



**SINK
OR
SWIM**

STEVE WATKINS

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In January 1942, twelve-year-old Colton is on his family's fishing boat in the Atlantic with his older brother Danny when the boat is capsized by a Nazi U-boat, and Danny is severely injured; realizing how close the enemy is, Colton takes his brother's enlistment papers and joins the Navy, determined to do his part to defeat Germany—if only he can keep his age a secret and survive life at sea.

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CHAPTER 1

My hands were freezing from the choppy waves in the January Atlantic Ocean. We were a mile out from Ocracoke Island off the North Carolina coast, and I had on a pair of my dad's old work gloves. My older brother, Danny, and I were there after school to do some net fishing, and it was time to let out the drop net between our two boats.

"Okay, Colton," he yelled over the rumble of both of our motors. "You got your side tied on?"

"Just about," I yelled back. "It's hard with these gloves on."

"Then take them off!" he said.

I did, and by the time I got my end of the net tied my hands were numb.

“Now run your skiff at the same speed as mine,” Danny said, gesturing to my boat. “Not too fast and not too slow.”

We were trawling for trout, sea bass, bluefish, whatever we lucked into, hoping for a decent catch so we could head back to shore soon, before it got too late in the afternoon and before the wind picked up and the water got nasty. It used to be the family business, but now Danny just went out when he could to help Mama with the extra money he earned from selling whatever he caught. We needed all the extra money possible after Dad died. It was hard for Mama to pay the bills when the only money coming in was from her working at the post office and washing clothes for people.

Danny was seventeen and I was twelve, so, of course, I did everything he told me, even though I was big for my age and nearly his same size. Sometimes strangers thought we were twins if they didn't look at us too close—not that we saw many strangers on the island.

It was only the third time Danny had let me come help him trawl, and there was still plenty I kept forgetting. Naturally, Danny was happy to point that out. Dad used to take Danny out on the ocean to net fish when Danny was my age, which was how he learned, but Dad passed away four years ago, before I was old enough.

When I was little, Danny was my best friend, even though he was so much older. We were always playing games around the house, going body surfing, riding beach ponies. But after Dad died, Danny didn't have much time for me anymore, or that was what he said. And I guess it was true, because he was always going straight from school to do whatever odd job he could find in town, or else out on the ocean fishing.

After we lost Dad, Danny just felt like he had to make up for it somehow. Like he had to step in to help keep the roof over our heads. And that also meant no more playing with his little brother, no matter how much I begged him to.

But in one more week, it was just going to be me doing the fishing—well, me and this kid Dean Shepherd from school who also came from a fishing family—because Danny was leaving for the navy. He'd signed up right after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor last month. Our navy had been getting kicked around in the South Pacific Ocean ever since then and now we heard the Germans had started attacking American ships up north that were crossing over to England. Danny wanted to do his part to fight back, especially now that the Germans and the Italians had also declared war on the US. Plus the navy pay would help out the family.