

Truth and Fiction

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By  
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December 2023

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my chair, Professor Anna Anderson. Without her patience, precision, and regular quality feedback this work would be a lesser production. My deepest thanks also belong to Doctor Andrew Smith, whose sincere encouragement and helpful comments bolstered my confidence in writing in general and this project in particular. This work would not have been possible without the two of them.

A very special thanks to my parents for being my first teachers and encouraging a deep love of stories. Last, thank you to my husband for his support and to my sons for just being themselves.

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## Abstract

This literary review explains the importance of literature in helping to indirectly describe reality. The review takes the reader through a plethora of literary examples and gives brief psychological and philosophical argumentation to showcase the importance of literature in the lives of children and adults. *The Function of Fiction* describes the ways in which fiction is intended to be employed. *On the Psychology of Stories* discusses how stories impact behavior. *On Myths* examines the ways in which myths connect to history and culture. *On Fables and Fairytales* dissects how stories often have a moral and encourage the best in humanity. *On Parables* traces the connection to stories and complex ideas. *On Allegory* explains the way truth claims can be made through narrative. *On Historical Fiction and Alternate History* communicates how a story can offer different perspectives and promote ideological arguments.

## Describing Reality

Telling stories is a noble endeavor. Storytelling turns experiences and perspectives into a narrative in which words are carefully chosen and crafted into something that can be seen in the mind and understood in the heart. It is an ancient tradition, tracing back to the earliest understood history. Beginning with mythic tales, blending to fables, a plethora of fictional genres acts as a way to understand and relate to the world at large, helping to explain the unexplainable, using stories to fill in the gaps where the physical world is unable to give answers to meaning, truth, and morality. There is a distinct importance in the tales that formed the culture and worldviews of people groups that have long been left behind. Whether riding the waves with Odysseus, traveling through the Black Forest with Hansel and Gretel, or journeying with Frodo and Sam to Mount Doom, something in each story speaks directly to the heart of the people who read them. Stories are a way to make sense of a complex world filled with complicated people. Fiction, as the main method of storytelling, can expand upon concepts without many limitations and say things that hyperrealism cannot. Ultimately, fiction is a means of indirectly describing reality.

The first stories were likely shared orally over the dim flickering of firelight under the stars at the beginning of civilization, and the heart of these tales live on in our modern world. G. K. Chesterton wrote on this in an essay entitled *Heretics*, where he discusses how interesting it is that novels are generally more popular than books of more necessary information— what we now call STEM, for example. Chesterton argues that while these other subjects come in handy at times, life itself is a narrative, so people find that they connect best with a story. He writes, “Our existence may cease to be a song; it may cease even to be a beautiful lament. Our existence may not be an intelligible justice or even a recognizable wrong. But our existence is still a story. In the fiery alphabet of every sunset is written, ‘to be continued in our next’” (Chesterton, 2021).

## The Function of Fiction

Fiction has many functions. It can be entertaining, soothing, or cathartic. To lose oneself in another world is a gift that authors can bestow, a chance to live a different life in the span of a few stolen hours. Fiction can also be stretching, challenging, and an invitation to readers to grasp for something beyond. Something to learn, to understand, to glean from the words placed so intentionally together on the page. This begins first and foremost in the imagination, the bedrock of a growing, transcending, spiritually enlightened, and empathetic society. Anthony Esolen, writer, social commentator, professor of liberal arts, and translator of ancient poetry, writes extensively on imagination and its importance in his book *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of your Child* (2011). One of the first prescriptions that Esolen cites as a death warrant for imagination is to steal genuinely good stories from children. He writes, "...[w]hen you starve your child of the folk tale, you not only cramp his imagination for the time being. You help to render vast realms of human art (not to mention human life) incomprehensible" (2011). Esolen argues that stories are imperative to understanding the world; they are a way to help children decipher what feels like chaos. Fiction breathes life into readers and listeners alike; it awakens the imagination, stirring the soul and bringing one closer to understanding reality.

Fiction often functions as a way of deciphering. The world is complex, and so are the people within it. Prominent German literary scholar of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Wolfgang Iser, made a strong case for the connection between understanding reality and fiction. In *The Reality of Fiction: A Functionalist Approach to Literature*, Iser writes that the term fiction is commonly understood to denounce actuality and is instead presumed to be a means of building something from nothing, representing a purely fabricated idea. He explains that the concepts of fiction and reality have long been at odds within their classifications. This caused some trouble as he strove

to explain what seemed like the obvious connection between reality and literature. Ultimately, he suggested focusing on what fiction does and not what fiction means.

Whatever the frame, the basic and misleading assumption is that fiction is an antonym of reality. In view of the tangled web of definitions resulting from this juxtaposition, the time has surely come to cut the thread altogether and replace ontological arguments with functional, for what is important to readers, critics, and authors alike is what literature does and not what it means. If fiction and reality are to be linked, it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not the mere opposite of the other—fiction is a means of telling us something about reality. (Iser, 1974)

Iser's prescription for understanding fiction is an entirely philosophical concept. Rather than focusing primarily on the definition of something, look to its function, use, and purpose. Do this, especially when it comes to language, which has a way of morphing throughout the ages. The origin of the concept of fiction comes from Latin, *fictiō*, which is defined as fashioning, kneading, or sculpting (Harper, 2023). This definition lends to the idea that fiction is a way of taking something real and making something intentional out of it. At the heart of fiction are creative endeavor, imagination, and reality.

## On the Psychology of Stories

Stories are psychologically significant. While scientific studies are limited, and empirical data is lacking, researchers understand enough to argue that stories have always been a unique part of human interaction. One study charted the positive hormonal reaction in hospitalized children who were read to (Brockington et al., 2021). The same researchers hypothesized that narratives aided in helping people simulate social realities that they otherwise would not have considered (Brockington et al., 2021). This study suggests what is apparent to anyone paying attention: stories can act, as the researchers coined, as “behavioral intervention” (Brockington et al., 2021). A simpler way of understanding this is that stories allow an opportunity for new perspectives. Fictional scenarios provide a space for empathy to grow off the page.

While it can be helpful to understand the underlying scientific significance of fictional stories and the people who interact with them, to boil fiction down only to the base chemical reaction it produces would be to misunderstand fiction as the art it is. Psychologist and author Dr. Jordan Peterson, noted for his lectures on the psychological significance of biblical stories, suggests that art is imperative to humanity and that literature is a part of the very foundation of culture. He writes, “It is the foundation of the process by which we unite ourselves psychologically and come to establish productive peace with others. As it is said, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’ (Mathew 4:4). That is exactly right. We live by beauty. We live by literature. We live by art” (Peterson, 2020). Peterson explains that art brings us closer to beauty and, therefore, closer to the Divine. He suggests that this forces us to contend with the destructiveness of human nature and encourages gratitude. Esolen, when writing about the importance of upholding the humanity within children, noted that public education tends to care only for information, facts, statistics, and tests, but literature goes deeper. Literature calls to the heart of a person as well as their



intellect (Esolen, 2015). Fiction is, in part, responsible for taking humanity deeper; many fictional works have survived throughout generations and still come into play in modern life.

## On Myths

Stories are an integral part of the world, built into cultures and civilizations, maybe even built in part by them, by the very stories that have sprung up throughout the ages. Every ancient religion is based on a story, every nation has a national myth, and all people groups hold old stories close to their hearts. Every Native American tribe has its own origin myth. The Navajo, one of the largest tribes in North America, has a prolific culture of stories that relate to their creation. The *Nihodilhil* is a story of a world that began from darkness built by the Dine into our present world. The Navajo still carry on traditions and hold belief systems rooted in this story and others that have grown from it (Cary, 2011). Similarly, Nordic groups, while more humanistic in these modern times, have a culture that was originally based on warrior-heavy mythology, a world that began as a vast space of nothingness called *Ginnungagap*, whose deities battled endlessly for power (Greenberg, 2020). Christianity, still the most widely practiced religion in the world (Vaughan, 2020), speaks to creation, meaning, human suffering, and the answer to it all. The Bible is full of different texts, from poetry, to history, to narrative. However, the work is a story that cross-references itself in a remarkable way (Chalabi, 2013).

National myths are still alive and present, though challenged and often debated. Children in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century were told stories that encouraged patriotism and national pride like George Washington cutting down his father's cherry tree and learning the importance of truth (David, 2016). Today, narratives exist to change national myths. The 1619 project, for example, identifies its function in the title—*1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. Nikole Hannah-Jones suggests that “Our myths have not served us well,” citing pervasive racism beginning from the

very founding of the United States (Hannah-Jones, 2021). The fact that national myths can cause such pride and upheaval showcases how much of a clear impact the stories that a country tells itself can have. One set of myths is intended to encourage one's love for one's country, while the other is intended to challenge and change it. One thing is for certain: myths can live on generations past their origin.

Some myths connect us to ancient history. Virgil's *Aeneid* is about a young warrior from the Trojan War escaping after the fall of the city. Aeneas wanders aimlessly through the Mediterranean, battles a Cyclopes, falls in love with, and then abandons, a queen. It may have helped bring the Punic wars to fruition, and if the legend is true, it helped found Rome (Virgil, 1981). While massive parts of this tale can be difficult to believe, it is not advised to throw out the entire narrative as fantasy. The plethora of mythical creatures might be a stretch, but even there, much can be surmised about what these creatures represent and what they are intended to make a reader grasp. The *Aeneid* suggests an original national myth, telling the tale of the origin of Rome, setting the scene for the founding of an empire that would be remembered throughout the ages.

Some of the claims made within stories have become almost prophetic. In the tale of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus embarks on many adventures. He is shipwrecked, fights monsters, pulls one from *Aeneid*'s book, combats a Cyclops, and is entranced by sirens. When he eventually reaches his home, his troubles are not over. He must battle to regain his place. In a remarkable scene, Odysseus cries, "My glory reaches heaven!" (Homer, 1919). Odysseus was not wrong. For millennia, his story has been translated, shared, and studied.

## On Fables and Fairytales

Worldviews are incorporated into every narrative, but moral stories are most notably ingrained into fables and fairytales. Aesop's fables are probably the most notable. Much is still unknown about the author. Herodotus describes him as a slave in Samos (Herodotus, 2017), while Aristotle connects him to the Libyan style of storytelling (Aristotle, 2014). Either way, the likely story is that Aesop is a pseudonym, perhaps for the author to remain private or because Aesop is several authors. His fables remain an important part of fiction to this day. These ancient Greek stories are seemingly simplistic, often using animals for characters and quaint morals. However, the reason Aesop chose to portray these stories in that way was probably an intentional strategic point. Stories have a way of breaking through biases and preconceived notions and having animals make bad decisions and either learn from them or experience the consequences adds a layer of separation. That layer makes it easier to see the problem from the outside, leading to gentle self-evaluation. Many fairytales do the same.

Some of the most popular fairytales in history come from the Brothers Grimm, the German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm, linguists and researchers who made it their business to gather local folklore and share it with the world. Most of these tales were collected orally, stories passed down from generation to generation, which the brothers collected to maintain Germanic culture. These tales certainly share a moral but lack the lighter touch Aesop employed. However, sometimes, a more frightening story leaves a more impressionable mark. Many fables were told to children to keep them from harm, explaining complex ideas through metaphor. Fables also tell the history of the dark past in a more palatable way (Williams, 2021). It was one thing to tell a child to stay out of the Black Forest; it was another to tell the little ones that witches who ate children lived there. Effective, to say the least.

C. S. Lewis, a popular 20<sup>th</sup>-century author, professor, and apologist, argued that the world is itself a dangerous place, and shielding children from stories about heroes and dragons did nothing to help them in reality,

I think it is possible that by confining your child to blameless stories of child life in which nothing alarming ever happens, you would fail to banish the terror and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable. For fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforter and protectors, the radiant ones ... It would be nice if no little boy in bed, hearing or thinking he hears a sound, were ever at all frightened. But if he is going to be frightened, I think it better that he should think of giants and dragons than merely of burglars. And I think St. George, or any bright champion in armor, is a better comfort than the idea of police. (Lewis, 2002)

Some stories may be dark, and they may take us to places or describe concepts that are uncomfortable, but fiction also allows for heroes and heroines. Fiction makes room for the idea that good can combat evil and win. Fiction can bring hope to the areas where harsh reality might attempt to kill it. Anthony Esolen argues, “Fairy tales and folk tales are for children and childlike people, not because they are little and inconsequential, but because they are as enormous as life itself” (Esolen, 2011). Life can be dark and tragic, but it can also be filled with hope. Fiction can act as a tool to give one the courage to overcome.

## On Parables

Parables continue to help with understanding complex ideas. They are another way of coming at an idea and broadening the explanation. Jesus Christ is best known for using this during his ministry. Jesus put his words to purpose, explaining the religious law, interpersonal conduct, and relationships. He employed metaphor and simile in conjunction, “the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed....” (New International Version, 1984). However, parables were a favorite. The parable of the prodigal son tells the story of a wayward son of a well-to-do father and a son who stayed behind. The wayward demands his inheritance, which he is given, and squanders until he is left eating the slop from the pigs. Finally, in full humility, he returns to his father with the request to simply live as a servant in his father's home. However, his father sees him coming from a long way off and prepares for a celebration, sparing no expense. The dutiful son looks on in disdain and questions how his father could go to all the trouble. His reply is beautiful. He tells his loyal son that he knows all he owns is already his, and his place is secure. But his brother must be celebrated, for “this brother of yours was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found” (New International Version, 1984). Jesus is not telling an interesting story. He is making a complex point. The obvious one is to be the prodigal son, turn away from evil ways, and be welcomed back. However, there is also the point of the loyal son: Do not be angry when someone else is celebrated for coming back to God. Finally, while the father most definitely represents the Father God, there is also a case to be made that Jesus intended his listeners to see themselves in all three characters. These stories, and many others, take on complex ideas and flesh them out, helping readers to have insight into themselves.

## On Allegory

Allegory and symbolism are popular ways to make truth claims through fiction. Whether an author intends it purposefully or not, there is generally going to be some bit of personal claim made by the author in every narrative. However, while truth claims are made in a plethora of ways through narrative form, some ways are more overt than others. In allegory, representation is intentional and obvious. For something to be an allegory, every facet of the novel must represent something else. This makes the truth claims made in allegory clear and concise. While allegory is seen less often now, it has been a popular way to tell stories for years. John Bunyan, an early 1600s Protestant preacher and notorious separatist from the Church of England, wrote one of the most notable allegorical stories, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a book about a Christian's pilgrimage through life and all the trials and tribulations that come with it. Bunyan began his work in a prison cell, jailed for not conforming to the Church of England's religious ideals. What Bunyan composed became a best-selling book for two centuries, second only to the Bible (Ryken, 2019). John Bunyan himself was not well-educated, and after his 12-year stint in prison, while his book was largely accepted throughout North America, Scotland, and Ireland, the places of higher education continued to look down on the work, likely because of Bunyan's low academic prestige (Ryken, 2019). However, that ultimately did not stop the influence of Bunyan's work. What likely made a simple allegorical work so touching to its readers was the authenticity of its subject matter. Bunyan wrote from a place of religious persecution, understanding the trials and tribulations that inevitably come from taking an unpopular stand. While the story takes the protagonist, Christian, through many tumultuous themes, the story is ultimately about everlasting hope. Stories can speak to many things, but truth finds a way through the narrative one way or another. In Bunyan's work, the truth is overt.

## On Historical Fiction and Alternate History

Historical fiction is a genre of literature that takes an interesting and unique look at reality. In historical fiction, the writer is able to use history as a launching point and reimagine scenarios. Historical fiction allows readers to view the past in a way a textbook of names and dates cannot offer. Elizabeth George Speare, a celebrated author and two-time Newberry award winner, excelled in bringing history to life through fiction. Speare used historical events as a setting or background for her work, building a narrative around a world that once existed. One of her most notable works was inspired by puritanical New England, where Speare resided. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* deals with tolerance of differing views, slavery, and prejudice. It brings to life issues that early Americans had to face. Some in academia go as far as to say that Speare herself made history seem kinder than it was (Schwebel, 2003) and question whether this type of writing can be beneficial for education.

Historical fiction is history reimagined in some ways. It is a look at real events from an entirely new perspective. Historical fiction gives particular insight into the mind of the author. It must be read with the idea that the story told is from the perspective of the author, which means that the modern era of writing, along with the natural bias of the author herself, will come into play. In the case of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, some academics criticize it as strongly coming from the “MacArthur era” of politics and is far too patriotic for the time in which it is set (Schwebel, 2003). Likewise, other books set in intentional historical settings have similar critiques. *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah (2021) is set in Texas in 1934, the infamous dust bowl and tough economic times are ahead. Hannah writes a book heavy on character development and interpersonal relationships while setting a believable scene for the hard years in the West. However, throughout the book, there is clearly a villain, capitalism, and a

misunderstood hero, communism. Modern perspectives often seep their way into the narratives of historical fiction, which a component reader can use to their educational advantage. Historical fiction is a great opportunity to see the past through new perspectives. It is also a good way to watch how others rewrite, reimagine, or simply put their own voice into historical events.

