

VOYAGE OF ICE

Being the true story of my, Nicholas Robbins', experience aboard the whaleship SEA HAWK, and of my captain's cruelty, our shipwreck in the Arctic, and of the hardships suffered thereby.

CHAPTER ONE

The day my father returned from the sea, I was five years old. It was a day like any other. Blue skies dotted with clouds, seagulls floating on the breeze, me peering through my spyglass.

The year was 1842, and my older brother, Dexter, and I lived with our aunt Agatha in a considerable grand mansion on County Street. From the glass-enclosed cupola atop our home, I could see down the hill, past our town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, and to the river. Dozens of ships lay alongside the wharves, their masts and yards like a jumble of spilled toothpicks.

There were always ships a-coming and a-going. I didn't know which ship was my father's; after all, he'd been gone since before I could remember. But every day I watched anyways, sometimes running down the steps to fetch my aunt, pulling her by the sleeve, asking her to come look through my spyglass and tell me whether this ship was *the one*. Aunt Agatha would look, sigh, say no, hand back my spyglass, and tell me not to bother her again, for she had a garden to tend, and raspberry jam to put by.

On this day, though, my aunt fetched me. I turned, and there she stood, wiping her floury hands on her apron, with Dexter beside her. She brushed a wisp of salt-and-pepper hair out of her eyes, leaving a white smudge on her temple. "Your father's ship is here."

I wanted to dash to the waterfront, not even stopping to put on my shoes. Aunt Agatha not only made me put on my shoes, but made me wash my face, scrub behind my ears, and then walk beside Dexter and behave proper. Dexter's whisper tickled my ear. "Do you think Father will like us?" Dexter was seven years old, and I couldn't imagine anyone not liking him. Everyone liked Dexter. As for me, I liked Dexter as well as I liked custard pudding. Maybe better.

I started to answer, to tell Dexter I liked him better than pudding, but Aunt Agatha yanked his arm, then rapped the back of my head. "Hush, now."

Long before we arrived at the wharf, a warm breeze wafted from the waterfront, thick with whale oil, fresh-cut oak, and pitch. Then, finally, we were there, standing beside my father's ship. My heart beat wild. He was here! Finally here! I kept pointing to the different men who disembarked, tugging on my aunt's skirt. "Is that him? Is he my father?"

"Hush. You'll know soon enough, I expect. And stop that jumping. Ye make my teeth rattle."

And then there he was. I near burst with joy. "Dexter! Nicholas! Right, smart, lively children you be!" He laughed and swung us both onto his shoulders. He was thin and tall as a ship's mast, or very nearly, anyways, and so it was a great thing to be atop his shoulder. He smelled of the sea, of salt, and the wind.

That night, when he tucked me into bed, he handed me a gift. "This is for you. Carved it myself, I did."

It looked like a horn, curved and whitish yellow. On it was carved a picture of Father's ship. I looked at him, wondering. "'Tis a tooth from the mighty sperm whale," he explained, "a

monster fish so ferocious it can swallow a soul in a single gulp; it can crush a ship and eat all the sailors and still be hungry.”

“Have you killed a sperm whale?”

“Aye. Many. ‘Tis what lights our lamps and makes our candles. Nothing burns so bright and white as sperm oil.”

I hugged the tooth, vowing to keep it forever. “It’s grand,” I said, “and you are very brave.” That night I dreamed I battled a whale. He thrashed his mighty tail and smashed my boat to splinters, but not before my lance pierced his vitals.

Day after day we strolled through the city streets, my father, Dexter, and I, over the cobblestones and under the elms, past other stately mansions and into the city center. Past the apothecary, the livery stable, the blacksmith’s shop. Father tipped his hat to folks, saying, “How be you, Widow Taber?” or “How be you today, Reverend Wood?”

Always they replied, “‘Twas a fine, greasy voyage ye made, Cap’n Robbins. All the folks be talking ‘bout it.” Then they pinched my cheeks, shook Dexter’s hand, and looked fair pleased to see us.

