

Chapter 1
Summer 1917
South Texas near Santa Maria

A red-eyed sun peeked over the horizon bringing the promise of a scorching day with it. Cottonwood trees by the crick were the only shade nearby. Our ranch tweren't much a place, a two room, slab-sided cabin with a loft where us kids slept. Ma fixed up some window boxes to make the place look homier. We has us a barn, a corral, smoke house, half a dozen horses, a milk cow, two dozen shorthorn cattle, a dog named Sam, some hogs and chickens. Ma had a vegetable garden fenced to keep the varmints out while Pa and me had planted the fields with oats, hay and corn. In the evenings Ma read us from the family bible or Pa played his fiddle and we'd all sing along. Any schooling we had come from Ma who'd been a teacher before marrying Pa.

It was a time of trouble along the Rio Grande with Mexican bandits burning ranches and killing everyone in their way so Pa carried his rifle and I had his short gun tucked in my waistband. Me and Pa was headed to the barn to feed the horses and slop the hogs as my younger brother Jeremy fed the chickens. In the kitchen my little sister Ann and Ma where frying up fat back and making grits and biscuits for breakfast. Later Ma was baking a cake 'cause it was my fifteenth birthday.

Just as we got to the barn a band of horsemen swept out of the trees down by the creek shooting and hollering like crazy. I saw Pa get hit in the back before something hit me a wicked blow on my head. When I come to it was past midday. My head felt like it been hit with an axe. After brushing away the flies I found a skull deep, blood crusted furrow above my left ear. Turning my head I saw Pa laying a few feet away, jeans and shirt cutup, stripped of boots, and rifle gone.

Somehow I managed to reach him, chased off the buzzards and turned him over. The bullet tore his chest open something awful. After that I passed out. When I come around it was dusk. I made to the water troth, drank my fill and cleaned the wound, covering it with a piece of my shirt tail. Gathering my courage I turned looking over the yard – cabin burnt to the ground, smoldering barn still pretty much whole, horses gone, pigs and chickens slaughtered, gut-shot dog in the yard. Staggering to my feet I searched for Ma, sister and brother. What I found haunts my dreams to this day.

I buried them quick before the buzzards and varmints came back. With day's last light and shovel from the manure pile I dug a hole under the cottonwoods. Using old feed sacks I gathered what was left and laid Pa next to Ma, Jeremy next Pa and Ann cuddled next to Ma. Praying, I filled the hole, pulled stones over, and too tired for tears, fell asleep next to my family one last time,

Waking up before dawn I washed in the creek and went to see what I could salvage from the ranch. In the barn I found a saddle, couple of horse blankets, a knife for cutting twine, an old pair of Pa's boots and a hat. Back in the corner by the feed sacks was the shotgun Pa kept handy for varmints and a hand full of shells nearby.

Pa'd been saving to buy a bull, keeping the money hid in the cabin floor. Clearing the spot I found the \$50.00 in gold and paper, a fortune at the time. I also found a side of bacon in the smoke shack. That and some corn from the field meant I wouldn't starve anytime soon. By mid-morning I had bacon and corn went in a feed sack, shotgun slung over my shoulder, the bills in my pocket, pistol in my waist band, and knife in my boots. After saying one more prayer over the grave, I started trailing the bandits.

They'd travelled fast to the Rio Grande then split up on the other side, six going west and the others headed south. The first group had our horses so I set off after them. I kept on through the night resting about every two hours. The fire was still warm when I found their camp the next morning. Cigar butts and broken bottles littered the ground. I did find an unbroken bottle which I badly needed for carrying water. I didn't find any sign they'd posted a guard.

Two days later I caught up with them as they bedded down for the night and lit a fire. My stomach growled so loud at the smell of broiling steaks I thought sure they'd hear it. The horses were strung on a rope between two trees a few yards from the camp. My plan was to cut the line then stampede the horses through the camp, leaving the bandits on foot and causing enough confusion to get away cleanly. Well, as I learned later, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. In the deepening twilight I checked my pistol and shotgun, carefully wiping each bullet and shell.

I waited several hours before working my way down to the horses. I managed to cut both ends before being grabbed from the back and slung to the ground. A match flared revealing a scarred, swarthy face with a long drooping mustache.

"Ah chico it is not good to steal a man's horse."

"You stole them from us. I'm just taking back what's mine"

"I see. You're from the rancho. Too bad you didn't die that day. I must correct that mistake."

