

A woman with dark, curly hair is seen from behind, looking out at a turbulent, stormy ocean. The sky is dark and filled with heavy, white clouds. The water is dark blue and grey, with white foam from the waves crashing. The woman is wearing a dark, sleeveless top with thin straps. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

WHERE
OCEANS
HIDE
THEIR
DEAD

A NOVEL

JOHN YUNKER

Author of *The Tourist Trail*

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Where Oceans Hide Their Dead: A Novel

By John Yunker

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Cover design by Rolf Busch.

To Bobbie, in memory

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

—JOHN NEWTON

*As long as there are slaughterhouses,
there will always be battlefields.*

—LEO TOLSTOY

PART I

ROBERT

1.

THE KILLING BEGINS AT DAWN.

Men and barely men spill out of the backs of rusted pickup trucks. Some are dressed for the job, wearing green rubber boots and bloodstained white overalls; others are in torn jeans, barefoot, shirtless. They carry axe handles or bats or pieces of rebar.

They take their time, yawning themselves awake, slowly cresting the craggy hill, pausing to take in the windblown waves in the shallow distance, then divide themselves as they approach their victims diagonally, picking up the pace, then swinging with purpose.

The victims, seals no more than a year old, scatter, clouds of sand and dirt rising. When one squirts through the tightening gyre, a man gives chase, cutting it off before it reaches the safety of water. He batters the creature into stillness, sticks a knife into its belly.

It takes a deep-seated desperation to do this sort of work, but in this part of Africa desperation is more abundant than jobs. That's what Noa had told him. She told him of the sands spotted black with blood, the mother seals, separated from their pups, helpless bystanders to the slaughter, heads swaying, sepulchral, their guttural voices calling out to lifeless bodies. And, as the men piled the bodies like sacks of soil onto the backs of pickups, the mothers made their sad retreat to the ocean, some with fatal injuries of their own.

The seals suffer this carnage every year, and still they return to these same sandy, rock-strewn shores. Robert suggested the seals were stupid, but Noa disagreed. *They have run out of desolate beaches*, she told him. This has been their home for thousands of years; they will not go down without a fight. *The seals*, she told him, *are the mirrors of our sins*.

Noa told him all of this more than five years ago, when they shared a ship's cabin and she was a hardened activist, he a seasick wannabe. They were passengers on a ship that placed itself with regularity between whales and whalers. Hull against hull, smoke bombs and stray bullets and shrapnel. Dangerous work by any standard.

But this was never good enough for Noa. She was impatient to do more, risk more. When the world awakened to their battle on the water and the cameras outnumbered the crew, she said, she would move on to those animals the world still ignored. There were so many species without sponsors, without any hope of attention.

The Cape fur seals brought her to tears. She swore that she would come down here one day and place her body between the seals and those spiked wooden clubs.

Robert had sworn to join her. He swore it the last night they spent together, both of them squeezed into a one-man cot in their vessel in the far North Atlantic. He swore to follow her wherever she went, and he intended to make good on his promise.

But he was an FBI agent, working undercover, sworn to a higher power, so any promise he'd made—and he'd made many—had been, in the end, a lie.

2.

IN THE DARK OF EARLY MORNING, Robert pulls off the dirt road, behind a strand of dust-covered bushes. On the horizon he sees the moon reflected off the waves. This was supposed to be the road to Dunkel Beach, but without any signs he has been going on word of mouth.

A week before, he'd begun his Namibian odyssey 500 miles up north, at the Cape Cross Seal Reserve. There, Robert had comfortably played the part of tourist on holiday, with so many others around to blend in with. Slow-roaming herds of travelers discharged from tinted-windowed buses. Shoulder to shoulder with aimless, younger, round-the-world types with backpacks and beards.

He had been to Namibia years before, back when he was fresh out of the FBI Academy and eager for passport stamps. He spent two weeks on the trail of arms traffickers on their way south from Angola. So he was already familiar with the country's slower pace, crooked cops, and crumbling infrastructure. The money, in U.S. denominations, was the only thing that kept this part of the world running—though judging by the number of Chinese tourists he'd seen crowding the viewing area, he suspected *yuan* might be equally effective these days.

Robert gazed over the dusty beach, undulating with the motion of thousands of brown fur seals, crowded together like the humans who were watching them. It was the first hot day that week, and many of the larger seals stood high on their black flippers, noses vertical, as if posing. Others lay prostrate, pups at their sides, nursing. And amid these motionless bodies, seals commuted to and from the water, pausing every so often to bark at a competitor or howl at nothing in particular—or at least nothing Robert could discern. Even with wind blowing hard out to sea, the chorus of yelps and grunts was loud enough to drown out the sounds of the tourists and

their beeping cameras. Robert wondered if the tourists knew that this beach was often the scene of great violence.

His eyes swept the beach, then turned to study the faces of the crowd.

She was not there.

He got back in his rental car and headed south, meandering from one increasingly desolate port town to another, where the number of travelers dwindled along with his hopes of finding her. The locals weren't of much help. Any time he asked someone about seal culling, he got that familiar, off-putting look—as if he were one of *them*. An activist. One of those outsiders bent on telling Namibians how to live their lives.

Just last night, in the harbor town of Lüderitz, he asked the clerk at his motel, a heavyset woman transfixed by a *Real Housewives* rerun, where he could find seals. She shook her head and handed him the same faded brochure from the Cape Cross Seal Reserve he'd been given a dozen times before. In fading light, Robert walked two blocks from the motel to the rocks bordering the shallow and mostly vacant port. A few lonely sailboats kept rhythm off to one side. At the end of a pier were two rusted fishing trawlers, the remnants of a once-thriving industry.

Robert's mind began entertaining thoughts of getting in his car, returning to Windhoek, completing the round-trip journey back to Washington. Gordon, his former boss, would surely take him back. Gordon had always said that it took a decade to create a reliable federal agent, and at thirty-five Robert was more than a decade into his tenure. Agents quit all the time in fits of madness or frustration, only to return a few days or weeks later. This little detour would qualify as madness. Searching for a woman he once believed dead, a woman who wanted nothing to do with him. A history he was now hoping to rewrite even though a part of him had grown comfortable with the current narrative. There was a comfort of sorts in assuming

that, if alive, she would not take him back anyway. Perhaps he was not as scared of failure as he was of success—to find her and learn, finally, whether there could be a future on the other side of all those memories.

Robert stepped into a small bar named Kappy's and sat next to a man named George to watch a rugby match. George was chatty, and Robert's instincts told him that the man was worth listening to. George had been in town a week waiting for a road construction job to begin, drinking through the paycheck he hadn't yet earned. He talked about the jobs he had worked, meandering his way up the coast from South Africa. Fisherman. "I spent more time bent over the rail than catching anything," he said. Furniture mover. "Wrenched my *bladdy* back hoisting a fridge into the truck."

But there were worse jobs out there, he told Robert, pure *kak* jobs. "You ever seen them harvest seals?" George asked. Robert shook his head and bought him another round. "Check here, my friend. It ain't like plucking grapes." And that's when George told him about Dunkel Beach.

And now, with Dunkel Beach ahead of him somewhere in the darkness, Robert gets out of the car and turns his back to the biting wind. He should have packed a jacket. Even though the days feel like Southern California, the nights and mornings feel more like Northern Ontario. He continues down the road, and after about hundred yards hears the surf over the wind. Then the smell, foul and fishy. He stops and tilts his head and hears the yelps and grunts of a seal colony.

Noa had said that the sealers arrived before daybreak and were long gone before any tourists showed. The killing device of choice was not a gun. Guns were rare and bullets expensive. But wooden clubs were plentiful. The leaders usually carried the official killing tool—the *hakupik*, which looked like something mountain climbers use, a sharp ice pick at the end of a long handle with a flat hammerhead on

the other side. The dull end was used for crushing the skull, the sharp end for dragging the body. From a distance, Noa said, the men could almost be mistaken for farmers sowing the land.

For so much of his adult life, the early hours of the day were the least enjoyable, not just because he was often hungover or sleeping in a third-world hotel room but because he always associated dawn with death. Years ago, while in training at the Academy, the early hours were used to test them. In the pre-dawn hours they were shouted at for yawning, for not reciting the correct phrase at the correct moment, ever reminded that they may be called upon to protect a life or take a life before the rest of the world was awake. Robert was excited back then, in his early twenties and aimless and eager to be a part of this new workforce, one that operated outside of business hours.

