



PROLOGUE

HONOLUA

The road to Honolua Bay was red dirt against a gray sky, and it wound up the bluff in a series of steep switchbacks. I pulled over at the top, where the grade leveled off in a clearing. Usually this lookout was packed with cars, trucks, surfers scouting the break, tourists taking photos, but on this storm-tossed day no one else was around. I got out and walked to the edge of the embankment. Below me, small waves broke on jagged lava rocks, their crests whipped white by the wind.

Low clouds pressed down, turning the bay—a crescent that usually glimmered in a spectrum of blues, from pale aqua to inky cobalt—a dull slate color. Even on brighter days, Honolua was a heavy spot. In centuries past the bay was a place of worship for Hawaiians, who pushed off from its lee in their voyaging canoes and made offerings to their gods in stone-heaped *heiaus* above its shoreline. There were no wide sandy beaches here, just a jig-

saw of rocks tumbling down to the water, disappearing beneath the surface where they formed a reef, shallow at first, then dropping off to a darker realm.

Conditions were crummy, but I had driven a long way to get here and this particular bay was known for its marine beauty, its profusion of corals and creatures, so I didn't want to leave without at least getting wet. I wouldn't have another chance for a long while: by tomorrow at this time I would be flying back to New York City. I was aware that a recent flurry of shark attacks had people thinking twice about going into the water alone, or even at all. Suddenly, it seemed, everyone on Maui had realized they shared the ocean with large, occasionally snappish beasts. Around the island there was a deep need for a clear explanation—Too many sea turtles? Not enough fish? Climate change? Were the planet's poles, perhaps, flipping?—some way to figure out the situation, wrap it up, get back to a time when sharks didn't occupy the headlines every other day. I stood there in the wind considering my options, and after a few moments spent listening to my mind spin tales of lost limbs, sheared arteries, nothing left of me but a few scraps of bathing suit, I picked my way down the path and across the rocks, stepped into the water, and began to swim across the bay.

In the water I would only be as alone as I felt on land, anyway. If something happened to me out here, I wasn't sure I cared.

I had lived with that feeling, a dull indifference to pretty much everything, for almost two years, since my father had died of a heart attack. He was seventy-one years old and athletic and strong, and when his heart's electrical system seized up, he had been at our family's summer cottage, walking down to the dock to take his seaplane out for a spin. The doctors said it probably took him five seconds to die.

In some dim, distant corner of my mind I had always known, as every person does, that my father wouldn't be around forever, but the idea of losing him was so huge and overwhelming that I never gave it any space. It lived inside my head as the most horrifying thing I could

possibly imagine, the monster I hoped never to face. By the time I hit my forties—divorced, childless by choice, restless by nature—I knew that my father was the central figure in my life, the rock, the anchor, the wise man whose presence allowed me to roam the world making mistakes and having adventures because I could always trust he'd be there at the end to help me make sense of it all. I could no more imagine a life without him than I could imagine life without my torso. And yet, here I was.

But a strange thing happens when your worst nightmare is realized: nothing much is left to scare you. After the initial tsunami of grief, I found myself walking calmly into situations that would have previously terrified me: a solo swim, at dusk, in prime tiger shark territory, for instance. Fear was replaced by an ever-present numbness.

As I headed across the mouth of the bay I veered slightly south, out to sea, until I was a half mile offshore. Treading water, I cleared my goggles and looked around. I could faintly see the bottom, unperturbed and sandy, and conditions were smoother out here, so I didn't turn back. I kept swimming. Some people crave illicit substances when upset; my drug of choice is saltwater. The ocean's vast blue country was either peace or oblivion, I wasn't sure which, but both of those possibilities worked for me.

I was about to head back when a movement caught my eye: a large, shadowy body passed diagonally below me. Then, a jutting dorsal fin; beside it something white flashed. Streaks of sunlight had filtered through the clouds and suddenly the water was illuminated. My adrenaline surged as the creatures revealed themselves.