However, while a marvelous tool for providing insight into aspects of reality, fiction should not be counted on as the end-all and be-all of insight into the real world. Fiction is intended to be insightful, shed light on differing perspectives, and provide a way to describe reality. Historical fiction ought to be taken for what it is: a narrative form of events sown together by the mind of an artist.

## In Conclusion

While the idea of fiction may lead one to think of something false or pretend, it is interesting to notice how its function lends to something else entirely. From the origin of storytelling, tales told around the fire, whether to entertain, warn, or teach, stories have always held a bit of truth. While the genres have broadened and grown, the reality held within fiction has maintained its place. The truth might make itself known metaphorically, lyrically, or symbolically, or maybe it takes its place in the background while a narrative unfolds around it. However readers experience fiction, the truth remains that fiction is important because of its place as an important tool for understanding complicated ideas in a complex world.



## Artists Statement

“Life may sometimes legitimately appear as a book of science. Life may sometimes appear, and with a much greater legitimacy, as a book of metaphysics. But life is always a novel. Our existence may cease to be a song; it may cease even to be a beautiful lament. Our existence may not be an intelligible justice or even a recognizable wrong. But our existence is still a story. In the fiery alphabet of every sunset is written, ‘to be continued in our next.’”

G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*

All of life is a story. It is one of the reasons novels tend to resonate with the individual. If someone were asked to think of their favorite book, one would often answer by telling a story. Maybe one's favorite is a memoir or perhaps philosophy. Most likely, it is a novel. Either way, I guarantee one way or another, it fits into a person's life *like* a story. Perhaps it is akin to a map, informing one's point of view. Maybe it offers a perspective, something to take comfort in or strive for. Or it might be something that fills one's heart with wonder, peace, or a quiet reflection. Perhaps at one point, it was read deep into the night, with a warmly lit lamp, blankets all around, and the sound of sleeping pets or loved ones in the background. Perhaps it comforted in times of grief and reminded one that dragons, of a sort, are real and that they can be defeated.

Stories are works of art, and art has a specific function. Art lifts the human spirit. Art shows us that we can be more than our current circumstances, shames our sin, and encourages our glories. A good story, then, will be relatable, authentic, and, most of all, truthful. Fiction allows us access to philosophical thought experiments in a plethora of methods and helps us to live in a million worlds we would otherwise never have known. In the story I humbly present,

although the dragons look like real people and the heroes might resemble our neighbors, my goal is for the reader to take courage, find hope, and most of all, experience truth.

## Background

The first picture of this story began in my undergraduate work. I had to write flash fiction, a one-page story. At that time, I was trying to understand someone I love who had experienced things I never will. So, I wrote a one-page story that was really a metaphor and a wish. It was about a young man fresh from war in 1945 riding a train home, surrounded by people he did not know, alone in a crowded compartment. He descends the platform, leaves the crowds of people happily greeting each other and walks alone toward an old road he remembers from years ago. The farther he goes, the more overgrown it becomes. Eventually, he sees what he is looking for — the cottage from his youth, the place he has spent years dreaming about. Rather than being the picturesque home he had remembered, it is broken, disheveled, and badly used. However, he looks it over with hands that have loved it. He declares it perfect and begins to rebuild. That story morphed into a screenplay in my graduate program and changed to the modern era. Funnily enough, the screenplay acted as an outline for me. I loved writing it, but I wanted to go into more detail and put some sinew, muscle, and flesh on those bones. Turning it into a short story was the natural choice.

I write from different places, whether from my interests, moxie, or simply from observing the world around me. I did not begin my story as a cathartic experience, but it became that in some ways. At times, writing was monstrously entertaining and then painful in spurts. It was borne from unanswered questions. For me, the best way of finding things out is through a narrative form. Facts and statistics are important for understanding, but narrative gives them context. Narratives have a way of helping one see a new perspective. *The Cottage* is, first and

foremost, a story that came from trying to understand people I love. No one individual character represents a certain person or event. Instead, the narrative acts as a thought experiment, love letter, message, and, most of all, a tale of loss, love, justice, and redemption. Each character is an idea, or several, representing but not retelling experiences I or others have gone through or witnessed.

Many of the people who are closest to me have served in the military; I have not. Instead, I have been the quiet observer. I was there before, during, and after deployments. Waiting for phone calls, emails and letters. Hoping for weeks that the phone would eventually ring to the sound of a familiar voice. Dreading a potential knock on the door from a stranger telling me something I did not want to hear. I watched each deployment workup and how they shaped and molded young men and women to prepare for combat and ready themselves to kill and possibly be killed. I have witnessed the military turn boys into men and men into machines. I have seen it bring families together to a depth that only devotion born of hardship can forge. And I have watched it demolish husbands, wives, and children in a manner that only the callous indifference of a ruthless bureaucracy can afford. I have listened to good men reminisce, sitting on the outside of the circle while stories were told, laughs were shared, and battles were relived with mirth. I have also observed the tears flow, mouths tighten, and backs straighten on men and women who did not wish to relive moments that never should have happened. Some friends have been falsely accused and tried for evil acts they never committed. Others were on the receiving end of injustice and were not believed. Or at least not until it became enough of a problem that the bloated organization could not help but take enough notice to cover its tracks. I do not claim the honor of having served, only the occupation of the observer, the one who sits on the peripheries and watches the many different stories unfold.

Observing has its privileges and pitfalls. I have been accused of being a jealous outsider. A military wife is often called a “dependapotamus,” a primarily sexist slur used to put down military dependents, specifically the wives. The term implies they are useless and entitled. To make it sting a bit more, it implies they are obese. After learning that some of my writing included military themes, one acquaintance accused me of “coveting the trauma” that seems to ensue from time in the military. In many circles, speaking on military life from the perspective of the observer is an insult of the purest form. It is as though people hoard their experiences like a dragon’s cursed gold. It is theirs and theirs alone, and no one else may speak on it, look at it, or try to understand it. Unless, and here is the caveat, it is done so with the humblest, quietest reverence, finished by an oath to one’s own forever ignorance. As readers will soon discover, I do not abide by this. I cannot see a world in which avowed ignorance is a helpful or loving action for anyone. I think people will forever have more in common than not, and it is our commonality that ultimately brings us together. After that, we can learn from our differences.

On the other side of the spectrum are the service men and women who have graciously shared their lives, hearts, and thoughts with me. They have allowed me to attempt to tell a story I never could have dreamed up without their help and humility. While this story is not entirely about the military, a significant portion is informed by that culture, ensuring that research was absolutely necessary. While literature and journal articles can inform on these things to an extent, no one can truly speak to events in the same manner as those who lived through the events. I have listened, I have watched lives unfold, and I have taken bits and pieces from others’ stories. This story is intended to inform to some extent. It is also intended to bring glimmers of happiness, laughter, and smiles. So many of the people around me, military and civilian, are vibrant, delightful, and incredibly decent human beings. My characters are my own creations, but

if they portray even a fraction of the interior life of friends and family I call my own, I will have accomplished something to be proud of. All of life is an adventure, a romance, a tragedy, and how we view the story we are living through will inform our reaction to what is thrust upon us. *The Cottage* is ultimately an homage to common individuals and simple lives, a raised glass to faithful lovers of humanity.

Decent writing is hard-fought, and the loneliness that can come from being on the peripheries often feels akin to powerlessness. Writing morphs that into something else. Putting one's own perspectives down on paper helps one to feel less like an inactive spectator. Choosing each word carefully becomes a way of life. The diction, the grammar, and the critical thought on how and where an emphasis ought to be placed bleeds into the reality of everyday life. While my story stays on the page, the lessons I learn from writing go with me. What is the best way to convey an emotion? Through a scene, dialogue, or empty space? Writing forces me to consider my own steps outside of the page, my words, my tone, and the way body language can be so much heavier than words. The edits, the constant, consistent, and never-ending edits. Editing has taught me to be less of a perfectionist and more of a steady plodder, abiding in grace and working toward betterment. Writing gives a purpose to what otherwise feels like an assault by information. Good writing forces one to investigate, research, and sometimes question one's own interpretation of the world. It requires curiosity and humility; it leads to introspection and a strong sense of self.

## Vision

There can be beauty in common settings, and the setting for any narrative will strongly inform the story. While Jack, the protagonist, spends time in different places throughout his life, from California during his time in the Marine Corps to his home state of Wyoming, most of the story takes place in rural northern Michigan, where Jack has settled.

I lived in Southern California for four years on the north side of Camp Pendleton, in the little, quiet beach town of San Clemente. It was where Marine Corps culture and Southern California life melded together like sand dripping from my hand at the beaches I often visited. Most of the towns surrounding the base had a very different feel from the one where I spent my time. Often, the differences slammed together like violent waves, throwing around the bystanders like rag dolls. It took experienced and intentional individuals to ride those waves without getting lost in them. Because I was just nineteen years old, I had no idea how fortunate I was to be in our little hamlet. San Clemente provided a great seat for watching and learning, and it kept me safe from lifestyles that, in my naivete, I had no idea lingered so close. California is deceptive. It is loud, jostling, and crammed, and it leads one to believe that there is no way of ever being alone. Meanwhile, not far away, an expanse of space resides on either side. The Pacific Ocean on the West, the Mojave on the East — quiet, dangerous, solitude. Kane finds himself between these two spaces in the loud excitement of Southern California and the quiet intensity of the state's desolate spaces. In scenes that take place in California, this quiet is always there, lingering in the background. While Kane finds himself as the oil to the water that is West Coast culture, he also finds solace in the quiet, in the desolate places that others avoid.

My time in Southern California helped to build a scene and an atmosphere to accompany it. The second location, Wyoming, came from the three black-and-white pictures of a

great-grandfather I never met. In one, he sits confidently on a rearing horse, an old Ford Model-T parked in the background. In another, he lounges on a log in the snow, showing off a fox pelt with a log cabin behind him and a look of peace in his eye. In the last, he is atop an incredible rock structure. He is young, happy, and living a beautiful life. His eyes are kind and soft, and I often think to myself what it would have been like to meet him in those years or at all. Before he was married, he spent time in Wyoming, and while I did not get to meet him on this side, he deserved a place in this story. Kane's father is modeled after the idea that the photos inspired. A brave and independent cowboy, yet with a subtle romantic streak glimmering through.

Kane moves to northern Michigan in this story. I was born and raised in Michigan, brought up nestled between cornfields and lines of trees. I watched the fireflies over the vast open spaces of pasture in the evening twilight and spent vacations "up North" in the woods. The Midwest is a place that either goes unnoticed by most of the country or is the butt of coastal jokes. The Midwest cities are mostly rich, white, and blue. The suburbs are middle class and bleed red. The poor, who exist in both of these spheres, are just trying to get by. Discarding the clichés, the people of the Midwest are as diverse as any other part of the country. Michigan is a beautiful state, full of vast lakes, deep greens, open skies, and interesting people. It is a good setting for someone trying to disappear but finding home.

I find life to be interesting when there is purpose, meaning, and obstacles to overcome. I think it follows that a good story will have a similar plot. This can be shown in many different ways, and literature is rife with examples. Fantasy, adventure, science fiction, and even romance find commonality in the idea that there is something to overcome. However, I do not want to encourage the idea that in order for a life to be interesting, there must always be drama, discomfort, or something to be worked through. Instead, my story is centered around discovery

and growth through everyday circumstances. While this story deals with trauma and violence, it is much more about the growth and healing that come afterward in the slow, quiet recesses of life.

The characters I strive to write exhibit real-life qualities. Quirks and idiosyncrasies can lend to this, aspects that make a reader feel as though they've met someone like this before. A neighbor, a childhood friend. I find imperfections important when creating a good hero or heroine while escaping the antihero cliché. The original understanding of antihero tends to be a protagonist with both good and bad qualities; however, I struggle with this idea as that simply defines a real person. What I see in most modern storytelling are anti-heroes who are purely dislikable characters. Characters who, in reality, would be inappropriate or downright criminal. Instead, I want to create characters who we can see a little of ourselves. Our insecurities, our fears, our sins, and our flaws. I want the readers to watch as the characters progress and conquer relatable issues. There will also be characters who choose different paths, who stay in a sort of neutrality in life, and there are those who choose evil. The complicated aspects of humanity are what bring characters to life and give a story the feeling of realness, that breath of fresh air that makes the reader feel like they have been inside this story before, somehow, somehow.

## Literary Context

*The Cottage* is a work of literary fiction. It is both a story about interpersonal relationships and a political critique of bureaucratic institutions. It was created and nurtured in the imagination but inspired by real-world issues. The story takes a look at many issues within the American military: sexual violence, injustice, and the dehumanization of the individual. It is a careful and calculated critique of the organizations that produce these injustices and not necessarily the individuals involved within them. While I attempt to maintain this story as one of



redemption and growth in the aftermath of trouble, a portion of it sits in the context of political criticism.

While *The Cottage* is a critique, it is also intended to be a story of hope. Fictional stories have the capacity to open a window to the cold, orderly home that is realism. The right kind of story can let in sunlight, fresh air, and the sound of a living world. It is up to the individual to discern whether or not one is enriching reality or hiding from the discomfort of truth. It seems to me that an accomplished artist can offer fiction to serve in a variety of ways. As rest for the weary traveler, an adventure for the bored, or a challenge to the questioning.

### My Perspective as a Christian Scholar

As a Christian, my life is lived for God, and the work I produce will be the fruit of a heart turned toward Christ. Popular author and Christian apologist of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Francis Schaffer, stated, “No work of art is more important than the Christian's life, and every Christian is called to be an artist in this sense ... The Christian's life is to be a thing of truth and also a thing of beauty in the midst of a lost and despairing world” (Schaffer, 1985). My life and my work ought to bear his image. Jesus is the truth incarnate, truth made flesh. It follows that the way in which the message of this story is communicated is an important process, a process intended to honor truth. It is essential that this story upholds what is good. When it travels to tragic places, my intent is to do as much justice to the truth as when the story rides the calm currents. There is very little mention of Christianity within my story. Instead, the essence of its message upholds the reality that is Christ, his justice, grace, and redemption. *The Cottage* is not intended to preach or prescribe a way of living. Instead, it is written as a lamp in dark places, a guidepost, a lantern, something to shed light in an otherwise dark world.

## Conclusion

*The Cottage* is about the importance of making the choice to be healed. It takes courage and intentionality to put down the burdens that no longer belong to us and choose to live freely. When pain and hardship have become what is normal, health and freedom become scary and unknown. Healing is told through the lenses of hard work, nature, and community, themes easily found in many readers' lives. It is my hope that each person who reads my words will find an aspect of their own story within my own.

## Creative Manuscript

### The Cottage

Camp Pendleton, California

2008

Six young Marines stood next to an office building that looked like it hadn't been updated since the Cold War. The tan and brown of their dessert camouflage uniforms, sleeves rolled up to regulation, stood out against the red burned brick of the emotionless building. They cracked jokes while they did what the enlisted do best: wait for the superior officers to stop wasting their time. Hurry up and wait. It was what they did day in and day out stateside.

First Lieutenant Clive Kane stood at the window of his first-floor office. He could see his new crew just outside. The fan briefly bathed him in the mid-July dry heat, only serving to circulate the scorched air. The once clear window was cloudy from age, capable of screeching briefly as it opened no more than a crack.

"Lieutenant." A staff sergeant stepped inside his open office door and stood at attention.

"At ease. Let's meet the new crew."

"Yes sir, right this way, sir."

Kane took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and stepped outside.

Kane made eye contact with a sergeant the name Cooper across her nametape. She cleared her throat, which drew attention to the new presence. A quick shuffle brought them all to messy attention.

"Officer on deck!" shouted the staff sergeant.

A half second later, all six young Marines stood at immaculate attention with their arms at their sides, fingers balled and thumbs straight.

“At ease, Marines,” Kane spoke clearly.

The six Marines relaxed their stance, drawing their arms behind them and holding them at the small of their back.

Kane scanned the group. Wondering how many still had a teen behind their age. It felt like each new crop was younger with every work up to the next deployment. Sometimes, it felt like getting kids ready to go play war. But there was no playing about it. Most of them were still in the first years of enlistment, and none had endured a deployment.

It was his job to make them a team.

“I’m your lieutenant. I’ll be overseeing this team during our next workup. Our pilot will be joining us in a few weeks.”