Robert hears movement to his left, swivels to make eye contact with a large cat. A jaguar, he thinks, but smaller. A broad, curious face, eyes catching the moon, then turning and sliding into the bushes. A sighting so brief Robert begins to wonder if he saw it at all.

Robert gets back in his car and checks his watch. It's only 4:45. On the horizon he sees a tiny light, most likely a fishing trawler. Most likely illegal. He watches the light move slowly across the windshield and thinks back to that night in his hotel, high above LAX, watching the lights of planes approaching the runway, wondering if he would succeed in his first solo undercover assignment.

His name was Jake for that role, and he was in LA for the Rights for Animals Conference. Playing the part of animal rights activist, he dressed in old jeans, a faded black T-shirt, Converse sneakers, and a wristband with the word PEACE imprinted on it.

He spent the first day downstairs wandering the sessions, from *Activism Against Vivisection* to *In Defense of Predators*. As an FBI agent, he was there to meet Neil Patrick Cameron, known as Aeneas, the infamous founder of the anti-whaling organization Cetacean

Defense Alliance. As Jake, he was there because he was committed to the cause, eager to join the next boat sailing out to do battle with whaling ships.

When he met Aeneas at the CDA booth, Jake told him of his desire to join the crew. Aeneas told him the boat was full and to try again next year.

But Jake wouldn't be around next year; Robert and the FBI didn't have the luxury of time. They were pursuing a domestic terrorist known as Darwin who had been torching mink farms in Idaho and releasing the animals. Darwin had caused millions of dollars in damage, which didn't include lost revenue for the farms. No one knew what Darwin looked like, and Robert suspected that it was Aeneas himself. What he did know was that Darwin was a member of the CDA and would be on that next boat out.

How could an outsider become an insider in less than a day? Robert was asking himself this as he exited a session and stepped straight into a woman in a long madras skirt and a white KISS ME, I'M VEGAN tank top. She grabbed his arms for balance, and he grabbed her waist. After an awkward moment, a moment that lasted a half second too long, a half second he would replay forever, she pulled back. Or he released his hands. When their eyes met, he smiled, and she wrinkled her brow. Then she began to walk away.

"Do you get many takers?" he asked.

She stopped and turned around.

"Your shirt," he said.

She eyed him suspiciously, studying him from head to toe. "You're vegan?"

"Of course," he said.

"Then how do you explain that?" She pointed at his wristband, the wristband that he suddenly realized was made of leather.

He smiled sheepishly. "I don't eat it; I just wear it."

"Perhaps you should visit the orientation session. Room 105.

And take notes.” She shook her head, and he watched her walk away. She had seen right through his disguise, though not far enough.

A car door slams, and Robert is jolted awake, eyes blinking into the dawn. He reaches up and grabs the steering wheel, pulls himself upright. The sun is still low, his car’s shadow outstretched toward the water, and he notices a vehicle parked a hundred yards ahead of him.

It is an old commercial van made less so with bumper stickers wallpapered across its olive-green exterior. A roof rack carries large plastic bins of various sizes and colors. On another continent Robert would dismiss this heap as a bunch of surfers getting a head start on the waves. But not here, not now. These people are getting a head start, all right—but not on the surf.

Four people emerge, three men and one woman, a blonde with a ponytail. One of the men carries a video camera. The others carry signs. The woman is wearing sunglasses, and Robert can’t tell if she’s Noa, not from this far back. Noa’s hair was dark when he was with her, twisted into dreadlocks. He curses himself for not packing binoculars.

He climbs out of the car and carefully approaches, keeping his distance. He watches them pause at the top of the hill before descending out of view.

What will Robert say if it is Noa? *Funny meeting you here? I just happened to be in the neighborhood? Took a wrong turn at Windhoek?*

And what if it’s not her? What will he say then? The sightseeing line won’t hold up, not at this hour, this far south. The truth is tempting but too risky. These people will be on guard as it is, and he’d only be perceived as another threat, particularly if he asked the whereabouts of one of their own.

But if he can’t play the activist or the tourist, what role is left for him to play?

He notices his right hand behind his back, checking on a phantom gun. It is a strange feeling to be entering a situation, like

so many others in which conflict appears inevitable, and not to be carrying a weapon. Though he had spent the previous twelve years silently resenting the weight of it, the perpetual pressure against his lower back, now that he is without it he feels unbalanced and vulnerable. His mind must adjust to a life of avoiding conflict rather than abetting it. From now on, evasion, not engagement, will be his life.

When he crests the hill he surveys the chaos unfolding on the shore below him. Spread across a sloping beach the size of a football field are hundreds of seals, yelping, heads waving, pups scattered about like schoolyard backpacks. Among them are a dozen men in two groups on opposite sides of the beach, swinging clubs at flapping, squirming pups.

Parked on the sand are two old pickup trucks, one towing an empty utility trailer. How did these trucks not wake him, he wonders, then notices the tracks extending along the sand for another half mile; they'd arrived by a different route.

Two of the activists stand far away, at the waterline, urging seals to escape, holding their pointless signs. The woman is screaming at one of the groups of men, bumping into them sideways to slow them down. This could be Noa—she'd always been the first to jump into the action—but this woman's body is leaner than Robert remembers.

Far off to the right is the activist with the video camera, a man in his twenties with shaggy brown hair and a beard to match, approaching another gang of sealers. His fellow activists, signs held high, form a backdrop. Two of the sealers are gesturing at the camera.

Robert picks up his pace until he is jogging down the hill, still unsure of what he is going to do or say. He needs to be closer to be sure, to see her eyes, but this is hardly the right time. He should wait, stay up on the hill. Yet something propels him toward the fight. Years of habit? Or maybe the simple fact that he wants the seals' crying to stop.

He gets closer, until he is standing behind one of the sealers, a kid maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, with no shoes and no shirt, oblivious to Robert's presence. As the kid raises high a rough-hewn wooden bat, Robert grabs it and pulls him around, and the kid's eyes widen with surprise.

The kid pulls back on the tool until Robert lets him have it. The end that Robert was holding is stained dark red, as are his hands.

"Beach closed," the kid says.

"So what are you doing here?"

The kid swings the bat at Robert, who ducks, then lunges into the kid's abdomen, knocking him to the ground. He grabs the bat again and turns to follow the woman's voice. Still standing, still screaming. He continues across the sand toward the cameraman.

The seals are kicking up clouds of sand and dust, and he now understands the meaning of the bandannas across mouths. The process, if there is one, entails men circling the seals, scaring them into one another, and, eventually, one of the men landing a lethal blow. But so few of the blows are lethal. The seals keep changing direction, the objects of some primeval game of baseball.

A young man is stabbing a seal in the eyes with a Bowie knife. The throaty sounds of crying fill the air, and pups scurry about with milk leaking from their mouths. And now, drips and pools of red in brown-and-white gull guano on rock are mixed together, a grisly Pollock.

The cameraman is surrounded. The boy that Robert disarmed shouts at him, then slaps him hard enough for his camera to fall to the ground. A man in prison-orange pants comes forward and strikes the cameraman with a club, knocking him to the ground.

Robert comes up behind the man with the orange pants, grabs his long hair, and pulls him hard onto his knees. Then he pushes him onto his back and steps on his windpipe. He uses the bat to wave off the other men as they gather around.

“You all right?” Robert asks the cameraman, who is sitting up.

“Yeah, mate. Thanks.”

A handful of sand hits Robert in the face. The kid stands a few feet away, improvising. More men have joined the semicircular fray, with Robert and the activist in the middle like renegade seals.

“You better get out of here,” Robert says to the cameraman. “You and the rest.”

“Can’t leave you here.”

“I’ll be fine. Grab your camera, join the others. Now!”

The activist hesitates, looking for an opening between the bodies and bats.

“Leave him,” Robert says, pointing with the club at the man under his foot. “Or your friend never gets up again.”

Bodies part, and Robert watches the activist scramble up the hill toward the others. The woman at the top is taking pictures.

Seven of them now surround Robert. The shortest of the lot, a bearded man in a red T-shirt with a faded white soccer-ball print, takes a step forward.

“Man, you in trouble. Big trouble.”

“Am I? That’s funny. So’s your friend. He’s going to suffocate in thirty seconds if you and your friends don’t back the hell off.”

Robert increases pressure on the man’s neck and watches his eyeballs bulge. The bearded man hesitates. Robert apparently picked the right captive.

