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**(This is a work of fiction, inspired by the historical George Davidson Whaler of Eden, New South Wales, Australia.)**

**Chapter 1**

**The Sea**

There is something calming, awe-inspiring and sometimes, terrifying about the sea. Everybody knows it: a child building a sandcastle, jumping, laughing and squealing in the surf; the black-sheep criminal who wants to be baptised in water, even if their life has been wasted and their body is diseased. They must immerse themselves in the water. The happy swimmer knows it suddenly when they are surprised ̶ slapped senseless by a violent wave and then dragged under by Neptune’s greedy claws, sucked under into Neptune’s greedy mouth.

The vastness of the sea and the sky awakens an instinct in humanity ̶ a hunger to wander, a yearning to explore, and a drive to conquer. In Eden, Australia, a British colony, in the 1800s, the name George Davidson would become synonymous with industry, with whaling, with whale oil and with wealth.

One of the George’s whalers was named Henry, and he had a troubled history. During those past dark and despairing days, Henry wondered how he taken such a bad turn on the road of life. He was sinking deeper and deeper into debt. There were creditors after him and he jumped at shadows. Any unexpected noise startled him and sent his heart racing. There was a guilt that he carried with him, and he deserved that. Because of the money he stole from good people, good people who had shown him only goodness and kindness. One bad decision led to another until there was no righting things, no way to stop the insane momentum of a spectacular crash ̶ he could only let the game play out to its ultimate conclusion.

Henry was a magician with the cards, and he couldn’t bear to lose face or to disappoint or fail anyone, and so he had to borrow more money. And borrow more money until he ruined his business and estate and family. He remembered the pale white shock on their faces when he told them. Henry got out of Sydney fast, dodging knives and bullets. The ugly scars on his ribs and shoulder a reminder of his lucky escape. Eventually, Henry limped into Eden and Twofold Bay and asked George Davidson for a job as a carpenter. George took him on as a whaler and when he found out about the debts, he actually paid them. Henry had been whaling for the Davidson family gratefully ever since that day.

Albert Yuin was a descendant of the native aboriginal whalers who had revered the orcas as reincarnated ancestors, the same aboriginal whalers who called the orcas with song and were expert with harpoon and lance. Albert was a deeply serious and superstitious man yet also could be moved quickly to anger, laughter or playful jest. He just never could temper his passions. After a drunken altercation in a pub with some troublemakers the police came looking for Albert ̶ then George intervened with his influence because he could see disaster down the road for the talented yet impulsive young man, and because he knew Albert Yuin would make a valuable addition to the whaling crew.

The townsfolk called her the queen of Twofold Bay, and it was true enough. Sarah Davidson was George’s wife and the mother of his children. She manged the estate as a cook, cleaner, gardener, accountant and confidant. But more than that she had a practical and utilitarian mind as well as an intuitive and perceptive heart, this was very useful in business. Somehow, she would read the secrets of people’s hearts and foretell events that seemed perhaps fated. George was not always one to express his feelings in words, but she knew that she was the love of his life.

Sarah, back in her maiden days had many suitors: there had been a solid, dependable yet boring farmer; an interesting yet skinny, poor artist; as well as an incredibly wealthy businessman with an explosive mean streak. In the end though, no one could stir her the way George did, even though the life of a whaler’s wife was mostly a life of loneliness and anxiety with brief shinning moments of gladness. Sarah enjoyed these glad moments.

Occasionally though, she regretted her decision, and yet she knew if she could go back in time and live her life over again, she would make the same choices, again. Her parents warned her ̶ that she would soon be a widow, and in her dreams, she watched death stalk her loved ones.

**Chapter 2**

**The Wharf and the Slaughter**

Henry stood on the decking boards of the Eden whaling wharf in New South Wales. The water in the bay was a hazel slate grey, grey as gravel and the wind was brutal and cold. Henry and his mates glanced up the hill nervously; then quickly returned their eyes to their tools, as they awaited their employer’s command. The master, George Davidson was talking to his wife, Sarah, at the gates of the homestead. Some words drifted down to them:

‘It was real, I’m telling you, there was a terrible storm, and Old Tom the orca was in a fury, and he was in pain!’

