

“Well, thanks for that, I guess.”

“Whatever. You want me to carry something?” Max could still sense hostility, but he couldn’t imagine why that would be.

“No, I’m good.”

“I’ll get the door then.”

Max’s head was spinning. He suddenly needed another beer, or two, or something stronger. He closed his eyes and began to whisper to himself. *Remember what peace there may be in silence...* He recited his meditation for a few seconds, took a

deep breath, and opened his eyes. The spinning stopped. He walked toward the house.

Jake continued his dialogue as he held the storm door open. “You should hear some of the stories they tell about you, though. Some pretty crazy shit.”

“Like what?” Max asked, afraid of the answer.

“Well, there was the story about you working for the CIA, then there was the one about you being in the mob, and then, there was something about you buying your own island somewhere and building a house on it so you could be by yourself with your madness and your mountains of gold.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, I might have exaggerated the last part, but that’s the kind of crap they come up with. The other story going around is that you lost everything, and you’re in debt up to your eyeballs.” Max winced at this, and looked up at Jake. The boy was studying his reaction. *Reading me*, Max thought. *Sizing me up*.

“That’s enough, Jake.” Kyle walked over and took the garment bag from Max. “Let’s not overload your uncle with crazy stories right now, okay? He’s dealing with a lot of other stuff, what with grandma’s passing and everything.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t want to overload him.” Jake’s words were heavy with sarcasm, and they drew a harsh look from Kyle. The boy rolled his eyes. “Sorry, uncle Max.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Kyle started up the stairs. “I’ll show you your room, and where the bathroom is. Miranda put fresh linens on the bed already.” Max followed him up.

Jake went into the kitchen, where Miranda was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee, staring out the window at nothing in particular.

“Hi, mom.”

“Hey, kiddo. How was work?”

“Same as always. It was work.” He took a bottled water out of the fridge, dropped into a seat across from her, and leaned back, balancing his chair on its back legs. “So,” he said, twisting open the bottle. “He’s really here.”

“Well, it’s like your dad always said, it would probably take something big to get him back to Glenbrook. I guess grandma’s death was that something.”

“Yeah.” Jake took a drink of water. “Did he even know about the car accident?”

“No. She was fine right after it happened. Then, when she took a turn for the worse, we tried to get in touch with him, but it was too late. We don’t even know how often he checks his email. The infection spread, and then...”

“Yeah, then she was gone. I was here, remember?” Jake stood up. “I’m going to take a shower, then I’m going over to Dave’s house.”

“You okay, Jake?”

“Course I’m okay,” he answered, anger flashing in his eyes. “Why wouldn’t I be okay? Gramma’s dead, and Max is back in town. So of course, it’s all about him now.”

“That’s not fair, Jake,” Miranda said, her voice more stern, “and you know it. He’s very private, and I’m sure the last thing he wants is attention. But he had to come. Don’t forget that your grandmother was his mother.”

Jake fixed her with a gaze that was filled with things he wanted to say, then

lowered his eyes. “Whatever.”

“Look, Jake,” she continued, her voice softer. “I know you’re not exactly a fan of Max, but you don’t even know him. Maybe you should give him a chance before you decide you hate him.”

“We’ll see.”

She sighed. “I guess that’s the best I’m going to get. Did you talk to your boss about the funeral?”

“Yeah, it’s covered. Sarah’s taking my shift.” He got up and started toward the stairs. “I’m gonna take a shower and go over to Danny’s to hang out, to get my mind off all this crap.”

“Okay.” Her eyes returned to the window.

He paused, then turned back toward her.

She looked up. “What?”

“Is it weird, having him back here?”

She sighed again. “Yeah, a little. It’s been a long time, and he’s changed. I could tell as soon as I saw him that he was different.”

“Changed good, or changed bad?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell yet. I don’t think he looks very healthy, though.”

“No. Do you think maybe he’s lost all of his money, like they say?”

“Who knows? We don’t even know where he lives or what he’s been doing for the last decade or so.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t that be great, though?.”

“I don’t really know if it would, Jake. It’s not my business. And don’t you ask

him about his money.”

“I won’t.” He paused. “I think he lost everything, though. I think he lost it, and he was so addicted to it, that now he’s sick. Physically and emotionally. The loss of his money is killing him, that’s what I think. He looks like shit.”

“Jake, come on. Watch your mouth.”

“Sorry. He does, though.”

“Yeah, he does. You know what? You should try to spend a little time with him, while he’s here. Maybe it would help.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, he’s a lot like you, I think. Or at least he used to be...” She drifted back for a moment, back to the memory of the young man Max had been years ago. “Max was always different from the other kids his age. I used to say he was too deep a thinker for his own good. I had never known anyone like him. Not until you came along.”