“Make that twenty seconds.”

The man takes a half-step back. “Let him go, and we won’t kill you.”

“That’s very generous.” Robert lifts his foot enough for the man to gasp for breath. “I don’t want any trouble. I’ve got no dispute with any of you.”

Then he steps off. The man lies there coughing.

“I’m leaving now,” Robert says. “Peacefully.”

“I don’t think so.” The bearded man smiles and displays a knife covered in blood, most likely the blood of seals. Human or animal, it all looks alike, and the thought enrages Robert. He wastes no time meeting the man halfway, leg to groin and both hands on his arm, twisting until the knife is on the ground, then spinning around with the man’s head in a vise grip. Robert, on one knee, fumbles and then finds the knife.

“Back up. All of you!” He holds the knife under the man’s jaw, tight enough so he won’t dare open that mouth of his.

“Back up!”

Robert stands, pulling the bearded man along, and takes a step forward. He feels a wave of confidence he hasn’t felt in a long time, realizing that he doesn’t need a handgun. Any old knife will do. And he isn’t afraid of them, isn’t afraid of anyone, the adrenaline giving him the courage he thought had drained away.

The men shuffle out of his way, and he continues ahead, dragging the bearded man along by his sweaty neck. Robert feels almost disappointed. He wanted to fight them all right now, live or die, on this beach. That’s what Noa would have done, and she would have loved him now, if she were watching.

Halfway up the hill, a safe distance from the others, he turns and pushes the bearded man to the ground.

Robert walks quickly up the hill, then stops and glances back. The man is still watching him, while the others have gotten back to work, dragging seal carcasses, clubbing the ones still moving. Robert looks down at his knife, covered in the blood of the murdered seals, now also mixed with the blood of one of their murderers.

3.

IN THE DISTANCE, ROBERT WATCHES THE VAN cough exhaust as it wakes itself. A sliding door slams shut, and it lurches away. He looks back toward the beach. The men have returned to their gruesome task, and he feels his anger rising. He takes a step toward the beach, then another. Maybe this is how he is meant to go—one final fight, witnessed by no one, on behalf of no one. A crazy, futile fight.

Then he thinks of Noa. He never got a good look at the woman, and now she's in the van and about to get away. He jogs to his car, and in a few minutes the dust cloud of the van is in his sights. It is headed south, slowly, over the pockmarked dirt road. He keeps a safe distance, needing only to follow the swirling dust. The road veers inland to a gravel road, and the temperature climbs. Robert follows the van as it continues south through a desert of some name—Namibia has so many it's difficult to keep track.

One hour turns to two, gravel to pavement. There are few signs of human civilization apart from occasional trucks and tour caravans of Land Rovers. The van slows as it approaches the closest thing to a town, and when it pulls over at a petrol station Robert continues on for another few hundred yards before parking behind a small warehouse. He gets out and watches around from the corner as the occupants stretch. He hopes for another look at the female, but she remains in the van. He tries to remind himself that this woman looked nothing like Noa, but the dust and the heat has turned his mind against itself. Perhaps Noa has grown an inch, bleached out her hair. He can imagine anything right about now.

The van has South African plates, and he has to stop himself from memorizing the numbers. Old habit. What's the good of memorizing a license plate when you can't run it through a computer? He is no longer a man with access to databases and websites that few others will ever see. He is a civilian now, living in the center of society

instead of lurking about in the shadows. He must play by its rules, abide by its natural laws. And remind himself every morning that he is not so special after all.

He watches the activists get back into the van as two boys approach him, kicking a half-inflated soccer ball. They stop and watch him. He considers for the briefest moment a pick-up game. Down here in the dirt and scrub, using steel drums as goalposts and laughing as the boys play keep-away with the ball and not thinking about anything but the game at hand. If only he could let the van go and everything else along with it. Instead, he only nods to them before returning to his car.

After another hour of heading south, it dawns on him that this van is not headed for a beach but rather the border. Headed back to wherever it came from.

IT IS NIGHT WHEN THEY REACH the Vioolsdrift border crossing—two lanes funneling past fencing and a gate and, beyond that, a two-lane bridge over the Orange River into South Africa. The bright lights illuminating the checkpoint make Robert feel as though he's approaching Las Vegas at night.

Three cars back, Robert watches the van empty and sees uniformed men rummage through bags, looking for drugs or hoping for a bribe. His hopes rise as the guards line the passengers up against the van, the woman at the far end.

She is attractive—but she is definitely not Noa. Her face is long and angular, and her shoulders slump as if from irritation or exhaustion. She's in her late twenties perhaps; Noa would be a good ten years older. And this woman has skinny legs and a narrow waist. Noa had curves.

Robert hears himself sigh. Now what? He could turn around and head north again. Find another beach. Another group of activists. Or

he could keep following this van. Perhaps there will be others at its destination. Perhaps even Noa.

The cameraman Robert had saved—an Aussie, he guesses—is arguing with the uniforms. The other two activists, both younger—one skinny and the other pot-bellied and bearded—keep their backs stiffly against the van. As an FBI agent, Robert would have dismissed this motley crew as amateurs or hobbyists. Certainly not ecoterrorists. Yet that is what they are, by this country's standards—by most countries' really.

When it is his turn in the queue, Robert knows he will have little trouble, as the guards had exhausted themselves on the others. Robert gets out of the car and watches the men poke at the seats with their rifles.

“Did you enjoy your time in our country?” a uniform asks. Robert studies his blank face to find any hint of cynicism.

“Not particularly,” Robert replies.

As Robert is waved across the bridge, he can't help feeling sorry for its resident captives. So poor and yet so close to this relatively wealthy southern neighbor. How hard it must be to keep your pride when you struggle to earn in one year what a South African makes in a month. And how easy it is to cling to traditions, no matter how vile, when those rich relations slum it up here on vacation and start lecturing you on how to run your country, how to treat your people, your animals.

Across the river the road surface evens out, and the van accelerates. It heads south for another hour and then turns right, toward the ocean. After another hour, the van passes the welcome sign of Port Nolloth and slows as it approaches a town with few lights or buildings but a bay just beyond. Robert can smell the sea again.

The van turns down a narrow street lined on both sides by one-story, windowless warehouses. Robert hesitates before turning to

follow and smiles when the van pulls over to one side. He continues straight and pulls over a block away.

He walks back and peeks around the corner of one of the warehouses as the van's occupants carry duffel bags and coolers through an open door. The ocean is maybe three blocks away, yet the area stinks like a fish processing plant.

After the activists disappear into the building, Robert drives by and, squinting through the darkness, makes out a tiny sign on the front door: SEAL RESCUE OP SA.

He finds a backpacker hostel a half mile away and books the weekly rate. In the darkness of a shared room he crawls into a lower bunk. He wishes he had alcohol as he stares at the springs above, listening to the sounds of snoring, trying and failing to picture her face.

He abandons the idea of sleep and sets out again, in search of a bar. He finds one two blocks away, with a multi-colored, cheery-looking façade that inside is low-ceilinged and dimly lit, with dark wood and a Windhoek Lager sign on the wall. Two couples circle a pool table, drunk and singing into the wide ends of their pool cues. He takes an empty stool at the end of the bar, swaying on its uneven legs, and orders a whiskey.

After the first sip, he closes his eyes. He wants simply to shut out the crooked wooden bar and the faces glancing his way—but instead he is transported, unbidden, back to the hotel bar near LAX. After the animal rights conference had ended, after he'd failed to make inroads with Aeneas or his Cetacean Defense Alliance, he sat staring blankly at the television above the bright, noisy bar, composing in his head the report he would be sending to Gordon the next day, explaining he'd failed.

Then he heard a familiar voice. "Where's your bracelet?"

He looked over to see the woman he'd bumped into yesterday, or who'd bumped into him. She was wearing a white T-shirt and a

wraparound skirt, a small pack slung over one shoulder.

“I must have lost it,” he said.

“I’ll bet you did.”

“I only recently became vegan.” He hadn’t known the first thing about veganism until he showed up at the conference.

He remembers they’d talked about the baseball game on the television, ordered a few more rounds of drinks. Then she said, “It’s a good thing you’re a vegan, Jake.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t sleep with carnivores.”