‘Sarah, I chart my course according to my compass and the price at market, not fears and dreams!’

‘And what about Effie’s birthday? Why don’t you stay for this month and hunt later? Please.’

‘No. I wish I could. But no…I will look after the men and the orcas, don’t you worry. And I have a grand present coming soon for Effie.’

There was silence and perhaps an embrace, perhaps tears or a kiss; but Henry was focused on his work.

George Davidson strode down the steps onto the decking boards; he was a tall and muscular man, with a flat honest face. Henry and his mates looked up from their tools towards their employer.

‘Jack, start pulling that winch, bring the whale in!’

Jack (George’s son) started on the winch eagerly.

‘Henry, grab your boat spade, you’ll be butcher today.’

Henry snatched up the boat spade that was leaning against the wall of the hut beside him.

‘Yuin, you can help Henry.’

The aboriginal who was painted in white ochre paddled his canoe closer to the wharf, his ancestors had been skilled hunters and whalers for generations in this land, their native land.

Henry looked at George, raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

‘How did you ever learn their language? It’s a strange tongue…’

‘There are many languages, the language of whales, of the tides and storms, and of the stock market, and of the natives. It pays to understand all of them. At the end of the year, you’ll see, we will be golden!’

‘You’re a shameless capitalist and a luddite George!’ Henry smiled as he said what none of his mates would dare say to George.

‘Only once I purchased one of those new fancy things, you remember what happened? You almost shot that harpoon gun into Jack’s belly, shot the second right into the sea, almost hit the orcas!’

There was no condemnation in George’s voice as he described the one instance that they had tried to use the new technology, it was merely exaggeration and banter. Henry sliced open the whale’s blubber, the fire and the oil pots awaited. He cut with his boat-spade, the gory incision starting from the massive dead whale’s eye and sliced all the way back to its fin. Then, with a hook and rope the crew peeled and ripped the long strips of blubber from the carcass, the same way a man peels an orange in a spiral.

The work was long and hard for the whole crew, and minutes passed into hours in a monotonous repetitive grind of messy butchery. The smell of blubber, the smell of fire and smoke and whale oil assaulted Henry; his fingers cramped, the muscles in his arms and back burned painfully. He lost himself in the artful movements of slicing and slashing, the same way he had once committed himself to saw and chisel in the carpenter’s shop, but sawdust was far more pleasant than the sticky, slippery feel and over-powering smell of whale-oil. And yet, this was the precious product that kept the wheels and gears of civilisation turning, and this was making a living.

If Australia was a house, then farming, mining and whaling were the integral concrete foundations of that house. Whale-oil kept the flame of civilisation burning. This was the true nature of commerce, the true nature of life.

**Chapter 3**

**The Horse and the Pup**

George rode his horse over to his mate’s house because Charlie was a friendly and useful man, and because he needed a favour. Charlie sold tools as well as cattle, horses and dogs. George dismounted his horse and approached the red-roof and veranda. The red-roofed house was surrounded by scorched brown grass and eucalypt trees with their gnarly bone-white trunks. He could smell the blue-green leaves as they shimmered in the morning heat. He spied his mate feeding breakfast to a litter of puppies in an old tin shed.

‘Charlie, hey mate!’

‘George, old pal, how are you? How goes the whaling?’

‘Lucky sometimes, sometimes not so lucky.’

The two men shook hands and fell in walking together in a companionable, chummy way.

‘Smoke and a scotch?’ Charlie smiled at his old friend.

‘It is too early for that! I wondered, if you have a dog and a horse for me? If you would hold them for me? I’d make good the purchase before Christmas.’

‘Of course, mate.’

‘I just need to butcher one more whale to clear my debts, and a second whale to buy the Christmas presents, keep the family and business going into next year.’

‘It’s a tough business George, you are fearless and crazy mate. How is Sarah doing?’

‘She has the patience of a saint, she worries though, she has these dreams... about disaster, you know.’

