

**The Threshold
at Indigo Cove**



Rhys Rees

A retreat over seven days with seven guests, all at crossroads in life. Led by psychologist and director Iona, she now must co-lead retreats with Kaan, a mysterious healer. How will energy shift? Who will find courage to cross a threshold?

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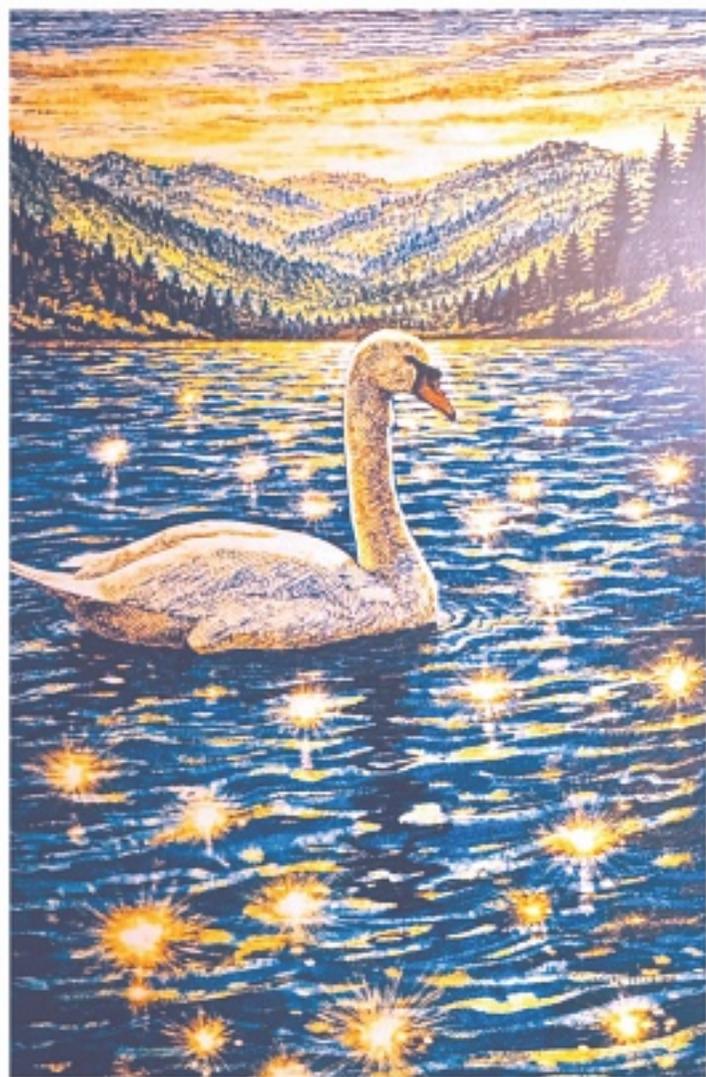
By Rhys Rees

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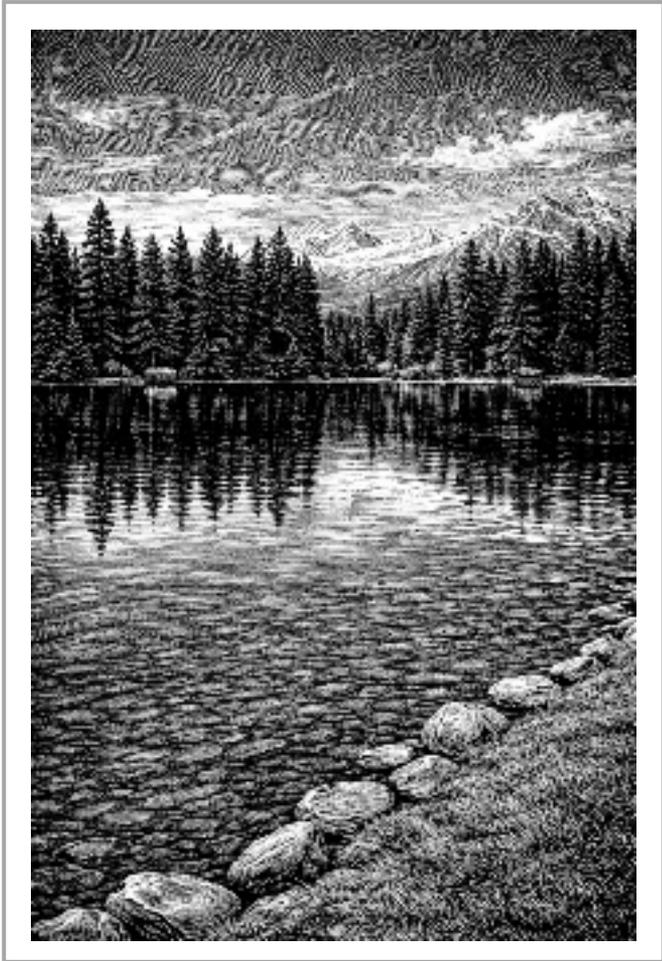
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Offering heartfelt thanks to my beloved family and friends who provided emotional support when I told them I was doing this.

For them and for you, dear reader, I hope these characters become friendly guides, taking you on a path toward the joy that comes from courageously crossing your thresholds.

With love.



Sunday, Day One

At Indigo Cove

FINDING SAFETY IN THE BODY AND BREATH

The Seaplane Brings Guests to the Retreat

Miguel placed his finger on the sentence in his book to carefully mark his place. He looked out the seaplane window. He loved flying on these small amphibious Cessnas. He laughed and shook his head a little. Was he really, finally, doing this week-long retreat? He had waited a year to reward himself with this, and he had selected carefully. Mostly, Miguel was drawn to the idea of renewal and restoration. It had been a monumental, incredibly hard year that swung back and forth between terrifying and rewarding, sometimes daily. It tested him at every corner of his existence. A week at the peaceful Wellness Center with campfires at night...he could almost hear “kumbaya” wafting slowly through the wind. He felt his shoulders starting to relax.

He picked back up his book and was halfway through the next sentence when the plane dropped. Not enough to send items rolling down the narrow, short aisle on the plane. Enough for him to hear the engine’s note change pitch.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, if your buckles are not latched, please do so now,” the pilot said—in the calm voice pilots always use when they aren’t giving calm news.

He carefully, almost romantically folded the corner of his page in his methodical way to know exactly where he needs to pick back up, running one finger slowly along the small crease to ensure the flap stays in place. He closed the book gently and held it, waiting for what he anticipated would be the pilot’s next message.

“This plane is a beauty, but she’s going to hit some wind here on the way to our water landing today, and it’s going to be a bit bumpy for a few minutes.”

“Bumpy?! A BIT bumpy?! WHAT?” A passenger in the seat in front of Miguel was screaming in a voice louder than needed in a small plane, with a shrillness that was impossible to ignore.