The next morning, as he listened to the sounds of her in the shower, his eyes wandered from the Tibetan prayer flag she’d strung across the TV down to her backpack on the floor. Something told him that it contained most of what she owned, and he felt intoxicated—not only by Noa but by her lifestyle. Just then he wanted nothing more than to leave Jake behind—but more than that, he wanted to relinquish Robert, too, before he got completely lost in bureaucracy and undercover assignments, before he lived so many lives as other people that he would no longer be able to tell the difference. Noa was authentic—this, he suddenly realized, was what drew him to her.

Noa entered the room, towel hanging from her breasts. She told him she was catching a boat to Norway, and, still under her spell, he asked without thinking if he could come along.

“We’d have to share a bed,” she said. “And you’ll work for your passage.” Her towel dropped as she walked toward him. “We all work for our passage.”

“We?”

“The Cetacean Defense Alliance. CDA. Ever heard of us?”

4.

THE NEXT MORNING, ROBERT SITS UP in his bunk at the hostel, a slight hangover pushing against the inside of his head. He crawls out of his bunk and makes his way out to the car, then heads back to the seal rescue building. The narrow street, dark and lifeless the night before, is now busy with trucks lumbering through to the neighboring warehouses.

He approaches the steel door, takes a deep breath, and knocks. After a few seconds with no answer, he knocks again. He leans forward, pressing his ear against the door, but can hear nothing stirring inside. He waits a few seconds longer and turns away. The van is no longer parked out front; perhaps everyone is gone again. It would be just his luck to have let them get away.

“Yes?”

He turns back to see a young woman standing at the open door—the woman from the beach. She is barefoot, and her hair, no longer in a ponytail, covers half her face. She’s wearing a white tank top that reveals something tattooed in Sanskrit on her left shoulder. He wonders if she recognizes him from yesterday, but he sees only irritation in her eyes, making him feel like a door-to-door salesman who rings during dinner.

“I’m here to volunteer,” he says.

“To do what exactly?” Her accent sounds British.

“Help the seals.”

She turns her head to one side to shake the straggly hair from her eyes. Her face wears a weary expression that Robert suspects is a permanent feature. How could he have mistaken this woman for Noa?

“If you really want to help the seals, we take donations, preferably in cash.”

“I’m broke.”

“So are we.”

The door closes with a metallic clang, followed by the sound of a deadbolt locking into place. Robert holds up a fist to knock again, then takes a breath. He hears Noa’s voice in his head. *Animal activists fear outsiders. They’ll take your money, of course, but they won’t trust you. They can’t afford to trust you.* Noa, who’d said this to Robert-as-Jake, was more right than she knew.

He walks down the street and stops when the smell hits him, a pungent, fishy odor coming from beyond a tall chain-link fence. He can see into a concrete courtyard with large, fenced-in dog kennels along the far wall. In each kennel is a blue plastic kiddie pool.

In the middle of the courtyard, taking up most of the space, is a much larger pool half filled with water, as well as the source of the smell—two seals resting on small jogging trampolines that abut the pool like miniature diving platforms. One of the seals, his wet fur glistening black, has lifted his head and is watching him.

He glimpses a suntanned woman in her late thirties, with close-cropped ash-blond hair, seated with her back to him on a folding chair in front of one of the kennels. She’s wearing a sweatshirt and cutoff jean shorts and has a bandanna around her neck, and as Robert moves closer he can see she’s bottle-feeding a pup, holding it in her arms like a newborn. She doesn’t look up as Robert lets himself through the gate.

“You need a hand?” Robert asks.

She looks up at him and narrows her eyes. “Who are you?”

Robert tries to place her accent. South African, he thinks. “I’m Daniel. I’ve come to volunteer.”

“American?”

Robert nods.

“You really want to help? We accept donations.”

“All I have to offer is my time.”

“Then you’re of no use to us.”

She stands and carries the seal into a kennel, places it gently on a wooden platform abutting the kiddie pool. The seal pops up on its small flippers and watches as she closes the gate behind her.

“Afraid he’s going to run away?” Robert asks.

“He’s sick. Can’t be around the others.”

She turns her attention to a much larger seal, slowly circling the larger pool in the middle of the courtyard. The seal’s eyes are locked on her, and when she reaches into a large plastic barrel and holds up a live fish, the seal yelps loudly. She tosses the writhing fish away from the seal, and in an eyeblink the seal is underwater, and the fish disappears.

“What is this one’s name?” Robert asks.

“Toby.”

“He’s looking healthy.”

“Wasn’t when we found him six months ago.”

She heads for a door leading back inside the building. “Close the gate behind you when you leave,” she says.

“So that’s it?” Robert asks, raising his voice. “Thanks but no thanks?”

She looks back at him. “I never said thanks.”

“Right. Because I didn’t hand over a credit card.”

“What do you want me to say? We’ve got enough people who can toss fish to Toby here. What we need are people who can help us keep that bucket filled.”

He finds himself without a response, and he can only look at her, into those eyes that squint at him irritably—or defensively, or both. Yet he does not look away, holding her eyes in his. There’s something about this woman that reminds him of Noa—the slow burn of her anger, perhaps, or the air of defiance, or the way she unflinchingly stares back at him.

Robert breaks his gaze and looks down at Toby, who is watching them both like a child witnessing his parents arguing.

“Guess I’ll be leaving, Toby,” Robert says.

The woman watches him as he closes the gate behind him. He is halfway across the street when he hears a man’s voice.

“Hey, mate!” The Aussie cameraman is standing by the parked van. His beard looks as if it’s grown an inch since Robert met him on the beach. He eyes Robert warily. “You followed us?”

“I did. And now I’m leaving.”

“Hold up.” He jogs over and stops Robert with a hand on his shoulder. He smells of cannabis. “I owe you a pint, mate. Name’s Mark.”

“Daniel,” Robert says.

“How’d you make it out of that bloody scrum in one piece?”

“I showed them what it feels like to get hit with one of those clubs.”

Mark smiles. “So, what the hell brings you to this sorry corner of the world?”

Robert sees the woman standing behind the gate, watching them.

“I came here to volunteer, but your colleague over there says I’m not needed.”

“Who? You mean Syd?”

“Stay out of this, Mark,” she says. “Let him be on his way.”

“C’mon, Syd. He had my back up on Dunkel.”

She eyes Robert suspiciously. “What was he doing up there?”

“Saving my arse is what.”

“I was just trying to help,” Robert says. “Fortunately, nobody about to be beaten or killed asked for a donation first, or I wouldn’t have been of much use.” He smiles at her, and she opens the gate and joins them in the middle of the street.

“Syd, you should have seen him,” Mark says. “He took on a dozen of the bastards.”

“You followed the van all the way down here?” she asks.

“I didn’t have a map.”

“Jesus, Syd. I’ll manage him, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Syd takes another step toward Robert, and he does his best to maintain eye contact. Those eyes of hers, dark and a bit large for her head, are staring hard, as if she’s trying to see straight through him, to learn everything about him through her sharp gaze alone. He wonders if she could possibly know, somehow, who he really is, and he feels himself preparing for recognition, confrontation, failure.

“We’re not feeding you,” she says at last.

“Fine.”

“Or putting you up.”

“You’re making me an offer I can’t refuse.” Robert smiles, hoping to elicit a similar reaction. But she shows no sign of emotion, and Robert can’t help but admire her stoicism. She would make a fine agent—a better one than he was, in fact.

“Come on, then.” Syd turns.

Mark slaps Robert on the back. “Welcome aboard, mate.”

Robert follows Syd back into the courtyard. He notices that some seals, like the one she’d been feeding earlier, are kept in enclosures while others have free rein of the yard. “Why do you keep them separated?” he asks.

“Quarantine,” she says. She points to one enclosure. “Betsy there. She’s got an infection. We’ve got her on antibiotics.”

Robert watches Toby hop up a ramp leading out of the pool to a wooden platform just out of reach. He pushes himself up onto his flippers like a dog awaiting a treat.

“No, Toby,” she says. “You’ve had your fill for the day.”

“Why do you use live fish?” Robert asks.

“We don’t want them acquiring a taste for dead fish. Puts them at risk when they’re out at sea—they’ll end up following the fishing trawlers. Fishermen shoot them.”

“Really?” Robert says, playing dumb.

“Seals are competition,” she says. “Though if those fishermen

were honest with themselves, they'd be shooting each other. They all take far more fish out of the oceans than the seals."

She holds up a large plastic pitcher filled with milk. "This is what the others eat. Multi-milk and fish oil, blended with sardines or mackerel or whatever we can afford."