‘You’ve got a good woman there George. A good Sheila. So, who are you buying the horse and the dog for?’

‘The horse is for Effie, and the pup for young Jack.’

Charlie gestured towards the shed housing the dogs and the paddock where his horses grazed. The two men strolled closer to the shed. The sun cast its warm golden-yellow-glow over the structures and the pastures. Their boots kicked up the dust and the air was hot.

‘I think I have something perfect for them both. A Shetland pony would be ideal for Effie, I have just the one, a calm and responsive Shetland pony. And I imagine that a blue-heeler Australian cattle dog would be ideal for Jack...’

‘Yes, excellent, that would suit them both I think. Effie is a wanderer at heart, she would love that. Jack is a thoughtful boy; it would do him good to care and be responsible for something. How is the dog’s temperament?’

‘Have a look and judge for yourself.’

Charlie opened the shed door; the pups were eating their breakfast out of their bowls. George noted one particular pup with a blue-white speckled coat, one side of his face was covered with a black marking, the other side of his face was a tan mask. The blue-heeler growled fiercely at two siblings, as they tried to steal his breakfast. Charlie erupted in a booming laugh.

George noted that the blue-heeler defended his breakfast successfully. Then, with the attempted theft forgotten, all the pups launched out to explore the yard and tumble over each other in a joyful bounding riot. George noted the pup was engaged in the play and even approached him, a strange human, even dared to sniff his boots and lick his hand. The heeler was scrappy, playful and inquisitive.

‘I think this might be the dog for Jack.’

‘Good choice George. I will keep him for you.’

**Chapter 4**

**Threats**

On his journey back home, George decided to make a stop in at the Seahorse Inn for a beer. Just one beer, after all he worked hard for it…

The Seahorse Inn had white walls and a silver sheet-metal roof, its many halls lay close to a grassy lawn with palm trees, as well as a sandy and gravely beach. Entering through the big front door that was panelled with timber and glass, he found the interior cool and dark and cosy.

He approached the bartender and asked for a beer and settled down to relax. Out of the corner of his eye he noted the last man he wanted to see; it was his impatient creditor. This was bad luck...

The man was in a meeting and unluckily for George, the meeting seemed to be closing, and the businessmen were dispersing. Like a bird of prey, the banker spotted and then swooped over to George. The man wore a waistcoat and a pocket watch, his features were small and his skin pasty. His nose was even hooked like a beak, giving the man a cruel expression, which coincidentally, accurately reflected the inner personality.

‘They call you fearless George, you must be fearless to show your face here, when you are so badly in debt!’

‘You will have your money Mr Tyler; you can count on that. I promise you.’

‘End of the month George, no later…Or else, I will seize everything you own…’

The banker glided on, intent on other economic favours, kills and conquests. The working men stepped aside as he stalked through the pub and then exited the Seahorse Inn. Then everyone breathed a sigh of relief, because everyone knew that man could make or break almost anyone with one stroke of his pen. George drank his beer and chatted to the bartender and a few other farmers and tradesmen, and just as he was starting to relax again; he saw a group of rival whalers drinking and smoking in a corner. George couldn’t believe it, more bad luck. One of them, tattooed with a shaved head approached him rudely.

‘Look here! It’s the great and legendary fearless George!’

The rival whaler bowed theatrically to him in scornful and bitter mockery.

‘Yeah, I don’t care what people say about me, compliments or insults, so just keep on walking arsehole.’

‘You get all the glory! But it’s your crew of darkies and those orcas who do most of the work. Where would you be without those orcas? You better hope no one slaughters those orcas.’

The rival whaler puffed up his chest and stood at full height, he clenched his fists in a drunken rage.

‘Threats mean nothing to me. You want to settle this right here, right now, just say the word!’

George put down his beer and turned to face the drunken menace. There was a grim and heavy moment of potential violence then, as the two men squared off. The whole pub fell silent.

The drunk was imagining in vivid picturesque detail just how he would uppercut George with the perfect uppercut and then smash his beer glass over the glory hog and how the whole pub would cheer for him.

