DAY OF THE WHALE

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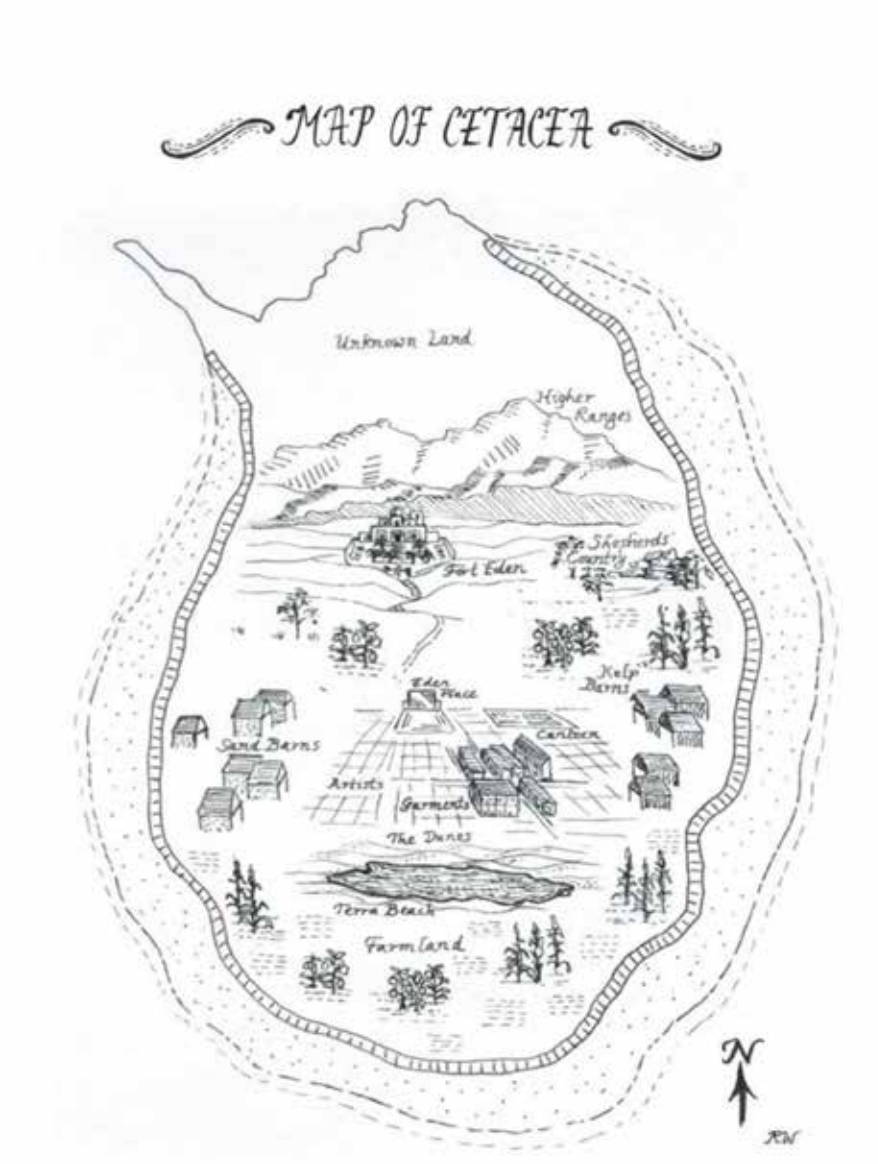
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To Mum, and to Australia,
where my own story begins



Cetacea pronounced: Si-tay-sha

‘Truth is not afraid of questions.’
– Paramahansa Yogananda

Chapter 1

Big Blue

A single note soared over the island – a high-pitched yawn that cut through the thick, sticky heat. Cam stopped scrubbing and waited, hoping another would follow. Hoping with all his might . . . Seconds later it came: a long, mournful bleat. A summoning call.

'Big Blue's coming!'

Cam dropped his brush and ran out of the barn and into the open yard where he fell, sprawling on piles of seaweed. The workers around him laughed and pretended to prod him with their rakes, but he picked himself up and kept going, dashing through the tight alleys of the kelp district, his green tunic flapping like sea lettuce in a storm.