The enclosures are carpeted with kitchen safety mats. She gestures for Robert to follow her into a cage inhabited by an emaciated-looking pup.

"This is Onyx," she says.

"Nice name."

"It's the name of the beach she was found on. Up north, across the border. Not sure she's going to pull through."

Robert can see her ribs, the bones of her neck. It looks as though the air had been released from her blubbery body, leaving behind a skeleton almost human.

Syd places a towel on Onyx's head and straddles her. "You watching what I'm doing?"

Robert nods.

"We need to tube-feed her. And I need you to do exactly what I'm doing. You tuck her flippers under her body like this. And you hold her head firmly."

Syd gets back up and lifts the towel. Onyx writhes around, mouth snapping feebly.

"Watch the mouth," she says.

Robert does as instructed and soon has Onyx between his knees, her body pulsing under him like a miniature mechanical bull. Her round, wet eyes look up at him with fear.

Syd holds up a clear plastic tube with a funnel at one end. She grabs Onyx's mouth and gently slides in the tube.

"Keep an eye on her breathing," she says. Robert watches the nostrils flare irregularly. Onyx makes sad little guttural noises.

"How do you know you've gone in far enough with that?" he asks.

“Years of practice.” She holds up the funnel with one hand and pours in a small bit of water. They watch it descend down the tube and into Onyx’s mouth. Then Syd picks up a plastic water pitcher filled with milk and begins pouring in small doses.

“Why tube feeding?” Robert asks.

“They’re too young for bottle feeding. Too weak. We need to get nutrients into them to fatten them up first. When they get some of their weight back, we can move up to bottles. Then, as quickly as we can, we move them to live fish. It’s important they get used to feeding themselves—and not used to us.”

Robert watches the last of the milk drain from the tube, and in one smooth motion Syd extracts it. Onyx lets out a sad little gasp, and Robert sets her free. The seal pushes herself up on her flippers and eyes Syd, then Robert, defensively. Robert backs away.

“I want you to stay with her a while.” Syd tosses Robert an old, matted-down stuffed otter. “This is her mother. You sit with her as she snuggles with her mom. Socialization is just as important as food.”

Robert sits on the floor and feels spilled milk seeping through the bottom of his jeans. He places the stuffed animal near Onyx, and the seal responds instantly, her nose running the length of the toy as if looking for a nipple. After a minute, Onyx relaxes, lengthens, and leans into it.

Robert looks up at Syd. Her eyes are on Onyx.

“She’s stronger than she looks,” Robert says, hoping to cheer her up.

“Toby came in looking just like Onyx. So there’s hope.” But she doesn’t speak with conviction. She turns away and leaves Robert in the cage. He watches her enter the building.

Robert spends another hour watching Onyx as she falls asleep. Then, as quietly as he can, he steps outside the cage and closes it behind him. Onyx wakes and looks at him.

“Don’t worry,” Robert says. “I’ll see you again soon.”

INSIDE THE BUILDING, Robert finds Mark and the rest of the group seated in a break room with an open laptop playing Bob Marley. The cinder-block walls are covered with faded concert posters from the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Midnight Oil, and a Tibetan prayer flag hangs from the ceiling, its rainbow colored squares swaying in a breeze from a nearby oscillating fan. Though these flags are as common among activists as tattoos, he wonders hopefully whether this flag could be Noa's, a sign that she was here.

Mark introduces him to the others, all of whom Robert remembers from the beach in Namibia. The girl who'd slammed the door in his face, the one he thought might've been Noa, is Andra. Jeremy is their cook, mechanic, and all-around handyman; T.J. is a young Brit with tattoos crawling up his arms and neck as if preparing to invade his pale white face. No one offers last names—which, Robert remembers, is normal among activists.

"Sorry about shutting you out," Andra says. "I thought you were a cop. Or a Mormon."

"Mormons travel in pairs," says T.J. "Plus, they wear ties."

"Yeah, but don't they have casual Fridays or something?"

The others laugh. Robert feels his face flush. He needs to fit in better, but he hadn't had the luxury of time to grow a beard or get a tattoo. And now they are looking at him as if he is one of their fathers, home early from a desk job. His mind pulls up the script he had prepared as he finished his last drink at the bar the night before.

"I guess I am a bit clean-cut for this line of work," he says. "Truth is, I'm ex military."

T.J. looks at him with alarm.

"*Ex* military," Robert repeats. "I flew helicopters for the Air Force, then left for the private sector. In Seattle. My wife died of cancer two years ago. She was passionate about the seals. That's why I came."

Robert pauses, and as they all watch him, he knows he needs to offer more. “She begged me for years to come down here so we could join the fight. She was ready to quit her job, sell everything we owned. She begged me to do the same, said we might actually find ourselves along the way. But I never took her seriously. Always had excuses, another assignment waiting. Morning traffic. Establishing shot for some new television series. I always told her we’d do it next year—and then a year later, I’d push it back again. Until the day she coughed up blood over the dining room table.”

“Jesus,” says Mark.

“By then it was too late for her to get on a plane,” Robert continues. “She died six months later. I know it’s too little, too late, me being here. Alone. But her death left me with too much damn time to think.”

“You never know,” Andra says after a pause. “Maybe you *will* find yourself down here.”

“Andra here is still looking,” Mark says.

“Fuck off,” Andra says.

5.

ROBERT SPENDS THE NEXT DAY following Syd around the courtyard. Feedings begin at 8:00 a.m. By the late afternoon he feels a degree of confidence in his ability to corral a seal. Toby watches over them as they move from enclosure to enclosure. Every few hours Syd pauses to toss Toby a few live fish from the barrel of recirculating water.

As Robert watches Toby doing backflips in the pool, he can picture Noa standing right where he is now. This is just the type of organization she would be drawn to—teetering on the edge of

insolvency, up against the steepest of odds and the most corrupt of governments. And, at the heart of it all, the fate of widely unloved and utterly vulnerable creatures—the Cape fur seal. The largest of the fur seals, an animal that hauls itself out onto land every year, not to relax but to breed. During these stressful months it places itself at the mercy of predators, which for much of the seals' early existence were limited to the four-legged variety—jackals and hyenas. Some seals breed on outlying islands, but the islands are small and are preyed upon by humans with boats. And what horrible irony that the land these seals require to keep their species going is the same land that is now threatening their existence. Noa would have fought to the end to protect these animals.

So where is she?

Robert looks up when Mark calls his name, and he follows him into the dining room, where Jeremy is placing bowls of beans and rice on the center table.

“I thought you weren't supposed to feed me,” Robert says.

“I won't say anything if you don't.”

In keeping with the group's philosophy, the meal is free of any animal ingredients. For Robert, who has been living off of French fries and energy bars, it feels like fine dining. He squeezes in between T.J. and Andra and listens as Mark talks about the situation with kangaroos in his homeland.

“Locals shoot at them for kicks,” he says. “Like fucking pests.”

“In the States, it's the deer,” Andra says. “Different species. Same result.”

Syd enters and notices Robert. He braces himself for a hasty exit, but she turns her eyes to the food, fills a plate, and takes it with her to her office.

Mark catches Robert's eye. “Looks like you passed,” he says.

“Do you get a lot of new faces each year?” Robert asks.

“Oh, yeah,” Mark says. “But they never last long.”

“Syd usually scares them off,” T.J. says. Robert is desperate to ask who might have been working here over the past five years. Was Noa one of the volunteers Syd scared away? He doubts it. Noa was intimidated by no one. If anything, Noa and Syd would have made a formidable team.

After dinner, Syd calls everyone into her office to plan for the next day’s trip back to Namibia. Sitting at her desk, she studies her laptop. “Weather tomorrow is dry and clear. You’ll leave at the usual hour.” Syd points to the people going. She does not point to Robert. He raises a hand.

“No,” she says, as if reading his mind.

Mark laughs. “Syd, he’s got one helluva left hook.”

“Exactly. I don’t want any casualties this time. Just content. Video content.”

“I’ll keep my fists to myself.”

“Next year, maybe.”

“And what if there isn’t a next year?”

Syd shakes her head. “There’s always a next year.”

When Mark heads out to the street to have a smoke, Robert follows him. The sky is clear, but with no moon the street is dark, and with the neighboring warehouses closed for the day, it’s eerily quiet.

“That could’ve gone better,” Mark says. “But she’s right, you know. Those bastards aren’t going anywhere.”

“What’s her problem with me?” Robert asks.