George was thinking of knocking this guy down hard and fast and leaving him toothless; and then getting out the nearest exit before a large-scale brawl destroyed the iconic Seahorse Inn and left the Davidson family without a husband and father (except for occasional visit to the local jail.) The moment of silence gave space for reality and reason to prevail, eventually. The drunken whaler withdrew then, of course as he retreated, he muttered threats and insults for his crew to snigger at. George finished his beer with his mates, and then he left the Seahorse Inn. He made his way back home to the Davidson homestead ̶ back to the wharf and the try-works. Visiting the Seahorse Inn today had been a mistake.

**Chapter 5**

**The Hunt**

The wintry wind raged in partnership with the heaving hazel-grey waters of Twofold Bay. George gazed through the telescope. Jack stirred up the embers of a small fire.

‘Where are the orcas now, do you think?’ Jack stretched out his legs and hugged himself in a futile battle with the wet and the cold.

‘I haven’t seen Old Tom, or Hookey, or Humpy, for a few days...’

They were watching from the cliffs, near the Kiah River. The Davidson homestead, the wharf and the try-works were below them. Their boat lay at the ready.

‘Why do you think that the killers like you so much?’ Jack looked over at his father and employer George Davidson. George adjusted his hat and stroked his moustache as he considered the question.

‘Do you remember that injured parrot that flew into the house, everyone was yelling at it, frightening it, causing it to bash itself against the glass? But you remained calm, you calmed it down and made it your pet?’

‘Yes, I remember. He was my first pet.’

‘Well, you’ve got the right type of stillness, you’ve got the knack. I was the same. When I was your age now, on our street there was this chained mad guard-dog that would howl and bark like a devil. Anyway, my friends used to play this game, they would throw sticks at the guard dog, who would run at them, but they would deliberately stand just beyond the chain’s reach. The dog would run out of chain and get choked to a stop. One day I told everyone that I was going to stand inside the reach of the chain, and that the rottweiler wouldn’t even bite me.’

‘That’s a pretty mean thing to do Dad, what happened?’

‘The poor mad dog lunged at me, but when it saw that I was holding my ground and completely calm, friendly even, it actually sniffed me, licked my hand and sat down at my feet! My friends couldn’t believe it!’

‘So that’s when you realised you had a knack with animals...’ Jack held his hands closer to the fire and smiled.

‘But sometimes lad, when we play the game, we get bitten by the dog, we lose. There have been whaling companies that went into debt and were closed; marriages and families that fell apart. Remember Peter Lyre? He was knocked out of the boat by a whale, he was dragged under and tangled up in the ropes, then his body disappeared. We searched for days, but there was no sign of the whale or Peter’s body… So, I carved his name onto a memorial plate on Ben Boyd’s lighthouse.’

‘Yes, I remember the story.’ Jack nodded his head dutifully.

‘So, we must remember to stay alert and focus on the task at hand.’ George looked again through the telescope over the waters of Twofold Bay.

The Davidsons watched in awe as the form of Old Tom breached out of the water, flew gracefully up into the air; and then descended and flop tailed the water playfully.

‘Rusho!’ George yelled out.

‘Rusho!’ Henry echoed from the try-works.

‘Rusho!’ yelled back Yuin or Albert from the aboriginal huts by the beach.

George and Jack scrambled down the cliff and down the timber staircase. Henry checked over the harpoon and the oars in the boat, checking everything was in order, checking for the third time that day. Yuin raced down the beach with the speed of an Olympic runner, and he leapt into the boat. George and Jack followed into the boat and then they were off! Chasing after the fin of Old Tom cutting like a knife through the water. George took his rightful place at the front of the boat ̶ he recited his traditional theatrical poem:

‘Row men, row!

For the ladies ‘comb, whale bone corsets and horse whips!

Burn your arms and break your backs, my lads,

For Sydney’s evening city lights!’