Kane observed each individual. Martinez held himself with the confidence of a man much bigger than he actually was, his dark eyes level and clear. Kane made note of a silver wedding band. Schrock stood next to him, almost oaf-like. His shoulders slumped forward as though it had long been a habit to hide his size. Apparently, the Marine Corps hadn’t beaten that out of him yet. Custer was next in line. He was unassuming, small, and quiet behind Schrock’s stooped shoulders. Kane got the feeling Custer had always been picked last in gym class. Dean stood to Custer’s left. Kane saw perhaps an arrogant confidence or maybe just an untested young man. He guessed this one would come back from the deployment as a different man. O’Hara stood like a torch. If his height didn’t give him away, his hair certainly would. Finally, there was Cooper. The only female marine on the crew and the only marine in the room with exceptional posture. Her eyes stood open and aware and gave one the feeling that she observed more than she let known.

Kane took in each individual, noting their characteristics. He had always learned more from watching. The tics people owned, the way they carried themselves, where their eyes went when they answered questions. When it came to conversation, he listened to what wasn't being said. The subjects people talked around, what they didn't say but wanted to.

He glanced at his paperwork one more time, then sat it down. "Let's get a few things clear. If you can follow directions, I can trust you. If I can trust you, this team can work. I'm not your friend. But I have your back. I don't care if you're in the Corps for four years or twenty. As long as you are here, you are my responsibility, and I do not take that lightly."

He looked them all over one last time, garnering nods of affirmation.

"Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then let's go, Marines!"

### Broken Pier, Michigan

#### *Several Years Later*

Clive Kane stood at the entrance to his newly acquired property, one arm draped lazily over the "sold" sign, the other stroking his dark brown beard thoughtfully. The driveway was rutted and needed some attention, as did the encroaching woods lining both sides of the long drive. At the end of it all, there stood a cottage encased in a sloping wrap-around porch and a sadly neglected cherry tree, its branches on the brink of death. Most windows were broken. Storms and mischievous teenagers had made a plaything of the place. But now it was Kane's: his responsibility, his burden, his gift.

He worked the sign out of the earth and carried it over his shoulders, turning and strolling down the drive. Taking in the sounds, his footsteps on the graveled ground, the bugs waking slowly from their winter sleep, the birds singing their lullabies. The sun sank over the lake beyond the cottage, its reflection sending golden rays over the broken-down house and poorly kept shrubbery.

Kane stopped at the bottom of the porch. Its steps stooped and peeled before him, weeds growing up the cracks and crevices. The inspector had told him he would save money by tearing the entire place down and building something else. Kane had other plans. He wanted the chance to rebuild, to fix something broken.

“Perfect,” he whispered to himself.

### Broken Pier, Michigan

#### *Present Day*

Kane woke with a stiff back and nothing more than a thin flannel sleeping bag between him and the 100-year-old hardwood floor. He groaned as he sat up, rubbing his face. The work was ever before him. Each room needed to be gutted. The only usable space at the moment was the living area in which he currently resided, some of the kitchen, a toilet, and a sink. The necessities. He was fine. The progress was slow going, and he continued to get hung up on issues he didn't know how to fix.

He made a fire in the hearth, which was the first thing he had ensured was in working order when he moved in. Started the coffee and went outside to chop wood. The only sounds were his own breathing and the sharp slice of the maul against thick logs. Kane had chopped wood since he was strong enough to pick an axe up off the ground. In the crisp Wyoming

mornings of his youth, his father had found himself with a distraught, rambunctious eight-year-old who had more energy than sense. One Saturday morning, Kane followed his father outside the cabin and was handed an axe for the first time.

“Watch me, son,” Arthur Kane said. His father, a man of average height but the kind of strength that only comes from hard labor, deftly lifted the maul above his head. Adjusting his stance, he took one deep breath and brought the maul down on a large log. It split, shooting out in three different directions. Kane took a step back at the commotion. Kip, their shepherd-mutt, eyed Kane with judgment as he stood loyally near Arthur.

“Come here, son.” Arthur motioned.

A young Kane moved forward, holding his axe awkwardly.

Arthur grabbed a smaller piece of wood that he had just chopped with his large hands and placed it on the stump he used for stability. He placed his hand on a portion of it, “This is where you’re aiming. Your goal is to get a small chunk off for kindling and building up the fire. You know what I’m talking about?”

He nodded.

“Eye protection, that’s important. Take mine.”

Kane put the large safety glasses on. His father helped him take his place, stood behind him, and together they raised his axe.

“We’re going to do the motion together, slowly at first. Then you’re going to do it yourself.”

Together, they went through the motions. Warm from the movement and from being encased in a near embrace by his father’s arms, Arthur’s worn flannel jacket was rough on his soft, young cheek.

“You got it?”

Kane nodded again.

Arthur ruffled his hair. “Of course you do. Let’s see it. Go through the motions first. Use your core and squat.”

Kane took his place. He practiced the movements, hands above his head grasping the axe, bent knees, letting the axe fall, and squatting simultaneously. He breathed heavy from the practice. Kane looked at Kip, the dog and waited expectantly near Arthur. If his master was confident, Kip was too. His eyes met his father’s, and he saw the smile in them and the slight nod of approval.

“Try it for real now, son.”

Kane took in an excited intake of breath. The axe came down hard. There was a loud thud and a jolt as it stuck hard in the stump. Kane had missed the log entirely.

He looked up at his father.

“That was a solid swing, but let it fall naturally next time. Most people don’t realize that gravity does most of the work. Your aim will get better with time. Again.”

Kane took his place. He raised his axe, breathed in, and brought the axe down with his exhalation, the breath visible in the cold morning air. The axe made contact. With delight, Kane saw a piece of wood fly through the air. He dropped his axe and looked excitedly at his father just in time to see the piece of wood slam into his father’s forehead.

Kane stood frozen as his father let out a grunt of pain.

Arthur’s hands were on his forehead, and blood was already seeping through them.

Arthur lowered himself to the grass and began to chuckle, getting a cloth out of his pocket to press against the gash.



Kane burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Dad!"

Arthur laughed out loud now. "Come here, Clive," he said, holding out an open arm.

Kane launched himself at his father.

Arthur grunted from the impact. "Good hit, there, boy. Solid. Strong. You're a natural."

Kane sniffed, tears still coming. "But I almost killed you!"

Arthur moved so he could look his boy in the eye. "You think a silly old log could do that?"

Kane shook his head.

Arthur smiled. "Gotta try harder than that to take out your old man," he said with a gleam in his eye.

His father stood farther off then and, once he was confident in Kane's abilities, had left him to it.

It had become a morning ritual Clive Kane was grateful to have back in his life these last several weeks. Kane's mouth twitched, a small smile forming as he thought of the memory and all the hours of wood chopping that had come after.

The cool morning air and exercise warmed him up. He walked around the cottage with a cup of black coffee in hand, unlaced boots, and shirtless. His solitary lifestyle was pleasant to him, in its way, but there came a time when he needed to venture out into the real world. As he inspected his limited progress, the crumbling foundation, the sagging porch roof, the peeling paint, he was forced to admit where his knowledge of home repair fell short. He needed a break. He needed to fish.

What Kane lacked in remodeling knowledge, he made up for in automobile repair. His first project after getting out of the Marines was to reconstruct something, anything. He needed

to get his hands dirty. He needed to challenge himself. He needed to keep busy. A few months after Kane left the Corps, that prayer of desperation was answered in the form of a sapphire blue 1975 Highboy in the backyard of an old widow who wanted her husband's "hunk'a junk" out of her sight. Had she sold it to anyone else, her resentment would have cost her. Kane knew on sight exactly what it was she had sitting under tarps next to her shed in an immaculately kept backyard.

"Ted loved that old thing, so I hate it," she had said, pulling her robe tighter.

Kane wondered to himself if it was to keep the autumn chill out or her own ice within.

"Give me a thousand, and you'll be doing me a favor. Want a cig?" She held out a package of Marlboro Reds.

Kane shook his head. "Well, I have to give it to your Ted. He had great taste in trucks, ma'am. I'd be stealing it from you for that much."

"He loved his trucks like he loved his women but was only faithful to one. Want to guess which?" She looked at him sideways. Through her four-foot-nine stature and frail figure, the battle-ax within made itself known, not for the first time.

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Some men don't know when they've found a good thing."

The old woman seemed to mull this over while taking a drag from her cigarette. She smiled slowly, as though deciding to allow the compliment, and leaned toward Kane, "I'll tell you what. I'll let you pay two thousand, and we'll both feel like we got a deal." She winked.

Those were the slow Wyoming months after the Corps. He'd spent the days next to his father in the hospital and his nights working on the Highboy in an old barn of his father's friend. He thought about the man on whose knee he used to sit, the baritone voice not just reading but performing *Beowulf* to his small son in the loft of the cabin that had been their small home. Kane

read to his father now, his own voice quiet amid the hum and beeps of the sterile place. Every day, he watched his father slowly deteriorate, witnessing the pain of each labored breath, the breaking of a man who was once so strong. Every night, he worked on the Highboy in a stuffy garage under a sterile spotlight. The engine needed the most work. It was the original 360, which he could either entirely replace with a 390 or be nontraditional and score a 410. It was mechanical jargon that only made sense to people like Kane and the car enthusiast whom he found most of the parts from in Cheyenne. He wanted to keep it in its true form, so he labored relentlessly to find the right components. It was from the golden age. No computers to mess with, just simple machines in need of maintenance or replacement. At least here, in this space, he was putting something back together. Rebuilding a material thing that once was broken, disused, and abandoned, but wishing he could do the same for the living. Slowly but surely, Kane had made the truck his own in that small Wyoming town.

With his background in engineering, he could make a decent wage. For now, he did some limited long-distance consulting from internet cafés or libraries when the opportunity arose, enough to get by. What he craved more than money was solitude. People, bureaucrats, and rules complicated his life.

His father had lost everything before Kane was able to get to him. The only thing he could do was watch as his father's home and material items were seized, all while Arthur lay helpless in a hospital bed. Unable to work, plus months of medical bills, had resulted in unpaid property taxes. While the mortgage was paid off, the government never was.

"It's just stuff, Clive. Don't let it bother you," his father had said.

Kane tried, but too much of his own time and things had been unfairly stolen from him. Watching his father here, it was almost too much. Kane had made it to Wyoming as quickly as he

was able, but it was only just in time to hold his father's hand on his deathbed for a few short months and have the conversations they hadn't had the chance to share. Lung cancer, the cowboy killer, his father had called it. There was just one thing Arthur had asked of Kane—take the time to rest.

“Go slow, Clive,” he had said. “You’ve been so used and abused. Just rest.”

But no son of Arthur Kane's was prone to lethargy. Kane had thrown himself into projects. Taking broken things and fixing them, the way his father had lived his own life.

He now drove his sapphire blue Highboy down the winding wooded road that led to the small town in Broken Pier, Michigan, just fifteen minutes away from his new cottage. Where he missed the rolling hills and mountainous horizons of Wyoming, he found something satiating in the pure green that was northern Michigan. Ivy climbed up some of the trees that grew a little too close to the road, and sunlight flickered through the expanse of thick, dark green leaves. Lake Michigan came into view as he turned a corner into Broken Pier. Pulling into his first stop, he eyed the old brick building, *Moore & Son's, Hunting and Fishing*. It was time to see if the small lake behind his house was full of more than just bullfrogs and mosquitoes.

A bell rang as Kane opened the door. He noted a few customers lingering here and there, who seemed to notice the stranger to town, peeking at him curiously. Two employees talked at the checkout. One, a young man with a sparse mustache and a red vest, fidgeted as another man regaled him with stories he didn't seem to want to hear. The talkative one wore his dark blond hair longer around his ears, sported a brown flannel button-up, and appeared to think he was holding court over the place. The boss, Kane thought to himself.

Walking over to the rods, Kane scanned for what he was looking for before picking up an Ugly Stick, the kind of rod he had used growing up.

The boss walked toward him. “That’s a good rod you got there. You must know what you’re doing. What’re you fishing for?”

“Based on what I know, the only things in these lakes are pike and rainbow trout.”

“There’s some catfish in the rivers,” the man retorted.

“Not a fan,” Kane replied, moving to the tackle aisle.

The man shrugged, a slight smirk as he did so. “You don’t want that tackle. This over here.” He held up a pre-made kit. “This will get you some good trout. What you’re looking at is the stuff my fiancé uses. Fine for a beginner, but this is for the more serious.”

“Your ex-fiancé.” The red-vested employee said under his breath.

“You shut the hell up, Cal. I don’t pay you for your opinion!” The man replied.

Kane looked between them. “I think I’m fine with what I have, thanks.”

“Well, I’ll check you out then. Go mop something, Cal.”

Kane put his things on the counter, glancing over the old building. It was well-kept but not well-maintained. It needed a dusting, some updates, and better music choices. But it had what he needed, and that’s all that mattered.

“I’m Glenn Moore.” The boss held out his hand. “My family has owned this shop for decades. You’re new to the area, aren’t you?”

Kane nodded. “I am.”

Glenn seemed to wait for more, but Kane offered nothing. Glenn nodded toward the eagle globe and anchor tattoo peeking out from underneath Kane’s red woolen shirt. “Marine, huh? Seen any action?”

“Not too much.”

“Man, bad taste in branches and tackle.” Glenn clicked his tongue in mock distaste. “I’m in the National Guard. That’s the way to go. Best of both worlds. But we all know you Marines think differently.”

Kane furrowed his brow and put his cash on the counter. “I have no opinion of what you do.”

Glenn looked surprised. “Oh, well, I was just ....”

Kane nodded goodbye and left, uninterested in further conversation.

The sun slowly sank on the west side of the small lake at the edge of Kane’s land. As it settled beyond the trees, a purple dusk began to take its place, bathing the atmosphere in low, moody light. Fog rose out of the water, shrouding the goings-on of the coming night. Kane gutted his newly caught rainbow trout next to the fire he was tending, wrapped in the warm light of the golden flames. The place was run down, but the earth was good. The cottage stood on three acres of mostly forested land. A short, shadowed path led through overgrown hedges and birch trees to the lake where there had clearly once been a well-loved deck and fire pit. It wasn’t finished, but it was one of the first things Kane had reclaimed when he had bought the place. He had revitalized the deck and pier, adding a fire enclosure to the middle of the space. He had plans to make a pavilion for the rainy days, a pizza oven, a picnic table. Maybe even string up a few lights for late nights.

Dried sage burned in the flames, keeping at bay the mosquitoes that were so prevalent in these parts. It was quiet; it was peaceful. The cold air and hot garlic-buttered fish melded well with the bottle of Two Hearted Kane sipped next to the warm fire. Somewhere between the

ducks playing in the fog and the crackling flames, Kane felt the twinge of something. Or maybe it was the lack of something, the empty spaces around him and miles of nothing beyond. He shrugged it off.

That night, wrapped in his flannel sleeping bag on a hard floor, Kane dreamed. He saw her again like he so often did. This time, she sat comfortably next to him while he gutted his rainbow trout, a blanket over her legs, and a cup of tea in hand, the way he had so often seen her in life in the evenings. Her long black hair hung around her shoulders, laugh lines around her eyes, he almost relaxed. He wasn't a grown man anymore; he noticed his feet barely touched the ground, and he sat at the edge of his chair. He looked around suspiciously, waiting for the danger that so often crept into his sleeping hours. In many of his dreams, they would talk, but he never remembered the conversations. Often, she would simply wander in and out of the scenes. He would try to find her, but it was only just in time to see the worst. He had found her in deserts in Afghanistan, on streets in Los Angeles, and on mountain hikes in the West. He often tried to save her from a perilous fate, only to realize he was too small. His gun was just a stick, his legs couldn't run fast enough, and his arms didn't have the strength. She looked away from the encroaching night and directly at him; her smile faded. Her brown eyes became serious, and the two lines of worry between her eyebrows grew prominent.

"Clive, what are you doing?"

Kane woke in the morning to the same issues he hadn't quite figured out how to fix the past several days. He had nothing but time but didn't like to waste it.

Kane drove back into town, annoyed that he had to be around people two days in a row and yearning to be busy with work and, most importantly, alone. With no internet set up at his

residence and what was beginning to seem like a glaring lack of knowledge, the library was his next destination. It was a small brick building penned in by perfectly trimmed hedges and potted geraniums. Kane felt sorry for the nature hemmed in by the concrete, the trees planted in square plots, unable to ever reach each other. He felt a strange ache for their solitary, lonely state.

Maud O'Malley was the youngest librarian Broken Pier had ever hired, which said more about the local demographics than Maud herself. She was 30 years old, unmarried, and well-educated. Maud was the type of social butterfly that flittered about her circles with festivity before happily retreating to her own introverted seclusion. She was lonely, that much she could admit to herself, and she endeavored to inoculate herself regularly with good conversation and lively activities. It kept her fairly distracted from the nagging pangs. She was of average height and build, with mid-length light brown hair and mirthful eyes. She had moved to the town years ago for reasons that never came to fruition but had found her degree in library science finally had a purpose. Under the tutelage of the retiring librarian Charlene Haines, Maud had come into her own. She worked most days quietly but diligently for an old community that still appreciated what pages of a book could offer. She had taken steps to take the library out of the brick-and-mortar building, orchestrated community book sales, and had begun what she hoped would become an annual community book festival each summer.