Jake groaned. “Please don’t compare me to him. You know how much I hate that.”

“Well, I mean it. You two even kind of look alike. Spend some time with him if you have a chance, that’s all I’m saying. It could be good for him. And maybe even for you.”

“Alright, mom, I said we’ll see.” He headed out of the room. “I’m getting in the shower.”

“Okay, just be home by eleven.” He was already halfway up the stairs.

## Chapter Four

The funeral for Charlotte Lockwood was a simple, conservative service, an appropriate reflection of the woman's existence. Max chose not to approach his father until just before the service, and even then, it was a simple handshake, as though Max were just another acquaintance offering condolences. They sat on opposite sides of the front pew, with Jake's brother and his family between them, and exchanged no words.

Throughout the chapel, as the ceremony unfolded, and later at the cemetery, Max could hear the faint whispers of family and friends as they shared rumors about where he'd been and what he'd been doing all these years. The funeral was for Charlotte, but it was Max who was the unintended center of attention. Before leaving the church, he ducked into the bathroom and emptied his flask.

When the service was over, he accepted a few handshakes, a few "so sorries" from people he either didn't know or couldn't remember, then he excused himself and headed for his car to go back to Kyle and Miranda's house. He whispered his meditation again as he drove. He repeated the words he had come to memorize, the words that had helped him get through, over and over, like a mantra against the difficulties of coming back to Glenbrook.

Kyle had given him a key, and he used it to let himself in. The rest of the family would be heading back to the church for a carry-in lunch, but Max just couldn't handle that. He grabbed a bottle of scotch and a glass from the bar, and collapsed onto Kyle's large leather easy chair in the den. He loosened his tie, unbuttoned the top of his white dress shirt, and poured himself a large drink. He finished it quickly, and poured another.

“Christ, what a day,” he said to no one, and took a sip from his glass. Outside, a car pulled into the driveway. “Shit,” he whispered between clenched teeth, jumping up to replace the bottle in the bar. He drained his second glass on his way to the kitchen, and was rinsing it out at the sink when he heard the front door open and close.

Jake came into the kitchen, dropped his keys on the table, and sat down, pushing back until he was balancing his chair on two legs. He looked at Max, the glass, and the loosened tie. “Hi, Uncle Max.”

“Hey Jake. I, um, thought everyone was going to the church.”

“Yeah, but I just couldn’t handle it, you know? Had to get out of there.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Thanks to the scotch, he was starting to feel more relaxed already, though he had to focus to speak clearly.

“Hey, you want to head over to Billy Burger? I could really go for some food.”

“I don’t know, Jake, I kind of think I need to be alone.” Max couldn’t face the prospect of dealing with another horde of strangers and their whispering. Even with the booze, that was just too daunting.

Jake shrugged. “I’m going with or without you. Could be your last chance ever for one of those cherry lemon-limes.”

Max mulled it over. He was hungry, because he hadn’t been able to eat much at breakfast. And two glasses of scotch on an empty stomach didn’t help. “Actually, that kind of sounds good.”

“Great. I’ll drive. Let’s go.” Jake picked up his keys and headed for the door. Max followed, and despite the invitation, he could feel the disdain underneath, like this was something he was doing only as a favor to Max.

They rode to the restaurant in silence, listening to a band called Coldplay from the CD player in Jake's Civic. Max liked the music. It was brooding and melancholy, an appropriate soundtrack for the events of the day so far. Jake drew no attention to their visit to Billy Burger, choosing a high-backed booth in the corner. Max had worried about the two of them seeming out of place in their dark suits, but the restaurant was apparently a common choice for local businessmen to have lunch these days, because there were several other suits at surrounding tables. Despite this, he still felt uneasy. He disliked public places, and today had already been an overload. He focused on breathing deeply.

Jake brought over a tray full of burgers, fries, onion rings, and cherry lemon-limes. Max thought that no meal in his entire life had ever looked so good. He took several bites of his burger, ate several fries and onion rings, and drained half of his Styrofoam cup before he realized he had started eating.

"Wow, I forgot how good this place is," Max said between bites.

"Yeah, it's pretty good, I guess. I eat here all the time when I work, so I'm kind of used to it."

Max kept talking to take his mind off of his anxiety.

"It's funny how the taste of a hamburger, some fries, and a damn cherry lemon-lime can bring back such memories," he said. Jake nodded in agreement and took another big bite of his own burger as Max continued. "This brings me back. Even more than the funeral did today."