The plane rocked quickly to the right side, then did the vertical shimmy that, on a larger plane, would have young children laughing with glee as their parents gripped the armrests intently. “How can we be bumpy; we’re in the damn air!” She was looking around frantically as if one of the other passengers was causing the turbulence.

The professorial-looking man seated directly beside her reached over and touched her arm in hopes of comforting her. She ripped her arm back and screamed like he had poured hot coffee on her. “Keep your hands off me! Why did I let my therapist talk me into this? We are going to crash into this ice-cold water and *die!*”

Miguel sighed, not unkindly. “Miss, I can assure you,” the well-dressed, believable looking Miguel said from behind her, “it’s hard to crash a plane into water when it has pontoons.”

The professor, recovered from being batted at, took a moment to share a tidbit from his readied arsenal of facts. “Actually sir, pontoon boats have a higher accident and fatality rate than land-based planes.”

The woman gave the professor a glare which inspired him to comment further, “I’m just speaking statistically,” trying to soften, but without apology, and already too late to repair.

Miguel reopened his book and uncreased the corner, leaving a mental note to himself: Get nice noise cancelling earbuds for Christmas.

He stared at the words on the page and found himself too distracted now, so he held his finger on his book and looked around the plane. Across the aisle, a couple seated beside each other hadn't spoken since takeoff. Arms crossed, legs angled away from each other, they clearly weren't comfortable with the turbulence but apparently lived with it in some capacity daily.

Miguel returned his gaze out the window. How serene the water looked from here, sparkling reflections on a calm sheet of blue slate colored water. He loved to fly, and landing on the water was so much richer than the jolt of landing on land, despite its potential peril.

Bounce! The pontoons made contact, the plane went a tiny bit horizontal in a skim, and the plane steadied into calm boat mode. Miguel smiled to himself and again folded his page and placed his book carefully in his jacket pocket.

He leaned forward between the seats ahead. "Miss, it looks like we are going to live for another day. We've landed peacefully on the water."

She snorted a humph sound. Far too loudly she declared, "Well then get me the hell out of this box! *Now!*" She proceeded to try to stand but the pilot was turning the plane to approach the dock, causing her to sit back down or fall.

Miguel leaned forward, "Please, unless you walk on water, you don't want out yet. It's best to wait until they get to the shore and tied onto the dock before we open the door. We'll all be happy to let you off first."

The professor looked at Miguel and smirked. Then it occurred to him she may be going to some enclave of peace and tranquility that had been gifted to him so intentionally for this time in his life. "Buggers," he said out loud for no apparent reason to those hearing it.

The captain spoke, “Okay folks we’re here. Welcome to beautiful Indigo Cove.”

The engine turned off, the door opened and the previously screaming woman stepped on the professor’s toes as she plowed past him to make it out the door where she immediately stomped up the dock, lighting up a cigarette and cursing aloud.

Miguel stayed seated a moment longer. He watched her go—not with judgement or irritation, but recognition. It was familiar. He had left rooms like that himself once, convinced that escape would bring relief, which seldom proved true. He saw her bag still in the plane.

As he stood up, he reached over and picked up her bag, noting it’s weight. “I’ve learned,” he said quietly aloud while not making eye contact with anyone in particular, “that what we leave behind in haste tends to come back to find us.”

He added her bag to his and smiled kindly as he waited for the couple who followed the professor out. They did not return his smile. He wondered if other calming retreats started more peacefully.

Kaan was up the small hill in the parking lot standing by the Wellness Center van watching the flight crew set luggage on the dock for passengers or Kaan to wheel up.

As the passengers walked up, he greeted them lightly. “Welcome, I’m Kaan I’ll be driving you to the Welcome Center,” was his hello to the professor. The professor pursed his lips and offered a “meh” getting in behind Sinti.

Kaan didn’t flaunt his role as the co-leader and tried not to call attention to himself in general, a surprising feat given his 6’2” and muscular build. He had a way of ‘blending’ into his settings when he wished. He liked

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driving the van to collect guests and load bags. Behind sunglasses he was watching each guest carefully. Body language, how they approached, who had heavy steps, and who had heavy luggage. Few engaged with him much, seeing him as the driver and a pass through for them.

Miguel debated whether telling Sinti about her bag. I loaded it anyway, he thought. She probably won't know she even left it anyway if I don't tell her, as long as it's in the van now.

He had given up the need to be right about things months ago and decided to just take his seat by the window. He looked around at the same people from the plane.

“Well, this may be an interesting retreat week,” he said softly. He wondered if he had shopped this experience as thoroughly as he thought he had.

Arrivals at the Wellness Center

It was Autumn, and it was glorious to those who don't mind a biting wind off the water from time to time.

Inside, the director circled up the small team in the expansive Wellness Center's lobby. The director, a diminutive, fair skinned, long curly red-haired woman, looked like she might be the daughter of a director. A spry, fit, yoga conditioned body, her face was round with cupid lips and just enough freckles to make complete strangers want to pinch her cheeks. She wore a knit sweater, a cotton skirt, some leggings and some black mid-ankle high army style boots with big rubber soles. The rubber heels looked like they could drop a person twice her size, such as a cheek pincher, if she knew anything about how to throw a kick.

Dr. Iona MacQuarrie began. “Good morning, all. It’s been an incredible season. Here we are kicking off our last retreat week of the year. Everything looks great, thank you all. Our guests begin arriving in about 15 minutes. Here’s to a healthy week!”

There was a lot of emotion attached to the kickoff of this week’s retreat. Dr. Iona had an annual contract, as did the assistant director Kaan. The team knew her renewal contract was on her desk, and she had not signed it...yet. The signed copy was due by the end of this week, and everyone had heard she might not sign again. Speculation was she might return to Scotland after the last retreat this week.

She had arrived at Indigo Cove from Scotland four years ago where she earned her Ph.D. in Clinical and Health Psychology at 27-years-old from the University of Edinburgh. The guests all liked her empathetic mind, and whole-body holistic care, while the owners liked her credentials, as well as her precision with the bookkeeping and budgets.

The Wellness Center owners were off site investors who liked one-year contracts with both leaders to keep things fresh. The owners intended to rotate practitioners in residence to garner some fresh PR and the cachet of new international personalities but had kept Iona the last four years.

This year they added Kaan, having aggressively sought him after he came out of a reclusive life in his mountains of Wales while mourning the loss of a wife and child. They had Iona hire him in time to start with her on this year’s retreat season.

He had an international following intrigued by his unique voice and powerful healing capacity. The owners weren’t sure how the two would intersect or align but they liked the potential.

Guests began arriving. The staff heard Kaan pulling the van in on the cobblestone driveway and all went to their designated areas, Dr. Iona behind the desk.