Today, Maud leaned back in her chair and sighed, her eyes in need of respite from the computer screen. She watched the spring sunshine dance on the concrete steps as it slipped through the branches and leaves. She anticipated a lunch break on the lawn in the open air with her newest read in hand. A man coming up the steps caught her attention. Tall, with dark hair and beard, a T-shirt that allowed the small tattoo on his left arm to escape. He had a thoughtful,



faraway look in his eye and a cinch in his brow. She had seen him before, and she liked the quiet look of him. The man came into the library, making the necessary eye contact and head nod toward Maud that was expected for strangers.

“Hello, can I help you?” She said, smiling, happy for the social interruption in her largely isolated day.

“I need to use the internet,” he said briskly.

“Of course, the Wi-Fi information is here, desks are over there. Need a library card?”

He stopped, considering.

“You don’t have to have one to use the library Wi-Fi, as you know.” She smiled, indicating she remembered him from his small silent stints in the building before. “However, you may find actual books to your benefit at some point.” She finished with a smile and a shrug.

He nodded. “Probably a good idea.”

“Indeed. What’s your name? I’ll get one started for you.”

“Clive Kane.”

“Nice to meet you, Clive. I’m Maud. Why don’t you give me your I.D., and I can input the information?”

He handed over his I.D. “Not much internet service at the house. Hope they work on that.” He offered.

Maud nodded as she tapped away at the computer. “That’s the way it is out here, middle of nowhere Michigan. What brought you here?”

Shrugging, Kane said, “Cheap housing and low cost of living.”

“Unromantic and practical. Fair enough. Here is your card and I.D. Let me know if you need help logging in.” She smiled openly at him. Her own quiet loneliness seemed to reach out

to him, to his appearance of strength, with the square of his shoulders, the confidence edged with something else. There was an awkwardness almost completely hidden except for the keen observer; something in him whispered to Maud that perhaps they could find a common comfort in each other. The way that he stood seemed to communicate a man sure of himself yet still finding his footing in uncertain territory. As she watched Clive Kane, who looked like he had just walked in off a mountain, maneuver himself within the four walls of a library stuck in the 90s, Maud found herself pleasantly interested.

He set up his laptop amongst the sea of desks until she noticed him looking her way a few times.

“Need help?” She asked across the space.

“I’m sorry to bother you again, but I can’t seem to log in.”

“No worries! I have nothing but time,” replied Maud affably, walking over.

She leaned over Kane, her light brown hair lightly sweeping over his shoulder. She quickly found the problem but was roused by Kane clearing his throat. Maud suddenly became aware of how close she was to him. She stood up straight, slowly.

“The password, we change it every couple of weeks. That’s all.” She said, slightly embarrassed, pointing at the Wi-Fi card she had given him and turning back to her own desk.

Kane strolled out of the library, a stack of papers in hand. He had printed out most of the information he thought he would need and skimmed it over distractedly as he made his way down the concrete steps. Kane’s shoulder suddenly made contact with Glenn Moore, sauntering in the opposite direction.

“Watch your step!” Glenn shouted and cursed. The cigarette that was in his mouth fell to the ground from the collision.

Kane stepped back. “Excuse me.”

“Look who it is!” Glenn stopped, looking from Kane to the building, a disingenuous grin growing on his pale face. He put his hand firmly on Kane’s chest. “What were you doing at the library?”

Kane frowned as he looked at Glenn, then at the hand on his chest, then back to Glenn. Glenn’s face went a shade paler than its natural complexion, and he removed his hand quickly.

Glenn lit up a new cigarette, trying to laugh off the uncomfortable interaction, as he walked up the steps toward the door and away from Kane. “You just don’t seem like a reader, that’s all,” he said over his shoulder.

### Camp Pendleton, California

*2008*

Midnight on a Friday night, and Kane was reading alone in his room. His roommate was at his girlfriend’s for the weekend. It seemed like everyone else on or near the base had left for the weekend. The usual factory-level noise that was Oceanside during the week had settled to an almost ominous quiet. A subtle reminder that beyond the buildings, the base, and the war machines was the unforgiving terrain of Southern California. Kane found this reminder peaceful. Growing up in the West under the vague watch of a loving but typically busy father, he had spent a great deal of time alone. He explored in all kinds of weather and got into the kind of trouble that would either educate or kill you. He had survived his free childhood, and now Kane felt his best in the quiet reminder that somewhere out there was open space and nothing but pure

possibility. He had nothing against grabbing a beer with a few friends; last weekend, he'd even gone on a date. It didn't work out; his mountain man persona and her LA pretensions were too much at odds. After that experience, it was difficult to resist the invitation to spend an evening alone reading old and familiar words.

His cell phone rang. A quick glance at the screen told him that one of his own was calling.

"Sergeant Cooper?" he answered.

"Hello, lieutenant." Cooper's voice said on the other side of the line. Loud music and voices were heard in the background. "I deeply apologize for getting an officer involved, sir. However, the team is out tonight, the staff sergeant isn't answering... and the boys have gotten a little out of hand."

Kane sighed. "What's the damage?"

"No NJP necessary at the moment," she said with a chuckle. "They're just being obnoxious. The issue is Martinez was the DD for the night ..." she hesitated. "And he is currently emptying the contents of his stomach in the nearest bush. I don't drink, but I drove my bike. I'm afraid of where the cab will end up if I just drop them in one, and ..."

"Where are you?"

"San Diego, gaslight district"

Kane sighed. "At least you haven't made it to Tijuana yet."

"Right? I thought I was doing pretty well keeping them on U.S. soil."

"Send me an address, I'll be there soon," Kane averred as he shoved his feet into his boots.

He had sounded intentionally gruff, even annoyed. Inwardly, he smiled to himself. At least his people had called him. Other teams had already gotten in trouble for things like this. It didn't take much for a seemingly harmless night out to turn into someone losing rank, a divorce, a smear on the reputation of the team as a whole and the officers in charge in particular. He was proud of them, immature children that they were.

It wasn't difficult to find the group. Cooper had used the half hour of time waiting for Kane to sober them all up as best she could with fresh night air. Kane parked on the road and walked toward the group of Marines, mostly sitting on the sidewalk outside the bar, giggling like high schoolers sneaking out of class.

Cooper waved him over. O'Hara saw him next and tried to stand at attention. The quick movement being rather difficult for him in his current state, he soon found himself falling into the shrubbery. Martinez was being collected by his annoyed wife.

Kane nodded to her. "Good to see you, Mrs. Martinez. Good luck."

"Good evening, lieutenant," answered Maria with a sigh. "Isaac is the only one who will need luck this weekend." She turned to Cooper. "Thanks for calling, Annie."

Kane nodded. He turned to the boys. "Schrock, Custer, Dean, O'Hara, get in my car. Now."

They looked around, disoriented and immediately nervous, hearing the voice of an officer. A few murmurs of "Aye Aye Sir" were heard as they scrambled to the car.

"Sergeant?" he said loudly, stopping Cooper before she walked away.

"Yes, sir?"

Kane held out his hand, "Good work."

Cooper smiled.

A commotion behind Kane brought the moment of camaraderie to an end.

They turned to see Schrock getting his face pummeled by a man twice his size.

“You thought you could get away with putting your hands on my girl? I said I’d find you, you piece of...!” A slurred drawl of curses and insults punctuated each hit.

In a matter of moments, Kane’s men were fighting the assailant’s friends in the street. Drunk and inarticulate, the fight was physically messy and ridiculous to watch. The high and tight haircuts made it clear that these were other servicemen. Kane had to end this now. He grabbed the nearest man like a rag doll and threw him into the closest bush.

“Knock it off!”

Cooper grabbed for O’Hara, trying to pull him away from the fight, the result of which ended up with a distracted O’Hara getting hit squarely in the jaw. Cooper punched the offender in retaliation, a man an entire foot taller than her. She reeled back in pain as her knuckles made contact with his skull.

Kane went for the instigator. Grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. The man whirled around and landed a fist on Kane’s nose. Blood instantly flowed freely down his face. Kane looked around at the chaos; they were like kids in a schoolyard fight, and his people were losing. *This is absurd.*

Kane took a step back. If they were going to fight, they were going to win. “Schrock, stop getting your ass handed to you and go for the scrawny one. Dean, take Glasses over there!” He roared through the river of blood pouring from his nose. “O’Hara, Cooper, put that sailor on the ground!”

The authority in Kane’s voice roused his people, and in a matter of seconds, they had reorganized themselves. Schrock stopped trying to prove himself by getting his face repeatedly

punched by a bigger man and rolled away to take down the other guy. Dean stopped flailing about wildly and began fighting with purpose. O'Hara landed a solid hit, while Cooper used all of her five foot, four inches, 130 pounds, to ram her body against the sailor and knock him off his feet.

"That barrel-chested boy is mine," said Kane, the blood still streaming down his face.

"Let's go!" the boy yelled, squaring up for a new fight, flexing knuckles splatted with blood.

An abrupt and unhinged swing made Kane's opening easy. He went for the tackle, knocking them both into the hedge. His goal was simply to subdue this drunk tractor of a man, but the boy wouldn't give up. Kane had landed two hits standing over him when he found himself swathed in red and blue lights, the meaning of which only registered after he heard the sound of the sirens. He cursed under his breath.

### Broken Pier, Michigan

#### *Present Day*

The air before rain has a particular scent, as though it was designed as a reminder to prepare yourself. Find a place to be warm, stoke your fire, and be still. It's about to pour. Kane sipped a coffee for his makeshift dinner as he tinkered with the cupboards he had just installed in the kitchen. Simple, oak, and refurbished.

Through the open window, he heard the first droplets. The breeze from over the lake mingled with the smell of French roast and the scent of a wood fire burning in the hearth. Kane was getting rather proud of how far he had come on this place. He was still nowhere near

finished, but with no previous renovation experience, he had done all the work himself. He didn't need help. The idea of this both bolstered his pride and left him feeling uneasy.

He went to each cupboard, tightening the screws and making sure they opened and closed with ease. He heard a trickle of water and peeked outside. He hadn't really looked into the eaves like he should have. No doubt they were overflowing, full of debris. Too late tonight, but if he left it alone, it would cause problems. He sat his mug down on the counter and picked it up again, surprised by the pool of water that had formed. *Oh no.*

Water was pooling in the ceiling, making its way down the wall and through his new cabinets. The papers he had printed from the library lay in a puddle he only just noticed on the counter. Ruined. Kane inwardly kicked himself for his moment of self-satisfaction, but he was too busy searching for tarps to cover the roof to completely beat himself up. Finding he had none, the only solution was to hope the hardware store was open.

It wasn't. Kane got out and banged on the door, hoping against all hope that someone was inside.

He yelled, "Hello? Anyone there?" He tried to peek through the windows, rain streaming down his face. He heard a sound, like a slip on the gravel, and turned to see a man righting his footing, a baseball bat raised to strike.

Kane took a step back, holding up his hands to show he was no threat.

"No vagabonds allowed here!" The man yelled, the hood of his yellow rain jacket hanging down over his head.

Kane kept his arms up. "No threat! No threat here, sir. I have a leak in my roof, and I need some tarps."



The man stopped. He removed his hood, and a big red beard with flecks of silver peeked out. Through the rain and the mist in the falling darkness, he gave the strong impression of a fisherman who had lost his boat. He peered up at Kane through the onslaught of water. His short stature might have made some think less of him, but the square of his shoulders and the look in his eye gave one the impression that he was capable of whatever he set his mind to.

“What’s your name, Son?”

“Clive Kane.”

“Who are your people?”

Kane paused. “I have no people.”

“Where are you from?” asked the man.

“I live down Birch Drive,” Kane said.

“You the one that bought the cottage?”

“Yes.”

The man nodded. “Are you hungry?”

Kane didn’t know what to say.

“I asked you a question,” the man said.

“I suppose so.”

The man finally dropped his baseball bat to his shoulder. Kane dropped his arms. The threat of violence seemed somewhat lifted.

The man nodded. He chuckled as if to himself. “I was expecting to fight a pack of dang raccoons out here. Wasn’t expecting you.” He looked up at Kane’s six foot five inches and nodded, clearly comfortable that he could take him should the need present itself. Kane believed in his unspoken confidence.

“Well, okay. Come inside.” He started to walk away around the back of the building.

“Sir, if I could just buy some tarps, I’ll be out of your hair.” Kane still wasn’t sure if he should be wary of the man. But he assumed the other had more reason than he to be standoffish. Kane was the one banging on his shop doors after dark, after all.

The man chuckled and rubbed his bald head with his hand. “I don’t got no hair for you to be in! Besides, my shops closed. I’m not working, but I’ll let you borrow some. Come meet the missus. She passes all the final judgments around here.”

Kane hesitated. He thought of the current leak in his kitchen. The water that was currently pooling on his countertop, the weeks of work down the drain. He did not have much of a choice at this point.

Behind the hardware, nestled amongst some trees and a garden in its prime of life, stood an old brick house.

The man stopped on his porch. He held out his hand. Kane shook it.

“Roland Haines.” The man nodded as if to himself, then went inside.

“Boots,” Roland said, taking off his own.

Kane followed instructions.

“Char, come make a friend. This is Clive Kane.”

A woman came from around the corner, holding a few plates. Her blonde and silver-speckled hair was in a loose bun. Laugh lines and the slow, consistent signs of the years lit up her face as she smiled.

“Hello there,” she said, looking Kane up and down with kind blue eyes, seeming to decide something, then smiling.

“I don’t mean to intrude; I need to buy a few tarps.”

“Is your roof leaking now?” Asked Roland.

“Yes.”

Roland nodded. “Char, what do you think?”

Charlene nodded. “Sounds like dinner on the run to me.” She peeked back into the dining room. “Maud, you don’t mind the interruption, do you, hon?”

Maud O’Malley came into view and smiled.

“Not at all.”

Kane looked around him, surprised to see the familiar face. However, the sense of what was quickly happening and his lack of control in it all slowly but surely dawned on him.

Roland disappeared; Charlene started packing up the food that had clearly just been ready to be consumed.

“It’s good to see you again, Clive Kane,” said Maud. “I don’t know if you remember me ....”

Kane did remember her; her open smile, the laughter in her eyes as though she was seeing something that amused her. She had been wearing a floral dress the last time he was at the library. Now she wore a comfortable cream T-shirt and loose jeans. She was lovely before, but today was comfortable. Something about her pleasant ease dared to put him at rest amidst the other parts of his brain that warned of unknown territory. “Maud, from the library,” he said flatly.

“Mr. Kane, do you like shepherd's pie?” Charlene asked from the kitchen.

“What? Just Kane. You can call me Kane. And, yes, I do, but ...” Kane was confused. This new situation had completely knocked him off his guard.

Roland came back in from the garage, handing tarps to Maud. “You got a rain jacket, Maud?”

“Of course.”

“Good, you’re gonna need it.”

Kane understood suddenly that they were all intending to come with him. “Thank you, but ....”

Charlene handed him warm Tupperware. “Hold these while I put my boots on, dear.” She steadied herself with his shoulder.

Off to the side, Maud slid on her red rain jacket. Kane got the feeling her light laughter was directed toward his clear bewilderment at the situation, and he looked at her sideways.

Maud smiled like she was in on a pleasant joke.

“I’m gonna warm the truck up. It’s a cold night,” Roland said, heading out the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Charlene said after him.

Kane and Maud were alone. “Honestly, this is not needed. I got this.”

Maud smiled and walked toward the door, stopping near Kane to wipe a stray water droplet from his coat.

Maud shrugged. “You don’t get to decide whether or not people like you.”

He looked down at her. “I don’t want to inconvenience anyone.”

“Of course not. But won’t it be more fun with friends? Let’s go.”

He gave in. “All right.”

The four of them made quick work of what would have taken Kane a lot of time and frustration to complete on his own. They quickly had the tarps spread across his roof, and Kane hoped for the best. He sighed and wondered if it was relief or discouragement; he wasn’t quite sure.

“Would you all like to come inside?” he asked awkwardly, looking around at the three wet figures standing in the rain. He regretted the invitation as soon as he had said it. He had lived so apart from others he hadn’t entertained in a long time. In his current circumstance, he didn’t have to consider what others might think of the way he lived or what his home looked like.

“I’m not used to having guests...” he said as they stepped inside.

“This is a lovely bachelor’s house if I ever saw one,” Charlene said as she took off her jacket. “Reminds me of when I first met Roland. Do you have a kettle? Tea would be perfect right about now.”

“Just coffee, I can make some.”

Charlene patted him on the back. “I know my way around a kitchen.”

“You wasted some time. But that’s about the worst of it,” Roland said. “I’ll call some buddies and have ’em out here to look at your roof.” He took a good look around the room, the work in progress home, and nodded to himself.