“Why,” said one woman, “but don’t Dexter look like his mother used to, God rest her soul, what with his sandy hair, eyes the color of molasses, and a smile that takes my breath away. Handsome as a hackman’s hat, he is.”

“The girls will be pining after him before too many years,” said another.

“And my stars and body, don’t your other boy look just like you, Cap’n Robbins! Eyes like shamrocks, and thin as a splinter, he is! Tall as a steeple too.”

“Why, how proud ye must be, Cap’n Robbins.”

Three months later, my father left to hunt whales again, aboard the *Africa*. I waved goodbye, sobbing, thinking I would be eight or maybe even nine years old before I saw him next. Each morning after, no sooner did my eyes pop open than I raced to the cupola, peering through the spyglass, the carved tooth beside me on the windowsill, vowing to watch every day until he returned. Every day I imagined him poised in the bow of his whaleboat, battling the sperm whale, thrusting his lance until the great beast lay still. A mighty hunter. My father.

But not all my life was spent in the cupola. No indeed. Aunt Agatha wouldn’t stand for it any more than she’d stand for dirty ears or picking your nose at the table. “You’ll turn pale as a worm,” she said. “Boys are meant to be boys. Run along now. Scat.”

So, month after month, come afternoon, Dexter and I would meander to the waterfront and sneak aboard the ships with our school friends. Aloft in the ratlines we scrambled, out on the yards, lazy as you please. Or we’d climb way, way up to the masthead lookout station. Whenever we spied the tell-tale spout, we’d holler, “*There she blo-o-o-ows!*” The sailors gave us treats. The mates told us to get down. The captains said, “Come back in a few years, boys. I’ll make ye rich as Midas and greasy as a hog.” And they clapped us on our backs and sent us on our way.

Dexter could climb higher than anyone, knew his knots and all the right cuss words. I was real proud of him. “That’s my brother,” I said to the sailors one day. “He knows all the right cuss words.” The sailors winked at each other and nodded serious-like. Then they taught me a few cuss words Dexter didn’t know yet.

That evening when Aunt Agatha told me to set the table for supper, I tried out one of my new cuss words on her. Judging by the soapsuds foaming out of my mouth for the next day or so, it was a right nasty word. Certain, I’d make a fine sailor someday. Then, after I was a sailor, a whaling captain.

Tall, smiling, and smelling of the wind.

The summer day stretched before us like freedom. We lay atop a rock, Dexter and I, sunning ourselves. We'd spent the afternoon here on Palmer's Island, running and hiding among the old cedars and craggy rocks. First we'd played Indians, then pirates. Now we played lizards.

A fly buzzed round my face and I blinked slow-like. I chewed on a stalk of grass. "Where do you suppose he is now?"

"Who?"

"Father." I glanced at Dexter. A stalk of grass poked out of the side of his mouth. Summer streaked his sandy hair. A few freckles sprinkled across his nose like cinnamon.

He shrugged. "I dunno. Somewheres."

"When do you suppose he's coming home?"

"I dunno."

"Do you miss him?"

He shrugged again. "I expect."

I propped myself up on one elbow, wondering if lizards did the same. "I'm going to be a whaling captain when I grow up, just like Father."

"Me too."

A warm breeze wafted over me and I lay back down. The sky stretched blue from one end of the horizon to the other. I imagined being aboard a ship, lying on the deck and staring at the sky. And after I finished staring at the sky, I'd stare at the sea. No matter where I stared, there'd be nothing but blue. "We'll be on the same ship."

"There's only one captain allowed in a ship."

I frowned. There must be a way where we could be on the ship at the same time. "Then we'll take turns being captain."

An easy smile played across Dexter's face. "Aye. But I'll be first." He sat up suddenly. "C'mon. This is boring. Let's play captains."

First Dexter played Captain Nye, who got his leg chewed off by a sperm whale but killed the whale anyways. Then I played Captain Coffin, who gave all the sailors a raise and a treat because they caught a whale, but who afterward bravely went down with his ship.