When he hit the main streets, crowds of people were oozing through them already, slow and thick like lava. He bounced on his toes, watching as the throng thickened. If he was swallowed up in that sluggish tide, he'd be stuck at the back, lucky to see anything at all.

And he had to see. He had to.

Crowds were now building up behind him; he was running out of time. Cam looked for an escape. To his left was a breeze tunnel – a gut-pinch alley between two houses, barely wide enough for a possum. He sucked in his tummy and slipped into it sideways, edging through it like thread through a needle to the other side, where he found himself in the network of small alleys that criss-crossed the districts. The backstreets were cool and empty, and Cam sprinted through them, zigzagging towards Eden Place as fast as he could.

Eden Place was at the heart of Cetacea: a square so big, it could hold everyone on the island. It was half full by the time Cam got there, and hot – the stone baking like an oven under the vicious southern sun. People scurried to pockets of shade and squabbled over the auditorium seats on the east and west sides.

That's where Cam and his dad had always chosen to sit. Not for the light breezes, like most, but for the clear view of the screen that towered over the north side of the square. It was almost as big as Eden Place itself, and from up there, at the top, when Big Blue came, they could see all of him, tip to tail. Cam recalled his dad's excitement, how his fidgeting hand would tap Cam's knee and he'd say, 'Take a good look him, Cam. See what he is.'

What he was, was a blue whale. And when Big Blue appeared, magnified and magnificent on the giant screen, it always took Cam's breath away.

Take a good look him, Cam. See what he is.

His dad had always urged him to look harder. And over the years, Cam had done just that. He'd memorised the whale's markings, colours, scars and barnacles; he knew the contours of the creature better than he knew his own face. He thought he knew everything there was to know, but it turns out he didn't know anything at all. Not about Big Blue. And not about his dad.

Because he never thought his dad would leave.

'If I don't come back, follow Big Blue and find the truth, Cam. Understand?' His father had gripped his arm and nodded as if to nail the words into Cam's forehead. Then stepped through the door and was gone. He didn't return that day or the day after, and, as the weeks turned into months, Cam took those last words and distilled them into an oath.

Follow Big Blue. Find the truth.

There was something else he needed to know about Big Blue – some truth – and when he found out what it was, then he'd find out where his dad had gone.

It seemed simple enough at first. But four Big Blue sermons had passed since then. Four times, Cam had rushed to the top row of seats and stared so hard at the Eden Screen his eyes dried up – inspecting the whale from mouth to tail fluke, from dorsal to belly – and each time he learned nothing new. Now, he suddenly realised how pointless it was. Pointless doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different outcome. If he hadn't seen the 'truth' in the last four sermons, why

would it be different this time?

He was going to try something else.

Instead of scrabbling up the scaffolding, he headed into the standing area, where people were surging like shoals of fish towards the slim shadows. Some fell due to the heat, or from sheer exhaustion after starting dawn work shifts. Others pushed and shoved. The pit was always like a tureen of boiling carrots.

Cam twisted his body through the tiny gaps that opened up between elbows and shoulders, pushing his way forward bit by bit until he found himself in the one area of Eden Place that everyone else avoided.

The very north side of the square was in full sun and right under the screen. The view was terrible and the noise unbearable. But that's what he had come for: the sound. If he couldn't see the truth, perhaps he could hear it. *Feel* it. Anything was worth a try.

He shook out his green tunic, scraped back his damp brown hair and climbed onto the wooden stage beneath the screen, positioning himself cross-legged in front of a noise box. When sound came, it would be unbearable; the vibrations would play his bones like a xylophone. But he hoped Big Blue's voice would sing right through him and leave a message under his skin.

As he waited for it all to begin, he recited the *Birth of Cetacea* laws, hoping Big Blue would somehow notice his devotion.

We do not speak of the dirty past –
the past destroys the future.
We will work hard –
we must sustain ourselves and clean the world.
We do not consume more than we need –
greed is our downfall.
We do not eat animals – all creatures are equal.
We stay away from the sea – we will trespass no more.
We work together. We eat together. We live together.
We obey the whales. Long live the whales.