“I wouldn’t take it personal,” Mark says, exhaling a cloud of smoke into the night air. “You’re new, so there’s that. And she’s been a bit pricklier than usual, what with our budgetary woes.”

“Is that why she doesn’t go up there?”

“She can’t. They blacklisted her.”

“They?”

“Namibia. They’ve got a photo of her up on the wall there at the border crossing.”

“Why?”

“You haven’t heard?” Mark lowers his voice. “She once had to be pulled off the Minister of Fisheries.”

“It shouldn’t have happened.” Syd is standing back by the front door, her own cigarette glowing in the darkness.

“You lost your temper, Syd,” Mark says. “You only did what most people have wanted to do for years.”

“Don’t you have packing to do?”

Mark sighs loudly and drops his cigarette, extinguishing it under his shoe. He picks up the stub and goes back inside.

Syd blows smoke at the sky.

“Mind if I have one?” Robert asks.

“Cost you a rhino.”

“What?” he asks, feigning ignorance.

“Ten rand.”

Robert hands over a bill. She holds the bill up to the flame of her lighter so she can see the rhinoceros illustration in green ink. “An elephant is twenty rand. Lions are fifty. Our natural resources, monetized. Fitting, really.”

“What denomination for seals?”

“Seals are worth nothing here, at least not alive.”

He leans forward as she lights his cigarette.

“I knew you had money on you.” Her lips curl slightly, the closest thing Robert has seen to a smile since he arrived.

“I’m staying at a hostel. If you let me stay here, I’ll pay you instead.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Have you tried to sneak across the border?”

“What do you think? They know me too well now by now. It’s practically become a game—*Catch Syd*. I tried sailing up one year, wrecked the boat against the rocks somewhere near Onyx. Gave them a good laugh.”

Syd lights another cigarette, and Robert watches her face. Her mind is lost—somewhere up north, he suspects.

“I used to visit the seals, before dawn, before it all began. My first year up there, I thought if I scared them all back into the water before the men arrived I could save them. But they wouldn’t budge. What a scene I made, whooping and hollering and kicking sand at nursing mothers.”

“I guess stubbornness is not unique to humans.”

“Namibians say the seals are stupid. It’s easier to kill them if they believe the seals can’t think for themselves. But they’re not stupid. This is their damn beach. They were here first.”

Robert glances over at Syd. Her eyes focus on the darkness at the end of the street, as if she can see all the way to the water a half mile beyond.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Robert lies in his hostel bunk nursing a bottle of whiskey, his mind unmoored. He feels no closer to Noa now than before he left the U.S.

She’s not here. This much is clear. But what if she was never here? What if she is not even alive?

For five years, the guilt of her death weighed on him like body armor. When Aeneas offered an exchange for Noa’s whereabouts, Robert did not hesitate to make the deal, even though Aeneas had every reason to lie, to put an ocean between them. Even though Robert had no reason to believe Noa was still alive.

But how could he not take a chance? So what if he had sacrificed his career and his life for an illusion; he knew agents who had died for less. And what if the universe was on his side for once?

Noa used to say, *You can’t control the outcome, only your response to it.* Yet he struggled with the sheer passivity of new-age wisdom. The *letting go*. The *putting it out there*. That the universe somehow will make everything right if you only let it. He lives in a different

universe, one that requires human intervention. And even then, things usually turn to shit.

Perhaps this journey will end in a similar fashion. He'd come down here trying to keep Noa's philosophy in mind—*if it's meant to be, I'll find her*. He knows he can't control the outcome. Yet he's not sure he'll be able to control his response to the outcome either, especially if she's not here.

His memories are another thing he can't control. Like the fictional wife he'd told the others about, he finds his past, real and undercover, becoming a chaotic jumble in his mind. Some use memories to escape to more pleasant times; Robert uses his to self-flagellate.

Like memories of Aeneas's ship. The *Eminence*. Robert didn't tell Gordon how he managed to get on board, as Noa's new boyfriend, only that he was one step closer to finding Darwin.

Midwestern bred, Robert had not grown up dreaming of oceans or sailing. The seas were always something other people enjoyed, people with extended families and second homes. People who spoke of Hawaii and Aruba as his family spoke of Lake of the Ozarks. During that first week on the boat with Noa, somewhere in the North Atlantic, Robert spent most days on his knees at the toilet. His body heaved with convulsions, as if trying to repel some strain of virus, in vain. Noa took pity on him, wiped his forehead, cleaned his face. In the dark, she was a soothing voice, a warm hand on his back.

When he finally found his sea legs, he began to hope that Darwin was not on board. He already had compiled a mental list of suspects. Tommy, the explosives expert, was at the top, followed closely by Aeneas. But if Darwin were revealed, Robert would have to make the arrest, turn the boat around—and Noa would exit his life as quickly as she'd entered. And she would hate him forever.

Aeneas attacked whaling ships and, when none could be found, attacked fishing trawlers. Robert, as Jake, took part, sometimes

by Zodiac, sometimes by helicopter. And at some point north of Svalbard, Robert resolved that he would never find Darwin, not even if Aeneas confessed.

What Robert did not expect was a confession from Noa.

One day on the ship's deck she told him about the fires that she had set, the mink she had freed, the alias she had used. Noa was Darwin. And Robert saw in front of him a woman just like him, living a double life.

If Aeneas had simply avoided cutting the lines of a fishing trawler, Robert might still be with Noa. But when one of the fishermen boarded the ship and held the crew at gunpoint, Robert drew his own gun—and in killing them, he also killed Jake. Before he could explain himself to Noa, swear that he would never harm her, tell her he would give everything up for her, she escaped in a Zodiac into the blinding white fog of the polar ice cap.

Robert, along with Aeneas, pursued by helicopter. But when he found her standing on unstable ice next to the upended Zodiac, he couldn't land anywhere near without the risk of shredding the ice she was stranded on. So he landed far away, and by the time he located her Zodiac again, his helicopter had sunk, and she was gone. His only salvation was her abandoned boat.

Returning to civilization alone, in silent mourning, was his purgatory, a fitting punishment for deceiving so many people, including himself. These people have different priorities, putting animals ahead of humans. That's what Gordon had said: *These people*. As if they were another species altogether. Which maybe they were. Robert had tried to become one of them—and he'd succeeded, for a time. Just not long enough. And now he is trying again. Placing animals ahead of people, placing Noa ahead of everything, to become, with a lot of persistence and a little luck, one of these people.

ROBERT ARRIVES AT THE SANCTUARY at 8:15 a.m. with another dull headache. The van is gone. Syd is waiting for him in Betsy's enclosure with an impatient expression. Betsy is squirming in her arms, as if trying to make a run for an ocean that isn't there.

"Sorry I'm late," Robert says.

"Come here," she says. "Take her."

"Why?"

"She's hungry, that's why. We need to feed the little ones every four hours until midnight. And we start at eight sharp, in case you'd forgotten."

Robert gets down on the concrete floor. Syd lifts Betsy by her fins and places her on Robert's lap.

The smell, even though he's growing more comfortable with it, still overwhelms. He instinctively wants to turn his head, but he can't bring himself to look away from Betsy's eyes, staring up at him, so helpless and searching. She weighs no more than an infant, relaxed in his arms, the suede-soft fur warm against his skin. Robert takes hold of the bottle, and when he nudges the nipple toward her mouth, Betsy locks onto it without hesitation, a persistent tug-of-war.

"Keep your fingers away," she says. "Her teeth may be small, but they hurt."

"Am I doing this right?" he asks over the sucking noise. Milk drips onto his lap.

Syd nods. "You sure you don't have any children?"

"The fact that I'm here should be evidence enough."

"And why *are* you here?" she asks. "Don't give me that bullshit story about the dead wife."

He glances up at her and feigns surprise as best he can. "Excuse me?"

"Why are you here?" She is staring down at him with a blank

expression, and for a moment he can't help but admire her tactics—this enclosure her makeshift interrogation room, the seal pup on his lap keeping him in his place.

“What do you want me to say?” he asks, trying to buy time.

“The truth would be a good start.”

“The truth?” Robert shakes his head, his mind racing. Had Noa told her about him? Or is she bluffing? “The truth is,” he says, “I’m not even sure why I’m here.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I’m trying to help. Isn’t that enough for you?”

“No.”

“Fine. You can take over here and I’ll—” He feels a sudden, searing pain and looks down to see Betsy’s mouth clamped on his right thumb, the bottle bouncing off the floor.