Pa taught me if you're going to shoot a man don't talk about just shoot. By the time Mustache reached for his pistol he had a load of buckshot in his brisket. Turning I grabbed a handful of the nearest horse's mane, swung up on his back and turned him toward the camp, the rest following along. One bandit started up from his blanket, catching the second load of buckshot for his trouble. I'm pretty sure I winged at least two more on my way out. By daylight I'd made several miles toward Santa Maria with a string of six horses behind me. Some were ours and others had tagged along.

I reached Santa Maria late in the day, hot, tired, and thirsty. Along the only street sat three stores, a post office, and the San Benito and Rio Grande Valley Railway station with the sheriff's office at the far end.

Sheriff Bob Hawks was sitting on the porch in front of his office reading a newspaper while next to him Deputy Pete Short whittled a stick. Seeing me approach Hawks gave me a quick once over and without turning his head said:

"Pete get Doc. Luke come into the office and tell me what happened."

Once inside he told me to sit down, got me big cup of water from the jug hanging out front and told me to rest 'til Pete and the doc got there. Bob Hawks was tall, with salt and pepper hair and handle bar mustache, his face and hands deeply tanned. Pete Short was short like his name, clean shaven, bowlegged, broad chested and red headed. Hawks and Short had been lawmen most of their lives, first with the Texas Rangers then in small towns around the Rio Grande. Them and Pa fought with Teddy Roosevelt in Cuba, something Pa never talked about.

Pete and Doc come just as I finished the water. Without a word Doc removed the bandage.

"Luke, you're one lucky fellow, a quarter inch to the right and be dead."

"Right now I'd rather be dead."

That stopped the conversation in its tracks. Nobody said a word as Doc cleaned and bandaged the wound. After he finished it was time to tell what happened at the ranch. I just stood there telling about the attack and afterward, trying not to cry.

“Son, that was a hell of a birthday,” Hawks said when the tale ended

“Yes, sir,”

“You have any kin in the area”

“No sir, Ma’s uncle runs a steamship company in Galveston so that’s where I’m headed.”

“Want us to send a wire and let him know what happened? And, you got enough money to get there?”

“No thank you, I want to tell him in person. I got enough money to get me there”

Pausing for a moment, he said to Pete.

“Take Luke in hand and help him out. Get him cleaned up, clothed, and fed then bring him back here.”

Turning to me he said:

“Leave you stuff hear and go with Pete. Since you’ve nowhere to stay, you’ll sleep here tonight.”

So, I went off with Pete. First I got me a couple of used pairs of jeans, three shirts, boots, cotton long johns, socks, and sack to carry everything. Next was the barber shop. After a bath and hair cut I began to feel a little bit better. One of the stores had a place to eat. Walking in my mouth started to water with wonderful smells of beef cooking and onions frying.

I hadn’t eaten since yesterday morning and my stomach seemed to think my throat been cut. I had a big fried steak; gravy smothered mashed potatoes, snap beans, and apple pie, washed down with several cups of cow country coffee. The waitress fussed around us, refilling our cups and glancing at my bandaged head, but too polite to ask questions.

Night had fallen by the time we got back to sheriff’s office. After asking how it went, the sheriff left while Pete settled in the office. Lying on the bunk in one of the cells I thought of my family, good times and bad. Those last memories were the worst and turning to the wall so Pete wouldn’t hear me I cried for the first and, what was to be, last time in my life.

I sold our horses. Some of the others belonged to ranches in the area so the sheriff took charge of them.

After breakfast Pete walked with me to the station. An engine with a load of cattle cars and a caboose behind it was getting ready to pull out. I stood to one side while Pete talked to the engineer, fireman, and brakeman. I found out later he’d told them what happened at the ranch. It turned out all three knew my Pa. Pete called me over.

“Luke, you’re all set. You can ride in the caboose to Brownsville. They can tell what railroads to take from there to Galveston. Good luck.”

In Brownsville, Wally Dunn, the brakeman, took me to a friend of his on the Gulf Coast Line which had a spur line into Galveston. Once again I rode in the caboose, sharing meals and listening stories of the early days of railroads in Texas. I also heard about the hurricane which hit Galveston the year before. The stories helped take my mind off losing my family. Nobody asked me questions. The fact I was young, travelling on my own with a head wrapped in bandages was enough for these men. In those days a man’s business was his own and nobody else’s and I wasn’t about to share what happened.