“I can’t believe I hadn’t really taken a good look at the roof. Entirely stupid of me.”

“No man is an island.” He nodded at Kane before following Charlene into the kitchen.

Kane went to the fireplace and stocked the smoldering ash back to life before adding a log. He watched as Maud stepped carefully around his sparse living room, her arms folded comfortably across her chest in the cold. She noticed his small stack of books on the floor next to his sleeping bag and knelt before them.

Maud spoke without looking at him. “A poetry lover?”

Kane watched her flip through the pages slowly like they were an old friend. Her light brown hair falling into her blue-green eyes.

“My dad always said you’d never be alone if you had a poet in your pocket,” he offered.

“I think I would like your dad.”

Kane pointed to the book she had picked up. “You picked my mother’s favorite. She liked Kipling.”

Maud sighed. “How lovely. He writes with such fervor. And if you like Kipling, you like him for his own sake. He’s not a popular poet to enjoy. She must have a mind of her own.”

“She did. Yes.”

“And what does your dad like?”

“My dad was a romantic. He liked Tennyson and Longfellow.”

Maud put her hands to her heart and tilted her head, “How beautiful. And you?”

“I read what they read. I’m not sure if I like it for itself or for them.”

“That’s as good a reason as any.”

Charlene’s call to coffee interrupted the moment.

Kane almost offered his hand to Maud, who was sitting comfortably on her knees on the floor, the pile of books next to her. He stopped and turned back toward the wood stove.

Maud cleared her throat. “Coffee?”

Kane nodded.

The small group of four stood close to the wood stove. Roland asked pointed questions about the cottage, the effect of which could not help but draw Kane out of himself. Before he knew it, his shoulders were less strained, relaxed even. He noticed now they felt sore from the strain he had kept them under with his physical rigidity. They made plans for the next day. Roland had already called a few of his aforementioned friends tomorrow, nine in the morning. Kane was in a position to simply say thank you and allow the man to continue his help.

Roland stopped at the door and turned to Kane. “The foundation and roof. Get those two things settled first. Same in life. Get your foundation in order.” Roland nodded again as if to himself, waved absentmindedly, and left.

Kane stood alone at the door and watched what had been three strangers a few hours ago pull out of the long driveway with the promise that they would be back the next day. He watched until the dim taillights were swallowed into the forest. He leaned against the doorframe and listened to the rain. It maintained a steady downpour, somehow adding life to the dark forest encasing him as it came down in torrents. He stood there, feeling a small ache at closing his door to this natural music and shutting out the very alive and active world that was surrounding him. What waited for him inside was simply a silent and cold dwelling, one that held necessities but very little else. For a few moments of time, the small space of his home had been alive with conversation and people in a way that he had forgotten existed.

### Camp Pendleton, California

*2008*

Kane entered the hangar to the familiar smell of diesel. He walked over to the Cobra, running his hand down the nose in a familiar fashion.

“Lieutenant Kane,” a voice spoke from behind him.

He turned and, seeing the rank, saluted. “Captain Ambrose.”

“At ease, no need to be formal. I am to understand this isn’t your first rodeo?”

“Yes, sir. I was the gunner in my last deployment.”

“Great. I appreciate the experience. Introduce me to the team.”

Broken Pier, Michigan

*Present Day*

She stood at the front porch looking out at the sand cranes. Those beautiful, majestic birds, backlit by a red sunrise, came after stormy days. Her long black hair reached her mid-back. He waited at the door, not wanting to disturb the scene, knowing it wouldn't last very long.

"You know, they mate for life." She said, not turning to look at him.

He quietly replied, "I know."

"Does that make you sad?"

He thought for a moment. "No, it just..."

"What, Son?"

"Just seems like one will end up with a life of loneliness."

She shook her head. "Just a moment." She patted his hand. "Just a moment of loneliness. Then, forever."

Kane woke cold on the hardwood, the flannel sleeping bag doing little to keep out the bite of a chilling floor. He shook his head to clear it. He needed a mat, or maybe even a real bed, but that was far down the agenda.

Memories of his mother weighed heavy in his heart as he went through the motions of making a quick breakfast. He splattered the eggs needlessly, overheated the iron skillet, burned the butter, and had to start afresh.

Anniversaries. Too many uncomfortable anniversaries, he thought to himself. Kane wished to forget the calendar, at least the internal one, the dreams that crept into his sleeping hours during the times of the year he had been most vulnerable. Most people only thought of the good ones, weddings, and births, happy memories of bright moments. But then there were the



anniversaries of tragedies, of deaths, of the days that led to wasted years. She had left them too soon, and despite the 30 years that had passed, it was never something he could think about without feeling a dull ache in his chest. The ache that he felt every day as a little boy while his mother withered away. His father had almost lost himself after it all. The powerlessness, the lack of control, the absolute void that was the place that Carolyn Kane once resided. That tall, tanned woman, her calm dark brown eyes almost at odds with her wild black hair, beautifully matching her independent mind. A force to be reckoned with, a peace to aspire to. Her presence was one that could never be replicated. His father had known that, too. The knowledge was almost too much for him. A young Clive Kane watched as his father sank deep into the abyss of grief. Somehow, he had found his way out, mostly. Kane wasn't sure what caused it, but one day, his father looked up and seemed to see the broken, grieving little boy for the first time in months. Life got a little brighter after that, but there were bouts. Anniversaries and moments when his father went somewhere else entirely. Kane never forgot the pain he had witnessed at so young an age.

The incoming deluge of strangers at his door that morning forced Kane out of the fog. If he could have avoided the situation entirely, he would have. Apparently, when Roland Haines suggests something, it's as good as done. Several trucks rolled up, and a mess of men joined Roland in standing outside and critiquing the roof. Kane could barely make himself presentable before his house was surrounded by half a dozen retirees making judgments on the cottage. One kicked at the foundation. Another rubbed his gray beard thoughtfully as he walked around the entire exterior. The others stood in a huddle, making gestures and talking in low tones.

Kane walked onto his front porch. "Morning, gentlemen." He said it with confidence, but inwardly, Kane wished to go back inside and shut the door. He willed himself to take another step forward.

Roland Haines offered a firm handshake. "Morning, Kane. Let me make the introductions. This here is Bobby Dean, that's Walt Ferguson, Douglas Gatling, Samuel Harte, and Malcolm Ritter. Most of us are retired and it doesn't sit well with having nothing to do, except for myself and Walt, but we don't do much anyway. Fellas, this is Clive Kane."

The men nearly looked Kane up and down, though it wasn't so obvious. He was keenly aware that he was being assessed.

Bobby Dean stepped forward. "How much experience do you have with this type of work, Son?"

"Nearly none, sir."

Bobby nodded. "It shows."

Douglas Gatling clapped Bobby on the shoulder. "No time like the present to learn. What do you know?"

"I have a background in engineering, sometime in the military, currently working remotely."

The men nodded, still assessing.

"Have you ever rebuilt anything?" Bobby asked, his hands stroking his long gray beard thoughtfully.

Kane pointed with his coffee mug toward the blue truck parked nearby. "That Highboy right there."

"Well, that's a start." Bobby allowed. His eyebrows arched, showing his appreciation.

Walt Ferguson stepped up. “What branch?”

“Marines.”

“What did you do?”

Kane took a slow drink from his mug before he answered. “I spent some time in Afghanistan. Wasted the rest of my time in the States.”

The men nodded. Walt spoke up, “Well, you’re in good company. You got three sailors here, two Marines, and one soldier.”

“Enough chit-chatting. Let’s get to work.” Roland walked near the base of the cottage. “Kane, you’ve neglected the foundation.”

#### Camp Pendleton, California

*2008*

Kane had respected his previous captain. Captain Reynolds was a good man. He led well and only went home after the work was done, often being the last to leave. He wasn’t much for talking, and they never saw him after work, as the only person he cared about seemed to be his wife. He had left the military at her request, and the last anyone knew, they were living the dream in Alaska, homesteading with their six children. He had been respected, as well as seen as an oddity. Kane had held within himself a sort of quiet coveting of Captain Reynolds’s life. The solemnity of it, the independence. The character of a man like that stood out in a place like the military. All but the most stalwart were shepherded into boxes. It took little intellectual thought to strip people of their individuality and instead place them in labeled groups. Generally, they were all simply put into their personal MOS context, with all the cultural connotations that came with them. Captain Reynolds had stood apart from all of that.

Captain Ambrose was of a different breed of captain entirely. Kane found himself having to consciously adjust his expectations. He was classically handsome and charismatic, with an ever-so-subtle southern accent dripped from his South Carolina lips.

Kane and Captain Ambrose walked around the Cobra as Sergeant Cooper walked them through what the team had been working on. The captain asked thoughtful questions. Kane acknowledged to himself that everything seemed professional, tidy, and neat with Captain Ambrose. So, he couldn't put his finger on why he was uncomfortable.

Kane couldn't help but think Ambrose was slippery, even though he couldn't convince himself as to why. The main thing Kane noticed after several interactions with him was the way Ambrose said a great many things without saying anything of importance. The man was used to holding court, and he liked it. The crew would often crowd around at the end of the day while Ambrose regaled them with one of his war stories. Kane listened at first. Then, he stayed around out of respect. Soon, he began making excuses for having to leave the end-of-day story times. Listeners seemed to feel engaged, important even. Kane caught himself nodding along in the beginning before realizing he was agreeing with nothing but emptiness. He didn't appreciate men who embellished and glorified personal feats. That was the excuse he gave himself. Each story the captain told left Kane with a sick feeling. He pushed down the creeping idea that it was something more.

Broken Pier, Michigan

*Present Day*

Bobby Dean handed Kane a large plate piled high with homemade food he hadn't made. Steam rose in soft curls in the chill evening air. Some of the wives of the men had shown up near the end of the day and brought with them a feast. The smell of baked beans, sweet corn, rolls, and barbecued venison lit up the incoming night. Wiping sweat from his brow with his free hand, he wondered how the old men could keep up. They walked a little slower at the end of the day and greeted their wives' offering with gratitude, but otherwise, they had kept time with the younger man. Kane offered beers. He was becoming a fan of the Michigan microbrews and was thankful he had stocked up on Shorts, Bellaire Brown. It was all he had in the way of hospitality at the moment. They sat around the fire, using logs Kane hadn't yet chopped as their seats.

The conversation throughout the day had been little more than a few words here and there. Some bantering, grunts, and nods or swift shakes of the head. He looked around at the six men enjoying a well-earned dinner and realized how strange this was to him. Kane was surrounded by people, yet it felt secure.

As Roland climbed into his truck, he invited him for dinner the next week. "Charlene's idea, she says I don't get to have all the fun meeting new friends."

"I really couldn't."

"Sure you could."

"You've helped enough. I appreciate it." Kane shook Roland's hand, attempting to end the conversation.

"Tuesday it is."

"Excuse me?"

“We’ll see you Tuesday. About six.” Roland started his truck, abruptly ending the conversation.

Kane preferred not to dream. Too often, it took him to the past. The places he wished he could let go. Places he wanted to forget. Tonight’s dream brought him to a haunting memory. The space around him was dark, cold, tasting like antiseptic. An incessant pounding kept him up at night. Peace never rested her fair head in this place. He knew why he was here, and he still couldn’t bring himself to regret it. He never would. He beat his own head against his pillow in frustration and hoped he would be out of this hellhole in time to see his father.

He was woken up by her, but he knew he was still asleep, fading from one dream into the next. She sat on the floor next to his sleeping bag and looked through one of her old books that he kept near. He watched her quietly, aware of the fact that he was now small, just a boy of seven years again. If it was a pleasant moment, it would pass too soon.

“You don’t read these.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he replied, “I do.”

She shook her head. “Not like I taught you.”

He watched as she ran her fingers familiarly over the page.

“This one,” she said. “I think you need this one.”

She stood up and walked to the door.

He felt anxiety as she walked away. “Where are you going? It’s dark out there, cold.”

She waved her hand dismissively, opened the door, and faded into the night.

Kane dressed for dinner. He had picked up a bottle of red wine and a small bouquet of flowers for Mrs. Haines. He now realized he had neglected a more important part: making sure he had clothing that was clean and free from debris. He found his least dirty pair of jeans and managed to pull on the best green flannel he had in his closet.

Walking through his living room, he noticed one of his books open, lying flat and with the pages to the floor, stressing the spine. He knelt to right it and saw it was the Kipling volume. Kane paused as he looked at the page. “If” was written across the top. Kane read it, the words coming out in quiet whispers.

“If you can keep your head when all about  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowances for their doubting, too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,  
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:  
If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to be broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools – ”

Kane stopped reading and closed the book. He cinched his eyebrows and shook his head. In a far-off memory, he heard his mother reading those words to him. A grassy field, a quiet day, the feel of cold ground beneath his bare feet, and her voice. Enunciating each syllable, teaching him lessons he didn't yet know the meaning of.

Maud came to dinner on Tuesday evening, as she always did. This time, Kane, the interesting stranger, was sitting at the table engaged with Charlene. It felt a little like a trap, but she laughed at her friend's attempt. A thirty-year-old woman like herself was more than capable of maneuvering her own love life and friend groups. At least, that was what she told herself. But Charlene had been a mother hen since the first moment she had walked into this town. She had saved her from horrible choices and guided her toward the light, and there was no stopping her now. However, she still felt herself having to consciously push down a pang of anxiety, the one that crept up every time she attempted to get to know a new man.

Maud brought the last dish of food to the table and sat down with a smile, observing the scene in front of her.

“You have lovely taste in wine, my friend,” Charlene complimented Kane as she topped off the four glasses.

Roland gave a silent nod of approval as he took a generous sip.

Kane shrugged. “You live in California long enough, and eventually, you have to pick a hobby.”

“Surfing wasn't your thing?” Maud smiled across the table.



“Tried it a few times, but I prefer my feet on dry land.”

“Ah, you need control.” Maud was attempting to see what she could get out of him by this playful jab.

“That old ancient myth we all chase,” remarked Charlene.

Kane took a sip of his wine. “You don’t think we have control over our lives?”

Charlene smiled at him. “Not much. But I think Maud is better with words than I am.”

Kane looked at her and raised his eyebrows expectantly. “Oh?”

Maud thought for a moment. She leaned toward him from across the table, a smile on her lips. “I find we can control very little, and it always comes in the form of responsibility. Most of us abdicate it in lieu of chasing what isn’t ours to take on.”

“I suppose I can’t find anything to disagree with there.”

“Please, Kane, flirt on your own time,” Roland said, then laughed at his own joke.

Maud laughed too, a little ring of silver in the air. “I don’t think that was intended flattery, Roland.” Maud changed the subject. “Since we’re on the subject of your life, why don’t you tell us a little about it?” She noticed the question caused Kane to grow still.

“What do you want to know?”

Roland spoke first, “For starters, where are you from? Not Michigan, I’d wager not even the Midwest.”

Kane nodded. “Wyoming, originally. Born and raised by a ranch hand. Then college, then the Marines.”

“What brought you here?”

“I was looking for someplace new after settling my dad’s affairs. I took a long road trip and decided this place was as good as any.”

Maud was curious. “What made you leave the military?”

Kane took a sip of his wine. It dawned on Maud that he was giving himself time to consider his answer.

Finally, he said, “It wasn’t the place for me anymore. I knew it, and they knew it.”

“I’m sorry,” Maud said.

“Nothing for you to be sorry for,” said Kane.

Roland looked at him intently, “Sometimes things run their course, don’t they?”

“They surely do,” replied Kane.

Maud was sunk into a pleasant observational silence as the others spoke, looking from Kane to the others but always coming back to Kane. She watched the scene play out in front of her and wondered about the narrative that was being presented by this man, or perhaps the lack of one. She wasn’t quite sure what story she was reading with him because Kane shared nothing but a simple outline. She considered most of the people she encountered, and she met many from different walks of life in her line of work. There was a similarity in most. They presented the story they would like others to believe. Whether true in part or sprinkled with fallacy, everyone had an angle. Maud usually read people’s individual stories quickly, then looked for what was between the lines. It wasn’t like this with Kane. It was the supreme lack of a story offered that interested her most. He answered questions yet offered little depth in the politest fashion. It was an empty, open hand, held up in defense but ready to react.

As the evening waned, Maud turned to Kane.

“I live down the street. Would you walk me home?”

Kane blinked. Then, he righted himself. “Of course.” He turned to Charlene and Roland and thanked them for the night.

Out in the chill air of the summer night Maud held her light jacket close around her shoulders. She watched Kane close. He seemed to be moving slowly and intentionally. His shoulders were back, but his hands were buried deep into his pockets.