“What is that noise?” she asked out loud. “There’s a shrill sound outside. How unusual.”

As she spoke the words, the door opened and a loud woman wedged herself in the doorway by somehow wrapping her long purse straps around the handles.

She was pulling and pushing and cursing, moving sporadically in all directions. Finally grabbing the right piece of strap and yanking in the correct direction, she broke herself free and entered the lobby while the others from the van kept a healthy distance from her and stayed back.

“Welcome to Indigo Cove. I’m the director, Dr. Iona. May I have your name?”

“Sinti. As in the Sinti who almost died in an airplane crash trying to get here in the middle of nowhere.”

“So glad you made it here intact, Sinti,” Iona smiled like mothers do at small toddlers on the precipice of disastrous behavior. “While I get your bungalow keys will you please give this a read.” Iona slid over a pretty document formed around community agreements for engagement and proper, expected behavior while at the Center. “We already emailed this to you, but a good refresher maybe...”

“Let me guess, no smoking, no booze. I probably can’t sleep late. What have I missed?”

Iona's head tipped sideways, a bit shocked by the reception, but those on the plane seemed not at all surprised and were still hanging back several feet away.

Iona turned back toward Sinti and looked puzzled. Kaan was now standing beside her smiling at Iona. She wondered how he *always* did that, sailing into someplace where people don't really recall him entering, he's just *there*. She had seen it for months. She knew he was quiet for a large man, but that was fast, and welcome in this case, given Sinti's response to the community agreements.

"Hello, I think I heard your name is Sinti," Kaan was reeling her in. "Welcome. I'm Kaan. I'm one of your leaders and instructors here," he stuck his hand forward to shake politely. "I drove you over here from the dock."

"Well, Hellooooo." Sinti looked him up and down far more than he wished. "Damn. This is looking up."

Iona sighed. Kaan gave an obligatory sideways nod that meant anything but agreement.

His goal was to cull her from the herd immediately and see if it was something he could defuse a bit. He had previously been invisible to her at the dock in his role as driver where she barreled past him, but he heard a few mumbles from her in the van. He was silently running a list of checkpoints in his head: Some people don't travel easily. Maybe she needs water. Her chakras probably looked like a game of marbles, no alignment.

He was waiting for Iona to hand him the bungalow key. "Why don't I take your bags over for you and show you around the common area on the way?" he offered.

“You can carry anything I have Keen,” Sinti swooned.

“It’s Kaan, not keen,” he said softly, correcting.

“Yeah.” She finished with a ‘whatever’ wave at his name correction.

Iona, who was facing front holding Sinti’s key did a quick turn and switched keys quietly. Turning back around, she handed them over to Kaan.

“Kaan, we’ll be giving Miss Sinti here our special number one bungalow please. Sinti, please be back by 5 for our openings and dinner. It’s on your agenda in this packet, and we also emailed it.” She wanted Sinti in bungalow #1 where they all could keep an eye on her.

“As you wish, Iona,” Kaan smiled. “Sinti, let me show you around...” and he opened the door for her hoping to not relive the door wrestling she created on the way in.

She dropped in beside him, suddenly demure, and tossing her hair, followed him out the door like a puppy.

The other four from the plane watched her exit, perplexed expressions on all four of their faces. Thinking it safe, they began to approach closer to the desk.

“Hello, Dr. Richard here,” said the man who shared the plane seat next to Sinti.

“Hello, Dr. Richard. I’m the director, Dr. Iona.” Iona only used the title on introductions. “So glad you’re here! This is your bungalow key, and a few bits of information about the retreat. We’d like to ask all of you back here for our welcome kickoff at 5 please. Very casual dress. Juice bar and dinner, and then our first session this evening.”

He read the agenda. “Interesting programming. My husband bought me this retreat for my upcoming retirement as a professor. He’s a real love

– a popular massage therapist whose getting into all of this energy work. The professor used air quotes for the words energy work which caused Iona to try not to visibly grimace. She smiled as Dr. Richard continued. “I think my partner wants someone else to explain it to me, so he doesn’t have to.”

Iona laughed softly at that. “That’s a good strategy. We’ll be happy to help him with that! You and I can have some conversations about topics we’ll cover in our daily Focus Sessions. I think you’ll find them very interesting throughout week.”

She motioned to Jackson who came over. “Dr. Richard, this is Jackson. He’ll walk you over. He’s one of our very talented yoga instructors. He’ll lead sunrise yoga sessions each morning for those who want to join, not required. He’ll also do an afternoon session – usually outside – before dinner. Thank you, Jackson.”

“Happy to do! Nice to meet you Doc Richard, let me show you around.”

She looked at those remaining – first the peculiar couple. Peculiar in that they came together, must be the two with the same last name registered, but who acted like they’d rather be with anyone else on Earth. They didn’t come forward, so Iona beckoned.

“Next?” she asked, smiling.

The couple came up, not even walking forward in unison.

The woman, radiantly beautiful stepped out in front of him. “I’m Leah and that,” she pointed over her shoulder without even turning toward him, “is Christopher,” she said, a bit dismissingly.

“Chris. Chris is fine,” he stepped forward to say firmly, then took a step back, leaving Leah in front.

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Dr. Iona, your director, and I’ll be leading many of your Focus Sessions here. I am excited to see you both here. A question if I may. I see you specifically requested a bungalow with two beds.

“Yes” they both said in unison.

Hmm, thought Iona. So, they are capable of unison on something.

“I’ll put you in number six, that bungalow is a bit bigger and has two very comfortable beds.”

She noticed they had the same last name but broken chemistry – maybe fighting siblings.

“Jenna, one of our assistants to Chef Simon is part of our welcome team and will walk you over. Please take this packet with the agenda and such...” Iona paused. Thinking about their check in, she corrected course.

“One moment please.... here, let me give you each your own agenda and packets, and here are two keys, one each. We’d like to ask you both back here by 5 please for a juice bar happy hour and communal dinner followed by our first session.

“Kill me now” Chris whispered under his breath, but loud enough for Iona to hear.

“What’s the dress?” asked Leah who had an excessive amount of luggage and was already dressed to the nines, strewn in designer logos all the way to wildly inappropriate shoes for the Pacific Northwest coast.

“Casual is great, Leah. Most of this week will be cotton Tees or simple shirts and loose pants or longer skirts. Shoes you can walk in are important. We want this to be about who you are, rather than what you

wear, so no need to dress up here. We recommend leaving jewelry in your safe if you wouldn't normally wear it to sleep."

"Hmm," said Leah with an air of disappointment, thinking of the outfits in her luggage she had staged for this.

"Finally," muttered Christopher as he walked off behind Jenna and Leah.

