

{ CHAPTER 1 }

MY NAME IS LUKE.

I guess that's the way I should start this off. A fellow here in Massachusetts wrote a book about a white whale, and he began it with "Call me Ishmael." I read most of it, but it was too windy for me. I'd put him about a nine on the Beaufort Scale. He blew so hard he could have pushed a fleet of clippers around the Horn. Besides, the old guys around the docks tell lots better stories, and they don't babble on for hours the way that Ishmael does. Some people say the book wasn't really about blubber hunting, anyway. It was full of ambiguities, they said, full of deeper things. What I think it was full of is whale manure, and I guess that goes about as deep as you can get. If you write about a crazy man with an ivory peg leg chasing across the Pacific for a pissed-off whale, I don't think you've got room for a lot of claptrap about everything else. Still, saying who you are seems to be a fair way to get going on one of these things, but don't expect that I'm going to tell you anything about whales, except that

around here we don't think much of whaling. My Grandpa says—and he should know because he's sailed all over the world—that nothing on land is as stinking and ugly as a whale ship with its trying kettle smoking out in the middle of a blue ocean. And the whalers! My God! They come back covered with greasy soot, their skins permanently saturated with rancid fat, and their clothes ready to be burned. Pigs would cross the road.

Of course, we do use the oil.

What I'm going to tell you about is what happened last summer, only it wasn't really what they say it was. I told them that at that investigation back home, but it didn't seem to make any difference. An old guy with a nose as red as the port light on a packet steamer, some kind of a government lawyer, tried to get me to say things I didn't believe. He wore steel-rimmed glasses that caught the light as he pushed his face right into mine and breathed peppermint at me, the sort that some of the men favor after they've tossed down a drink or two. He had a lot of white hair that needed to be trimmed at the corners. I didn't take to him from the moment I saw him, so I just sheeted in and waited for the blow to start.

“Now, young man, tell me how they kidnapped you.”

“Well, they didn't.”

“They didn't what?”

“They didn't kidnap me.”

“You were taken off on that boat and nearly killed, and you weren't kidnapped?”

“No, sir.”

“Why, that's rather hard to believe.”

I'd be willing to bet that he'd heard and believed a lot more ridiculous things than that, and I'd even go further and wager that he'd said a few himself, but I was nervous and a little bit scared of being up there in that chair in front of a room full of unfamiliar people, and so I kind of squirmed down in my seat and gave him a straight look. He had a flinty gaze of his own.

“I'm just trying to tell the truth, sir.”

“Do you deny that you were on the boat and that they wouldn't let you leave? If you don't know that's kidnapping, you don't know much about the law.”

“Well, sir, if you think they could have put me ashore, you don't know much about nor'easters.”

“That's hairsplitting, boy.”

“I just wanted to make sure people understood.”

“I think we'll excuse you for now and deal with this later.”

He snorted and blew his nose on a big blue handkerchief, then waved me away from the stand.

And they never dealt with it later.

I wasn't trying to split any hairs. All I was saying was that the law can get awfully high-and-mighty when it describes something because there might be some shadows that don't show up. A man who makes an honest mistake can be turned into a hardened criminal by a law book and a lawyer. Of course, it works the other way too, and some of the country's biggest thieves and even murderers are sitting down to roast beef and beer because the same sort of law book says they are as innocent as babies. I know we have to have laws, but I've looked at the Constitution and it doesn't say anywhere that we have to have lawyers.

I don't really know that much about the law, so I'll just shut up about it for now.

And I see now that like that fellow who wrote about the white whale, if I want to tell my story I'm going to have to include a lot of things that you probably think are unexciting, and they are, but if you don't know who I am, why would you want to know the story? So what I'm trying to do is show you who I am.

Anyway, this all began the day I had been down on my Grandpa's boat, the *Mary Constance*, doing the job Grandpa Mike had given me. I'd stowed the coils of rope, small stuff for reefing or mousing, in the forepeak locker and secured the locker door so that the boxes holding paint pots, brushes, seldom-used fittings, sponges, and a jumble of other items would stay put when the boat pitched against a heading sea or rolled in a trough. A big roll of canvas took up a lot of room and weighed as much as a small locomotive, but there were other bits of sailcloth, large manila rope, and some heavy-duty blocks—some with sheaves and some just the cheeks—along with wooden wedges, canvas straps, and God knows what all. Actually, I knew what all because Mike had me label everything. I also jammed in two large jugs, one of turpentine, the other of linseed oil. Mike—I only call him "Mike" when he's not around—gets pretty cranky about keeping things where they're supposed to be, and for as long as I can remember he has drummed into my head that when a sailor needs something, in a storm, in the dark, he damned well doesn't want to have to search all over the boat to find it. He should be able to go to where it's supposed to be and lay a hand on it.