Maud allowed a few moments of silence to grow between them before she ventured to ask more questions. She wondered if getting him moving and more private would make him comfortable enough to reveal anything more about himself. She could admit the physical attraction on her side. Even without touching, his tall, strong presence was warm near her. However, she couldn't allow herself to dwell on this curiosity of a man until she understood a few things. She was getting too old to be making the same mistakes over again.

She ventured a beginning to a conversation. "Thanks for walking with me. I love walking. I just prefer not to be alone at night. Old fashioned of me, I know."

"I don't mind," replied Kane.

They walked a few more steps, the sound of their shoes on the pavement and waves from the lake in the distance filling the silence.

"So, your father was a ranch hand in Wyoming..." Maud ventured.

"Yes."

"What about your mother?"

"She died when I was seven," he answered, looking forward.

She put her hand on her heart. "Oh, I am so sorry." She let the silence fill in the space a touch, then pressed on. "Did you have any other women influences in your life?"

"Not really, no. I was largely raised by cowboys. It wasn't a bad life for a young boy." Kane shrugged and tried to share a side smile.

She looked up at him out of the corner of her eyes. “But your dad was a romantic... at least, that’s what the books in your home suggest.”

He laughed lightly. “Yeah, a romantic cowboy. I’m not sure if that’s a contradiction or....”

Maud finished for him. “Perfection.”

Kane shrugged again, but there was a softening to his smile. His restless walk had become more relaxed.

“How long have you lived here?” Kane asked, clearing his throat.

“About eight years. I’m originally from Alaska.”

“Why did you ever leave?”

Maud sighed. “Well, I was young and foolish once and still am. Foolish, that is. I moved here for a boy when I was just a silly girl myself. We met in college, we got engaged, I moved to his hometown, and found out very quickly how terribly wrong I had been.” Maud shuddered involuntarily.

Kane stopped. “Did he hurt you?”

Maud looked to the side. “In many different ways. None of them are the kind that can be proved in court. I was the one who saw red flags and thought it looked like a carnival ride. I have a lot to blame myself for, too. I am just thankful no one walked down an aisle.”

“Can I ask why you’re still here and not back with family?”

“The short answer is, as much as I love the great white North, I don’t have anyone there anymore. My family is spread out all over the country, and my parents are long gone. The longer answer is I made a small and unlikely group of friends here. The Haines are just a few of them, and you’ll have to meet the others some time. I love my job. I’ve really made something of our little library. And the book festival, it’s in a few weeks. You’ll have to come!” Maud thought for

a moment, then added, "...bumping into my old fiancé every now and then is probably more painful to his pride than it could ever be to mine."

Maud slowed her stride as they came closer to her home. She felt like she had thawed him a degree.

"This is me," Maud said, displaying her small historic home. The porch was full of pots. "I container garden, it's a rental." She shrugged.

Kane nodded and seemed to take it in. He surprised her with a question.

"I would like to take another walk with you sometime. If you're interested."

She looked up at him, a little surprised. "I am. I would. I mean, I would like that."

Kane nodded. His eyes smiled, but his mouth betrayed nothing. "I'll bump into you at the library?"

Maud had collected herself from her surprise. "Definitely. Or... you could have my number and ensure it."

Kane woke and readied himself for the day. His days were beginning to take on a more orderly format. With other people involved in his life, gone were the days of shirtless wandering and untied boots. This cottage, this new plane he had searched for, with all new people, was beginning to feel comfortable, if not safe. At least a whole lot less like a place to hide. He began to live differently. Kane planned out his days, worked diligently, and spent most evenings with people at his home or in town. He kept a few items of clothing clean, stocked his kitchen with guests in mind, and in short order had gained a few extra pounds. The fresh cookies, bread, and shared meals had added to his waistline.

Charlene had patted his stomach lightly one evening. “Happy pounds,” she said and winked.

He would have been embarrassed if he hadn’t been so surprised.

On this cool, sunny dawn day, Kane wandered his beaten paths, the places in his woods he liked best to walk. A place that had been so foreign to him was now beginning to take shape under his feet as he took care of it. Tended to it and loved it. Today he was looking for standing dead trees in need of coming down. It was a natural way to clean out the forest and stock firewood while leaving younger trees to thrive. It also encouraged old growth and made for a happier, healthier ecosystem for all. He went through more firewood lately due to more bodies sitting around the fire pit in the evenings. It was not a bad reason to need to do more work, and chopping wood with his father’s maul made him feel closer to his roots.

Kane spent the afternoon cutting down and then logging dead trees with the chainsaw. He hauled the logs to the woodshed in preparation for splitting them another day. He took a break in the afternoon, sitting by the edge of where his porch used to be. He had been slowly taking the porch apart in an effort to rebuild.

All around him, the land had come alive in just a few short weeks. When he had bought the cottage, winter was only just giving up her cold grip. The plants were brown and black, and he wondered what kind of life they had left in them. The sky was a dull matte gray, with the lake matching its mood. The weather had resembled Kane in many ways, broken down, tired, almost beaten to death by the season before. Today, the scene was quite different. The green was pervasive, overwhelming, all-encompassing. Being in the woods was like being swallowed by an emerald ocean. The wind blew through the poplars like waves, and the sound reminded Kane of

the sea. In the early mornings, he woke to the aching call of the mourning dove, and he worked to the chirps of robins. As the world had come alive around him, he had begun to live again within it.

Kane took a cold drink of water and inspected the dead shrubbery that resided alongside his home. While everything in the surrounding area flourished, the branches here still sang their somber death march. He stood up and broke off a piece of one, dead to its center. Something inside of him went cold. He tried to shake off the shiver.

A car pulled slowly into his drive and parked. Maud stepped out, a bag of things under one arm and a house plant in the other. She smiled pleasantly and came near.

“Good morning! Or afternoon, I suppose. What has your attention?”

Kane looked down at the broken twig in his hand. He had forgotten about it as soon as Maud pulled in. She had a way of making him forget everything that had ever happened to him. She walked like a sunflower waving in the wind, an incarnation of sunshine.

“Oh, nothing much. Just realized these shrubs are dead. I’ll have to add this to the list of things to tear out.”

“Let me see,” Maud said as she sat her things down on the grass. She broke off a piece of twig.

Kane gestured to it. “See, dead all the way through.”

Maud shook her head and got down on her knees near the base of the plant. “Ah ha!”

“What?”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Maud teased. “The plant isn’t dead. These branches are just old growth from seasons past. They have to be pulled out in order to provide space for something new and healthy to grow.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, look.” Maud used her hands to dig around the base of the plant, pulling out dead leaves and dirt that had blown over it. Little green shoots were fighting to reach the surface and find the sun. “You see, if you leave the dead branches, it won't die right away. But leave it like this for years, and it will wither away over time. If you want something healthy, you have to do away with the dead parts the plant can't let go of by itself.”

Kane was quiet.

“It just needs some help; it is not as hard as it looks once the branches are truly dead. It's best to pull them out at the right time when they're dry and brittle, and you think there's no life left to it.” She pulled on a branch. It stuck only briefly, then came out easily. “See? It wants to let go! It just needs a little nudging.” Maud looked at him sideways. “You okay?”

“Yes. That's just... it's interesting. I hadn't applied that principle to shrubs.”

Maud shrugged. “It applies to us all.”

### Camp Pendleton, California

*2008*

It was a rare Southern California rainstorm. The kind that brings to a halt the normally bustling streets. Interstate 5 went from the fast and the furious to a flowing river. Kane attempted to peer out of his windshield. Only the rain and the vague red lights of the bumper in front of him were visible. He wondered if these sudden bursts of weather ever reminded anyone that where they currently resided was not the bustling metropolis that humanity had tamed but, instead, it was a piece of unfeeling nature, prone to take its own course without thought or heart. From the fires that raged each season to the landslides that swept away entire homes to the jolting



earthquakes, this place remembered it's wild ways, no matter how many mansions or high-rises were built to claim it.

Kane had been late leaving the office. He was not making a good impression with Captain Ambrose. Perhaps his own perception of the man came through despite his best efforts to keep his outward appearance and behavior professional. He didn't dwell on the why. Instead, he simply put his next foot forward and planned to continue to work hard the next day.

### Broken Pier, Michigan

#### *Present Day*

Maud thought about him when he wasn't around. She woke up thinking about his subtle smile, his soft black eyes, the movement of his shoulders as he worked. All the ways he said her name, quickly, comfortably. And sometimes slowly, like something smooth and sweet, like he savored it. She liked the way it sounded coming from his lips.

Maud stood on her front porch this morning in her oversized yellow robe, her feet bare on the cold concrete as she watered her potted tomatoes and herbs. She consciously tried to reign in her thoughts as they crept into her feelings. They were friends, she said to herself, and friends didn't think about each other all the time. *Did he ...* she wondered, then shook her head.

There was a stillness in the air. Maud sat down on her front step, her watering can in need of refilling and her head needing to be emptied. She shook her hair lightly, and it fluttered about her, giving her a wild look. She breathed in deeply and let out an intentional breath. Yes, she would be intentional in this. She wouldn't let it just happen to her. What did she want? To be loved, the thought rushed to her quickly. Well, of course. She pushed it away. More than that, deeper. She had to figure that out first.

“Yikes.” An unfriendly voice spoke from the sidewalk.

Startled at the interruption, Maud looked up quickly. She put her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the low morning sun that blinded her. “Oh,” she replied flatly.

“Well, don’t be too happy to see me. What will people say?” Glenn Moore walked up and sat on the step next to her.

“Can I help you this morning?” Maud fidgeted and moved slightly away from the presence.

“I think I can help you.”

“No, thank you.” Maud stood up to go inside but was stopped by a firm hand on her wrist.

“Hear me out, Maud.”

She froze like prey at his touch.

His voice softened. “There ya are. Hear a man out.”

Maud felt her mouth go dry. She tried to swallow and shook his hand off. She crossed her arms unconsciously. “What is it?”

“I heard you been spending some time with the new guy. What’s his name?” Glenn thought for a moment. “Clive Kane, that’s it.”

“And?”

“And I am not comfortable with that.”

Maud scoffed. “Please, we haven’t been together for a long time. Your opinion on my life is null and void, Glenn.”

“Yeah, I figured that’s what you’d say. But this isn’t about me. I’m worried about you.”

Maud resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She blinked slowly instead and said nothing.

“It’s true, Maud.”

“I’m not allowed to hang out with the mysterious new guy? Isn’t that a little cliché, even for you?”

Glenn looked angry but simply shrugged.

Maud continued. “I’ve been here before. It is about you, but you make it about me, and eventually, I feel insane. I think that sums up most of our interactions.”

“That has got to be about the biggest bunch of nonsense I ever heard,” Glenn spat. “Are you speaking English? Say something that makes sense.”

Maud opened her mouth to speak, but Glenn put his hand up.

“I didn’t come here to fight. Here’s the thing: I know people. Some of the things he says don’t add up. You’re a researcher, aren’t you? That’s what you’ve always said. Do your dang research.” He stood up slowly to leave. “He stinks. Something ain’t right. And you can thank me later.”

Maud watched him walk away, his footsteps ensuring his direction down the street. She watched for a while, just to make sure he was really gone. Maud put little stock in his words. He had attempted to break up many of her friendships. She couldn’t see this as anything that had not been endured in their history. Perhaps his reaction had a bit more of a bitter flavor, as jealousy always did. Maud wrapped her arms around herself again, watching Glenn disappear from sight down the road before she retreated inside. Maybe it was harder to live in the same town as her ex-fiancé than she had admitted to herself. She locked the front door behind her.

The cottage was taking shape. It had gone from a shell of a house to something that was beginning to look like it could one day be a home. Kane walked around the outside of the white

structure. The slanting sun from the late morning warmed his back, promising a warm weekend day for the festival in town. He put his hand on the paint-peeled siding, one of the last things he would fix. It was as though this cottage was beginning to remember what it was intended to be. Despite its neglect throughout the years, its abuse from unthinking or malicious wanderers, its bones remembered their purpose. Kane felt that it wanted a life.

Later that day, Kane parallel parked his car in the Lake Michigan access area. He got out of his truck and was swathed with the warm sun of a summer day and the cold breeze that perpetually blew off the expansive freshwater lake. The downtown was small and quaint. Kane walked by a coffee shop, an ice cream parlor, and a mom-and-pop diner. All the shops had small tables set up outside full of used books from the employees and owners. Maud had explained to Kane that she had started the festival as a way to encourage reading as well as give the small town a little boost in tourism. Broken Pier was often overlooked, as most of the summer vacationers went to Mackinac City for the island or Traverse City for the wineries. Last year, it had worked like a charm, and based on the number of people Kane uncomfortably waded through, it seemed to be going well this year as well.

Kane stopped at the coffee shop and ordered an Americano for himself and a cappuccino for Maud. Skimming the books as he waited, he found a few Louis L'Amores to browse through until his name was called.

Kane held up a book to the barista. "How much?"

The barista set down the coffees before answering, moving to the next order quickly. "It's all donation. It goes to charity. Each business chooses its own," she replied.

Kane nodded. "Thanks," he said and stuffed a few bills into the jar.

He put the book under his arm and walked down the street toward the library. He saw her there in the distance. Her movement seemed akin to dancing as she moved about the tables. The entire array was bathed in yellow sunshine.

Kane waited near as she finished speaking to a few people with questions about the books that littered the table. When she was finally free, she took her coffee from him with a smile. The two of them sat on the steps together. Their conversation meandered like a pleasant walk in the woods, lit by light laughter and marked by the ease between them.

Maud's face suddenly turned from an uplifted smile to a grimace.

Kane turned to see what she had seen.

Glenn Moore walked up the stairs toward them until he was standing over the seated couple.

Glenn nodded at Maud. "Maud, I see you're busy at work."

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Well, if I needed any help, I'd have to go searching for the librarian. Aren't you supposed to be manning the books?"

"I'm fine here." Maud looked away.

Glenn began to say something else, but Kane stood up.

"I think you can move on, Glenn."

Glenn looked Kane up and down. "Don't talk to me like you know me."

"I don't want to know you. I am being polite for the moment."

"Glenn, you're making things really awkward. Please stop."

"Am I embarrassing you in front of your new friend?" Glenn almost spat.

"Please?" Maud begged.

Glenn shook his head. "Fine. But I'll see you later." As he walked away, he spoke over his shoulder, "You're going to regret hanging out with this guy. He's bad news. I'm telling you."

Maud watched him go before turning back to Kane, covering her face with her hands. "I am so sorry."

Kane waved it off. "Most people have a weird ex. Don't worry about it."

Maud looked at him. "He is a walking memory of my poor life choices." She shuddered visibly before going on. "That is not the first time he's said you're bad news. But don't worry, he has said something along those lines about everyone I have been friends with. He didn't like my friendship with Charlene! Imagine someone disliking her. Ridiculous."

"What were his reasons?"

"Oh, they always have that spark of truth to them, which makes them really dangerous. Nothing more devious than lies with just a pinch of truth to them. They always make you hold on and wonder...."

The rest of the day continued on without another visit from the unwelcome guest. After Glenn had walked away, Kane hadn't thought much more about him. He saw Glenn for what he was: a man without a point or purpose. Devoid of self-respect but demanding it from everyone else. His father had pointed out a man like that to him once. He had told Kane to give the man grace but not to turn his back on him. Both were hard to do. As Kane strove to put the interaction out of his head, his father's advice lingered in his mind.

As evening fell, Maud and Kane cleaned up what was left from the day. Maud locked the library door, the last of everything put away for the night. She turned to Kane and smiled.

"I think it was a successful day."

Kane couldn't help but smile back. "It was."

Kane walked Maud home, and the two spoke quietly, as though not to wake the town around them that was slowly putting itself back to its ordered state, resting from the bustling day. The sound of cicadas and frogs lilted the ascending darkness as the streetlights began to alight.

Too soon, they were at Maud's home. She slowly reached for her keys, playing with them in her hands as Kane waited to see she was safely inside. Instead of going to her door, she turned around slowly. Maud stepped down a stair and closer to Kane. Her face was inches from his where she stood.

Looking up at him, she spoke softly, almost a whisper, "Thank you for today, Kane."

Kane looked down at her face. He said nothing and didn't move.

Maud lifted her face to his, leaning in slightly. There was no misinterpreting her invitation.

Kane placed a hand on her cheek and admired her hazel eyes and soft skin. The way she looked at him now made him feel things he had not allowed himself to think of for years. Considering her now, the sweetness, the kindness, and the intellect of this woman. He made a decision. Kane leaned close to her. Her own lips lifted in wait. He kissed her forehead quickly before dropping his hands into his pockets and turning to face the fleeting sun behind him and away from Maud.

He heard Maud speak behind him. "Oh, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to presume."

Kane took a step away, then turned back toward her. Seeing her face, stricken with embarrassment and emotion, he shook his head quickly.

"No, it's not that, Maud." He wanted to wrap her in his arms and hold her close. Show her here and now what he felt. But he knew himself. He would need to use his words instead.