The crowd suddenly *aaaaah*-ed. Cam leant back a little and saw above him the Eden Screen had blinked on. It was filled with blue. Fish now flickered this way, then that. Sun pierced the water in shimmering spears. Like magic, it had become a porthole into the Cetacea Sea.

Applause rippled through the square and Cam knew that somewhere in the ocean blue, a dark shape was emerging. They clapped harder and cheered. He was coming.

Big Blue, the Master Whale.

Cam couldn't see clearly from his position, but he knew it by heart – how the giant appeared from the deep, swimming closer and closer until the grooves along his throat were as big as the plough lines in the fields. So close, it looked as if he might break through the glass and swim right into the crowds. And then stopped and hung

there, suspended, gazing out at them with a patient eye.

Cam gritted his teeth. 'This time, Dad, I'm going to find the truth. I promise.'

The sound box buzzed to life and vibrations spread through his skin like a shower of pins. Then a voice flowed out of it, rich and slow like syrup.

'Good morning, Cetacea.'

On a platform to the left of the screen, fifty metres above the stage, a curtain was pulled back to reveal Byron Vos, the greatest whale expert the world had ever known. The founder of Cetacea. The only person on the planet who could talk to whales.

Next to the giant master whale his body looked tiny, but his presence was huge; he always drew everyone's attention.

Byron raised his arms to the sky and the crowd began to chant.

'Byron! Byron! Byron!'

His voice soothed. 'Everyone, please be still.'

The applause evaporated. Eden Place fell silent. The whale-talker focused, and Cam braced himself.

A groan burst through the noise box and slammed into his body. The sound boomed; it twisted, yawned and throbbed like earache. Cam squeezed his eyes shut against the pain and tried to imagine the whale call wrapping itself around his heart.

'What truth? Tell me!' he yelled, but Big Blue fell silent and Byron's voice took over.

'Big Blue says welcome, citizens of Cetacea . . . Because of your dedication, the seas surrounding your island are abundant with life. Fish have begun to fill the reefs. The waters are awash with nutrients . . . The sea gardens will soon be restored to glory.'

'Yeah!'

Cam turned his head to see who had spoken. Behind him, a boy was standing in the pit, his arms resting on the stage. About the same age, with light brown skin and blond hair, wearing the yellow tunic of the sand workers. The boy was smiling right at him. Cam wondered why, but he couldn't be distracted, not now. He couldn't miss a thing. He turned back to face the noise box.

Big Blue continued his sermon with wide, hollow bleats that strummed Cam's throat and shook his bones. But as the call faded and Byron began his translation, Cam was left with nothing but a churning stomach.

'You are making progress, but you are yet to rid the oceans . . . of waste created by thousands of years . . . of human neglect. Look after the Earth and the Earth will look after you.'

Look after the Earth and the Earth will look after you. Those were always the final words. So, just like that, it was over. The shortest sermon in years.

A sob escaped Cam's chest as he looked up and saw the blurred image of Big Blue drifting like a giant monolith into the steely distance. The Cetacea Sea faded too, along with Cam's hope that this time would

be different. He wanted to slink away and scream with frustration, but the session hadn't finished – not until Byron said so.

The whale-talker's upper half now filled the screen. His linen top and long sandy hair fluttered in the thin breeze and his hands were positioned in front of his chest, wrists pressed together and palms apart.

'Adopt the whale tail,' he prompted.

Everyone placed their hands in the whale-tail position for their silent promise to reject the dirty past and live for a clean future under the guidance and laws of the whales. Cam usually loved this part. But today he was agitated. His body was still shaking from the noise, and his mind was maddened. The truth – whatever the truth was – had evaded him again. He felt his father slipping further away.

'Thank you, all.' Byron Vos's bright green eyes seemed to look at each and every one of them in the square. 'Let us remind ourselves. Who caused the floods?'

'*We caused the floods!*'

'What must we do?'