It was like working bent double in a cave. It wasn't hot, so I hadn't even bothered to raise the skylight because I hadn't thought the job would take very long when I started it. That's the hell of a boat: everything takes longer than you think it will. Also, as it turned out, I learned once more that you never know what will happen when you do something or what will happen when you don't. It sure makes life pretty unpredictable.

Laziness is another thing Mike can't abide, not that I'm a layabout who loafes on the job. Maybe he simply believes that if he keeps saying over and over that he can't stand sloth, I'll step lively to every task that he throws at me. And I usually do. Sometimes, I even start doing things before I know what I'm supposed to do.

But this was August, late in the afternoon of a surprisingly cool but sunny day, and school didn't start for weeks. The guys I usually hung around with were all either out on fishing boats or locked up with shore jobs of some kind or just doing chores around their homes. Most times, especially when Mike was around, I went to the chandlery to try to help out. I know where most of the things are in the shop, even things that are kept in boxes right up near the ceiling. I wrap things in paper and deliver them to places on shore. When Grandma Ellen fills in at the shop, I get to do all the ladder climbing, but when Grandpa Mike is there and running things, he usually scampers up the ladder without asking for help. He likes to think he's as spry as I am.

I guess I'm about average size for my age and, because I've done all kinds of jobs since I was small, I'm fairly strong. At least, I've done all right in arm wrestling, running, and

things like that. Working on boats has been the best exercise in most ways, although many people seem to think that all sailors do is hang on the rail and tell lies except when they're ashore swilling something that makes their eyes roll up. Of course, I don't do that, but I do the other things sailors really do, and that is lift heavy boxes, haul away on lines that raise big sails, and climb up high in the rigging when something needs to be done up there. I haven't got to the point where I can grab the leech of a sail and, just using my grip, slide all the way down to the deck. That's a pretty impressive performance, and I don't recommend it unless your fingers are strong enough to pick up a fifty-pound keg of nails by the rims and you've got calluses on your fingertips as tough as a schooner captain's tongue. I'm not there yet.

I've only been out on the Banks a couple of times, and those have set off some caterwauling at home by Grandma Ellen—wails that I'm too young to be out there with those rough men and complaints that there should be laws that keep youngsters off boats and ships until they're old enough to have long whiskers. Considering all that's gone on in my background, I guess you could excuse some of her concerns, although I just have to look at things from my own point of view and not worry too much about what other people think. I don't want to worry anybody, but I don't want them worrying me, either.

That August day the harbor was quiet, the way it usually is when the fishing fleet is out on the Banks during the summer going after cod, not that there's much of a fleet these days. Old-timers talk about the time, not so long ago, when about a hundred schooners worked out of Marblehead, but nowa-

days there are maybe twenty-five or so. With even that smaller number of codbangers, if they had been in port there'd have been some yelling back and forth, some thumping and bumping of boats and barrels. The fact that the fleet was smaller was also a reminder that the number of fishermen had been reduced as well. I guess having to earn a living can be rough in lots of places, but it doesn't seem very forgiving on the face of the sea.

The way it was that day, about the only thing disturbing the peace was an occasional dog bark, and down where I was those were barely audible. You might say that it was pretty dull.

We had some excitement that summer, though. Some fellows laid a wire cable across the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean from Newfoundland to Ireland! No kidding. They've already got one from England to France, and so far it seems to work, at least they're not trying to cut each other's throats the way they've been doing for centuries.

Well, with this new one, the English Queen sent a telegraph message to our President, and he sent one right back at her. Imagine. It only took about a day for the two messages to be sent and received.

From what we heard, the cable is made of copper-wire rope and covered with gutta percha. Where the hell do they come up with these names? It's sort of like India rubber, and they get it from trees way on the other side of the world. It's kind of funny. It gets soft when it's heated and then, like in the cold water of the North Atlantic, it turns hard but not brittle. And, best of all, it keeps the water from messing up the telegraph. At least that's what they said when they built it. And they wrapped the whole lot in galvanized wire. Un-

fortunately, the signals whimpered out after a few weeks, and nobody's sure what to do now to solve the problem.

It's all about electricity, and I don't understand electricity. I don't think anybody understands electricity, even though they can make it do things.

Hell, you could say the same thing about having a dog fetch a ball. You can get him to do it, but you'll never know why he does.

I've been wondering whether it would be possible to send sounds over a cable. Wouldn't that be the damnedest! Just think about it. Instead of those clicks and clacks on a telegraph, you'd be able to actually hear somebody far away talk to you. Like the Queen of England! What would she sound like? She speaks English, so you should be able to understand her, although one day in town I heard a man from way down in the Carolinas talk, and I could barely understand a word. He said it was English.