“Hold still,” Syd says. She reaches over and slowly pulls Betsy’s jaw open. Robert can see she was right; the teeth are small but razor sharp. Robert pulls his hand back, blood dripping on Betsy’s fur.

“I told you to keep your fingers away,” Syd says irritably.

“It feels like she’s ready for fish now.”

“Give her to me.” Syd pulls Betsy up into her arms. “Go wash that out inside. There’s rubbing alcohol and bandages in my office.”

Robert makes his way to Syd’s office. Through the small window overlooking the courtyard, he can see Syd with Betsy, oblivious to him. Robert glances at the desk: a slew of papers, a laptop computer, a scattering of spare change. He opens a file cabinet, then another. Blood is dripping on the linoleum floor, and he pulls up his T-shirt to press down on the bite wound.

Then he sees her.

Noa. Staring back at him from a photo on the wall, a bulletin-board mosaic of photographs and news articles. In the photo, she is standing in the courtyard cradling a small seal in her arms, smiling like a new mother. Her dreadlocks are gone, her hair short and even darker than he remembered.

He reaches out and touches the photo, leaving a blood-red smudge, his fingers trembling, adrenaline surging. He backs into the desk, knocking papers onto the floor, then leans over to pick them up.

“What are you doing?” Syd is standing at the doorway.

“I couldn’t find the—” He glances around the room.

She pushes past him and opens a desk drawer, pulls out a box. “You okay? You’re all pale.”

“Maybe it’s the blood loss.” He resists the urge to turn around, to meet Noa’s eyes again through the photograph.

“Please. That’s nothing,” she says. “Take a look at this.” She holds up her left hand and displays a row of scar tissue—teeth marks running across the palm of her hand like life lines. “You need to clean out that thumb.”

Robert takes the box to the bathroom. With the water running over his aching thumb, Robert considers coming right out and asking Syd about Noa. What’s the harm at this point? Syd already distrusts him; she already suspects he has an ulterior motive. Perhaps if he confirmed her suspicions she would tell him what he needed to know, if only to get him out of her way.

Then again, she’s more likely to kick Robert out onto the street without telling him a thing. And then he would be just as lost as before, worse even, because now he knows Noa is alive. But where? In Cape Town, working to protect the African penguin? Or maybe she moved inland to defend elephants or rhinos.

He opens the box to find antibiotic ointment and bandages. Better to wait and to work, he thinks as he wraps a bandage around his wound. He’ll continue to change light bulbs, clean toilets, scrape the ever-accumulating rust from the bars of the animal enclosures. Besides, in quarantining Robert from the others Syd will, eventually, become comfortable around him. Maybe she’ll even learn to trust him.

FOUR HOURS LATER, THE COURTYARD erupts in a symphony of pups begging for their food, bleating like sheep. Robert and Syd attend to each of them, repeating their morning ritual, the seals as hungry as if they hadn't eaten at all that day. Robert wants to let Syd feed Betsy, but she insists he go back in. He does, this time keeping a close eye on her mouth as she sucks down the milk. He even talks to her, telling her he was certain she meant him no harm. Betsy rewards his forgiveness by peeing in his lap.

And once everyone is fed and quiet, with the other team members still gone, the courtyard takes on a monastic feel. Robert scrubs out one of the kiddie pools while Syd walks from kennel to kennel, offering treats and the occasional soothing word. Robert feels a comfort in Syd's near-silence. Syd requires nothing of him other than to follow her orders, and this is something he's eager to do, with every chore getting him a step closer to the information he needs.

But there is more to it than that. With the pups splashing water all over the courtyard, he feels almost as though they are the parents of an unruly household. It's a comforting feeling—one he'd never known, having never been married, having never been a father. For the first time he can see the appeal of it, of the shared bond parents must have. When Betsy had peed on him, he'd looked up and caught Syd's knowing eye, a parent's eye, and he received, for the first time, a real smile.

He pauses while mopping a seal pen and sees Syd on the other side of the yard, cradling one of the younger pups. She talks to the pup in a voice Robert can't decipher, a voice that belies her hardened exterior. She is far more compassionate than she allows Robert to see, even if it's reserved for the non-human animals.

He continues to study Syd as she places the pup back in his kennel and stands up, wincing a bit as she straightens her back. She looks a few years older than Robert, and her face is worn around

the edges, but her eyes are dark blue, her body and arms strong and forceful, and he finds it hard to look away from her. He's drawn to strong women in a way he can't articulate. His mother wasn't strong, and maybe that's why. His father ignored her, belittled her, and occasionally hit her, and Robert resented her weakness.

Is it any wonder he fell for Noa, a woman who he always knew would not hesitate to leave him behind? Before Noa, he was the one who did the leaving, a routine he had perfected through practice. It wasn't until Noa that he realized it hurts far less to leave than to be left behind.

He's intrigued by how similar Syd and Noa are. And, despite himself, he enjoys spending time around this seemingly cold-hearted woman, whose compassion he knows runs deeper than she shows. But she reserves it all for the animals, with nothing left for people—not even herself. She wears used T-shirts with stretched-out necks, and if she owns a bra Robert hasn't seen it. Somehow her bedraggled look has a certain allure. Or maybe it's that she reminds him so much of Noa.

Later that day, as he finishes mopping the floor, he catches her watching him from behind the live-fish container. Toby and Betsy are balanced on the edge of the pool, their heads bobbing up and down in silent begging. He approaches.

"Can I feed them this time?"

She nods. "Don't make it easy for them. If they can't catch fish here, they'll never make it when they return to sea."

"And when will that be?"

"Soon," she says. "I need you to fetch more supplies."

"For them or for us?" Robert asks.

"Both."

He follows Syd's directions to the local supermarket, and when he enters, he feels as if he stepped through a time machine: worn linoleum floors and narrow aisles, antique grocery carts. He feels cold

steel in his hands as he navigates the squeaky cart through the aisles, tossing in cans of beans, bags of rice, onions, garlic, olive oil. Syd told him to get as many of the largest containers of fish oil he could buy with the money she gave him. But she hadn't given him nearly enough to cover what was in the cart. So he adds a dozen containers of fish oil, used to feed the seal pups, and charges everything to his credit card.

After leaving the supermarket, he heads to the city pier, where he pays a man named Martin 500 rand for two buckets of sardines. Back at the seal rescue, he pours the fish into the live-fish barrel.

In Syd's office he places the money she gave him on the desk. Syd glances up from her laptop but says nothing.

"I thought that might make you happy," Robert says.

"Get an extension on our utilities and we'll talk."

WHEN HE FINISHES spraying down the concrete floor, he spools the hose and then sits down on an overturned bucket and watches over his rubbery little charges. Now that Betsy has been promoted to the free-feeding pool, she has worn herself out wrestling with Toby. Now they lounge together on their diving platform, and they look so relaxed that Robert begins to feel as if he is an attendant at a country club.

"The water warm enough for you?" he asks.

Betsy eyes him curiously.

"Can I bring you anything? Mai tais, perhaps?"

Toby lifts his head to give him the same strange look as Betsy. Robert glances over at Onyx. She's still prostrate where he left her two hours ago. Syd won't admit it, but even Robert's unskilled eyes can see that Onyx is getting weaker by the minute.

He enters Onyx's enclosure. Though her body remains still, her eyes open slightly. He kneels, feeling the urge to stroke her neck, though Syd says he shouldn't. The less human contact the better—only what's absolutely necessary, she says. He has come to believe that

this is her approach to her fellow humans as well.

He places his hand on Onyx's neck and feels the bones of her spine. He expects her to tense and push up, but she stays motionless and watches him as he pets her. He feels his eyes welling because he's petting her like a dog—the only response he knows—yet this is not a dog. This is a creature of the ocean, and he's powerless to read her mind. Then again, he hasn't had any luck with Syd either, so maybe the problem is his alone.

THAT EVENING, HE RETURNS to the courtyard on his way out for the day. In the twilight, Toby and Betsy, motionless, watch him. The only light comes from Syd's window. He can see her inside, typing on her computer. He could have left a half hour ago, but he's not ready to face the hostel again.

He goes back inside and pops his head into her office. "You want to go grab a drink or something?"

"I already have a drink." She holds up a whiskey bottle.

"How many rhinos will that cost me?"

She nods him over and pours him a glass.

"When's the last time you left this place?" Robert asks.

"What place?"

"This sanctuary. This town."