"Really?" Jake asked through a mouthful of food.

"Yeah, really. At the funeral, I was just kind of... there, you know? There, but not really there. It felt a little bit odd. Unreal. Like an out-of-body experience. This,

though,” He dragged a French fry through ketchup and popped it into his mouth. “This feels completely real. More real than anything since I’ve been back.”

“But I guess that makes sense, if you think about it,” Jake said.

“Does it?” Max said. “How so?”

“Well, a lot of this town has changed in the last twelve years, plus you had never been to our house until yesterday, and the funeral was, well, a funeral. That’s an experience that’s unlike reality because of the magnitude of the situation. It’s the death of another person, and it’s all ceremony and relational politics. It’s not normality. That’s why it makes sense.” Jake gestured at the table with the onion ring in his hand. “This place, this food, is the most familiar thing you’ve experienced since you’ve been back.”

Max was impressed by Jake’s immediate, succinct, and accurate assessment. “You know what, you’re exactly right.” He looked around the restaurant. “Nothing has felt like I was home until now. But why? Why not even seeing your mom and dad again?”

“Simple,” Jake answered without looking up. “Your experiences and their experiences have not been shared experiences for more than a decade. Those experiences when you were all younger were what made you so familiar to each other. Since then, they’ve been living their lives, and you’ve been off doing... whatever the hell it is you’ve been doing. That familiarity is gone now, so you feel like a stranger when you’re around them. They feel the same way, I think. It’s natural. Especially with the lottery. And the trust fund just adds another degree of weirdness to the situation, because money always causes problems. Complicates things needlessly.”

Max was amazed by the simple way Jake was able to coolly and logically size up

the situation. “What about you then? Why aren’t you acting like that?”

Jake shrugged as he chewed his food. “Don’t know. Guess I’m just too young and dumb to be affected by all that shit. Plus, I don’t really care about money.”

Max snickered. “Yeah, right. You don’t care about money.”

“No, I don’t. I’m just not... obsessed with it, like a lot of people are.”

“But that’s easy for you to say. Your family has always had money, right?”

“That’s irrelevant.” Jake was raising his voice now, growing defensive. Again, Max saw himself in the boy. “My parents have money. I don’t have their money. I don’t want their money. That’s why I have my own job.”

Max waved his hand dismissively and continued to eat.

“But that’s doesn’t even matter,” Jake continued. “I’m just not into buying stuff or having stuff. I just want what I need. Not a life cluttered with shit. That’s not what it’s all about.” Jake was focused on his uncle now, and Max could feel the passion in his words. “Life’s about getting out and living, you know? Not accumulating. I would rather get out and live and have memories of stuff I’ve done than just waste my life working myself to death so I can buy a bunch of crap I don’t need.”

Max shook his head. “Okay, I get it. You don’t care about money. So that’s why you don’t feel weird around me?”

“Yep. When you won the lottery, the money you won became a big part of who you are, and it affects the way people here think of you, including my mom and dad. I don’t really care about all that.” He glared at Max. “To me, you’re just another guy. You obviously have some issues, but...” His voice trailed off and he smiled as Max shifted in his seat.

“Well, thanks for that insight, Jake.” Max thought of the book of world records Jake had been so fascinated with when he was small. Still the same kid. Perceptive, matter-of-fact, and straight-forward about things. But now, he had developed an edge, an abrasive hardness to him, that Max didn’t get. Then again, it had been awhile since he had been a teenager. He changed the subject. “So where are you going to college?”

“Don’t know if I’m going yet.”

“You don’t know? Shouldn’t you know by now?”

Jake sighed, as though tired of having this discussion again. “Why should I know by now? Shouldn’t it be up to me, and not up to what other people think I should be doing, and when I should be doing it?” He ran through his lines with the polish of a Broadway actor on the last night of a six month run. “Can’t I make a decision like what the hell I’m going to do with my life without worrying about what people will think?”

Max put his hands up in surrender. “Hey, chill out. That’s not what I meant. Do what you want. I was just making conversation.”

Jake fixed him with a wary eye, then shrugged it off. “Anyway, as I was saying, I’m not sure if I’m going yet. I got accepted at Ohio State, but we’ll see. I haven’t decided for sure if I want to go.”

Max snickered. “Your dad should be happy about that. Is there anything in particular you think you might want to do?”

“Yeah, I like to write.”

“Oh yeah? What do you like to write?”

“All kinds of stuff. Fiction, non-fiction, essays, you name it. But I prefer journalism. I wrote for the yearbook and the school paper all through high school. I also

wrote an award-winning nonfiction short story last year.”