Lastly, Miguel, the man dressed in the linen jacket with a book in his hand looked over his dark rimmed glasses at the desk, and saw it was his time. He wandered over and warmly extended his hand making good eye contact and beaming a broad smile.

"Hi. I'm Miguel. Might have applied as Mike on your records, but since then I decided to be Miguel. I'm trying to take my birth name back for some mid-life crisis spice," he laughed. "A little reinvention."

"Hello Miguel, I'm Dr. Iona. I love the approach with a new name for a new identity. I'm the director, and one of your instructors. Let me get your key and your packet." She was relieved to see this cohort had a warm person with a good sense of humor.

"Possible to get one a bit down from number one?" he whispered, leaning over the desk.

"We'll take care of you, Miguel." She turned and grabbed the key for #8, "Farthest possible, number 8."

She turned back with the key and Kaan was back standing beside Miguel.

"Hello again, I heard your name is Miguel. I'm Kaan, the other leader and co-facilitator."

"Oh yes, hello. Goodness, (he turned to Iona) motioning to her and Kaan back and forth, "do these programs make everyone here good

looking... and *please* tell me it's the food because I've never been vegetarian and I'm afraid," he laughed gently.

"It *is* the healthy food, Miguel. You may decide you like vegetables," Iona laughed and Kaan smiled as he walked Miguel out.

For a moment the lobby lulled and then another participant came through the door, this one with grace and an air of elegance, despite her very casual dress.

"Hello, I'm here for the retreat, please. My name is Eliza Bosworth."

She was a woman of distinction, undecipherable age with silver curls in a cut that read spunky with style.

"Hello Eliza. I'm Dr. Iona. You're the one who came from a trip with your daughter in BC, yes? How was that vacation?"

"Yes. It was fabulous. It's always hard to part ways with her." Eliza looked down for a second but regained composure and lifted her head.

"Did your daughter know you were coming for this?" asked Iona very softly putting out feelers.

"Oh yes, she paid for it. She thinks I need it," smiled Eliza. "Probably do."

"Well, we'll do our best to make this everything you need. Let's see who's back. Jenna, will you walk Eliza over here to her bungalow? Please be back here by 5 Eliza— we'll have a social with some nice juices and mocktails, and then our community dinner followed by a great kick off session. Casual dress all week – simple shirts and loose pants or skirts are the best.

"My uniform!" smiled Eliza grabbing her one small roller bag. Her 'casual' was an understated elegance. Some people make traveling look easy.

Iona heard a van pulling around back. She looked to Jackson who was back, ready to ask him to see where the van was parking, but heard it stop near the kitchen. In a few minutes the 30-year-old, boisterous ball of sunshine Chef Simon from Ireland came bounding through the door with a young woman at his side.

“Iona Love, this is Emma. I’ve had her park her caravan on the side by the kitchen door so she’s out of the front, but easy to access if she needs something in there. It’s her full-time home and she let me peek. Quite the glorious reno there she did. Emma this is Iona, she and Kaan coming in now are the leaders of the program you’ll be taking. I’m the chef, and I’ll keep you happy with healthy food.”

“Hi, I’m Kaan,” he waved as he was heading for the desk to get the last keys from Iona.

Emma glanced over at Kaan casually, nodded then turned back to Simon.

“Thank you, Simon, you’re so nice. I saw that you’re a big deal on Instagram for your cooking. That’s cool. It feels kind of weird to not be in my van, so I’m glad I can keep my eyes on it.”

“What did you tell me you named your caravan? Blaze? Well rest assured, Blaze will be safe here by my kitchen door, Emma.”

Iona called her over. “Hello Emma, come on over here and I’ll get your key and packet. I’m Iona, the director and co-facilitator of the retreat. Have you been to retreats like this much?”

“No.” she said looking around. “A venture capital lady I build sites for gifted this to me.”

“Lovely! That’s a generous gift. We’ll take good care of you, Emma. Just let me or Kaan here know if you need anything.”

She was mentally registering a cornucopia of accents she was hearing. Irish from Simon, Scottish from Iona, and somewhere in UK she thought from Kaan. She did find that mix interesting, even if the rest of the whole thing felt completely out of her comfort zone.

“Okay Emma, here we go. Kaan will walk you to your new home for a week.” Iona handed Kaan the key. Kaan noticed her spine tense slightly when Iona said, ‘your new home.’

Emma looked at Kaan and offered a small nod as she tightened her grip on her backpack. She had no other bags.

After they left, Iona turned to Simon. “Well, Simon... that’s everybody in the last cohort. Do you have plenty of help in the kitchen?”

“Aye love we are ready for anything!”

Iona glanced out toward the bungalows.

“We may need to be, Simon.

Comfortably Settling In

Miguel put his bag down and looked around. He loved the comfort and style of the bungalow. Understated, but thought was given where it was needed, he noted. The fluffiest warm bathrobe, a soft comforter, and complimentary cap with gloves in case the wind outside got chilly. He liked the smell of the soap so much he put one under his pillow, still wrapped of course. This would be fine. He decided to explore the area before the 5 p.m. meet up.

Standing on his porch he took a deep breath. What a distinct smell. He loved this area for that. Kaan, who was putting more wood on the fire looked up, saw Miguel, and walked over casually.

“Hey there Miguel, how’s your bungalow?”

“It’s comfortable. Man, it smells so good here! What is that smell?”

“The trifecta of tree excellence,” Kaan laughed. “It’s great, isn’t it? We’ve got Western Red Cedar, Douglas Fir and Sitka Spruce. It mixes with the damp soil and moss and there you have it – perfect, impossible to replicate Olympic Peninsula air.”

“Feels like it’s cleaning my lungs. Maybe my soul,” Miguel smiled.

“Well then by all means, keep breathing that in!” Kaan gave him space.

Miguel was going to casually make his way over to the main building. He had a passion for architecture, though he never pursued it professionally. He never would at this point because it wasn’t number one on his life list, but he loved looking at thoughtfully designed buildings. This one had been in one of his magazines a year or two ago, probably what planted the seed to come here.

En route, he stopped by the fire, and facing the fire found himself rubbing his hands together even though they weren’t cold yet. He smiled, must be some kind of muscle memory at fires. He headed for the welcome lobby.

This is as beautiful as the photos he saw in his back issue of West Coast Architects, he thought. Clean organic lines, tall ceiling with big beams, wood everywhere, a lot of it with live edges on tables and counters. He ran his hands along the live edges, a habit he knew he had. He liked the stainless steel used with discretion in key places to create a sense of security. He could see why the appeal of this in photos lured him closer to this retreat over others. He was always drawn to a sense of balance he feels in designs that breathe the outdoors in through organic design.