“What is it, then?” She covered her face again, noticeably embarrassed.

Kane looked at his feet. Taking a deep breath and then letting it out, he looked into her eyes.

He spoke carefully. “Maud, when I kiss you, I am not going to want to stop.”

Maud made a sound. He couldn’t tell in the porch light, but it looked like the color rose in her cheeks.

He continued, “So when I do, I want to make sure that we are both on board with where this is going.” He took a breath, letting there be a pregnant pause. “And that you are aware of who I am.”

Maud nodded. A small smile formed. “Okay, Kane.”

“Clive. That’s what my parents called me. I think I’d like to hear it again, especially from you.”

Maud’s smile broadened. “All right then, Clive. I like your plan, and I like you.”

Kane smiled, too. He could feel it, his real, unadulterated smile from days long past. “I like you too, Maud.”

### Camp Pendleton, California

*2008*

Kane was on his way out of the hanger. He didn’t like to get in the way of the crew. An officer had a way of making the enlisted uncomfortable. It was understandable. He usually completed his business and left when it was reasonable to do so. Cooper was working on the Cobra. The intense look on her face caused two lines to grow rigid between her eyes. She was



nothing if not intent. She worked long hours and was particular about her job. Kane did not know her well; fraternization with the enlisted was taken seriously. But he respected her work ethic.

Today, Captain Ambrose lingered. On his way out, Kane noticed Ambrose engage Cooper in conversation. He could see him pointing to parts of the Cobra. The entire conversation appeared professional. But it bothered Kane.

Ambrose was a talker. He talked to everyone. It was clearly a major part of his personality. It probably helped him rise to his current position. He was likable and interesting, and people liked to listen to him. Kane had watched the captain talk the ear off countless individuals, and the rank didn't seem to make a difference. So why was Kane particularly uncomfortable with the way Ambrose spoke to the female Marines? There was nothing to point to, and no argument could be made against him. Kane had tried to parse his intuition in an effort to make logical sense of what bothered him.

He wondered if he was making too much of nothing. But something gave him pause. So, he went over the aspects that could be causing his inner discomfort. The first thing that came to mind was the fact that Ambrose seemed to take his rank for granted. The responsibility of being a higher authority did not simply add weight to the work. It meant that the lower ranks saw and treated you differently. Ideally, that puts weight on higher rank to wield power responsibly. Too often, Kane had seen it used as leverage. Another reality to contend with was the fact that misconduct within the military was only too real. Everyone knew someone who had been either abused or accused, and the path to truth was not often as clear as it ought to be. One thing was abundantly known: the military looked out for itself first. It was your job not to get in the way and, better yet, to be an asset. Have enough government money put into your career so your skills would be needed. Enough to either have your case heard or thrown out. That was the way

of things with bureaucracy; it favored itself. Kane was reminded of a book his father made him read as a teenager. *The Screwtape Letters* and how the author made hell itself a bureaucratic institution. He wasn't familiar with the author, but he must have understood the military.

## Broken Pier, Michigan

### *Present Day*

Summer turned to a warm fall with all the tumultuous grace of ever-changing lake weather. Some days were hot and humid, and others dropped to a cool fifty degrees. The tourists hurried to get in as much fun as possible before the school year began. They made themselves scarce in Broken Pier, and the bigger cities received them instead, leaving colds and stuffy noses in their wake to keep the locals occupied.

Kane found Maud in a sorry state one weekend as he dropped by her home. She was on the porch in her puffy yellow robe, taking care of the plants she loved so much. Her nose was stuffy and pink. She sniffed as she moved around the porch, stopping to cough hard into her sleeve.

He walked up the sidewalk unnoticed until the crunch of leaves under his boots announced him. She turned around to the sound and jumped.

"Oh gosh," Maud said, exasperated, putting a hand over her face. "I am just in my own head over here."

Her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, she tried to brush some light brown strands behind her ears and make herself a little more presentable. She scooted her glasses up her red nose.

Kane smiled. “You look like you need to rest.” He looked around at her porch. “What can I do?”

Maud’s shoulders relaxed. “There is a frost projected tonight. I’m trying to bring my pots in under my porch. I’m not quite ready to give them up for the season.”

Kane began moving the terracotta, setting them into a comfortable order under the overhang. Maud sat in one of her wicker chairs and blew her nose.

“I might need to cover those bigger ones with something....”

“I’ve got it,” Kane said. “Broom?”

“In the kitchen, by the fridge.”

Kane returned, covering the bigger pots with white kitchen plastic bags, and swept the leaves off the porch. He picked up the mat in front of her door and shook it out in the yard before returning it to its place.

“I didn’t know you were stopping by today. A girl likes a few minutes warning to make herself presentable, you know,” Maud teased. “But I am thankful for the help.”

Kane shrugged. “You look fine. I had a grocery run to make. Should have told me you were sick, I could have picked something up for you. You need anything?”

Maud shook her head. “I think I have it all. I should probably go make some more tea and just wait this out. How did you avoid this chest cold? Everyone else seemed to come down with it.”

“Easy, avoid people in general,” Kane answered with a sarcastic grin.

Maud pointed a finger at him. “Not a reasonable long-term goal, Clive.”

Kane laughed. "Maybe you're right." He sat down next to her, the silence between them comfortable. The wind through the falling leaves made enough music to fill the air with a peaceful melodic tune.

Kane began to speak slowly. "A year ago, you wouldn't have recognized me, Maud."

"Oh?"

Kane nodded. "I moved out here to get away from anyone I had ever known. I thought people were the problem."

Maud was quiet, but she nodded encouragingly.

"And sometimes they are. We all are. But," Kane paused, trying to find his words without over stating his point. "I have tried to do things in the past, things I thought were right. Maybe I was right. But I was punished for it. I didn't want to put myself in a situation to care again."

"Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one. Not even an animal." Maud quoted quietly, almost to herself. "That's a quote I read once. I used to remind myself of it often."

He looked over at Maud. In the golden light of the sunset, she looked like happiness and peace itself. Like a quiet place to rest.

Kane began to speak again but stopped. He needed a few minutes to think about his words. "Can I make you anything?"

"I'll take a cup of tea if that's all right."

"Certainly," he said as he went inside.

Maud's home was cozy and small. It seemed like the walls were built of bookshelves and glued together by trinkets. Alongside the filled bookshelves, piles of books without a home were stacked everywhere. He walked through the living room. It held a single couch with a large knit

blanket draped over it. Nicknacks from her travels were placed neatly on small shelves on the walls. The kitchen was simple; the walls housed plain white cabinets, and the floor was a rough, grainy wood, with a few colorful area rugs in front of the stove and sink.

Kane started the kettle and found the tea and mugs.

He came out a few moments later.

It felt like the wind stopped as soon as Kane opened the door. Glenn Moore stood at the bottom of the porch steps, one foot on the next step as though he was considering coming closer to the furious Maud. Before he had committed to that next step, the noise from the screen door shutting behind Kane must have brought his attention further up the porch. Kane watched as Glenn relaxed back into his stance instead.

Glenn nodded to Kane. "Clive Kane," he spoke like it was a bad taste in his mouth.

Kane nodded back. "Glenn."

"Cute mugs."

Kane and Maud remained silent.

Glenn brought his foot back to the step. "Why is it I always find you two together? I can't seem to get a word in to my old friend here without you around."

"Oh, come on, Glenn. I am certain that you can work that one out." Kane said, passing Maud her tea and sipping his own.

Glenn glared at the two of them.

"I asked you to leave," spoke Maud quickly. "I expect you to respect that. We're not friends if you recall."

"Now, isn't that rude, Maud? Jeesh!"

"It isn't rude if you're driving me to say the obvious."

Glenn took another step up the concrete stairs. He looked at Kane, changing the subject.

“How fresh are you out of the military? How long were you in?”

“I think Maud requested you leave,” Kane replied.

Glenn took another step up. “Because I am trying to piece some things together. And they just don’t add up. I know you didn’t use veteran benefits to get that place. Small town, people talk.”

Maud rolled her eyes. “Ugh, Cassie was your realtor, wasn’t she? Such a gossip. Of course. Cassie, Glenn, really?”

Glenn shrugged and smirked.

“What’s that to you, Glenn?” Kane asked.

“Something stinks.”

“It sounds like none of your business,” Maud said.

Glenn shrugged again. He stepped onto the porch and leaned against the banister.

Kane sat down his mug and put his hands to his sides. He shifted his stance. Glenn seemed to notice and stood up straight, taking a step toward Kane. The two men looked each other in the eye.

“Glenn, you need to leave. Just walk away.”

There was silence.

“Glenn, go away!” Maud was angry now.

Glenn did not look away from Kane. “Or what?”

“Excuse me?” Maud asked.

Glenn directed his next words to Kane, closing the space between them with one step. He punctuated each word with a jab from his hand to Kane's chest. "What" *jab* "are" *jab* "you" *jab* "going" *jab* "to" *jab* "do" *jab* "about it?"

Arthur Kane found his nine-year-old son crying under the stairs.

Kane wiped away his tears quickly, ashamed his father should see him as anything but brave. However, his black eye and bloody lip could hardly be hidden. He tried to cover both with his hands.

His father's strong arms pulled him firmly but gently out of his hiding place. He led the boy to the bottom step. They sat next to each other in silence for a few minutes.

Finally, Arthur spoke. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Kane stayed silent.

Arthur sighed. "Let me see the damage, son."

After a moment of inner turmoil, Kane relented and lifted his face to his father.

He looked the boy over. "That lip was in need of stitches hours ago. As is, it's about as closed up as it's going to be. Let's get some ice on the eye, at least. Come to me sooner next time."

Kane found himself in their small kitchen, a bag of frozen peas held against his eye. Dinner simmered in the oven. Elk roast made Kane's hungry stomach growl.

"Okay, I've let you stew. Let's have it," Arthur said firmly.

Kane looked down. "What do you want to know?"

"Don't give me that. Tell me the story."

"I don't know where to start," said the small boy.

“I find the beginning is a good place.”

Kane took a deep breath, summoning all his nine-year-old strength. “I got in a fight.”

“Yeah, I got that part. The story, boy.”

“With Alex.”

“Uh-huh. Go on.”

“He called ... he called Mom a dirty name.”

“You fought someone over words?”

It spilled out. “She’s not even here to defend herself! He called Mom a half-breed Cheyenne. Said I was worse cause she married a white man! He insulted us all!”

The boy began to cry.

Arthur put his hands to his chin thoughtfully. “Words do hurt, it’s true. No matter what people say about it.” He seemed to be inwardly philosophizing. Suddenly, he said, “Well, what did you do about it, son?”

“I hit him.”

“Okay. You made a choice. Did you think about the consequence?”

Kane shook his head. “Not at the moment, sir.”

“Are you going to accept the consequences of your actions?”

Kane looked up at his father. It was as though his mother’s own dark eyes gazed back at Arthur Kane from the grave. “I am.”

Arthur put his hands on his son’s shoulders. “All right then, son.”

Glenn left his fingers jabbed into Kane’s chest a little too long. Before he could react, Kane had taken Glenn’s palm and folded it backward into an unnatural state.



“If you want to fight, we can fight. You will lose. Mostly because the first thing I will do is break your arm.”

Glenn swore loudly. “Let go of my arm, man!”

“Don’t” touch people who don’t want to be touched, Glenn. Bad things happen to people who do that,” Kane said simply.

“Let go!”

“Are you going to walk away, or are we fighting?”

Glenn swore and spat again. “I can’t leave if you don’t let me go!”

“Good enough.” Kane released his arm.

Glenn took a few steps backward. He quickly took a swing at Kane but missed as Kane took a quick step back.

“Don’t,” said Kane. “If that had made contact, I’d put you on the ground right now. Walk away.”

Glenn rubbed his sore arm, taking a few steps down the porch without turning his back to Kane. Out of reach, he spat a few extra expletives in the direction of the couple. “I’ll see you again, Clive Kane.”

As Kane stirred a small pot of chicken soup, Maud sat at the small breakfast table, looking out toward the backyard. She surmised her kitchen was likely filled with a lovely herb and stock aroma, but she couldn’t smell it herself. She blew her nose into a tissue again and threw it gingerly toward the trash bin. Kane had stayed for lunch, heating up some soup that had been left for Maud by friends.

The tree branches swayed to the increasing wind, and Maud watched as the red and golden leaves danced through the air before covering the ground with color. Her mind went over the events of the uncomfortable morning, and her emotions swirled inside. Namely, she felt anger toward Glenn and his lack of respect and embarrassment that Kane was forced into the messy parts of her life. Somehow, Kane had yet to be scared off. A part of her wondered what it would be to finally make him leave, the thing that made him reconsider.

“I am sorry, again, about this morning,” said Maud, a little pathetically.

“You don’t have to keep apologizing. Life is messy sometimes.”

Maud sighed. “Thank you.”

She thought for a few moments. “If you don’t mind me asking, I know it is personal. Why did you opt out of using the veteran aide for your property? Why would Glenn make a big deal out of that?”

Kane was quiet, his back to her as he worked at the stove. The only noise was the wooden spoon against the soup pan as it went round slowly.

She waited a few moments longer.

“It is personal,” Kane finally said.

“Of course.” Maud nodded.

Kane sighed. He turned the heat off and dished out two bowls, bringing them over to sit on the table between them.

Maud felt the awkwardness growing between them. She didn’t like it.

“There is sourdough in the cupboard. I’ll get it out.”

“I got it.” Kane stood. He cut several slices. “Butter?”

“Just there, on the counter.”

Kane sat across from her again.

Maud began to silently sip her soup, unsure what to say next.

Kane made a face, drawing his eyebrows together. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. A heavy sigh fell from his mouth.

“I don’t use any veteran benefits....”

“You don’t have to explain,” Maud cut him off, embarrassed by the growing feeling between them. “I’m sorry I asked such a personal question.”

Kane shrugged. “It would probably bother you if you left it. The things Glenn said that is.”

Maud grimaced and almost opened her mouth to defend herself. She quickly decided to listen instead.

Kane went on. “I don’t use, that is to say... I *should* say I don’t have access to veteran benefits.”

“I thought you were an officer.”

“I was. First lieutenant.”

“You were deployed?”

“Iraq, Afghanistan, yes.”

“I am not familiar with how things work in the military, I guess. I don’t know what any of this means and why Glenn would bring it up. Is it somehow significant?” She coughed into a tissue.

Kane nodded. “It is, yes.”

“So, you lost your benefits? Why does this feel ominous?”

Kane sighed. “I was dishonorably discharged.”

Maud stared for a moment. With her limited understanding of how the military functioned, she only understood that this meant some sort of trouble had occurred, and Kane had presumably been in the wrong.

“Oh,” she managed to let out.

Kane seemed to be watching her intently. “You realize this means I am probably not as good a man as you hoped I was.”

She took a moment to take a drink of her water and think. “Honestly, I am not entirely sure what it means.”

“That’s fair,” Kane stated.

“What happened?”

The awkwardness was palpable between them.

“I was sent to the brig for a few years. Fort Leavenworth.”

“Prison?” Maud tried to put the pieces together in her mind.

Kane nodded.

“Okay.” She nodded slowly, taking his words in. “Is this something you were planning on keeping to yourself?”

“Well, it isn’t something I like to lead with.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Maud took another drink to give herself time to think. “What did you do?” She finally asked bluntly.

“Honestly, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Maud cocked her head. “If you’ve said this much, don’t you think you could tell me the rest?”

Kane stroked his beard. “Fine.” He sighed. “I assaulted a superior officer.”

“You hit him?”

“No, I beat him. I beat him to within an inch of his life.”

“Oh,” Maud said flatly. “I’m sure you didn’t mean too....”

“Maud.” Kane looked at her. “I know what I did. I made a choice. He almost died. I took the consequence.”

“Did you intend?”

Kane looked her squarely in the eye. “I didn’t care whether he lived or died.”

Maud was quiet. “But why did....”

“No.” Kane stopped her question. “That,” he said firmly, “is not my story to tell.”

The drive back to the cottage felt cold as Kane gripped the steering wheel a little too tightly. All the warmth had gone from the air as a heavy cloud cover began to take up residence over the autumnal sun. Even the changing leaves seemed to take on a gray color as the Highboy took curving roads home. He had been beginning to feel surefooted with Maud, with this community, with his new life. It only took a brief, uncomfortable situation to leave him feeling like the ground was unsteady yet again. At Maud’s home, they had finished their lunch and cleaned up, all the while feeling the immense space of unspoken questions growing between them. Maud hadn’t asked anything more, and he had offered nothing. He left quickly, both mentioning something about calling the next day.

He thought about all the things he could tell her, the reasons he could offer. The truth was, when he thought about that night, about the choices he had made, the cost to himself was small in comparison to others. He went through what he had told himself a thousand times. He

reacted to a terrible situation. He made a choice. He took the consequence. The rest of the story did not belong to him, and he wouldn't be a party to someone else's continued humiliation.