Galveston was the biggest place I’d seen. Brick buildings lined the streets; trolley cars were everywhere, wagons and carriages crowded alongside the tracks. Men in suits wearing bowlers or straw boaters and women in long dresses, their hair covered with wide brimmed hats decorated with feathers walked along the sidewalks. Newsboys shouted the latest news from

street corners. I almost fainted at the odor of horse droppings and people crowded together. I was used to clean ranch air and the smell of growing things.

Being only half stupid, instead of tackling this strange place on my own I'd asked one of the railroad men to help me find the Morgan Shipping Company, my uncle's company. It turned out to be a large, two story building housing the company's offices and warehouse along the shipping channel. Thanking my new friend for his help I walked in, finding the wood paneled offices located on the second floor overlooking the street. A thin, dry looking man wearing glasses, sleeve garters, white shirt, and a green eyeshade sat behind the counter going over his books. He looked up as I walked in. With a look of distaste he said sharply:

"What do you want? If it's a job see the warehouse manager. Otherwise get out."

"Please sir, I'd like to see Mr. Morgan."

"Tell me why you want to see Mr. Morgan. Whatever reason I'm sure Mr. Morgan does not want to see you."

As politely as I could I said:

"My reason is my business, not yours. I'll tell Mr. Morgan and no one else."

That did not sit too well. His face started to turn red. Over his shoulder he yelled: "Bobby get in here, there's a boy here that needs to be thrown out."

Bobby walked in, took a look at me and smiled. He was a big slab of bald headed muscle. Cauliflower ears framed little pig eyes and a flattened nose.

"This will be fun. The kid will never know what hit him."

"Just do it quickly and quietly, no use in disturbing the rest of the office," added the clerk.

I admit I'm not much to look at on the surface standing about six feet tall, sandy hair and weighing all of 160 pounds soaking wet. What doesn't show is I've been working from "can see to can't see" all my life, plowing fields, reaping wheat, baling hay, wrangling cattle, busting horses, so there's not enough fat on me to fry an egg. I'd carried a rifle since I was tall enough to keep the butt off the ground and shooting a pistol with a kick strong enough to break my wrist. Pa'd taught me boxing, wrestling, knife fighting, stuff he'd picked up along the way. In all modesty Bobby was in for a surprise. I was one cocky kid.

As he made a grab for me I caught his wrist, swung it across my body pulling him toward me, stuck out my leg, throwing him over on his back about three feet away. Getting up he rushed me with arms open, trying to give me a bear hug. Well, some people are slow on the uptake. I slipped inside the arms, slammed a left into his heart and a right in his belly. As he bent over I pushed his head down onto my knee coming in the other direction, breaking his nose. This time he stayed down. Maybe I hit him harder than needed but after the past few days it felt good to strike back at someone.

My uncle rushed into the room roaring:

"What the hell is going on out there?"

The clerk who had been dancing around spit on a griddle during the brief altercation replied:

"This boy demanded to see you and wouldn't leave so I called Bobby to help."

After my uncle looked at me and at Bobby bleeding on the floor he turned to the clerk while pointing at Bobby saying:

"Get his garbage out of here and clean up this mess."

Motioning me to follow into his office, he closed the door, told me sit down, before seating himself behind an oak desk, one wall lined with book shelves. Photos and paintings covered two walls while the fourth was mostly a window overlooking the shipping channel.

James Morgan was a well set up man wearing a linen suit. He had salt and pepper hair, neatly trimmed goatee, and blue eyes the same color as Ma's. His hands were large and scarred for years on sailing ships. I learned later "Big Jim" was a tough, honest, and good man as a friend. But, not one you'd want as an enemy.

"Luke that was one hell of an entrance. What brings you here? Are your folks with you?" he asked after lighting a cigar.

So I told him. He looked out the window, not saying anything for a long time. The cigar burned down to ash before he looked at me again.

"How old are you, seventeen, eighteen?"

"I turned fifteen the day the bandits attacked."

"You look older. Any idea of what you're going to do now?"

"No sir. There's nothing left for me at the ranch. With the raiding across the border and all there's no riding jobs since everybody is hunkered down. I have enough money to last for a while; maybe I'll figure something out before I'm broke."

Pausing to light another cigar, he asked if I'd like to work for him.

"Thank you to the offer but I can't accept charity even from kin."

Giving me a big grin he said:

"Believe me it won't be charity. There's an opening for a stoker on the Lone Star leaving tomorrow for South America. You'll be shoveling coal in the engine room, the hottest, most miserable job in world but a good way to learn the machinery.