'*Clean up the Earth!*'

'Who saved our souls?'

'*The whales saved our souls.*'

'The whales are our masters. Long live the whale!'

'*Long live the whale. Long live the whale.*'

Chapter 2

The Boy

It was over. The image of Byron Vos dissolved, the screen went blank and the magic vanished. The crowds filtered back through the myriad lanes, taking their time to gossip, delaying their return to work as long as they could.

Cam didn't usually try to avoid work – he liked his work, he *believed* in it. He liked to the be the first in and the last out. But with his mind and body aching, he moved slowly towards the kelp district.

Suddenly, someone crashed against his shoulder and he was knocked off-balance. He stumbled sideways. He was shoved again, and again, until he was on the ground.

'Hopelessly devoted to Blue,' a voice teased. 'He doesn't even know you exist, loser.'

It was Matteo. Others behind him echoed like lyrebirds. *Loser. Loser.*

The bullying never normally affected Cam – his dad's words had always been like an invisible talisman, keeping his chin up, keeping him strong; he didn't need

to be liked when there were bigger things to think about. But now, the words unexpectedly stung.

Matteo pulled a face as the gang passed by. 'If whales are so great, why don't you ever look as if you're having fun, Cam?'

Cam waited for them to turn the corner before he got up. He watched Matteo's long hair bounce out of sight and wondered, not for the first time, what had gone so wrong between them. A sense of loneliness swelled inside his chest.

Then, a scuff of shoes on the stone caught Cam's attention. There was a figure watching him from the shade of a wall. Wide face and straw-blond hair. It was the boy in the yellow tunic.

'Are you following me?'

The boy stepped forward and grinned. 'Yeah, it looks like I am.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Just curious. Never seen anyone get on stage during a sermon before. Hey, Big Blue's voice was awesome, wasn't it? Sounded like it was coming from the centre of the Earth.'

'Yeah, I suppose it did . . . Who *are* you?'

'Banjo.'

'Like the instrument?'

'Like the frog. You?'

Cam tried not to laugh at the idea of being named after a frog. 'I'm Cam.'

'As in camouflage?'

'No.' Cam laughed out loud. 'Just Cam.'

'Why did those boys say mean things to you?' Banjo rubbed his eyes, and Cam noticed they were red, typical of sand workers, who squinted twelve hours a day, separating plastic and metal particles from the grains.

'It's a long story.'

'I got time.' The boy's smile was wide, crammed with white teeth. His brown eyes, though sore, sparkled.

'I haven't. I've got to get back to work.'

'You're kelp,' Banjo said, pointing at Cam's green tunic. 'Whale work, like me.'

'Yeah. Look, I've got to go. I'm late.'

'Okay, see you around.'

'See you.'

Cam ran to his kelp barn as fast as he could. He was the last one in, but the manager pretended not to notice. Mr Freedman was rarely angry. He hardly ever raised his voice, and Cam had never seen him use the strap, not like some managers. Nevertheless, Cam set to work, determined but numb, hardly feeling the sting of sea water on his cracked hands.

Washing kelp was tough; all day, every day they scrubbed the long weed ribbons to dislodge the microscopic plastics, so they could be replanted in the clean sea gardens. It was 'whale work' – a planet-protecting job, like sand sorting. But where the sand sorters had sore eyes, the kelp cleaners had gnarled

hands. The salt water damaged the skin, and workers often snagged each other with their hard bristle brushes.

Cam's workstation was opposite Dean. The bully's brush instantly caught his hand, knocking the tender scabs.

'I saw you sitting in front of the noise box,' Dean said. 'That's just weird. What were you doing?'

Cam gave him a hard stare, trying to grab onto that inner strength he once had, muster some confidence.

'Hey? I asked you a question, weed-brain.'

Dean's brush smashed into Cam's knuckles again, ripping back the skin like paperbark. Cam chewed the inside of his mouth to stop himself crying out. He couldn't let Dean win.

There'd be another sermon. Another chance. Stay strong.

'Why?' Dean persisted.

'None of your business.' Cam flicked his brush across the table, nicking Dean's wrist.