“Really?” Max was full now, and he offered the rest of his French fries to Jake, who took them without hesitation. The way the boy ate reminded Max again of a younger version of himself. *You eat like a horse, but you’re built like a broomstick*, his mother used to tell him. “What kind of award did you win?”

“What, you mean like was it a real award? Or was it a made up award to get you to buy some book or something?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Jeez, I was just asking.” Max wondered if the boy always floated in and out of defensiveness and anger, or if it was due to the company.

“It won an editor’s choice award from the Journal of American Essays, a national literary journal that published it in their February issue.”

“Very nice. What was your award-winning short story about?”

Jake smiled at him, and the boy’s expression reminded Max of a spider that had just watched a fly land on its web. “It was about this guy named Derek Fischer. Ever heard of him?”

Max shook his head.

“Derek Fischer was a successful stockbroker in New York City back in the eighties, with a beautiful girlfriend, penthouse apartment, a lot of cool stuff. A real accumulator. Great for the economy. But after some bad investments, he lost everything. Lost his job, lost his girl, lost his apartment, lost his stuff. It killed him. Literally. He was so depressed about it that he wound up killing himself. He decided that life just wasn’t worth living anymore.”

“He... killed himself?”

“Yep. Couldn’t take not having his money and his stuff. Put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.” Jake leveled a gaze on him.

Max met the boy’s eyes. He thought he detected a hint of smugness. “Well, it can be hard on someone, losing everything.”

“I guess,” Jake replied, looking suddenly bored with the conversation again. “But I think that some people need to lose everything to figure out what’s really important, whether it’s family, friends, love... whatever.” Jake’s expression was easy to read this time. Smug. Superior.

“And this is what your story was about?”

“Yep. Wanna read it?”

“Uh, sure.”

“I have a copy at home, I’ll give it to you when we get back.”

They got up together, Jake threw away their garbage, and stopped at the counter to say goodbye to his co-workers. They left, and Max felt a little sad to think that this might be the last time he would eat at Billy Burger. He found his sadness odd, though, considering he hadn’t even thought of the place in many years. They got into the car and drove back to the house.

## Chapter Five

That night, Miranda made a wonderful dinner of lasagna and Caesar salad, and the four of them ate together, talked, and enjoyed each other's company. The uneasiness was still there, but it was more faint than before, and the wine helped. Max mostly listened as the three of them talked about the sorts of things that families talk about over dinner, things like school, work, friends, and weather. They tried not to talk much about the funeral, which seemed acceptable to all of them.

Though Max didn't talk much, he enjoyed the meal and the conversation. They didn't ask him any questions about his life, and he didn't offer any answers.

When the meal was over, they went into the den to relax. Jake excused himself after a few minutes and went up to his room to change. It was Friday night, and he was going out with friends. When he came back down the stairs, he handed Max the February issue of the *Journal of American Essays*.

"Here you go. My story's on page forty-two."

"Oh, right. Thanks. I'm looking forward to reading it."

"The things you own end up owning you."

Max frowned. "What?"

"That's the title of the essay." Jake smiled at him again, with the same smug look he had given Max at the restaurant. "Hope you enjoy it." He turned and waved to his parents. "I'm out, see you guys later."

"Be careful," Miranda shouted as Jake went out the door. "And be home by

midnight.”

“I will.” The door closed, and they listened as Jake started up his Civic and drove down the street.

Miranda offered Max more wine, and he accepted.

“That Jake, he’s something else,” Max said as she poured. Miranda and Kyle both smiled.

“You could say that,” Kyle answered. “You could definitely say that.”

“Does he play any sports?” Max tried to make the question a casual one, though the topic had caused him a considerable amount of angst in his own youth.

“No,” Kyle said, “he’s never been very interested in sports, though God knows I tried.” Max was surprised to not hear gruff disapproval in his brother’s voice. Instead, he heard only good-natured exasperation. “He watches a lot of football with me, and he has a real grasp of the game, but I think he just watches for my sake.”

Miranda laughed. “That sounds right.”

Kyle smiled. Max looked down at the magazine on the coffee table.

“And that doesn’t bother you, Kyle? That he doesn’t play sports?”

“Not really.” Kyle looked at his wife as he continued. “I think it used to bother me, but Jake is…” Kyle seemed to struggle with what he was trying to say. Miranda simply watched him, waiting for the words to come. “He’s just not your average kid. He never has been.” Miranda smiled her approval.

“He can be frustrating sometimes, but that’s because he’s always been so passionate about the things he believes in,” Miranda continued.

“I’ve noticed that,” Max said. “he seems like a real bright kid.”