He spied a big comfy armchair and had to test it. He sat and instinctively reached for the right pocket in his jacket. He only wears jackets that hold his books, and he always has on a jacket. It just had to hold one book at a time. He opened his book and lovingly unfolded his creased marker on the page. He liked bending the pages. He liked books that looked handled and read. He felt like it recognized the life of the book rather than treating it like it lived under glass. Sometimes he'd intentionally set his coffee cup on them, knowing the risk of a ring, and thinking it gave the story a story of its own.

He began reading with little commitment to finishing today, stopping periodically, finger pointing to his sentence to look around. The place felt incredibly sheltered, secure and cloistered from a chaotic world. He was settling in and didn't even have a hot cup of coffee or cocoa beside his chair, yet. This may be a good place for him after all. Time will tell, he decided. He went back to reading.

He heard the door open and looked up as a woman who had *not* been on his plane came in. She had to be there for the retreat. What a distinctive walk. She was class without the trappings, he noticed. Something about her seemed familiar, but at this age, a lot of people start to look familiar. He was sure he'd never seen that haircut before. What a feisty hair cut for a silver haired woman. And the long curl in front just telegraphed that she had opinions. This was getting more interesting as the day rolled on. Not that he was here to look for anyone, he soothed himself for even piquing interest. He was here for the classes and talks and the sheltered chance to explore his newly invented self. But she was interesting. He looked down to avoid staring and went back to reading.

Not long after, he heard Jackson ringing the bell he was told would summon them all, and he was ready. He wouldn't normally respond well to being called by a bell, but he had looked at this one and realized it

was one made from armaments in a war, now ringing for peace of mind. He was okay responding to that.

He folded his page, rubbing the crease with his pointer finger, and tucked his beloved paper friend into his jacket. He gave it a little pat with his hand and stood up. He didn't realize he was seated this close to the dining area. Am I smelling good food from a vegetarian kitchen? That will be a first. Is it hot bread? He loved the smell of warm bread baking. Comfort. He remembered times last year where comfort was not within his reach, and he was glad to have that chapter of his life behind him.

He saw some people he recognized from the plane heading toward the classroom and followed them in. He was feeling cautiously optimistic, more so than two hours ago.

Getting to Truth Quickly

“Hello friends, and welcome again,” Iona opened each session as Kaan stood by her side. “I hope you’ve settled into your places comfortably. Tonight, we are starting with a short session coupled with some delicious mocktails before you all sit for your first amazing meal from Chef Simon’s kitchen. Then we’ll take a short break before we gather back in here for the first Focus Session.

Iona’s personality was professional and demanded the attention a professor had in a lecture hall at a distinct university. It all was in interesting contrast to her strong, but faery looking appearance.

“Seldom in life are we ‘grown ups’ given time to reflect and ask ourselves important questions like ‘Who am I? What do I really want in life? Is this my life’s purpose?’”

“While we certainly won’t get all of those answered here this week, we’re going to start asking. Just by asking we open ourselves to such interesting possibilities and transformations.”

“Iona and I have good news,” Kaan smiled. “This is a short writing exercise to help us get to know each other, which means, no one has to stand and introduce themselves to the group. We’re just going to ask you two questions, and we’d like you to answer directly. The first one is a blessing in a place like this. What’s something you wish everyone in this building (and beyond) just knew about you without you having to explain it, or worst, feel like you have to defend it.”

“Yes,” Iona chimed in. Let’s just get that truth on the table quickly for each other to know. Then we can begin to ponder an answer to question #2. What’s something you wish you knew better, but you don’t yet know? Okay, so not so tough but we see some interesting outcomes from these.

“Kaan’s holding up some pieces of paper. On there are the headshots I asked you to send with your registration. It has that and your name. If you go by something different, just change it. Then write your answers for those two questions. We’re going to post those on the wall over here this week so we can all get to know each other while respecting boundaries.”

Kaan pointed to the bar where Simon was standing. “Our chief optimist Simon and his assistant Jenna will make you delicious drinks, including a signature special tonight. What’s tonight’s Simon?”

“Aye, this one is for Iona. Scotland’s flower is the thistle. Our Thistle has pomegranate, dry ginger beer, and a dash of pepper for the thorn in

the flower and a sprig of rosemary for the nose! Lots of other choices too, friends.”

“I’ll be right there for that one Simon!” Iona was excited. “Okay everybody, go for it! As you finish, please hand Kaan your profile and he’ll give you your personal journal and beautiful wood pen so you can jot down your thoughts and notes this week. Helpful to read later sometimes.”

Kaan walked around handing out the sheets and smiling while Sinti made a bee line for the bar. She downed the first one quickly and in a loud indoor voice exclaimed, “Damn this is so good. This would be great with vodka!” She turned and asked for a second. Simon gave Iona a skewed smile but poured anyway. Miguel was still trying to understand Sinti. Some of her behavior was familiar. He had seen the wiry intensity in past meetings. Her dark black hair, algae green color eyes, and ample eyeliner made an already dramatic presentation even louder. For what he guessed was mid-20s, she looked tired.

Iona pulled Kaan out of hearing range. She asked him quietly if he worried about what might end up on the wall with *this* group.

“Only if it stays hidden,” he said.

Miguel studied his photograph on his sheet. He struggled with which one to send. He didn’t want the huge smile that reads fake in photos, but he wanted to look approachable. He had aged a bit this year but lost some weight. It was okay.

Apparently, I am still in the overthinking self-conscious phase, he noted to himself. Alright, time to do this. Something I wish people just knew? I’m 12 months sober. Something I wish I knew more about? Will they freak out if I put Kama Sutra? He laughed at his own jokes, as usual. Okay, Salsa. He realized it looked like a joke, so he added a short, honest explanation. “I love the way this dance looks, and I don’t have a clue

for how to do it. I'm thinking if I do know it, it will make me look more attractive to someone I'd like to ask to dance. I'd like to increase my marketability as a middle age single guy reinventing himself." Yes. That's close enough. He got up and walked it over to Kaan. Kaan thanked him and handed him a journal and pen and motioned toward the bar.

Miguel walked toward the bar. Another old muscle memory kicked in and for a second he forgot he was at a sober location, and he was dreading having to ask for something with no alcohol instead of bourbon signature drinks being pushed at him. What a relief. He could go to the bar and get any signature drink on their mocktail list and not have to make it a thing that he wanted a non-alcohol drink. He got the Thistle and then watched as Kaan began to post the sheets.

He walked around, did a little light mingling and then saw the lady with the silver curl turn hers in. He made plans to read hers.

Kaan was collecting and posting sheets but seemed to have heightened observation of the room and the group. Miguel wondered if that was always his way. Kaan wandered over to Emma. She had been thumping her pen repeatedly on the page and looking around the room.

"Hi there Emma, how's that going?"