It was a pod of spinner dolphins, forty or fifty animals, swimming toward me. They materialized from the ocean like ghosts, shimmering in the ether. One moment they were hazily visible, then they were gone, then they reappeared on all sides, surrounding me. I had never been this close to dolphins before, and I was amazed by their appearance. One of the bigger spinners approached slowly, watch-

ing me. For a moment we hung there in the water and looked at one another, exchanging what I can only describe as a profound, cross-species greeting. His eyes were banded subtly with black, markings that trailed to his pectoral fins like an especially delicate bank robber's mask. I wondered if he was the pod's guardian, if the others followed his lead. The dolphins were traveling in small but distinct clusters—couples, threesomes, klatches of four or five—and within those little groups they maintained close body contact. I saw fins touching like handholding, bellies brushing across backs, heads tilted toward other heads, beaks slipped under flukes.

The entire group could have darted away in an instant, but they chose instead to stay with me. Spinners are known for their athletics, rocketing out of the water in aerial leaps whenever the urge strikes, but these dolphins were relaxed. They showed no fear, despite the presence of several baby spinners tucked in beside their mothers, replicas the size of bowling pins. The dolphins had simply enfolded me in their gathering, and I could hear their clicks and buzzes underwater, their cryptic aquatic conversation.

I dove ten feet down and the big dolphin appeared beside me again, even closer. He had coloration like a penguin's, dark on top and tuxedo white on his belly, with a long, slender beak. At eight feet long he was a powerful animal, but nothing in his body language suggested hostility. We stayed together for maybe ten minutes but the meeting felt eternal, as though time were suspended in the water with us. The ocean rose and fell rhythmically, almost hypnotically, but I had no point of reference, no horizon. There was no land, no sky. Everything glowed, as if viewed through a lush blue prism. The dolphins watched me watching them. They moved with an unearthly grace, as though they were more presence than form. I swam with the spinners until they headed into deeper waters, where the light fell off to nowhere in long, slanting rays. The last thing I saw before they vanished back into their world was their tails, moving in unison.



After my encounter with them, I thought of the dolphins often. Not just for hours or days afterward, but for weeks and months. I thought of them at night as I was going to sleep—remembering their languid swimming motions made me relaxed and drowsy and calm. I thought of the dolphins after I left Hawaii and returned to Manhattan, where life was anything but relaxed and drowsy and calm, and where the luminous blues of the Pacific Ocean were a distant memory. In my thirty-sixth-floor office, in a towering glass and steel building in the city's midtown, I thumbtacked pictures of dolphins to the wall behind my desk so I could look at them while I made phone calls.

However brief my dolphin visitation had been, it was stuck to me, lodged inside my head. It was as though I'd been hit by lightning and that one strike had zapped clean through my brain, replacing its usual patterns and wavelengths and nerve impulses with a dolphin highlight reel. I couldn't forget the way the pod had sized me up, or their peculiar squeaking, creaking language, or how ridiculously *fun* it was to just cruise along with them. I got the impression there was somebody home behind each set of eyes, and the effect was surreal. I'd met other intriguing sea creatures, some shy and some lordly, some beautiful and some that only Mother Nature could love, but none of them had the same presence as the dolphins—not the Buddha-faced puffer fish with its wise eyes and tiny, whirring fins, or the spotted eagle ray that resembled an alien spacecraft, or the bullheaded ulua, a muscular game fish you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. Next to the fluid, social dolphins, the great white sharks I'd seen looked so metallic I thought they must have rivets. They were undersea Hindenbergs, majestic but not heartwarming, and if you had a personal encounter with one of them it was unlikely to be a calming experience.

At the risk of falling down the rabbit hole—a place you can easily go with dolphins, I would soon learn—my most enduring impres-

sion was how *otherworldly* the animals were. As they swam by me, they seemed to exist in a more hazily defined realm than our own hard-edged terrestrial one. They inhabited what ancient Oceanic peoples called “the Dreamtime,” a gauzy, blissful place located somewhere between our generally-agreed-upon reality and any number of sublime alternate states.

Certainly, dolphins have a laundry list of capabilities that qualify as magical. They can see with their hearing, deploying biological sonar to effectively produce X-ray vision: dolphins can literally see through objects. They know when another dolphin—or a human being—is pregnant or sick or injured. Their echolocation skills far outmatch the most sophisticated nuclear submarines; scientists suspect they can even use them to determine another creature’s emotional state. They can communicate at frequencies nearly an order of magnitude higher than anything humans can discern, and navigate electrical and magnetic fields imperceptible to us. They can stay awake and alert for fifteen days straight.