“Yes he is,” Kyle said with obvious pride, “he understands things that a lot of people his age don’t, and he’s sharp as a razor. We’re really hoping he decides to go ahead and go to college. He would do great there. He’d be around a lot more people who are like him. Who would get him.”

“Yeah, but we try not to push it,” Miranda responded. “You know teenagers. If we push him, that might be enough to make him decide not to go.” She gestured at the magazine. “He’s a very talented writer. Just wait until you read this. It’s a great piece. One of his best.”

A wave of jealousy swept over Max so suddenly that he felt like he had been punched in the midsection. Kyle and Miranda loved Jake so much that Max could hear it in their words and see it in their eyes. Kyle had dismissed his son’s lack of athleticism so simply, so effortlessly, that Max wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen it for himself. They loved and accepted Jake completely for who he was, which was something Max’s own parents had never done for him.

At the same time, he felt strangely jealous of Kyle for who he was. Kyle, his big, dumb, jock brother who was the apple of mommy and daddy’s eye, who was the source of so much anger and sadness, and so many feelings of inadequacy during his childhood. Now, he looked at Kyle and saw a generous man, a good husband, and a loving father. Finally, he understood what someone like Miranda had seen in Kyle all those years ago. She had fallen in love not with the immature boy Max had known, but with the man Kyle would become.

Also, he felt jealous of the love the two of them shared. Max was no longer infatuated with Miranda the way he had been as a teenager, but he did envy their

relationship with a sudden intensity that surprised him. Max's own love life had been a minefield that had left him with several emotional and psychological scars through the years, but Kyle and Miranda seemed happier and stronger than ever. He fought back the sudden jealousy and focused his thoughts on getting up to go to bed without causing a scene.

Max stood and picked up the magazine. "I'll read this when I have a chance. Right now, though, I think I'm going to go upstairs to bed. It's been a long day, and I'm pretty tired."

Kyle and Miranda also stood up.

"Oh, okay," Kyle said. He seemed surprised by this sudden end to their pleasant conversation. "I guess I'm a little tired myself. It has been a long day."

"Thanks for dinner, it was delicious," Max said to Miranda, as politely as he could muster. "I'll see you two in the morning."

"You're welcome," She answered. "See you tomorrow."

Max headed up the stairs, being careful not to seem like he was too anxious to get away from them.

That night, after lying in bed for awhile, trying to push away his confusing and frustrating feelings about Kyle, Miranda, and Jake, Max tried to sleep. After tossing and turning for a couple of hours, he heard Jake return home. He checked the clock on the nightstand. Ten minutes past his curfew. Max turned the light back on and stared at the ceiling.

He had been talking too much these last couple of days. He had said things... things he shouldn't have said. He replayed conversations in his head, searching for things he might have said that gave away more than he intended. He had been through things and done things he didn't want them to know, and he had always been careful to keep those things from them. But here, now, suddenly back in Glenbrook, he felt as though he had been careless. He had let his guard down, and he hoped he hadn't given away too much. He ran through every word he had said, but could find nothing. He had a nagging unease about something, though, a vague feeling that he had opened himself up far too wide.

His eyes and his mind wandered across the room, until eventually, they came to rest on the Journal of American Essays, which he had left on top of the dresser. He grabbed it and got back into bed. Flipping to Jake's essay, he began to read.

Thirty minutes later, he finished and put the magazine back on top of the dresser.

The hostility that he had felt radiating off the boy now made a lot more sense. Apparently, as evidenced by the essay and by their conversation at Billy Burger, Jake had a real issue with affluence, and particularly with materialism. The essay read like an indictment on the American Way. The lifestyle of accumulation, of gathering more and more at the expense of building anything of real meaning, had been Derek Fischer's downfall.

Beyond that, though, Max was surprised by the boy's powers of logic and reason. The essay was more than just a diatribe, it was an engaging story with a beginning, middle and end. It didn't throw out anything unfounded, but instead made a logical argument that presented both point and counterpoint in equal balance. Max thought that

a lot of prominent news reporters could benefit with Jake's knack for presenting the whole story, instead of only the part he agreed with.

After finishing with the magazine, Max was exhausted, and quickly fell asleep.

## Chapter Six

The next morning was Saturday. Max got up and pulled on a tee shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes. He was still feeling confused and disoriented about the events of the past few days, and he wanted to get out of the house and go for a walk. He knew he couldn't take the kind of walk he really wanted, which was a few days in the middle of nowhere, but he decided to pull on his shoes and head out anyway.