"I don't know, I'm kind of stuck I guess."

"Okay, it happens. Mind if I join you and we can knock it out together?"

"Okay."

"So, what's something you wish people knew about you? Let's see. Is there something people just ask you all the time and you're getting tired of it?"

"Yes. Why I live in a van. Everyone asks. All the time. If you're vacationing, they think you're cool, but when I say it's my home I get

100 questions. They ask where I'm from, where family is. I'm tired of explaining. I left my third foster home at 15 and finally got my own van at 17 and been in one ever since, almost six years. I have a job – it's remote. I'm not a slacker."

"Okay, well there's a lot to be proud of there." Kaan felt her starting to spool and spoke slowly, calmly, making sure she saw and heard him breathing slowly. "Look at how you've cared for yourself so well. How about you just put that you've been living the Van Life since you left foster home at 15. You're independent and have a strong career. How's that feel?"

"That's okay, yeah. Hang on let me write it."

He waited. She looked up. He asked, "You want to talk through question number two?"

"Not really, that's one easy. I really like vegetarian food, but I don't know anything about how to grow it or cook it— that's the van life kitchen challenge. So, the one reason I was excited about coming here was my boss, or client really, said there would be great vegetarian food."

"Perfect, go for it. See you at dinner then, and it's all vegetarian all week. Here's your journal and pen. Maybe you can get Simon to give you some notes so you can make some of his meals later."

"Cool. Thanks." She took the journal and pocketed it in, then looked down and started writing.

He walked away and collected himself realizing he was going to have to monitor his desire to protect her. The foster inference brought out his protector genes rapidly. She didn't need rescuing. What he had read as resignation earlier during check in may have been resilience. She just needed some allies.

Miguel had casually gone back to the wall and landed at Eliza's page. Nice name, Eliza. I like that better than Elizabeth. Great shot. Let's see, answer number one. Whoa, she's had a year and still looks so together and steady. Divorce, business sale, and house listed. Well, she and I will have to chat sometime, we certainly have some common grounds on the Big Shift year. I hope hers is going smoothly. He walked away. That's hard, that's a hard year, remembering his. She must be a strong woman.

Chris was curious who the man sitting next to Sinti on the plane was. He looked for his sheet to learn more. Richard. Married, proud gay man Quantum Physicist and university professor. Very cool, Chris thought. I wonder if he likes being an educator.

Miguel wandered over now to Sinti's. Maybe it's morbid curiosity, he mused, but I wonder what she wants us to know about her that she hasn't already broadcast. Oh. Her therapist of 10 years sent her here because she's high strung and needs to chill out, but she thinks it's all 'woo woo.' Well, he reasoned, this is going to be hard on you, Sinti. I hope you can rally.

Iona had begun reading a few and was looking for Chris. There he is. That explains the two beds and same last name. He's here against his will he says. Points for honesty she reasoned. His marriage counselor suggested they take a trip together before filing for divorce and he thought this was cheaper than divorce, so he came. Iona looked across the room and made eye contact with Kaan. Their gazes always locked. She looked at the wall. He nodded. He had picked up on Chris and Leah. Bumpy road ahead. He turned back to his work, but Iona kept staring at him. Was she really thinking of leaving this for Scotland?

"Dinner awaits your hungry tummies beautiful people!" Simon's voice could fill a room with joy. Folks began to filter over. The big round table could very comfortably seat 12, and they began picking seats. Eliza was glad the profiles were up before this so at least some of them wouldn't

start ‘light’ conversation with the litany of dreaded questions around her three-pronged disaster. She turned the corner and stopped, just looking at the table in awe. She used to entertain at home and at her bookstore. This spread was a cacophony of color and smells and was the most beautiful dinner presentation she had seen. Miguel was relieved seeing it knowing he wasn’t going to die just eating lettuce and carrots for a week.

Finding Safety In our Bodies Through Breath

Iona welcomed them all into the Round Room after the short break following dinner, which she estimated went well.

“Okay friends, just grab a mat and find a space you feel good about in here, just leave a couple feet between each other please.”

She was handing out rolled up mats. Kaan was seated up front on his mat and pillow, looking peaceful and making eye contact with each. Miguel grabbed his mat and went midway in the room not wanting to ever be in the very front or very back of anything – classrooms, cruise ships or churches. He spread his mat out and sat while wondering if his non-exposure to most of the holistic healing practices was going to make him feel self-conscious. He sensed some tension in his jaw and had to have his self-talk. Okay man, you’re doing okay. You don’t need to please anybody but yourself. You’ve set high ethical and personal standards Just take it easy and be real, it’ll be good enough.

Kaan began speaking, a voice so soothing Miguel could give his self-talk voice a break. Kaan had a unique authority in his tone, but not in the angry parent instruction way, more of a benevolent leader people wanted to hear from and follow. Kaan instantly gained both attention and trust. Miguel noticed he already felt safer.

“Let’s all just lie down on our backs and stretch a little. Nothing formal, no need to push or pull, just reach slowly with your hands and feet while keeping your back on the floor.” Kaan was talking them through it.

Iona and he had a way of passing the speaking role back and forth that was seamless. “This is not going to be about perfecting a process or protocol,” she said softly. “This is going to be about noticing. We’re going to breathe intentionally and see how our body responds.”

Miguel tried moving his back from side to side to roll his shoulders. He heard a little crackle and felt some tension off.

Kaan led the breathing. “Let’s all just take a nice deep breath through your nose, and we’ll count to four in your head, I’ll say it out loud. One, two three four. Now we exhale naturally, you don’t have to push it, it will just flow out. We’re exhaling a little longer than our inhale, so you’ll hear me counting to five for exhales. We’ll explain more about the different ways you can control your heart rate based on your inhales and exhales, but for now, just breathe with me. I won’t be counting out loud the whole time, but for the first three or repetitions think it in your head along with me.

Miguel was doing okay on the first repetition. On the second repetition he noticed someone across the room giving an exhale of boredom or exacerbation, like they were annoyed by having to count to five. He heard someone else tapping them out on the floor with their hands.

“Some of you are going to have thoughts or notice things as we do this, Kaan offered, “and that’s fine. You’re not doing anything wrong. The mind wanders. Just bring it back to your breath and catch my count. Inhaling one, two, three, four.”

Nailed me, Miguel thought.

Miguel was surprised how quickly he was able to retrieve his focus and bring it back to the breath; he was feeling a rhythm from it like the waves of an ocean coming and going at a repeated cadence. He used to count that pattern with waves when he was in his first weeks of sobriety. Several minutes in now, he noticed his mouth opened a little and tension in his jaw was releasing, his shoulders where he carried tension were hanging lower, not climbing up his neck. Exhaling was easier.