Dean yelped and drew his fist to his mouth and sucked the scratches. 'You're a little freak,' he hissed. 'You're crazy.'

Cam wondered if the bullies might back off if they understood *why* he was obsessed with Big Blue. But he'd tried to talk to Matteo about it, hadn't he, and Matteo had stuck his fingers in his ears and told Cam to shut his mouth. Since then Cam hadn't told a soul, and he sure as tides wasn't going to tell a moron like Dean. He'd rather put up with the insults and the cuts. One day, when

he found what he was looking for, everything would be better.

When their shift finished, the other barn kids ran out honking like geese. Cam hung back and crawled under the tables to collect the seaweed everyone had dropped in their hurry to get to mid meal. He did it to help Mr Freedman, and to put some distance between himself and the gang. But Mr Freedman pulled at his tunic.

'Get going, Cam. There's a replanting boat going out later so they'll be here any minute to collect the kelp, and they won't want you in their way. Treat your hands and get to the square, now, before you miss all the food. You know there's never quite enough for a full belly. If you dally any longer, you'll be lucky to get a crumb.'

'But –.'

'Go, or I'll have you transferred.'

It was a joke, but Cam didn't want to take a chance on that. On the Eden Screen, he'd watch their lush forests of clean, replanted kelp, providing shelter for sea life and calming choppy seas. Restoring the whales' watery home made him happy. It was a small link between him and Big Blue. Him and his father. He didn't want to work anywhere else. And Mr Freedman was right – he had to get a move on. There was never enough food to feel fully satisfied; people taking more than their share was the cause of most fights.

He washed his cuts and ran to Eden Place. The clatter of metal pans rang through the alleys, and with every

corner he turned, the chitter-chatter grew louder, like flocking cockatoos. In the square, people sat either side of colourful cloth runners, a hundred in every row, as the canteen crew weaved through them like hummingbirds in their bright blue tunics. They had a system. Everyone had a system. Cetacea ran on systems and rules.

Cam looked about desperately for a place to sit.

'Cam, over here!'

An arm was beckoning. It belonged to Lindy. She was probably the kindest of all the kids in his kelp barn, but he was wary of her – she camouflaged herself like an octopus so as not to stand out. Matteo had done that too, changed to fit in with a new gang. He never used to be such a bully.

Cam walked towards Lindy, and immediately regretted it when he saw the others all sitting alongside her, attacking the food like wild dingoes. Taking more than their share.

Pip was whining. 'Mum says the whales will drown me in bad luck.'

'We'll just sneak away for a few hours,' Dean said. 'Freedman probably won't even miss us.'

'If he does, we might get transferred to Harvest or Hygiene.'

'Who cares? Whale work is rubbish.'

'No, it's not.' The moment Cam said it, he knew he shouldn't have.

Matteo laughed. 'Look who it is. Cam Solomon. Are you called that because you're always on your own, Solo Man?' He was pleased with his joke.

'Matt,' Lindy warned. 'Why *are* you so obsessed, Cam?' Her voice was sweet, but Cam could see she had changed colour again.

'You know – look after the Earth and the Earth will look after you,' he muttered.

'Yeah, because your mum won't.' Pip smirked at the others. 'She looks ready for the grape fields.'

They all choked with laughter, apart from Matteo. Cam saw him shift uncomfortably. Lindy patted the ground next to her, telling him to sit. But no, they'd gone too far this time. His dad was gone, and yes, his mother had begun to disappear too, right in front of his eyes. Every day she faded a little bit, and some days she was barely more than a ghost. But to say that she was ready for the grape fields, ready to be put in the ground? That was just nasty, and none of those kids had lost a parent. They didn't understand grief.

Cam's eyes watered as he gazed across the square, looking for somewhere else to sit, trying to forget that once upon a time David Solomon would have been sitting here too, saving a space for his son.

'Hey! Hey, Cam!'

There was a flash of yellow and Cam saw a nimble figure jumping towards him in wallaby hops. Banjo. The boy landed at his feet, and quickly pushed something into his hands – a banana leaf stuffed with curry and rice.