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Across Enemy Seas

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For Peter and Megan, my beacons in the voyage

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Chapter One

Labor Day, 1943, just east of Richmond, Virginia

"Call the watch! Lower a lifeboat! The waves will swallow them up soon!" Wesley Bishop shouted. "Hurry!"

"Wes, are you daft?" Charles shook his younger brother's arm to quieten him. "Stop blithering!"

Charles Bishop sat back on his heels and scanned Wesley's face, trying to gauge if he was awake. Wesley's blue eyes were wide open, but clearly he was imagining a very different place from the shady pond where he and Charles were celebrating Labor Day with their American host family.

"We've got to do something!" Wesley shouted again. He pointed at the Ratcliff boys shoving sheets of water at each

other amid good-natured teasing. "They'll drown if we don't! Don't you see them?"

Charles recognized Wesley's sleep-talking daze all too well. Nightmares had hounded him ever since he and Charles had sailed the Atlantic Ocean to escape Hitler's nightly bombing of England – horrendous dreams about exploding firebombs hitting their London borough, about Nazi submarines torpedoing their ship convoy, about drowning in the war-tossed sea. Usually Charles could silence the ten-year-old before he woke up the Ratcliffs with his night-time outbursts. But here they were at the swimming hole with all five Ratcliff siblings and in broad daylight!

"Wes," Charles said, taking him by the shoulders. "Wake up. Look at me!"

Wesley quietened.

Awkwardly, Charles patted his arm. "There, you see, Wes, nothing but a bad dream."

He always felt so at sea himself when Wesley had these nightmares. Since crossing three thousand miles of ocean and settling in on the Ratcliff farm, Charles had had to play dad, mum and big brother all to Wesley. Truth be known, Charles was rather homesick himself. No one comforted him when he was racked with similar nightmares!

Besides, hadn't the British officials who'd herded them and dozens of other child evacuees onto the ocean liner instructed them to "never show they were downhearted", so they'd be good "little ambassadors" for England? Blubbering

certainly wasn't the way to do that. And it certainly wasn't the way to impress hardy American farm boys like the Ratcliffs.

Charles squared his shoulders. Mimicking the stiff-upper-lip adults he'd grown up listening to in England, the fourteen-year-old adopted a tone of voice designed to prompt agreement: "All righty, then, Wes?"

Wesley nodded.

Relieved, Charles flopped down onto the bank's velvety moss to watch the Ratcliffs swim in the deep pond that fed Four Mile Creek before it emptied into the James River. The pond was an oasis of coolness and playtime, an escape from their daily chores, and the family's favourite place on earth. The siblings hurried there whenever possible. Even on that sizzling afternoon, the Ratcliff boys had raced each other across frying-pan-hot fields, whooping and hollering, to see who'd reach the pond first, the corn popping with panicked grasshoppers jumping out of their way. There'd been no proper rain in Virginia for forty-one days straight, and all the farmers' corn had shrivelled to brown stalks. The air was so hot it almost felt too thick to breathe.

Despite that, Charles had kept apace with the American-rowdy clan, as usual. But Wesley had walked behind with the Ratcliffs' older sister, Patsy, who lugged a basket crammed with sandwiches and bottles of Royal Crown Cola. As soon as they reached the dark-green gloom of the woods, Wesley had lain down and fallen asleep, worn out by the heat. Charles had plunged into the pond with the Ratcliff boys,

scrambling out only at the sound of Wesley's first whimper.

Now Charles decided to stay by Wesley on the sidelines of the fun. He laughed as the youngest Ratcliffs – the seven-year-old twins, Johnny and Jamie – dunked each other. Their roughhousing reminded him of his and Wesley's corgi puppies back home. "Very like Hamlet and Horatio, eh, Wes?" Charles elbowed his little brother, trying to pull him into conversation, away from his bad memories.

That was a mistake.

Something about the boys' happy thrashing set Wesley off again. "There! Another hit! Another ship's going down!" Wesley cried out, gesturing wildly at the twins, then at the older boys, Bobby and Ron. "Throw them life preservers! Quick, oh quick!"

With this outburst, Charles knew the exact origin of Wesley's hallucination. He was reliving the night Nazi submarines, called U-boats, torpedoed nine ships in their convoy. The explosions had hurled hundreds of souls into the angry, freezing Atlantic.

"Blimey, Wes," Charles hissed. "Put a sock in it!" At this point, Charles was desperate to silence him before the others heard.

But it was too late. Patsy was already climbing off the tree swing where she'd been reading and writing in a big notebook. She hurried toward them, her heart-shaped face awash with concern.

"Wesley, honey, what's the matter?"

At the sound of Patsy's soft Tidewater drawl, Wesley shuddered. He blinked. His eyes cleared. He looked at Patsy, then at Charles, then back to Patsy. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I'm terribly sorry." He rubbed away a tear.

"What were you dreaming about, sugar?" Patsy took Wesley's hand and brushed his blond curls back from his forehead.

Worrying how Wesley might answer, Charles jumped in: "Oh, it was nothing much. Just some rubbish about our trip over." He cued his brother with a little nod to get him to follow his lead.

For a moment, Wesley's lips quivered. But then he murmured, "Right. Nothing much."

"You know, Charles," said Patsy, "bottling stuff up all the time can't be good for you. Better to vent off some steam now and then." She whispered a big-sister-to-big-brother aside: "That's especially true for Wesley. He's right ...well...tender, isn't he?"

God's teeth! Patsy was only two years older than Charles, but she was head-over-heels in love with a neighbour named Henry, a bomber pilot off flying missions over Europe, and she acted like that wartime romance elevated her to an almost adult position. Or at least that's the way it felt to Charles. Still, he admired the way she was always so patient with her younger brothers and Wesley. Charles knew he should try to be more like her, but he hadn't asked to be Wes's nursemaid.

What was it with Americans thinking that talking about

feelings helped anything? Charles continued to fume. He'd been completely taken aback by their tendency to hug people they barely knew, and for Virginia ladies to say "Bless your little heart" whenever they met Wesley. Did they really think that talking or hugging or those molasses cookies and lemonade they endlessly offered could wash away the memories of houses shattering, friends trapped under rubble, or ships exploding and burning while survivors clung to wreckage in ten-foot-high waves?

Shut up, Bishop, he cautioned himself. He and Wes had escaped the Nazis' bombs only because of the Ratcliff family's kindness. Their father had saved Mr. Ratcliff's life during World War I, so Mr. Ratcliff had readily agreed to save Wesley and Charles from Hitler's Blitz and London's raging fires. That Ratcliff generosity made him and Wesley among the lucky few – two of only some four thousand British child evacuees who'd gotten across the sea safely before Nazi U-boat attacks became so deadly that the British government refused to let more children risk the crossing.

Most of their friends back home still had gas masks hanging around their necks, and hunkered down in underground Tube stations or in flimsy backyard shelters during bombing raids. Charles remembered what it felt like during a Luftwaffe pounding, not knowing what might be left of their life when they crawled back out. He wasn't about to bite the hand that fed him, as the saying went, with some rude demand that Patsy mind her own business.