



**SINK
OR
SWIM**

STEVE WATKINS

Scholastic Inc.



ALSO BY STEVE WATKINS

Ghosts of War series
The Secret of Midway
Lost at Khe Sanh
AWOL in North Africa
Fallen in Fredericksburg

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Copyright © 2017 by Steve Watkins

This book was originally published in hardcover by Scholastic Press in 2017.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

While inspired by real events and historical characters, this is a work of fiction and does not claim to be historically accurate or portray factual events or relationships. Please keep in mind that references to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales may not be factually accurate, but rather fictionalized by the author.

ISBN 978-1-338-05793-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

This edition first printing 2019

Book design by Maeve Norton

FOR WAYNE, JO, AND ORIGINAL JO

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.

“Keep your mind on what you’re doing!” Danny barked.
“You’re steering too close to me.”

I straightened my skiff. “Sorry,” I said.

He frowned. “Sorry won’t help if you run into my boat, or run over the net and tear it up with your propeller.”

I said sorry again, and this time tried to pay better attention to what I was doing.

We kept nosing forward together through two-foot waves, and pretty soon I felt something pull on the net, hopefully a school of fish. Danny must have felt it, too, because he gave me a thumbs-up and grinned and that made me feel better.

It was the middle of the afternoon, but no sun. Just sky so gray it could have been dusk already. We were used to it, though. I got out a harmonica that Mama had given me for my Christmas present. I was still learning how to play it. About the only song I sort of knew was “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” As soon as I started, Danny groaned.

“You’re not gonna play that again, are you? I must have heard it a thousand times already. Don’t you know anything else? Besides, you’re scaring the fish.”

“I am not,” I said. “Fish like music. I think.”

I was about to say something else, but suddenly we heard a roaring noise from out of nowhere coming up behind us. Before we could even turn to look, a giant swell lifted our boats! He grabbed the sides. "Colton!" he yelled, but whatever he was going to say, he didn't get to finish, because the swell passed and his boat slammed down hard in the water, sending him sprawling. Something had hold of the net and jerked us both forward, like maybe a whale had gotten caught down there.

"Cut the net!" Danny yelled as we were dragged behind the swell, our boats bucking wildly, threatening to throw us out. I had a tight hold on the sides of my boat and was scared to let go to cut the net or do anything else.

Danny kept yelling, pulling out his knife and slashing at where the net was tied to his gunwale. "Cut it now, Colton!"

Just as he said it, though, the bow of his boat tipped under the surface, and he dropped his knife. Water poured over the bow and over Danny. His whole boat was going under. Panicked, I lurched forward, fumbling frantically for my knife, and somehow managed to slash through the taut ropes—just as I was about to be swallowed, too.

"I'm loose!" I hollered to Danny, only he wasn't there

anymore. His boat wasn't. The net wasn't. Nothing was, except the swell, pulling away fast.

"Danny!" I yelled as loud as I could, over and over. "Danny, where are you?"

But he was gone.

I sat there, paralyzed, rocking in the waves. The motor had quit on me, but I didn't try to start it up. I was too much in shock, staring at the place where Danny had vanished.

Then, a quarter mile ahead of my now drifting boat, something broke the surface. It was the swell giving way to something enormous and gray, only it wasn't a whale. It had a tower and deck guns, and as it kept rising out of the water, slowing down, I saw the deck, and the sides with some lettering and some numbers that were too far away for me to read.

A hatch opened and men climbed out onto the deck.

I knew what it was right away and terror froze me in place. We'd learned about it from Mrs. Payne, my seventh-grade teacher: a submarine. And not just any sub, but a German U-boat.

There was talk about Hitler's U-boats off the East Coast. Folks had been saying it was just a matter of time before there would be fighting in the Atlantic against them. Still, I could hardly believe my eyes.

I squinted into the distance and saw the fishing net and Danny's boat caught up on the bow of the U-boat, dangling over the side.

Some of the German submariners looked back in my direction, just standing around and smoking. Others went over to the boat to cut it loose and dump it into the ocean. There was still no sign of Danny anywhere.

One of the men pointed at me and seemed to be laughing, though I couldn't hear anything except the groaning ocean and waves slapping the sides of my boat. Some other men joined the laughing submariner. Others just stood there.

I was still so scared that I couldn't move. There was no place to go anyway. Nowhere to hide. I couldn't jump in the water or I'd freeze. My motor was still stalled out, and I doubted I could get it started quickly enough to get away. And even if I managed, I knew I couldn't outrun those deck guns.

They didn't do anything, though, except eventually go back down below, close the hatch, and churn away through the dark Atlantic until the sub was just a speck on the horizon.

I did the best I could to shake off being paralyzed from fear. I had to find Danny. So I got busy trying to start up the

motor, praying it would still work. And like a miracle, it did. I was taking on water through a crack in the hull, but I couldn't worry about that now. I aimed for the spot where the U-boat had surfaced, hoping I'd find Danny, calling his name again, over and over.

Ten minutes later I saw him, his head barely above the waterline, clutching the ice box where we stored the fish we caught. I forgot about where that U-boat might be lurking. "Danny!" I yelled. "Hold on!"

He didn't lift his head or say anything when I pulled up beside him, but at least he was still breathing. He'd probably used all the strength he had clinging on to the ice box. I could barely peel his fingers off to loosen his grip, and then hang on to his arm to keep him from slipping under. The ice box bobbed away out of reach.

I wasn't big enough or strong enough to just pull Danny in, so I had to figure something out—and fast, before he got hypothermia and died. Then I could deal with whatever injuries he might have had from being lifted and slammed and dragged underwater by the U-boat.

I grabbed a line from the bottom of my boat and looped it around the arm I was holding, pulling him up with it as far as I could, and then tying it off. I did the same with more

rope and one of Danny's legs. Then, with him secured to the side of my boat, I reached for Danny's belt, took hold, braced my feet against the hull, and pulled with all my might until I got him up to the side—and then over. He landed on top of me, both of us splashing into a couple of inches of oily water.

I sat Danny up as best I could and wrapped a tarp around him because it was about the only thing I had to try to keep him warm. "Just hold on," I told him, even though he was still unconscious. "Don't die!"

Once I had him situated, I aimed the boat back toward Ocracoke—actually north of the island a little way, since the currents would be pulling me south and I had to account for that. I tied off the throttle to keep it open as fast as the waves would let me, and then spent the next half hour bailing water with an old coffee can.

Danny moaned a couple of times but didn't open his eyes. Once I had enough water out that the boat could ride high enough to make decent time, I went over to check him, feel for broken bones or anything I could think of. But whatever was wrong with him, I didn't know enough to be able to tell. Maybe he hit his head, though I couldn't feel a lump. Maybe he had water in his lungs. Maybe something inside was broken or torn.

“Hang on, Danny,” I whispered to him, hugging him partly to try to make him warmer, and partly—mostly—because I was so scared and wished he would wake up and tell me what else I should do that I hadn’t thought of yet. I started crying, which I hadn’t done since Dad died. Thankfully, there wasn’t anybody around to see me doing it—especially nobody from school—and if by some other miracle Danny was to open his eyes just then, I doubted he’d make fun of me under the circumstances.

It was growing darker, which turned out to be not such a bad thing because now I could see lights on the island and had something to navigate to. But I still hated, hated, hated being out on the ocean in the nighttime.