

CHAPTER ONE

# One Torpedo

**E**very man should be prepared to lose one son in a fight to defend his own.”

That is my Pop talking to me. To me and my brother, Theo. But that almost goes without saying. Naturally he is speaking to me *and* Theo, because the last time anybody said anything to me without Theo being close enough to hear every word was when I was one year old. Then he was born.

We're kinda close.

Anyway, that is Pop talking to my brother and myself as we stand in the front hall with the door wide open, the two of us just heading off to sign up to fight in the war that everybody knows is coming.

It is a shocking thing to hear, to say the least, on the way to do what we are on the way to do. It sounds like he is giving us up, throwing us to the sharks in the name of patriotism.

But of course he's doing no such thing. This, in fact, is Pop being as soft and emotional as I have ever seen

him. He has more to say. The reason we have to keep standing there in the open doorway and wait for him to say the rest of it is because he is choking on that first part. So he starts again, but faster this time.

“Every man should be prepared to lose one son in a fight to defend his own. But no one should have to lose two.”

Now it makes sense. Though, perhaps not to my mam. None of it makes sense to her. Which is why she is elsewhere today, bawlin’ her eyes out to her own mam.

It is usually Theo’s job to lighten stuff up when stuff gets all grim. And he is frequently kept busy with that task since my father, as fine and upright a man as there ever was, can also be the very definition of what is known as *The Dour Scotsman*.

“Ah, nobody’s dyin’, Pop,” Theo says, laughing, waving our old man off and sauntering out the door. As if he thinks that will end it.

“Everybody’s dying, Theodore,” Pop intones — because that’s what he does; he intones. He intones in such a tone, without even raising his volume, that the pavement shakes under my brother’s feet and freezes him there as surely as if he’d been seized by the ankles.

“Sorry, Pop,” Theo says, turning slowly back toward us.

“Don’t be sorry, and don’t be stupid. People are getting killed everywhere and every way in this bloody mess, and the surest way to join them is to go thinking that you somehow know something that the Brits and the Poles and the French and all those other sorry souls don’t know. Do you know such a thing, my son, that you would like to share with the rest of the world before it’s too late, if in fact it’s not too late already?”

I believe there have been entire months during which my father has not spoken that many words.

“No, sir,” Theo says, wisely. “I know no such thing.”

Pop exhales then, releasing the lungfuls of air he had stored up in case more speech was required.

“Good,” Pop says, softly. Then, he gets to his point-of-points. “Henry,” he says to me, never much liking the nickname *Hank* outside of birthdays and holidays and such. “You’re set on the Navy, correct?”

“I am, Pop.”

He nods. “It’s a fine and noble service.” Pop himself sailed, fine and nobly, in the Great War.

“Me too, Pop,” Theo calls out. “It’s the Navy for me, too.” It is a frantic attempt to head off what he knows must be coming.

“No, Son,” Pop answers.

“Pop!” Theo shouts.

This would not be something my brother — or

anyone else I know — would normally try on our father. I brace for the wrath.

But it doesn't come.

Pop shakes his head very slowly instead. He opens his mouth to explain, then looks down at his feet. He continues to look down as he speaks, haltingly.

“One torpedo . . .” he says. “One. Just the one, and that's . . .” His head starts shaking again. Then his hands, until he balls them into death-white fists and knocks them against his thighs. “We could never bear that. Thinking about that . . . every day, every night . . . I've seen torpedoes, up close, and their work, up close. . . .”

“But the buddy system,” Theo pleads. “We'll be able to look out for each other.”

“He's not your buddy, Theodore. He's your blood.”

Desperate, Theo tacks the other way entirely. “They'll never put us on the same ship anyway, Pop.”

“Yeah,” I say, but with a lot less emphasis, a lot less expectation.

Then, a little curveball. Pop starts laughing. He looks up, shows us his rare red-rimmed eyes, shows his deep-creased face and mouth stretched in pride and stubborn admiration. “If there was any way, you two would make it happen. If you made it as far as the

recruiting office together, you would make it happen somehow, of that I have no doubt.”

It is, in the combination of the words and the manner, the warmth and the threat, titanic praise from the titan himself.

And it is also, definitively, the last word on the matter. My brother and I will not be enlisting in the same service. The logic of the argument is almost certainly my mother’s, the steely resolve my father’s, the combination an irresistible force.

He puts a big gentle hand on my back, eases me out to where Theo stands mute, and shuts the door firmly behind me.