Camp Pendleton, CA

*2008*

The military was going to be his career. Kane was sure of it. Since ROTC, he had never diverted from this dream. He liked the surety, the clear lines, the discipline, the straightforwardness of everything. Yes, there were always aspects that frustrated him. The paperwork, obviously. The red tape, more importantly. But it was good, hard work with a good cause. He was certain.

As Kane held the paperwork in his hands for his DD214, he questioned everything. It was odd to think that the hours, the dedication, and the heart that had gone into his job were now represented by a simple handful of paper. Boxes to check and jargon. Fill it out, get a few signatures, turn it in, and he was done. Cut loose, given a handshake, benefits, and a future of "thank you for your service."

Was he a failure? The thought continued to bounce around in his head while he stood frozen in place, the paperwork hovering in his hand over his desk drawer. He was overreacting. Leaving because he didn't like his command. He could suck it up. He could put his head down and continue onward. Ignore the small things, the little incidents that left him uncomfortable. Leaving the Corps felt emasculating, but the alternative felt wrong, too.

Kane took in a deep breath of the stale air inside his office and let it out slowly. He could stay. That was a choice he could also make.

Kane went to look for Captain Ambrose. He first went to his office, where the captain was usually occupied by necessity. However, Ambrose liked people. If he were not at his desk, he'd be found with a crowd. The hanger, Kane thought to himself.

Kane walked up to the Cobra, hearing voices amidst the noises of work all around. He quickly saw the forms of two people standing around the other side. Captain Ambrose stood with his back to Kane, facing Sergeant Cooper. She stood at attention, but rather than the stone face of professionalism, there was something disconcerting about her eyes. The way her mouth cinched together like she was in discomfort. Her eyes quickly found Kane's as he fully came around the side of the helicopter, a look of embarrassment and relief flooding her face. Ambrose turned around quickly at the change in her. Kane stood at attention.

"Captain."

Ambrose said nothing right away. He took a few steps toward him, closing the distance between them quickly. Kane felt like Ambrose was making him stay in position for a few extra moments while Ambrose thought about what to say.

Ambrose's mouth almost twisted as he wrestled with his words. "Lieutenant." He spoke slowly. "At ease."

Kane put his hands on the small of his back, but he hardly relaxed.

"What do you want?" Ambrose almost spat.

"I wanted to talk to you about... about my future, sir."

Ambrose nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

"Thank you, sir."

Ambrose strode quickly away toward the exit of the hanger.

Kane watched him walk away for a moment, then turned to Cooper. She stood at attention, looking nowhere in particular.

“Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you okay?”

Cooper blinked. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Yes, at ease, Cooper. I asked you a genuine question.”

Cooper went to parade rest. She relaxed her shoulders, and Kane perceived a slight shudder in them. She took a deep breath before speaking. “Sir, you don’t get as far as I have in the Corps without a few run-ins with...”

Kane nodded. “You can continue.”

“Too-friendly men.”

Kane nodded. “I understand that. Are you okay?”

Cooper quickly went rigid again, her relaxed stance suddenly angular.

“Lieutenant Kane!”

Kane turned around quickly. Captain Ambrose stood behind him.

“Yes, sir?”

“My office. Now.”

“Yes, sir.”



Broken Pier, MI

*Present Day*

In the crisp air, the bite of the promised winter was present. Several frosts had come and gone. The trees were almost entirely missing their leaves. Kane chopped wood in the clearing of grass near his cottage. His maul made hard, consistent contact with the logs, sending the pieces flying in opposite directions.

“Kane.” Roland shut the door to his truck, making his presence known.

Kane split another log, breathing hard afterward. He waved a hand, catching his breath. “Roland, hello.”

Roland came over, and the two men stacked the wood neatly in the shed, bark side up. That would be next winter’s supply. It would sit comfortably there, drying all year round. They worked silently but diligently until the yard was cleared. Kane hung his maul up in the shed.

“Let’s get to that drywall,” Roland said, brushing the wood chips from his jacket.

They worked quietly, hanging the large slabs of drywall in the back rooms that had been gutted due to water damage.

“You talk to Maud lately?” Roland asked suddenly.

Kane nodded. “A little. Here and there.”

“Char and I were thinking you two were becoming a couple.”

Kane grunted, holding the sheet of drywall up and waiting for Roland to do his part.

“Something happen?”

“Personal details aren’t exactly your style.”

“Well, I got Char asking me questions. Won’t be happy if I come home empty-handed.”

“Maud and I are friends; you can tell her that. I’m not certain we’ll ever be more.” Kane said the last part quietly.

They worked for several minutes in silence.

Finally, Roland spoke again. “Any reason for that?”

Kane looked at him, annoyance obvious in his eyes.

Roland suddenly swore. “Kane, really, what in God’s green earth do you have to lose?”

“It’s not about me.”

Roland swore loudly. His red beard furrowing in his frustration, like a flame gleaming on his chin. “You gotta let go of whatever you’re holding on to, boy. You can’t build a life or hold a woman and babies if you’re too busy carrying burdens from the past. Put them down.”

Kane stared at the man huffing and puffing beside him. He was surprised by the outburst. Kane tried to make a measured defense. “It’s not even my burden.”

“More reason to let it go. You don’t need to carry other people’s burdens. Only one man has ever done that, and guess what, you ain’t him. As it is, you’re spreading your ... your grief to everyone you come in contact with.”

Kane was beginning to feel an ember of anger in his stomach. “I didn’t ask for friends, Roland. I know who I am. I know what I bring to the table.”

“You need a good clock to the jaw to wake you up. You’ve been living this way for too long.”

Kane shook his head. “Like I said, I didn’t ask for friends. You chose this. You can walk away anytime.” Kane turned around and took off his tool belt, standing on the other side of the room.

Roland shook his head. “So that’s how it is, boy? You’re giving up that easily.”

Kane rubbed his hands down his beard in frustration. “You have no idea.”

Roland laughed out loud. “Of course, I don’t know your story. But don’t you think I have my own? Don’t you think the other men do? Char has her past even, angel that she is. Maud has a living, breathing, walking demon in this town. You ain’t alone in your pain unless you decide you are.”

Roland put his tools down, realizing he had been shaking a drill at Kane during his speech. “I’m late. I gotta get some things done at the store.” He walked to the door and turned back. “Don’t you for a second think I’m gonna let you wallow in your own self-pity. I’ll be back tomorrow to help you finish this up.” As Roland turned to go, he said over his shoulder, “Hopefully, by then, you’ll have had some sense knocked into you.”

Camp Pendleton, CA

*2008*

“Take a seat,” Ambrose said.

Kane lightly sat in one of the office chairs presented to him.

“So.” Ambrose’s voice grew light. “Your future.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What of it?”

“I have decided to move on from the Marines, sir.”

Ambrose nodded. “Well ... all right then.”

“I can begin the paperwork?”

“Certainly. You’re well within the timeframe.” Ambrose put his hands behind his head comfortably.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Of course. You can see yourself out.”

Kane moved to leave.

“You never were much of a team player, Kane.”

“Sir?” Kane asked, stopping at the door.

“I think you’re making the right choice.”

Broken Pier, MI

*Present Day*

Kane should have slept more comfortably these nights. Same place on the floor in the living room, with the same flannel sleeping bag. However, he had invested in a cot that kept him off the increasingly cold floor. Instead of peaceful sleep lit by the crackling fire beside him, he tossed and turned, never really falling into the deep, dreamless state he wished for.

He heard a tap. Looking over to his side, he knew what he would see.

“Clive,” his mother said, sitting cross-legged by the pile of books. By her tone, Kane could tell she was about to chide him.

He stayed silent. Waiting.

“Finish what you start.”

He opened his mouth to say something. She put her hand up to her lips to shush him. She tapped a book with the other.

“This,” she said. “And this.” She waved at the room around her. “Finish it right. See it through.” Her eyes softened. “And let go, my son.”

Kane woke suddenly in the dark. He breathed quickly. The fire had gone out, leaving only a small ember of light in the darkness. He felt for the lamp nearby. Kane knew the book and found it quickly, turning the pages to the poem he had left unfinished before. He picked it up, rubbing his eyes from their sleep, and continued reading from where he had last left off:

“... If you can heap all of your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will, which says to them: ‘Hold on!’  
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,  
And — which is more — you’ll be a Man, my son!”

## Camp Pendleton, CA

*2008*

He shouldn't have been there. That's what everyone said afterward. His presence had caused more problems for the Corps —more paperwork, and more issues. It was the wrong place at the wrong time. He should have walked away. Others lamented that if only he had kept driving, hadn't turned around, hadn't gone back, years of his life would not have been stolen. He was accused of jumping to conclusions. Some even said he should have turned a blind eye.

Kane had been driving for twenty minutes toward his apartment and off base. He suddenly realized that he had forgotten to get the captain's signature for his DD214 paperwork, sitting in the passenger seat next to him. Kane was on his way out of the military. His time working with Ambrose had made him realize that life as a civilian would be better than working for someone he could not respect. He swore under his breath and turned around. It couldn't wait. He had felt the subtle dislike from the captain for several months now. Maybe it was that he could no longer feign interest in the deluded stories. Maybe it was that his own dislike of the man was not well hidden. Either way, something in his gut told him to get out.

Kane would never forget that night; it would haunt him more than the hard nights on deployments. The scent and the sound of that lonely dark evening would echo in his ears on the nights he couldn't sleep. The rain beat down hard in one of those rare Southern California downpours. It had the effect of making Camp Pendleton go from a bustling military base to dark and ominous terrain.

Kane parked in a dark parking lot. The lights dim beneath the onslaught of rain and thick fog. As he walked toward the building, it felt like trudging through a dark cloud in the night sky. His dessert camouflage uniform became more soaked, and he heard each step of his boots against

the pavement and the splash of water that had nowhere to go. It was late, too late for the captain to still be in his office, but he had to check.

He stopped. He heard a muffled woman's scream. It sounded like terror and despair strangled together. Then there was nothing.

He took a few steps forward. Questioning his hearing, wondering if he was correct. A loud crash answered his question for him. Two bounding steps, and he was in front of Captain Ambrose's office door. The window was lit behind the closed blinds. He knocked hard and heard something on the other side that he couldn't make out.

"Captain Ambrose? I forgot to get your signature on this paperwork. I need to turn it in first thing in the morning."

Silence.

Kane banged on the door again.

"Captain?"

A strained reply came from behind the door. "Tomorrow is fine. Come back tomorrow."

Kane didn't move. Something told him to wait and listen. Something else told him to leave as fast as he could, that whatever was going on behind that door was none of his business.

He hesitated a moment, then he heard more commotion. A muffled moan of distress. That was enough for him.

He kicked the weak spot right next to the lock. He had no idea what he would find on the other side, but his body had gone into fight mode, a feeling he had once been very used to. He had half the door shattered in three hits.

There was no questioning what had been happening a few moments before. Without a second thought, Kane had lifted Ambrose off the woman and thrown him behind his desk. Kane

barely noticed the initial hit that broke his own nose or the next one that cracked his rib. Ambrose's fists were flying, but Kane's adrenaline was fighting harder. With unmitigated fury, Kane let his fists fly. Ambrose was now on the ground, stuck between the desk and the wall and at a severe disadvantage. With each impact of Kane's fists, Ambrose's attempts at fighting back grew weaker. Kane only stopped when his own breathing was heavy. He looked at the crumpled, disheveled, and undignified body before him. The man was breathing, Kane acknowledged to himself. He wasn't sure if he cared.

In the corner of the office, with her hands streaked in her own blood and covering her face, Annie Cooper wept.

#### Broken Pier, MI

##### *Present Day*

Kane sat on his porch in the crisp air, a rough jacket over his shoulders and wool socks on his feet. A truck pulled in, and as expected, Roland stepped out with a coffee mug in hand.

The older man took a deep drink before looking over the outside of the cottage in silence. He walked slowly over to the porch and took a seat next to Kane.

"Cheers," Roland offered, and the two men clinked their mugs together.

"Thank you," Kane said, watching the trees sway in the wind in front of him.

Roland made a face. "For what?"

"For being a friend."

Roland nodded his head, saying nothing at first. "You know, this cottage was almost condemned. No one thought it was worth keeping around. A few rich folks from the city were talking of tearing it down and building a vacation home here."

"That so?"



“Yup. But you saw something else.” Roland paused. “You saw something that could be rebuilt. We all just wish you could see yourself that way, too.”

Kane picked up a small bouquet of flowers. Sunflowers, all differing species, it was a wild array that splayed out in differing directions. The florist had seemed confused when Kane asked her to add more, and then more, and then just a few more stems. What had been a petit organized bunch now looked like a lion's mane of yellow and orange petals. It was just like her, and he hoped it would be the beginning of enough.

Kane parked down the street and walked toward Maud's home. Breathing the cold air deep into his lungs, hoping it would invigorate him to say the things he must. The sun was setting. Darkness began to creep slowly up to the edges of the pools of light from the streetlamps and porch lights. His head was down as he took the steps up to Maud's porch, still considering his words with care.

When he looked up, he saw most of her lights were off, the windows dark. His heart sank as he realized she was likely away from home. Then he noticed her front door slightly ajar. Kane stopped. His body stilled. He listened.

There was nothing at first, then he heard it. Muffled voices. He put his hand on the door and gently pushed it open enough to enter, taking slow and quiet steps toward the only lit room, Maud's small kitchen at the back of the house. Kane heard her quiet voice.

“You're drunk,” Maud said, agitated.

“Stop saying that,” the other voice slurred.

“You need to leave. I'll call one of your friends to pick you up.” Her voice seemed strained but measured.

“Oh, come on, you like me better this way anyhow.”

“No. No, I do not.”

“Come on now.” There was a shuffling of movement.

“Don’t touch me!” Maud cried.

Kane entered the room. Glenn Moore stood over Maud, his hands on her wrists. Maud strained against the grasp. Without another thought, Kane jerked Glenn away from Maud, placing himself between them as Glenn stumbled to the floor.

Glenn, slightly disoriented, struggled to get up for a moment. Seeing Kane, he spat, “Of course. Can’t you mind your business?”

Kane seethed. He understood what it was like to see red. He felt himself falling into that particular mode. It was known to him; he understood it. Rage had been a part of him for too long to forget it entirely. He’d been here before. He’d do it again. A change came over Kane. He took a slow, intentional step toward the swaying Glenn.

The color drained from Glenn’s face as he looked at Kane.

A warm hand on Kane’s arm stopped him. He blinked, then looked behind his shoulder.

Maud stood near. Her concerned face turned up toward him. “Clive,” she said his name softly. “Are you okay?”

Kane stopped. He felt the adrenaline in his body fighting against something else.

“I’m... fine,” Kane managed to get out.

In the midst of the distraction, Glenn shuffled to the door and made his escape. Kane and Maud went to the window quickly, watching as he stumbled toward his truck on the other side of the road.

Maud sighed. “I better call the police department. Let them know to watch out. He’s going to be a danger to anyone on the road.”

Maud left the room to fetch her phone. Kane was still seething. His breath quick, he put his hand on his chest and felt his heart beating rapidly.

“Yes, it’s no problem,” Maud was speaking into the phone. “Goodbye.”

Maud bent to pick something up off the floor. She turned on a lamp and came to sit near Kane on the couch.

“Were these for me?” She asked quietly.

Kane put his head between his knees.

“Clive? Clive, I am okay. I’m not hurt....”

Kane nodded his head. Maud rubbed his back gently for several minutes.

Kane began to focus on his breathing. He ventured to speak. “I can’t let that happen...”

“Hey, nothing happened. It’s okay.”

Kane shook his head. He felt himself coming down from the high, tears behind his eyes replacing the excitement. He covered his eyes with his hands.

“I’m sorry, Maud.” He spoke.

“For what? It’s not your fault.”

Kane shook his head. “I should have been here. Shouldn’t have left when it got hard for me ... I should have been here.”

“You showed up. You showed up when it mattered.”

“He almost ....”

Maud shook her head. “He didn’t almost do anything. He could barely stand up. It’s okay.”

Kane took a few breaths. He began to feel like himself. He allowed a few tears to fall despite his best efforts. “I have some things to tell you, Maud.”

As the last grip of winter began to dissipate, spring began to show herself. Shoots appeared on the trees, and bits of green grass were striving to push themselves up from under the brown. The sky had long turned from its depressing gray to a promising blue. Brighter days were ahead.

Kane walked around his finished cottage with a sense of immense gratitude. There would always be work. However, maintenance and the continued journey toward beatification had stopped becoming his personal punishment. Instead, it was a welcome gift. The hand he held within his own was secure. The engagement ring around her finger promised a new beginning in a few short weeks.

“Would you look at that,” Kane said, pointing to a shrub growing around the porch.

“What do we have here?” Asked Maud.

Kane bent low to examine. “New growth.”

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