She looks up at the wall, at a calendar from the previous year.
"Eight months."

"Where'd you go?"

"Cape Town."

"Vacation?"

"Funeral. My mother."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? She wasn't your mother."

Robert watches her drain her glass and pour another. "I think we should talk about Onyx," he says.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Syd shakes her head dismissively.

“She’s not doing well.”

“No shit.”

“You really hate me, don’t you?”

“I don’t hate you,” she says. “I just don’t trust you.”

“Still?”

“You’re not here for the seals.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“You’re in your mid-thirties, right?”

Robert nods.

“How many men in your particular demographic—clean-cut, professional manner—traipse halfway around the world with the sole intention of cleaning up seal *kak*?”

“I came here to fight the sealers.”

“Right.” She looks at him. “So you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I told you already.”

“Yes. Your wife. May she rest in peace.”

Robert puts down the glass and heads for the door.

“Hold on a second.”

He stops.

Syd sighs and looks down at her laptop. “Look, we’re about to get our water shut off again.”

“Yeah? So?”

“What are you paying at that hostel?”

“Twenty a night.” He takes a step forward, waiting for her to look up. “Are you actually inviting me to stay here?”

“I’m out of options.”

“What a charming offer. It’s a mystery why you have trouble fundraising.”

When she looks up at him, eyes narrowed, he smiles, mostly to show he means well but also because he’s enjoying the moment. For

once, he feels in control of what's happening here, even if only briefly. And, by staying here, he may be able to get one step closer to Noa.

"Well?" Syd says.

"Okay," Robert says. "Where do I sleep?"

"There's a cot in the utility closet." She extends a hand. "Prepayment required."

THE CLOSET IS CRAMPED and cluttered, and Robert has to keep the door propped open for air. In the middle of the night, he gets up to pee, and when he returns to the closet, in the darkness he trips over a broom, breaking it in two.

Syd is asleep in her office, and Robert sits down in the hallway on the floor, staring at the shrapnel, waiting, almost hoping she has heard and will emerge to investigate. But after ten minutes, with no sound coming from her office, he returns to his cot and to the stale, dusty air of the tiny room.

7.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING ROBERT enters the courtyard to find Syd standing outside Onyx's enclosure. He looks down at Onyx. She isn't moving, her eyes closed.

"Syd?"

"She's dead," Syd says, not looking up.

"Syd?" Robert asks again, hoping to catch her eyes.

"Better now than later," she continues. "We have two pups getting dropped off this evening, and we need the enclosure."

Robert stares at Syd. Despite his time with her, he's taken aback by her seeming indifference to this dead newborn on the

concrete between them.

“What should I do with her?”

“Get the carrier and load up Toby,” Syd says, heading for the street.

“Wait. Why?”

“It’s time for Toby to go.”

“Where?”

“Where do you think? The bloody ocean.”

“This feels sudden.”

“It’s been six months. We don’t have unlimited resources. Now go on. Get him loaded.”

Robert maneuvers Toby into a large dog carrier. A few minutes later, Syd pulls up to the gate in a rusting red Toyota pickup. She barks out instructions to him as he helps her move the carrier into the back of the truck.

He stays silent as she drives them outside the town center, then onto a dirt road and around the bay, to the outer reaches of the port. He wants to talk to her about Onyx, as much for her as for himself. The apparent ease with which she distanced herself from this dead creature makes him wonder if he is going soft.

The concrete sidewalks and gravel parking lots give way to brown grass, strewn with large rocks and beer cans. A place where kids come to drink. A place where a young seal can slip easily into deep water.

As he exits the truck, Robert feels a drop of rain and looks up at the gray sky. Darker clouds approach. On Syd’s instructions, he positions the carrier fifteen feet from the water’s edge and then opens the gate. Syd stands next to the carrier as Toby peers out, looking up at the woman who has been his mother for past six months. He doesn’t move.

“This must be difficult,” Robert says.

“It’s impossible to know what a seal is thinking.”

“I was talking about you.”

Robert catches her eyes for a brief moment before they both turn back to the carrier. Toby stays focused on Syd’s face, waiting for those furtive eyes to return to his.

“As hard as it is for us, it’s worse for him,” she says. “He’s all alone in that dark world. If he’s lucky, he’ll find his way back to his colony, maybe even find his mother. If he’s not, he’ll get snared by a fishing trawler or taken by a shark.”

“Do you ever see them again?”

“Sometimes. We can tell by the tags. Franklin, a pup we rescued five years ago, turned up a week ago, just south of here.”

“How’d you find him?”

“A fisherman had shot him in the head. Our phone number is on the tag. A beachcomber found him and called.”

Toby continues to watch Syd from the safety of his carrier.

“Lift the back of the carrier,” Syd says.

Robert does as he’s told, and still Toby resists eviction. Robert holds up the back end of the carrier and waits patiently. He thinks back to the time his father dumped him off at kindergarten on his first day of school, two full blocks away because traffic was bad in front of the school and he was running late for work, leaving Robert to navigate the sea of parents and their more fortunate children, walking hand in hand as he tried to find his way to his classroom.

“We don’t have all day,” Syd says.

Robert steps away as she takes hold of the carrier. She begins to shake it aggressively as Toby struggles to wriggle his way back inside.

“Easy, Syd,” Robert says.

But she doesn’t stop until Toby tumbles out, landing hard on the ground. He pushes himself back up on his fins and climbs up to the highest rock, his enormous eyes staring at them.

“C’mon,” Syd says, voice raised. “Off you go.”

She nudges Toby along with her left foot, firmly, until Toby

begins lobbing toward the water's edge.

"Easy," Robert says again, though he's not sure why.

"He's begging for food," Syd says as if reading Robert's mind.

"But he's weaned. It's time he learns to fish on his own."

"Will he?"

"Some do. Some don't. The flipper tags on the carcasses that wash ashore tell us who died but not always why."

Toby turns his head and looks back at them from his tenuous perch above the water.

"Go on now," Syd says. She waves a hand, and Toby slips into the water without disturbing it. A few seconds later, ten feet away, Toby's nose breaks the surface.

"Go on!" she shouts.

Robert is surprised by the tone of Syd's voice, a tone he hasn't heard since the day she told him to leave. He looks back at her accusingly.

"You can't get attached to them," she says. "They don't belong to us."

"Doesn't mean you have to yell at them."

"You want them to be comfortable around humans? So the next time they haul themselves ashore and they see a man walking toward them carrying a bat, they offer themselves right up?"

"No, I—"

"If he pokes his head out of the water begging for fish from one of these trawlers, he's dead. People are the enemy. He needs to remember that if he's going to stand a chance."

Her eyes reflect the water, dark and moody, and he can feel her staring him down, as if he is the source of the world's misery.

She walks past him to the water's edge. "Years ago, when we lost our first pup, I didn't know what to do with the body. Do you bury it? Where do you bury it? Do you take it to the water to feed the sharks? This guy shows up one day saying he'll cremate the bodies

and do it for free. I was naive and overwhelmed and didn't realize until a year later that he was selling the skins. Forty rand a body. The thing is, we could really use that money right about now. Onyx is dead, and that money would help keep others alive. But I can't do it. I just can't."

She turns to him, her face red. He wants to go to her, put a hand on her shoulder at the very least, but he knows she doesn't want that.

"I'll bury her," he says instead.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll do it after dark tonight. Not like there's not enough land around here."

She looks relieved, but a moment later she turns back to the water.

"Is Toby gone?" he asks, scanning the water.

"Yes."

Robert watches her walk back to the truck. He wonders how many times Syd has performed this sad ritual, bringing rescued orphans back to life and then kicking them out again.

Robert turns back to the water and waits another minute to see if Toby might surface again. Syd honks at him from the car, and he reluctantly gets in. Before he can fasten his seat belt, she is pulling away.

“...you will find yourself thinking about the passionate, flawed, and funny characters all day long ... without even realizing how much *Oceans* has forever changed you.”

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Robert Porter has quit the FBI in search of his long-lost (and presumed dead) love, Noa, only to find himself on the wind-raked shores of Southern Africa working for a seal-rescue organization. When a confrontation with local sealers ends in murder, Robert must abandon the seals and his search to join a private intelligence firm seeking to locate an activist who stole files from one of the world's largest biotech companies.

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The stories of Robert, Amy, and Tracy collide on a desolate beach in Australia in this passionate, adventurous novel about living on the edge of society and love in all its myriad forms.

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