Max roamed for more than two hours, hiking up and down the streets of Glenbrook, letting his mind wander. He knew it was time to get out of this town, and he didn't know if he would ever be back. He planned how he would tell Kyle, Miranda and Jake goodbye. He practiced several different ways he might thank them for their hospitality. His feelings of jealousy from the night before were softened now, and he attributed their previous intensity to the wine. Now, he just wanted to get the hell out of here as fast as possible and get back to his normal life.

Before leaving, though, he wanted to tell Jake what he thought about his essay. He mulled this over as the road passed below him, his feet softly flopping like a metronome on the warm pavement.

A thought struck him, in that random way that sunlight sometimes bursts through the cloudy sky to brighten a room, giving everything a different appearance in the new light. The thought stayed with him, transforming itself into an interesting idea, and then becoming an internal argument. As he walked, he debated with himself, tossing the idea back and forth between absurdity and plausibility. In the end, he decided to go ahead with it despite some misgivings, and he headed back to the house to tell Jake. It would be

difficult, he knew, but he also knew it could also be exactly the answer he'd been searching for. How ironic, he thought, that he might find a way out of his tortured existence here, in Glenbrook, which he had always thought of as his least favorite place on earth.

Jake was sitting at the dining room table, eating cereal and drinking coffee when Max came in the house. He was also reading the newspaper, but looked up when he saw his uncle enter the room.

“Hey. You been out walking?”

“Yep.” A dark patch of sweat on his chest was growing steadily. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. He poured himself a glass of water and walked over to the table.

“I read your essay last night.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep.”

“What did you think?”

“I thought it was well written.”

Jake looked into his eyes, his eyes probing as they had been at the restaurant. He was looking for something else. Max guessed he was looking for more than just an analysis of the mechanics of the piece, he was looking to see if the searing nature of it had done anything to Max's psyche. “You thought it was well written?”

“Yeah, you did a good job.” He turned away, to keep the boy from picking up on his unease. “I can see why you won that award.” Max finished his water and put the glass in the sink. He sat down at the table next to Jake and took a deep breath. *Here goes*

*nothing*, he thought.

“You just got out of school for the summer, right?”

“Yeah. I graduated two weeks ago.”

“And when do you... leave for college, or whatever it is you decide to do?”

Jake’s eyebrows creased. “Well, I guess if I decide to go, I’ll leave in about ten weeks.”

“What are your plans for the summer, besides working at Billy Burger?”

“No plans, really. Thought I would just hang out with friends, kind of take it easy. Some of my buddies and I might take a road trip over to the east coast, hang out on the beach or something.” He looked at Max. “Why?”

Max pushed forward, ignoring the question, instead asking another one of his own. “If you decide to go, how are you paying for college?”

Jake hesitated, unsure of how to answer. “Well, I hadn’t really thought much about it. Why do you care about...”

“I have a proposition for you,” Max interrupted, “and I want you to think about it before you say yes or no. I haven’t talked to your parents about this yet, because I wanted to discuss it with you first. You’re an adult now, and I want to treat you like one.”

Jake had put down his spoon now, and was listening intently. Max thought of the small boy watching him at the Thanksgiving dinner all those years ago, focused on what his uncle was going to say next.

Max crossed his arms and leaned back against the sink. “I want you to come and stay with me for the summer, and I want you to write me a book.”

Whatever Jake had expected to hear, that wasn't it. "A book? What kind of book?"

"A biography, I guess. About me."

"About you?"

Max nodded his head. "I want you to write a book about me." He was still formulating this part of the idea, and hearing the words out loud made him unsure of himself. "A book about me, before and after the lottery. Mostly about my life these last twelve years."

"A book about you winning the lottery? And you want *me* to write it?" Jake sounded incredulous. And why wouldn't he, Max thought, after all, this was Max Lockwood, the almost mythical man from Jake's childhood, the reclusive lottery-winning uncle who had done God-knows-what all these years, and had been God-knows-where. And Jake was obviously a kid who thought that money was evil.

"Yes, I want you to write it. You have a unique perspective on the situation, since we're related, plus you're a good writer. It makes perfect sense, doesn't it?" Max was still trying to get a mental grip on the concept, but he continued.

"I'm planning to pay you for the work," he said to Jake, "and I'm planning to pay you very well."

"How well?"

Max chuckled. "You ask that pretty fast for a person who doesn't care about money, Jake."

"Well, I didn't mean it like that," Jake replied, "it's just that I was planning on working at Billy Burger so I could save up some cash and..."

Max interrupted him again. "I'll pay you enough to cover all of your college expenses for the next four years, plus room and board, and spending money. Everything you'll need. Whether you go or not."