The sun was sinking. The sky burned orange. I was in the middle of drowning when I saw something lying under a tree. Something alive. I hurried over and gathered it up. "What did you find?" Dexter asked from behind me, panting because he'd been drowning too.

"A baby bird." It was pink and featherless, and its purplish eyes were still closed. I saw its heart beating beneath the skin.

"Put it down. It's hopeless."

I stroked it with my little finger. "But it hasn't even lived its life yet."

Dexter peered into the tree overhead. "Must've fallen from its nest. C'mon, Nick, put it down. It'll make a fine meal for something."

A lump like cold, day-old porridge formed in my throat. Dexter was always bossing me around. I tried to keep my chin from quivering. "But we can't let it die."

"All things die, Nick."

"I can feed it milk. And a worm, maybe."

He sighed, shrugged. "Fine. Suit yourself. But don't come crying to me when Aunt Agatha busts your hide for bringing it in the house."

I rushed to the rowboat. The hatchling was warm in my hands, and all the way back I whispered to it while Dexter rowed the boat and rolled his eyes.

At home, I didn't tell Aunt Agatha but hurried to the cupola. For two days I kept the bird alive, but it finally died as Dexter said it would. I held the cold, stiff body, thinking maybe it wasn't really dead yet, but Dexter snatched it from me and buried it in a hole in the yard. "It's over," he said, dry-eyed and looking disgusted.

I bawled my eyes out. Couldn't help it. I visited the little grave for weeks, until it was overgrown and I could no longer see where it used to be.

Two years, four months, and twenty-six days after our father left, a man came to our house. Tall and unsmiling he was, and dressed in black. He stood on the doorstep crushing his wide-brimmed hat in his hands until Aunt Agatha invited him in for a cup of tea and a biscuit or two. He sat in the parlor and put his hat on his knee. The clock ticked on the mantel. In the distance, I heard the clop-clop of horses' hooves and the crunch of wheels.

While Aunt Agatha went to fetch tea and biscuits, Dexter sat beside me on the piano bench. Together we studied the man. "Maybe he's from school," Dexter whispered, accidentally plunking the piano with his elbow. "Maybe they're holding you back a year because you're stupid and still can't read."

"Maybe he has news of Father. Maybe he knows when Father will be home and how many barrels of oil the *Africa* has taken. Thousands, maybe."

"Or maybe he's here to ask for Aunt Agatha's hand in marriage. Maybe they're . . . lovers."

Aunt Agatha? Married? What a ridiculous thought! As ridiculous as kissing a girl and pretending you liked it. We stifled our smiles and sat up straight when Aunt Agatha entered the room carrying a tray.

Just then the stranger spoke. His voice fell into the silence like a rock dropped into a still pond. It about stopped my heart. "Perhaps 'twould be better if the boys left the room."

Aunt Agatha blinked, and I could have sworn she paled. Then the lines on her face turned hard. She set the tray on a table. "Dexter, Nicholas, go to the cupola. I'll fetch ye when 'tis time."

At first we didn't budge, but when she said, "Go now," in her special voice that meant *You'd better behave or I'll give ye a taste of switch pie*, we both hurried out of the room, closing the door behind us. Halfway up the stairs, Dexter stopped. "Let's listen anyways."

We pressed our ears to the door. I could hear the thump of my heart, Dexter breathing beside me, his eyes wide.

The man was speaking. I caught snatches of his conversation. ". . . the *Africa* . . . Captain Robbins . . . God rest his soul . . . lost at sea . . . a bull whale gone mad . . . dashed to pieces."

I didn't wait to hear more. Without a word, I fled. Out the door, down the hill, my lungs bursting, past the wharves to the shore. I collapsed on the riverbank. Then the tears came. Flowing into the grass, into the soil.

After a while, I rolled over, my face to the sky. Dexter was beside me. I didn't know how long he'd been there. "Don't cry, Nick," he said, his voice breaking. "Don't cry." But he lay down too and we stared at the sky for a long, long time.

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