"If you work out well, the next trip I'll ship you as a deckhand to learn seamanship. After that we'll see what happens."

Go to sea? The biggest body of water I'd ever seen to that time was the Rio Grande at flood. I tried not to show how nervous the thought made me.

"Thank you sir, I'd like that. But, I'd like no one to know I'm your nephew."

"I agree that's a good idea. Now that that's settled I'll have the captain sign you on. You can get any clothes you'll need from the Slop Chest on board."

So began my seagoing career.

Built at Bethlehem's Baltimore shipyard three years earlier Lone Star was 250 feet long, with a 44 foot beam, drew 20 feet of water and had a top speed of eight and half knots. Her hull was black, deckhouse painted white with mahogany wood trim while the stack had red, white, and blue bands with the company's "MSC" logo in red in the middle of the white band. She had two cargo hatches forward and two aft. Big Jim got her for a song after her original owners went bankrupt, having lost most of their ships in the hurricane.

Big Jim's shipping manager took me aboard. We met the Purser, a pinched faced, narrow shoulder man with a sour expression. He reluctantly signed me on saying the only reason he was doing so was they were shorthanded and sailing the next morning. Finishing up, he introduced me to the Chief Engineer, Scotty McDevitt, a bantam weight, bright eyed Scotsman. Scotty got me settled in the berthing area and helped pick out what I'd need from the Slop Chest.

At supper that night I met most of the crew. It was a mixed bag of Americans, Swedes, Norwegians, Mexicans, and an Italian or two. Being new and unsure of myself I sat quietly in a corner eating supper, trying to be invisible. It almost worked. What looked like a big ape dropped into the place across me, blowing a lung follow of smoke in my direction as he did so.

"Hey kid, what's your name?"

"Luke"

“Luke Cooper”

“What are you doing here?”

“Eating my supper. So please go away and let me finish.”

“Well ain’t you just the little gentleman. ‘Please go away’” he minced.

“Well, I ain’t going away. What are you going to do about it?” he said, then gripped my fork holding hand and started to squeeze.

“Hey Skunk, leave the kid alone,” someone yelled.

I asked him again to leave.

“Nope. Ain’t gonna do that” He replied, squeezing my hand more tightly.

I’d a hard day and a harder week. I just wanted to finish supper and get some sleep. I looked up, sighed. Using my left hand I grabbed Skunk’s thumb I slowly bent it back. He tried to pull away, but I kept bending until his face went white and he yelped in pain, stopping all conversations. He got up, stumbling and grumbling his way over to his friends. Slowly conversations picked up again, but no one else bothered me. I finished my supper and went to bed.

Over the next few days I found out what Hell must be like. Temperature in the engine room was over a hundred degrees. I worked for four hours stripped to the waist as the sweat rolled off me like rain off a tin roof. I didn’t know there were so many places on my body for coal dust to get into. Because she was a steam ship we had plenty of water to wash with, but after a while coal dust became so ingrained we were never completely clean. My four hours off were barely enough time to clean up, eat and sleep.

After the first night on the mess deck people left me alone which was okay because then no one could ask questions I didn’t want to answer. I’d almost forgotten about Skunk but he hadn’t forgotten about me.

At the end of the mid-watch one night I’d reached to top of the ladder from the Engine Room when I was grabbed from behind and slammed hard against the bulkhead. Next a fist exploded in my stomach followed by one in the ribs.

“Hey kid, remember me? Are you going to ask me to please stop?”

I just shook my head.

“Okay then, Jelly, you and Ralph hold him up until I get tired.”

Somewhere along the line I passed out. Coming to I dragged myself up and staggered to my bunk. They did a good job. But, they made one mistake, they didn’t kill me.

I made my next shift. Scotty saw me stagger into the Engine Room.

“What happened to you?” he asked although it was pretty obvious I’d been beaten up.

“I fell down a ladder.”

He walked away shaking his head.

About three weeks into the voyage I figured I needed to get off my butt and begin learning about the machinery I’d been feeding so diligently every day. After cleaning up from my watch I asked Scotty how best to go about it. Staring at me a while stoking his pipe he asked:

“Why do you want to learn?”

“‘Cause I don’t want to stoke engines the rest of my life.”

“Can you read and write?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you have any mechanical background?”

“I don’t.”

“How good are you at math including geometry, trigonometry?”

