

Chapter One



THERE ARE PLACES in the world where the sea flows in gigantic wide circles, like slowly spinning merry-go-rounds. You will find the strangest things drifting on the surface there, or just beneath it: messages in bottles, spiders in coffee cups; sea buoys, sea mines, fishing nets, fishing lines; living things, dead things, and plastic—endless, unsinkable, indestructible plastic.

Most of it is just thrown into the sea, or dumped from ships, or carried down rivers, but sometimes the sea reaches up and takes it, along with boats, cottages, animals, and people. All of this stuff drifts around and around until it collides

with a passing ship, or a whale, or becomes waterlogged and sinks. But some of it, especially the plastic, will float forever.

Plastic never becomes part of the sea. Fish eat it, sharks eat it, whales, turtles, dolphins, and seabirds eat it. And it kills them. Then, when their bodies decompose, or get torn apart by other creatures, the plastic re-emerges to float on the sea again. Imagine if you swallowed Lego pieces when you were three years old, and they were still in your stomach when you were ninety. And a thousand years later, when archeologists stumbled upon your grave and picked through your bones . . . they found Lego.

I dream of a ship that gobbles plastic the way minesweepers picked up sea mines during the wars. I dream of it every day as I watch the plastic drift by. I know that the sea is dying. I mean, the water will always be there, of course, but the life in it won't. And even though there are still days when whales breach in front of my sub, and dolphins race playfully past, and flying fish soar over my head with the funny whispering of their fins, there are much longer stretches when I see nothing on the water but garbage and torn nets with rotting sea animals, as if the sea were nothing but one humongous human garbage patch.

Recently, about six hundred miles southeast of Japan, I met a remarkable man who was doing what I want to do—cleaning up the plastic. He was an odd sailor for sure—very old and very ingenious, and his story is bizarre to tell. And yet, in the oddest way, he has filled me with new hope for the sea.



I saw her for the first time through the periscope. From her markings I could tell she was a small freighter out of East Asia, with a sharp pointy bow and pointy stern, but she sagged in the middle like a deep-sea fishing trawler. She was reddened with rust, and as the late sun fell down on her, she looked almost more like a painting than a ship on the sea. As we drew near, I wondered if she had been abandoned. There were no lights, no flags, no visible cargo or people on board, and she was drifting sideways in the current. Barnacles and sea coral had grown into a grotesque skirt three feet wide at her waterline. She looked as if she had been dragged up from the bottom of the sea.

I circled her twice, cried “Ahoy!” half a dozen times, and banged on her crimson hull with a gaff. Half an hour later I threw a rope onto her deck. It took four tries to hook it. I tied one end to a handle on the portal and moored the sub. Then, with a flashlight in my pocket, I shinnied my way up the rope and climbed onto her deck.

Ships are like people in a way: they die young or they die old. They might get sick, or damaged, or even filled with holes, but still sail for a while if the sea decides that’s how it’s going to be. If this ship was truly abandoned, then by the law of the sea I had the right to claim her. I could tie a rope to her bow and tow her away, except that . . . there was nowhere to go.

It would be impossible anyway. The barnacle skirt made

her a dead weight to tow. And my sub was tiny in comparison. She was probably two hundred and fifty feet long. My sub was twenty-five. It would be like a minnow towing a whale.

And what would I do with her if I could take her? She was just a shell of her former self; I knew that the moment I stepped aboard and began to explore. I could feel it and smell it—the smell of metal that has lost its strength.

Oddly, I had a strong sense of being watched. I kept turning my head, expecting to find someone behind me. But I scoured every inch of her and never found so much as an empty can of beans. If there were somebody here, I would have seen a sign of it, something. Yet every time I turned a corner into a passageway, or climbed a ladder, or poked my head into a cabin; and every time I found myself back on deck, I felt someone's eyes on me.

And there were suspicious smells. On the deck in my rubber sneakers I'd smell the usual odours of an old ship: rust, salt, rope, and tar. But then, when I wasn't thinking about it, I'd catch the scent of grilled fish, onions, garlic, and tomatoes. I'd look around and try to follow those smells, but they would disappear as soon as I turned a corner.

And there were sounds. The wind blew across the bow, lifted a metal flap on the bridge, and dropped it against the steel wall. But that was a predictable sound, the kind you stop hearing after a while, even though it clangs like a bell. Down in the engine room, where the only light was the light of my flashlight, and where I had to brush spiderwebs out of

my hair because spiders in this part of the world can be poisonous, the hull creaked and moaned like cows in a barn.

But those were identifiable sounds. What spooked me were the smaller, sharper sounds, like a dropped wrench, or a tin can kicked by a foot. Those were the sounds I couldn't identify, and they always came from the opposite end of the ship, and sounded as though they were caused by someone.

And then I heard something that stopped me dead in my tracks: someone laughing. It sounded like a girl, but it was thin and far away. I heard it as clearly as my own breath, and yet I wondered if it could have been the wind, except that I had never heard the wind sound like that before. It echoed through the halls and walls of the ship and curled my toes in my sneakers.

And then there were shadows: the ones created by my flashlight, and the ones that appeared out of nowhere. They spooked me at least half a dozen times, but were probably caused by my movement through the ship. There simply was no one here.

I had seen so many things drift on the sea in two and a half years, but I had never seen a whole ship rusted out so badly, and so full of dents and holes that she should have settled on the bottom long before I was born. Here she was sitting on the water like a turtle on its back, as red as an apple, as lonely as the wind that stuck to her. Never had I seen a ship that looked and sounded so much like a living creature.

I spent three hours exploring every inch of her, except for

the holds. They were rusted shut. But they must have been empty, because they had sounded hollow when I banged on the ship's side with the gaff. And the ship wasn't sitting low in the water; she was about midway, which was probably only because she was carrying water. Why she hadn't sunk yet was a mystery to me.

At first hint of twilight, I shinnied down the rope, swung it free from the deck, climbed into the sub, and motored away.

Half a mile north, I took a quick peek through the periscope. I wanted to see her one last time before the sun went down. Already her redness had faded to brown. Darkness was about to engulf her. There, standing on the bow as if he were standing on top of the world, was an old man watching us sail away.