Recently, scientists have marveled at dolphins’ healing abilities, which include infection-resistant, pain-free, hemorrhage-proof rebounds from even the deepest wounds. In a letter published in the delightfully named *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*, researcher Michael Zasloff, MD, described the process as mysterious and miraculous, likening it more to regeneration than repair. “Despite having sustained massive tissue injury, within a month the animal will regain its normal body contour,” he explained in an interview. “A chunk of tissue maybe the size of a football will have been restored with essentially no deformity.” He also surmised that dolphin tissues might contain “the long-sought natural morphine that we’ve been looking for.”

The dolphins’ evolutionary path is itself a preposterous feat: their predecessors were land mammals that resembled small, hooved wolves. After an interlude in swamps and coastal lowlands, these fledgling aquanauts moved permanently into the water. Over the course of

twenty million years (give or take a million or two), their limbs turned to fins, their shape became streamlined for swimming, their fur turned to blubber, their nostrils migrated to the top of their heads—in other words, they developed all the equipment needed to master undersea life. They aced it, too: dolphins have perfectly hydrodynamic bodies. They swim faster than physics would seem to allow, given the density of water and the amount of muscle they have. Their bodies are so ideally adapted for speed, navigation, plunging into the depths, and keeping warm that it's hard to imagine improvements.

But while it's tempting to project onto dolphins all the superpowers we wish we had ourselves, I knew (on an intellectual level, anyway), that these were creatures who have it in them to be cranky and withdrawn and have their own version of a bad day. It is now widely known that dolphins don't always act like the gentle, perma-smiling unicorns they're often made out to be; their range of less-than-cuddly behaviors is actually quite complete. In fact, despite the vast differences between our two species, possibly the most startling thing about dolphins is how inexplicably they resemble *us*. "It's like dolphins and whales are living in these massive, multicultural, undersea societies," said Hal Whitehead, a marine biologist from Dalhousie University. "Really the closest analogy we have for it would be ourselves."

In any group of dolphins you'll find cliques and posses, duos and trios and quartets, mothers and babies and spinster aunts, frisky bands of horny teenage males, wily hunters, burly bouncers, sage elders—and their associations are anything but random. Dolphins are strategists. They're also highly social chatterboxes who recognize themselves in the mirror, count, cheer, giggle, feel despondent, stroke each other, adorn themselves, use tools, make jokes, play politics, enjoy music, bring presents on a date, introduce themselves, rescue one another from dangerous situations, deduce, infer, manipulate, improvise, form alliances, throw tantrums, gossip, scheme, empathize, seduce, grieve, comfort, anticipate, fear, and love—just like us.

The Hawaiian dolphins were like some ancient tribe I had stumbled upon, and though I didn't understand their lineage or their language, they had somehow communicated with me. More important, for reasons I could not say, the spinners made me feel better. They took the edge off my sadness. During the moments I revisited them in my mind, the dolphins made me feel happy again.



Once I started paying attention to dolphins, I began to notice them everywhere. They were no strangers to the headlines, and extremely popular on the Internet. I read stories about dolphins helping salvagers locate undersea buried treasure, dolphins saving surfers from imminent shark attacks, dolphins recruited as soldiers by the U.S. Navy. While scientists argued about the existence of animal culture, dolphins and their close relatives, whales, were observed making babysitting arrangements among themselves, congregating for a funeral, and calling one another by name. *The Guardian* reported that a beluga whale named Noc had, after seven years in captivity, begun to mimic human speech. Belugas, members of the toothed whale family along with dolphins, have been nicknamed “the canaries of the sea,” for their expressive vocals. Among other things, Noc had apparently demanded that a diver in his tank get out of the water. In their science paper describing this event, the authors referred to “other utterances” that sounded like a “garbled human voice, or Russian, or similar to Chinese.” The whale had been insistent, the paper revealed: “Our observations led us to conclude the ‘out’ which was repeated several times came from Noc.”