And I wonder whether the cable down deep in the ocean could pick up underwater sounds, the bubbling, gurgling and splashing. Because nobody's ever spent any time at the bottom of the sea, we get all the crazy ideas people can make up. Maybe oysters are performing a chorus of "What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor," or mermaids are singing harmony, or those crazy sirens that caused the Greeks to run ships onto the rocks are tuning up for the next Odysseus to come blundering along. I tell you, there's a lot we've got to learn.

I read in the newspaper that cable just like the one they used for the telegraph had been cut up into little pieces and is being sold by jewelry stores in New York. So help me. Some

of the pieces are even set into gold geegaws with pins on them so that ladies can wear them around town apparently showing how advanced they are. And bigger chunks of the cable have been peddled to businessmen to use as paperweights. Sometimes, it's hard to figure out what things are really valuable and what things are junk.

Take all those guys who went to California with the gold fever a few years ago. They endured rounding the Horn or going through the Central American jungles or bumping across the continent in jolting, dusty wagons just so they could—maybe—find a few grains of gold. In the process they ignored millions of acres of dirt that lay between New England and California. You can grow things in dirt: corn, potatoes, beans, and so on. You can graze cattle on grass that grows in dirt. But as far as I can tell, the only thing you can do with gold is look at it and say it's pretty or that you're going to call it money. But gold is supposed to be valuable, and dirt is supposed to be cheap.

The men at the harbor have been talking about the telegraph cable and how it beat everything in history in getting messages from one side of the ocean to the other. One of them, Hancey Darnell, got all excited over the thing. Why, according to him, it was the greatest invention of all mankind, and it was a triumph of Western Civilization, and it was finally going to end the scourge of war.

"How's that?" Mike asked.

"Because people will be able to discuss things with each other. Countries like the United States and England or France or Germany or anybody else over there won't be getting into fights with people on the other side of the ocean because

they'll be able to communicate their problems immediately and head off matters before they heat up. I'm telling you, it's the beginning of the Age of Peace."

Grandpa looked at me and asked: "Luke, do you think this cable is going to do what Hancey says? That people will talk with each other and not go to war?"

"Well, sir," I said. "I can see that it might help, but those three fellows on the other side of the hill who got put in jail last week for trying to knock each other over the head had been talking all evening before they started going at each other. As a matter of fact, if they hadn't been gassing the way they were, they probably wouldn't have fought at all.

"Besides, we've got telegraph wires strung all over this country, and we still have people in the North not getting along with people in the South and people in the South who think Northerners are all idiots. You could work that telegraph until the wires started to smoke, and it wouldn't make folks love each other. At least, that's how it seems to me."

Mike nodded, Hancey started getting scarlet in the face, and I decided that I had some chores to do and got the hell out of there.

Wire cables, and not just copper ones, are getting a lot of attention around here, even without all the babble about the telegraph. I guess they've been working with them to hold up bridges and things like that. One fellow built a bridge over the Niagara River with wire cables bracing it up, but not many have been put on sailboats, yet. The British navy has been using them some, and a lot of the steamships have them—big, thick twisted wire. Grandpa Mike, who's generally ahead of things, has made all of the standing rigging on

the *Mary Constance* out of smaller galvanized wire, and, even though it pained him, he replaced the lanyards and dead-eyes on the shrouds with turnbuckles and wire rope. He says they're the way to go, even though they don't look as shipshape. That didn't seem to bother him for the rest of the boat, and he put turnbuckles on the remainder of the rigging without a mumble.

Turnbuckles—the limeys call them "bottlescrews"—are hollow tubes with a screw thread at each end, and each screw is cut in a different direction. Rings at each end are used to attach the ends of the stays or shrouds to a chainplate, and the fact that the turnbuckle's screws work in opposite directions means you can either tighten or loosen the stress on the cable depending on which way you twist the turnbuckle.

Able Hampton, one of Grandpa's friends, says if you rig a boat with metal cable, it's going to rust in the salt air—everything made out of metal does, except bronze and lead, and copper turns green. Gold doesn't rust, but I've already said that it's worthless for any useful purpose. Of course, you've got that telegraph cable, which also uses galvanized wire along with the gutta percha and the copper, and if it can stand up to the bottom of the ocean, it should be able to hold up a couple of masts for a while.

The ropes most boats use now for the shrouds are covered with blacking that's a smelly mess made of thin tar, whiskey—so help me—hot salt water, lamp black, and a kind of powder that comes from lead. I call it lead dust, although that's more than likely wrong. You have to wonder how all that got mixed together in the first place. Probably some old navy captain started pouring tar and hot salt water together, took