The room was a good temperature for him, not too cold, not too hot. He could breathe in and hear the soft music in the background and breathe out and not hear traffic like LA. Kaan had stopped counting for a while, but he made his breath audible enough Miguel could hear it and follow. The person tapping wasn't something he was resisting.

"Feel that clean air come in, and then slowly gently let it out longer than we inhaled. Trust your body," Iona said softly.

His breath was getting deeper and he wasn't forcing it; it was just finding its way. His shoulders collapsed softly into the mat. Oh, *that's different*. He felt it on the exhales. It wasn't earth shattering, but there was change in his nervous system, welcome subtle change.

Kaan spoke again softly to remind them all they were breathing for a few more minutes. After a comfortable 10 minutes where they felt the patterns without straining, Kaan wrapped it up by bringing the count to a close.

"...And five. Just breathe naturally now. As you rest, scan your body with your mind. See how you feel. Is there any place that feels more rested and relaxed than before, just wander over the body."

"After you do that for a little while we'll start to sit back up. Take your time with that," Iona coached.

Miguel decided to take another minute. He felt like he did after the occasional massage. He heard others moving around and decided to slowly join them, sitting up.

Kaan and Iona were seated up front, both with a glow he couldn't really understand or explain. It was more than eating healthy food. They looked peaceful and vital. Yes, vital. Like life was moving through their bodies easily.

He looked around and saw Sinti sitting quietly with an unfocused gaze. She had just awakened. He'd seen that look from coworkers who fell asleep at working conferences. She probably needed that rest as much as he needed her to sleep for a minute.

Iona gave the room a minute and then asked about the experience.

No one shouted answers back quickly, the room was still stirring just slightly.

"Peaceful," someone said.

"More focused," the professor Richard offered.

"It makes me feel quieter inside," said Eliza, the woman with the silver curls.

"Yes, it really can do all of that," Iona said. "I want to let you know what you felt is simple science. You can do this anywhere. When you inhale your heart speeds up, when you exhale it slows."

"There are many ways to do breathing patterns. A teacher I like on Insight Timer uses 5.5 seconds for both the slow inhale and exhale. That's one way to do resonance breathing. The longer exhale can quickly drop anxiety for many like we did this evening."

“The Navy SEALs have a tactical breathing called Box Breathing where they inhale four, hold breath four, exhale four, hold breath four. They do it to regulate their nervous system, reducing stress and increasing alertness by controlling the autonomic nervous system.”

“By intentionally breathing slowly with longer exhales, you’re resetting your nervous system, telling it it’s safe.”

Miguel thought about those words, *telling it it's safe*. That was it. That’s what felt different. He spoke without lifting his eyes which were looking at his hands resting peacefully on his lap. “I’ve had anxiety attacks in the past, and they come on quickly. This feels like a way out of that. I didn’t know just breathing longer exhales could give my body that kind of support and well, regulation or a reset.”

Someone made a “mmm” sound of agreement.

Kaan appeared to be in thought scanning the room, then nodded, confirming.

“This is good. We can leave it here gently for today.” He smiled and stood. “Beautiful job everyone,” Iona said standing. “Try it in your bungalow this week, if you feel inspired.” She turned the lights up halfway, slowly.

The Quest for Understanding

Several of the guests were enjoying the fire tonight for a bit before heading to their bungalows. Iona always enjoyed sitting by it before tucking herself in. She, Kaan and Simon each had their own bungalows nearby the guests. She grabbed a chair and Richard the quantum physicist came walking directly over.

Dr. Iona,” he sounded formal.

Yes, Dr. Richard?”

“Would you like to help me save my marriage?”

“Oh, my gracious. That’s a big ask. Of course, I’d like to lend any expertise I may have, if it helps you. Please go on.”

“As I mentioned when I checked in, my husband bought me this retreat. I think he had a few reasons. One was to get me out of the house for a week so he can paint without me trying to debate the colors. But more so, he wants me to understand the things he cares about. He’s been a well-respected massage therapist in our village, and there has been a growing interest in energy healing and all the holistic healthcare modalities. When he starts to talk to me about what excited him at his last meet up or such, I engage with a litany of more scientific-based questions looking for empirical research-based findings etc. I think you’re with me on this so far, yes?”

“Of course, yes, I’m much the same.”

“Well, I think he thought if I was exposed to some of this, very experientially, I may enjoy it. We’ve been married long enough that he knows that’s going to open the door on questions for me. He just doesn’t want to be the great informer on any of this.”

“Ah yes, you did allude to that when you checked in. Yes, let’s try to save this marriage. How can I help.” Iona smiled and leaned into the conversation.

“After these sessions, not necessarily in them, if I have follow-up questions may I ask you for information that may bore others?”

“Absolutely. We can nerd out and have fun talking about the details. What specifically are you wondering about right now?”

“Curious to better understand your take on the mechanisms in this inhale/exhale exercise. Why does it make a difference, and what’s happening. Elaborate please,” he waved his hands in rolls forward, beckoning her to take it away.

“It’s transformative isn’t it, Richard? What’s happening inside your beautiful body is magnificent. When you inhale your heart is beating faster moving blood through your system and as you exhale your heart rate is slowing down. It’s not a steady constant beat and that’s good. You want to create what we call Heart Rate Variability. It measures your autonomic system’s ability to manage stress and recover.”

“When we use a longer exhale than inhale it can lower our heart rate, slowing it, and offers many benefits including activating your parasympathetic nervous system. When it’s activated, your brain and your heart communicate to create calming in your body, reducing stress, lowering heart rates and releasing more carbon dioxide. These responses are the opposite thing your brain finds when your body senses you’re stressed. We’ve all heard of fight-or-flight response when we feel adrenaline rushes. This is the opposite, often referred to as rest-and-digest. When we’re in that higher heart rate variability, we have better cardiovascular health and feel less stress, often feeling more resilience and less fatigue.”

“Inside your body is very large nerve that looks like an upside-down tree. This is your vagus nerve. Your heart rate variability is driven by the vagus nerve. When we do something as simple as breathing in for five and a half seconds, both inhale and exhale, we signal safety to our nervous system. Extending the exhale just a small amount more than inhale can quickly help your body reduce stress and lower your heart rate.”

The Threshold at Indigo Cove

“It’s how a person can have a better sense of safety in their body and control of their nervous system through intentional breathing in less than ten minutes. The Navy SEALs rely on it in stressful situations. How’s that?”

“Stupendous and greatly appreciated. Thank you and good night, Dr. Iona.”

“Of course, Dr. Richard. Come back any time.”

She smiled. He is very charming, she thought. And wasn’t his spouse being a lovely partner to invite his husband into this conversation in this way via the retreat, so Richard could get the learning his husband needed him to have.