We've long known that dolphin brains are impressive, bigger even than the brains we consider the gold standard: our own. Yet science still searches for answers to what the dolphins are *doing* with such metabolically expensive machinery (and, for that matter, what human brains are really up to). No creature would cart around a big brain if

this heavy artillery wasn't in some way essential for its survival. A clue emerged when dolphin brains, like humans', were found to contain von Economo neurons: specialized cells that relate to higher notions like empathy, intuition, communication, and self-awareness. Interestingly, dolphins have far more of these neurons than we do, and they are thought to have developed them 30 million years ago, about 29.8 million years before *Homo sapiens* swung their first clubs.

Even so, despite the similar heft of our gray matter and our shared ability to express irritation, I was surprised to learn that the dolphin genome, sequenced in 2011, bears a striking resemblance to our own. When researchers compared the dolphins' gene mutations to those of other animals, they found 228 instances where the dolphins had done something smarter, evolving in ways that revved up their brains and nervous systems. These adaptations aligned them more with humans than with any of the other species tested, even those which were more closely related to dolphins. Having been around for so much longer than we have, dolphins had also developed some nifty tricks: one of their responses to type 2 diabetes, for instance, is to internally flip a biochemical off-switch and block the disease's progression.

While scientists made news with their dolphin findings, the animals also caught the attention of the film world. *The Cove*, a movie about a barbaric dolphin hunt in Taiji, Japan, riveted audiences, and went on to win the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2010. Each year, the movie showed, local fishermen conduct this hunt, driving pods of bottlenose, striped, white-sided, Risso's dolphins—any dolphin they can catch, basically—into a narrow cove, then netting off the entrance and killing the animals with gaffs and long-handled knives. Getting rid of as many dolphins as possible—whom they view as competition for what few fish remain in the vacuumed-out oceans—the fishermen claim, is a vital matter of “pest control.”

Most of the captured dolphins end up in Japanese supermarkets and restaurants (though the meat is highly contaminated with mercury

and other toxins), but some do not. Younger females and calves are separated out, examined by trainers and dolphin brokers, and then sold to marine parks for six-figure prices. Every year, the hunters kill or sell thousands of dolphins.

Once the Taiji hunt got dragged into daylight, celebrities like Jennifer Aniston and Woody Harrelson and Robin Williams spoke out against it, drawing even more attention to the secretive little town. Sadly, Japan wasn't the only place dolphins were dying en masse—they were washing up on shores all over the world. Scientists have scrambled to find a possible cause for the global die-off, but pinning down a single problem is hard—there are so many. Over in California, the bottle-nose dolphins were suffering from gaping skin lesions. Across Europe, striped dolphins have washed up emaciated and riddled with herpes, their immune systems hopelessly compromised. In Florida, dolphins fall victim to runaway cancers. Dolphins everywhere, from Australia, to North and South America, to Tahiti, are so laden with industrial pollutants—pesticides, heavy metals, flame retardants, carcinogens of the most noxious kinds—that their bodies are disposed of as hazardous waste. If this chemical onslaught weren't enough, the acoustically sensitive dolphins also contend with a clanging underwater mayhem of drilling, ship engines, oil-rig construction, explosives, and submarine sonar that can blast sound across entire ocean basins; this bombardment harasses millions of animals, and can even kill them. "The future for dolphins is a lot gloomier than their smiling faces suggest," the magazine *New Scientist* wrote in an editorial.

If reading about these travails makes you upset, you are not alone. It's not just the idea of dolphins in trouble—dolphins in general strike a deep emotional chord in most people. On some level, however vaguely at times, we seem to know how connected we are, the dolphins and us, and how inevitable it is that we share the same fate. Rigorous science balks at the notion that these animals affect us so profoundly because of some innate spiritual connection, but that doesn't make us feel it

any less. Anyone who's ever spent time around a dolphin, any dolphin, faces abstract, philosophical questions such as these posed by marine biologist Rachel Smokler: "Do [dolphins] have the same powers of reasoning that we have? . . . Do they feel love and hate, compassion, trust, distrust? Do they wonder about death? Do they have ideas about right and wrong and accompanying feelings of guilt and righteousness? What could they teach us about the oceans? How do they feel about one another? What do they think about us?"