Max balked at that. "That's ridiculous." He let loose a high-pitched, off-putting giggle. "Do you have any goddam idea how much that is?"

"No, I don't. But I'll trust you to tell me how much it is."

"Listen," Jake said, the cocky coolness returning to his voice. "If you think you're going to impress me or something by throwing around a bunch of money..."

"That is not at all what I'm trying to do, Jake." He was serious now. "I'm not screwing around here. I think I need... I mean I think it could help me if..." He paused, took a deep breath, and continued carefully. "What I'm trying to say is, I want you to come and stay with me for the summer, and write my story. It could be quite a bit of work, maybe, I'm not really sure yet, but I want to pay you for it. I'm not trying to impress anyone. I just need a job done, and I think you're in the position to do it. Does it sound like something you might want to do?"

Jake became silent as he considered the offer. Max watched him think it through, then the boy's eyes lit up. Something had clicked. He had made a decision.

"I want to do it. But..."

"But what?"

"But, I don't even know where you live."

"Oh, right." Max had dropped as much off the face of the earth as he had been able. For the first couple of years after he left Glenbrook, he had kept in touch regularly, mostly with Miranda and his mother. After a while, though, he had decided it wasn't

important that they know exactly where he was or what he was doing. Eventually, they stopped asking.

“Well, I... I live in New Mexico.”

“New Mexico? Like the desert?”

“Well, yeah.” His heart was pounding now. No going back. Even with this big idea, and with this offer on the table, Max felt like he had just fucked everything up. He knew that if this idea was going to work, though, he had to make changes. He would have to learn to open up to Jake, and tell him everything. He would have to be honest with the boy in ways that he was not even honest with himself. But, he would have to work on that later. He closed his eyes and whispered his meditation. He opened his eyes. His heart was still pounding, but it had come down a notch.

“Ever been out west, Jake?”

“I’ve never been west of Saint Louis.”

“It’s a lot different than what you’re used to,” Max said.

“New Mexico,” Jake said, turning the idea over in his mind. “What happens if I can’t finish in ten weeks?”

Max shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t really know. Hadn’t thought about it. I guess you can finish it later. That part doesn’t really matter.”

“What happens if I change my mind after a few weeks?”

“You won’t be a prisoner. If you want to leave, you can leave.”

Jake studied his coffee cup for a minute, then looked up at Max. “If I do this, it’s as much for my own purposes as yours, and the end result might not be exactly what you’re hoping for. You know what I mean?”

“Sure, I can understand that.”

Jake didn't look convinced, but he nodded. “Okay, then. As long as you know that, I guess we're good.”

Max walked across the kitchen. “I'm going to shower and get dressed, then I'm gonna start packing.”

“What? When are you leaving?”

Max answered over his shoulder and headed up the stairs before Jake could respond. “We're leaving today.”

Upstairs, Max took a long, hot shower. He was glad he had gone for a walk, because it had given him a reason for the sweat and adrenaline. As they talked, he had fought to keep his hands from shaking. As he showered, he began to immediately regret his decision.

“This was a mistake,” he said to himself, as the hot water pummeled his head. “A big mistake. I shouldn't have said anything. Hell, I told him he could come to my house for the summer... no, no. I can't do that. Miranda and Kyle won't want that. I'll just tell them it was a mistake, let's forget all about it.” Having made the decision to take back the offer, Max was able to relax a little. He began again to whisper the words of his meditation. “no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should...” He would get dressed, pack his bags, apologize, and leave town. Then, he would be able to get back to his own life, and forget all about Glenbrook again.

He had finished dressing and was starting to pack when someone knocked on his

bedroom door.

“Come in.”

It was Miranda. “Hey, Max. We’ve been talking to Jake downstairs about what you said.”

He ran a nervous hand through his wet hair. “Yeah, Miranda, about that. I’m sorry. I just thought that maybe…”

“I think maybe it’s a good idea.”

He didn’t know what to say for a moment. “What? You do?”

She nodded. “Yes, I do. Jake wants to do it, and if you’re sure it’s something you want, I support his decision. Kyle’s not sure, but he’ll come around. There’s just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The money.”

“Oh.” Max hadn’t considered the possibility that they might want more money.

“Well, we can talk about that, I guess.”

“Jake thinks it’s too much money.”

Max was taken aback. “He what?”

“He said it’s too much money. He wants to go, and he wants to write your book, but he said he only wants as much money as he would make with any other summer job. He wants to do it for his own reasons.”

“He thinks it’s too much money?” Max said the words slowly, deliberately. He was still confused. “But he’ll need the money if he goes to college! I’m offering him a well-paying writing job, and he would rather work and go to school?”