The boat glided through the water after the orca, towards the rocks where their prey presumably had been herded. The orcas chased the whales, the orcas were hunting and business partners with men, they were comparable to sheepdogs’ herding sheep. All the orcas wanted was to eat the tongue (which was massive and could weigh up to two tons), and the humans could have the rest. Dark clouds suddenly engulfed them, the wind and the rain increased rapidly. The swell of the waves became ever more turbulent, and rain pelted the sea and shrouded the horizon before them and the beach behind them in mist and mystery.

‘This storm is a bad one I think, we should turn back. Dad?’ Jack’s brow creased with worry.

‘These are angry spirits! We should hunt later...’ Albert agreed.

‘What do you think George? It will be a bad one...’ Henry spoke up with concern.

‘If we don’t catch a whale this month, our creditors will shut us down and seize everything. Don’t you men want to have your own house, your own family?’ Don’t worry, Old Tom will show us the way, and we will harpoon this whale!’

And the boat bounced on after the happy fin of Old Tom.

‘Row men, row!

Steady lads steady, with hearts of oak.’

Henry was well built from years of construction, Albert was thin yet muscular and naturally athletic, and Jack was just a determined boy really. The whole crew pulled on the oars with a fanatical, intense passion, this was the time to give it everything and ignore the hurt.

Twofold Bay was now a heaving seascape of hills and valleys, hazel-grey frothy waves lifted and then dropped the boat. Fat frozen rain pelted the whalers hard enough to leave bruises, the wind slapped them back and forth with the rude arrogance of a giant’s hand, unapologetic as fate itself.

‘Old Tom is circling!’ Henry pointed out excitedly, and George smiled as his trust in his orca friend was rewarded.

The whalers in their boat came closer to their helpers, the orcas. The whalers rowed closer to the rocks and their herded, trapped prey. Then, the unexpected blow that hit them was like a hammer-blow that shook through the boat, shook through their arms, their bones and even banged their teeth together. Jack tumbled down onto the deck boards and lost his oar. Albert Yuin and Henry grunted in pain ̶ they spasmed like scarecrows in a storm, flailing around the boat wildly. George growled in frustration as he grabbed onto Henry and saved him from going overboard. Then, the whale’s fin rose up as it streaked away from the boat in furious flight and defiance. Albert lifted Jack from off the floor; blood and rain soaked the poor boy’s face.

‘You alright Jack?’ George asked, stepping over and placing his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

‘Sometimes… in the game, the dog bites you.’ Jack answered, his smile smeared with rain and blood.

‘Hearts of oak, my boy, we are walking on water now and by Christ, we will catch this whale!’

As the men pulled and heaved on the oars, they gained on their prey; the boat speared through the heaving waves and stormy atmosphere. Old Tom continually herded, blocked and countered the whale’s manoeuvring and intelligent attempts at escape.

‘Row men, Row!’

The boat was within striking distance now, George was close enough to the whale’s fin that churned up the sea with its will to fight, its ancient and primordial need to live. They would only get one shot, one chance, because the storm was escalating in its destructive rage. George was assaulted by images in his mind, images of his impatient creditor and the drunken rival whale-hunter. He remembered the words of Sarah, her foreboding bad dream. He pushed the fears away and connected with his moment in time, the opportune moment, he gripped the harpoon with all of his strength. George plunged the harpoon deep into the whale, it was a perfect shot.

All the hours he had spent forging, hammering and sharpening the harpoon to perfection, all the weary hours he had spent training with weights and javelin set him up for a successful kill. The whalers roared their victorious joy. It was bloody and gory, triumphant and sad, morbid and elemental as the circle of life, and the boat still rode the raging seascape and howling storm, but they had their whale, and they had their precious, valuable whale oil. After Old Tom was rewarded with his feast of the tongue, they towed the whale back to the wharf to butcher and harvest the oil.

Mr Tyler the creditor would have his money. George’s rivals would continue to hate him and curse him with bitterest envy. Come Christmas, Effie the wandered would have her horse, and Jack that brave boy would have his cattle dog. Death would not claim the whalers or the orcas today. Sarah would be there waiting for them on the wharf in the rain. Death would not claim them today, today they would live.

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