Regardless of the dolphins' allure, few people feel as close to them as Sharon Tandler, a concert promoter from London who became the first human to officially marry one. Tandler and her groom, a thirty-five-year-old male bottlenose named Cindy, had courted for fifteen years at the Eilat Reef resort town in southern Israel. The bride wore a flowing white gown, a veil, and a headdress of orchids as she kneeled dockside to kiss Cindy, who accepted her gift of mackerel. Though dolphins do have a reputation as ladies' men, showing an unusual amount of interest in interspecies amour, Tandler declared that the marriage would remain unconsummated. "I'm the happiest girl on earth," she told the press, adding: "I am not a pervert."



Clearly, dolphins are charismatic enough as plain old wild animals; they don't need to be angels or gods or spiritual guides in the bargain. Undeniably, though, they get nominated for these positions. Walk through any New Age bookstore and note the dolphins per square foot; you'll find them on bookmarks and posters and stickers, glittering in 3-D notecards and tinkling on wind chimes, adorning CD covers and T-shirts, leaping across the covers of countless journals. (Note, too, that in the forest or the savannah or the jungle, even the most impressive beast is not usually mistaken for husband material.)

What *is* it about dolphins? Why do we obsess about them so? As

far back as anyone can cast in history, there is evidence of a unique bond between us. The Maoris and Aboriginal Australians and Pacific Islanders, the Greeks and Romans: Odysseus, Poseidon, Apollo, Aristotle, Socrates, Plutarch, the Plinys Younger and Elder, the Emperor Augustus—they were all dolphin crazy. Actually, everyone was. Dolphins were painted on palace walls, sculpted into statues, stamped on gold coins, tattooed onto bodies. In ancient Greece, apparently, dolphins had the same rights as people. Perhaps even greater rights: while it was considered perfectly all right to snuff your disobedient slave, to kill a dolphin was equal to murder. Our relationship might even have included literal conversation. In his 350 BC *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle wrote, “The voice of the dolphin in air is like that of the human in that they can pronounce vowels and combinations of vowels, but have difficulties with the consonants.”

The image of a sea creature poking its head above the water to speak to us is like something out of *Alice in Wonderland* or the latest Pixar masterpiece—an irresistible thrill. Theoretically, anyway, dolphins have the brainpower and the communication skills to do this, and so they occupy a singular place in our imaginations. They take us back to our earliest years, to that little blip of time when we believed that we *could* communicate with other creatures, because there was no separation between their world and ours. “When we were children we wanted to talk to animals and struggled to understand why this was impossible,” the naturalist Loren Eiseley wrote. “Slowly we gave up the attempt as we grew into the solitary world of human adulthood.” This loss of hope, Eiseley pointed out, is a very sad thing.

Dolphin intelligence may come in a different package than human intelligence, but a thread of awareness connects us. It’s an ephemeral link, an ember almost. Although we can’t easily define it, we seem to long for it. In some deep-seated way, we hope to find other wisdom, other guidance—*others*. It’s the reason we point telescopes toward the stars, and wonder if there’s anyone out there who wants to talk to us.

Even the slightest possibility that the answer might be yes both terrifies and entralls us. Given our curiosity about the bigger questions, our hunger to know more about the purpose and scope of our lives, it's really not that unreasonable to wonder if behind their Mona Lisa grins, dolphins might be in on some good cosmic secrets.



When I think back on it now, my swim with the spinners in Honolua Bay was an experience as mystifying as it was uplifting. Who *were* those creatures? It's been said that humans are the only animals who believe the stories they tell about themselves—but what about the dolphins? What is their story? And what about those haunting sounds they made? Their whistles and clicks and squeals seemed to me like a liquid symphony, a communiqué from another realm, a galaxy of meaning conveyed in a language that defied translation. When I saw the pod, I felt joy. I felt awe. And I felt the slightest bit frightened, though the dolphins were not scary. I felt their beguiling mix of mystery and reality; I felt a sense of bottomless wonder.

The one thing I didn't feel was alone.