“Fair at arithmetic, but nothing else.”

“Physics?”

“I have no idea what that is” I answered sheepishly.

These not too helpful answers got me the same type of head shake as the one after I got beat up. I thought I was doomed. Instead he stuck his head out the cabin door and called:

“John will come over here?”

“John” was John Noonan, the Second Engineer. He arrived a moment later.

“John, Cooper here wants to learn the machinery.”

Turning to me Mr. Noonan asked:

“Okay Cooper, what machinery do you want to learn?”

“All of it sir,” which got me a skeptical look from both men.

Scotty told him about my apparent complete lack knowledge on all subjects related to the task but that I can read and write.

“Well, that’s a start. I’m bored and a challenge like this will cure that,” Noonan admitted.

“I’m going to work your butt to the bone.”

And, he did. He was one of the finest men I ever met. He’d majored in Engineering at the Naval Academy then spent several years in the fleet in everything from submarines to dreadnaughts while travelling all over the world. Deciding the merchant marine held a better future than the peace time Navy he resigned his commission. Being from Galveston Noonan knew about Big Jim’s shipping company and applied for a job. Big Jim knew a good man when he saw him and Noonan was hired. All this came out between times when Noonan pounded my brain to mush trying to teach a ranch boy about machinery. In his spare time he worked on my diction, manners, knowledge of international politics and anything he felt I should know.

Nothing stays secret aboard a ship. Soon the crew and officers knew of my working with the Second Engineer. I’d made some friends particularly among the Mexicans since I spoke Spanish. The Italians started teaching me Italian. I took a lot joshing, some good some nasty but nothing to lose my temper over. Other than some snide comments, Skunk, Jelly, and Ralph left me alone figuring one beating had been enough.

Caracas, Venezuela was our first port. I don’t remember what we off loaded or what cargo we took on board. I do remember the heat, humidity, and every type of flying, crawling insect in creation, all with either sharp teeth or a really nasty stinger. It was a quick turn around with no shore leave. Heading south we made stops at several small ports where our agents managed to find cargo.

At some ports a few of the crew went ashore for booze, women or both. A couple of them were beaten and robbed, one got stabbed in a fight over a whore, and most came back reeling from too much bad liquor. I didn’t go ashore at any of the ports, learning the cost to my health and welfare wasn’t worth it.

Our last port was Belém, Brazil for a load of rubber, hardwoods, and miscellaneous cargo. Here I went ashore, not for liquor or whores, but to settle a score. Skunk, Jelly, and Ralph always went ashore, coming back aboard drunk just before we sailed, bragging about the amount of liquor they’d drunk, the fights they had, and of women used and abused.

I slipped ashore unnoticed our last night in port. From their bragging I knew they’d be at the seediest whore house in town. I hunkered down in a reeking alley across the street. I had Pa’s pistol and the knife from the barn with me. Not the first time I’d spent sitting in a blind waiting for varmints to show up. Minutes can seem like hours especially at night.

About four in morning I startled awake as a great crash shook the whore house and the three men I wanted came tearing out the door, laughing and hollering like crazy. Suddenly flames shot up from the building accompanied by screams of terror. The bastards set the building on fire as they left. I chased them down alleyways, across deserted streets until the fire and screams were left behind. Still laughing the three slowed to a walk, figuring they were safe. I got ahead of them by cutting through some alleys. I stepped about ten yards ahead of them. Seeing me they stopped. Skunk started the conversation.

“Well looky here, we got us the little gentleman again. Guess he needs another lesson in manners.”

Jelly and Ralph snickered, saying that it would be a perfect end to a perfect evening and started towards me.

“Not this time asshole.” I replied with a smile and pulled out the pistol.

Skunk seemed undeterred

“Boy, you’re going to eat that thing.”

I shot Jelly in the kneecap and Ralph in the foot. That slowed them down. Skunk kept coming. When he got close enough I slipped the knife out of my boot, moved inside his swinging arms, and drove it into his fat stomach then slowly up to his heart, smiling the whole time I did it.

Jelly and Ralph stopped hollering as Skunk hit the ground.

“What are you going to do with us?” Jelly asked.

“Nothing. The locals will take care of care of you for burning down the whore house.”

“We’ll tell them you killed Skunk. They’ll get you for murder.”

“Tell them what you want, no one will believe it. Besides, the ship sails in an hour. I’ll be on it, you won’t. Have fun in prison.”

With a clear conscience I walked back to the ship.