Miranda shrugged helplessly. “He doesn’t want that much money. That’s Jake. We’ve offered to help him through college, we can afford it, but if he goes, he wants to work his way through. He doesn’t want to be beholden to anyone. Not us, not you.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Max said insistently. “If we’re going to do this, I’m paying him what I want to pay him. Not what he thinks. I don’t care if he gives the goddam money to charity.” Max turned away and went back to packing.

He glanced up at Miranda in the mirror. She was smiling as she left the room. “Okay, I’ll tell him.”

Max came down a little while later, carrying his luggage. Miranda and Kyle were sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee. Kyle didn’t look happy.

“Morning,” Max said, not making eye contact.

“Busy morning, huh?” Kyle replied.

Max set his bags down on the kitchen floor. “I guess you could say that.”

“Look,” Kyle said, “I don’t exactly understand what’s going on here, but I trust Jake enough to let him make his own decisions. All I’m going to say is, you take care of my boy, you understand?”

Max met his brother’s gaze, and realized then that Kyle wasn’t angry at him, he was worried about his son. “Of course, Kyle. Nothing’s going to happen to him.”

“He’s never been away from us for more than a week,” Kyle continued. “He’s a smart kid, and I know you know that, but he’s still... young.”

“I promise you, he’ll be fine.”

“Where exactly are you going in New Mexico?” Miranda asked.

The idea of sharing this information caused an icy flower to blossom in Max’s gut. “I have a house and some land outside of a small town called Three Rivers. It’s a couple hundred miles south of Albuquerque. That’s where we’ll be.”

“Can we get a phone number?”

“Sure, of course.” Max picked up a pad of paper and a pen from next to the phone and wrote down his phone number.

Miranda continued, an unmistakable nervousness in her voice. “Do you, um, have access to email out there?”

“Yeah, we do. Does he have a laptop?”

Miranda shook her head. “No, he has a desktop in his room.”

“No problem, I’ll get him a laptop.”

Kyle got up from the table and poured his coffee into the sink. Max handed him the notepad, and the two brothers looked at each other.

“Why do you want to do this, Max?” Kyle asked. “Why now? Why Jake?”

Max thought hard about how to answer. “I just... These past twelve years have been... I’ve been through a lot. You wouldn’t even believe all of it. To tell you the truth, I don’t even believe it sometimes. I’m kind of... lost right now.” Max saw something in his brother’s face he had never seen before. He saw compassion and concern, where years before he had seen only contempt and disdain. He marveled again at the man Kyle had become. “I just don’t know what to do anymore, Kyle. I feel like a ship without a sail, if that makes any sense.”

“Sure it does,” Miranda said from the table.

“But I just feel like... maybe Jake can help me make some sense of it. He was there when it all started, even though he was just a kid, and he kind of reminds me of myself back in those days. Kind of angry at the world, you know?”

Kyle and Miranda looked at each other. “Yeah,” Miranda agreed.

“And he has real talent, so maybe he can put it all together or something. It sounds stupid, I know.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kyle said, looking toward the stairs. Jake was coming down, with two suitcases and a backpack.

“Okay,” Jake said. “Let’s do this.”

Kyle and Miranda helped them carry their bags to the car. As Miranda hugged and kissed her son, Kyle offered his hand to Max once again.

Max took his brother’s hand and shook it slowly. “Thanks for everything, Kyle. I really mean it.”

“You’re always welcome here,” Kyle replied. “If you need anything, you call us.”

“I will. And I’ll watch out for Jake. He’ll be fine, I promise.”

“I know he will.” As Jake came over to say goodbye to his father, Max walked around to the back of the car, where Miranda gave him a big hug. She had tears in her eyes. “Take care of our boy, Max. And take care of yourself.”

“I will, Miranda. And thank you.”

“You know that we’re always here for you, and we love you, Max. Always.”

You're family."

"Thanks. I'll try to remember that."

She took a step back to look him in the eye. She wiped a tear from her cheek and held his shoulders firmly. "Jake is our whole world, Max. Watch out for him."

"I will. I promise."

Jake closed the trunk and they got into the car. As they pulled away, they waved to Kyle and Miranda, who waved back until they rounded the corner and were out of sight.

"Well," Jake said, his voice uncertain, "here we go."

"Yep," Max answered. "Here we go."

"Where are we headed?"

"The airport."

"What time does our flight leave?"

Max looked out his window, watching the large oak and buckeye trees pass. "Our flight leaves when we get on board."

"Oh."

"I have a Lear jet waiting for us."

"Oh. Okay then," Jake said as he looked out his own window. "A Lear jet."