Late Embers from the Fire

Iona stayed at the fire longer and later than usual, enjoying the flames. She had unstoppable insomnia with everything in her brain and heart, this week. The stay or go dilemma was crippling even though she had all but firmly decided.

Kaan had been watching her and intentionally gave her time alone before walking over after the last guest retired to their bungalow. He threw a few logs on the fire and handed her a blanket. He pointed to the chair next to her. “May I?”

“Of course.”

“You sleep much lately?” he asked.

“Absolutely none! Why do you ask?” she looked at him.

“I see your light on a lot at night when I’m up. I know you don’t want to talk about your contract, but we’re going to have to talk about that soon, Iona. I’ll give it another day, maybe two. Fair warning.”

“I hear you. I get that. Professionally and personally.”

“Speaking of personally, I was having fun last night replaying scenes in my head from this season together with you. We have a lot of good memories.”

“I know, I was doing that last night, too!”

He connected with her gaze and did not look away. “One of my favorites was the first day we met here after the zoom interview call when you offered the contract. Remember that day when I came here straight from my cross Atlantic, then cross U.S. flights?”

Oh my God! She could feel her face turning red. She wondered if he remembered the crazy misstep and what she blurted out. She would try to not remind him.

“Oh, I recall parts of it, yes.” She tried to cover.

He laughed. “Iona, you know when you’re dodging the truth with a sensitive like me, we can tell.”

“Well, damn it, Kaan that was *so* embarrassing. *Oh my God.* It still is! I was so concerned about us having this ethical framework we’ve been living by. I kept reminding myself to not swoon for you when you got here, because you know, people *do* swoon for you. I kept talking to myself reminding myself I would not be getting involved.”

“You set up a pretty effective defense.” Now he was laughing harder, but not in a mocking way, more building giggles that couldn’t stop. “I remember flying halfway across the world, walking in and saying, ‘Hi

Iona, I'm Kaan. How are you? And you fired back '*Celibate!*' Then knocked your coffee over and fumbled your pen."

She had her face buried in her hands laughing, but so embarrassed. "Oh my God Kaan. I had hoped you might forget that."

"That one's hard to forget." He was still laughing. "Memorable."

"Will this get funnier as time goes on or will I always blush," she asked peeking through her hands. "How smooth right? Thanks for saving me with the graceful response, anyway."

"What was it I said to you?"

"You smiled and said 'Well...oooookay. I wouldn't have opened with that one as an ice breaker, but I hear you and respect your position on that, Iona. Duly noted.' I'll never forget that pride-saver response. It really did take a lot of pressure off."

"Must have, because you jumped right into the calendar and started talking about how we needed to roll up sleeves and iron out our schedules. Pointing to files and just going full speed ahead."

"I know! Oh Kaan, you're torturing me with this," she was laughing now too. "I know you were standing right there with your backpack still on your shoulder, and a satchel in each hand. And I never even offered water."

"Yeah. For what it's worth Iona, it didn't make me mad. I thought it was kind of adorable, really. I was surprised by your diminutive stature. You came across on Zoom as a very serious and stern Ms. Professional and sat so tall. I thought you might come around the corner like a drill sergeant. I loved seeing your feminine side, and I also loved seeing you get your composure back and show me the feisty horse in you I know now, too. There are so many facets to you."

He continued, “And the tour of the place was great, even though you didn’t let me put my bags down for an hour.”

She laughed. “I know. What an idiot. At least you let me carry one when we decided to walk the woods.”

“I know better than to tell a woman of your spirit no when you ask for something.” He paused for a second and stopped laughing. “That’s one of the best memories in my life so far, Iona.”

“Really? Our first woods walk? You’ve been all over the world. Why that one?”

“You knew I had led Forest Bathing meditations. Nature is my church in many ways. We had so much to talk about, and I thought surely as we stepped on the path the business talk would keep going, and I was kind of dreading it. Not because of the topic, but because of the place. But the second those black boots of yours hit the path, *bam*, silence. You spoke the same language I did. I felt such a communion with you on that walk. We had such effortlessly shared energy.”

“Aw. I loved watching you in there. You’d reach out a hand to one tree and touch the trunk of it for a few seconds, then another down the path. It was like you were greeting old friends in our sacred silence.”

“They are my friends. I saw you tickling the ferns. Sometimes you look like a faery, but don’t worry, I know it’s a super intelligent, very independent, semi-ferocious faery.”

“As long as we’re clear on that,” she smiled.

She noticed he was staring straight at her the entire time they were talking. Most people look up to the left when recalling memories. He never broke the gaze.

“Remember when I asked you about your last name?” She asked smiling.

“Yeah, that was odd, you knew my last name, but what you asked was if both of my parents were Welsh. I guess you were trying to figure out why a Welsh man had brown skin and dark brown eyes?”

“Yes, that was it, actually. Kaan Arslan. You told me that Arslan means lion in Turkish. That’s how I see you. From the first time you walked in, you just stride like a giant lion, and you already have the mane.”

He looked at her and held up his hand like a paw and roared comically.

“I bet there’s a real roar in there,” she said.

“I hope you never see it, but yes.”

“Can you always know my thoughts?” she asked with sincerity.

“Sometimes, but never always. I don’t snoop or prod. If you’re thinking of telling me something I can pick it up. If you’re hiding or blocking something, like now and Scotland, I don’t know what’s behind that block, just that there is a block. And with *you*, I never, ever, know what’s coming from you in the future. I don’t think I’ve ever even guessed correctly what you’re going to do next.”

“Ha, well I’m glad I have some mystery.”

“You are mystery personified. All of this,” he motioned his hands over her. “I just never know what’s next.”

“Listen,” he paused and entered a much more serious tone. “I know we have this promise to keep this professional during the retreat season and you and I have honored that. We both know that season ends in a few days. Seeing the contract not signed on your desk, and hearing that you’re likely moving back to Scotland for a lot of reasons, well it has everybody pretty tied up, Iona. Me included. I’m here if you want to talk

it through. I think you know how I feel. I hope you feel it, too. I thought by now you might be asking me if I would consider going to Scotland with you, and that's not coming up... yet. So, I'm going to go now and give you some space, but let's talk about this very soon, please. Beautiful dreams."

He got up and walked away without looking back.

She gasped for air and realized she was holding her breath while he was saying that. He was becoming a lot more conversational using words rather than non-verbal communication as October progressed. He was right, she knew, it was decision time. The pull of energy between them was becoming a very tense wire.

**The Threshold
at Indigo Cove**



Rhys Rees

A retreat over seven days with seven guests, all at crossroads in life. Led by psychologist and director Iona, she now must co-lead retreats with Kaan, a mysterious healer. How will energy shift? Who will find courage to cross a threshold?

The Threshold at Indigo Cove

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