

An illustration showing three boys from behind, looking out at a night sea. The sky is dark blue with white stars and a bright, glowing area of light. In the foreground, a red ship's hull is visible on the left, and a white ship is on the right. The sea is dark with white waves and a large, bright, glowing area of light in the center, suggesting a collision or a large fire. The boys are wearing blue and orange clothing. The overall scene is dramatic and suggests a story of conflict or discovery.

CHAPTER SAMPLER

COLLISION

Eric Walters

Governor General's Literary Award-winner for *The King of Jam Sandwiches*

and **Danson Mutinda**

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and
Danson Mutinda

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Published in Canada and the United States in 2026 by Orca Book Publishers.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Collision / Eric Walters and Danson Mutinda.

Names: Walters, Eric, 1957– author | Mutinda, Danson, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250217597 |

Canadiana (ebook) 20250217635 | ISBN 9781459842298 (softcover) |

ISBN 9781459842304 (PDF) | ISBN 9781459842311 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8595.A598 C65 2026 | DDC jC813/.54—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025937754

Summary: In this touching middle-grade novel, thirteen-year-old Daniel witnesses the aftermath of two ships crashing in his small town's canal and learns that people have been discovered inside one of the shipping containers. Since his mom works at the hospital and his dad with the local police, Daniel gets an inside perspective and forms a friendship with one of the refugees.

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Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover artwork by Salini Perera.

Design by Rachel Page.

Edited by Sarah Howden.

Printed and bound in Canada.

29 28 27 26 • 1 2 3 4

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For Anita.

*And thank you to the real Ryan Rumsby and his students at
Diamond Trail Public School, who were my first readers.*

—E.W.

*To my children, Leon, Prosper, Henrie, Howard and Harvey:
May you find great friends in your life regardless of
race or geographical differences.*

—D.M.

ONE

“Daniel, I have to leave for work,” my mother said as she came into the kitchen.

I looked up from my homework on the table. “Eight- or twelve-hour shift?”

“Twelve, but it could be longer depending on what’s happening in the ER. Either way you’ll be safely snuggled into your bed and asleep before I get home.” She ruffled my hair.

“I’ll just have to tuck myself in.”

“Your father is going to be home within a few hours, so you won’t be alone too long.”

“Mom,” I said, “I’m thirteen, not three. I think I’ll be okay. I might enjoy a little quiet to finish my homework.”

She smiled. “Good plan. Make yourself a sandwich for lunch. I also left some food in the fridge for your father to

warm up for dinner. Don't forget to mention that to him or he'll just order pizza."

"Okay, I got it. Tell Dad to order pizza for dinner." I chuckled.

"I'm not sure which of you is worse, you or your father. On the bright side, at least you don't have a gun."

"Or handcuffs, a baton or a badge," I added.

She leaned over the chair and gave me a big hug from behind. "You really are adorable."

"That's what I aim for. Now if I could just convince somebody other than my mother of that fact."

"And funny. That's what attracted me to your father in the beginning," she said.

I pretended to cover my ears. "Before we get into the too-much-information phase of this conversation, could I please go back to my homework and you get to work?"

She gave me a kiss on top of my head. "See you tomorrow before you go to school."

"Have a good shift."

She went out, leaving me at the table to work on my homework. I was almost enjoying doing it. The assignment was called Local People in Our History. Everybody in my class had to try to interview somebody in the community who was part of that history and then do a presentation about them. I didn't mind doing the interview or writing it up, but I didn't like the idea of standing up in front of everybody.

At least I didn't have to look too far for my subject, because I was planning on interviewing my grandfather.

He'd lived in Welland his whole life. Born and raised. So had his father—my great-grandfather—and my great-great-grandfather, whose family had moved here from Ireland when he was thirteen. Our roots went way, way back, and our family was all tied up in the things that formed our city. My task this weekend was to write down an outline of my whole project. This was a big assignment, and it wasn't due until almost Christmas, but Mr. Rumsby, my teacher, had to approve each step along the way.

There was a pounding on the back door, and I startled. I wasn't three, but I really didn't like being home alone that much. More pounding and some yelling. I recognized the voice—my best friend, Noah. Why hadn't he just walked in? I jumped to my feet and went to pull open the door—it was locked. My mom must have locked it when she left.

"Why is your door locked?" he demanded once I'd swung it open.

"Probably to keep you out."

"Yeah, like I don't know where the spare key is hidden. Anyway, you won't believe what just happened!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

"Weren't you listening? You won't believe it! Grab your bike, and you can see it for yourself!"

Before I could think to respond, he spun around and raced out of the kitchen. I jumped to my feet to go after him. I detoured through the garage and grabbed my bike, hitting the opener and then scooting out before the door had fully opened.

“Come on!” Noah yelled as he pedaled away.

I jumped on my bike and hurried to catch up. What could he possibly be so excited about, and where were we going? Up ahead Noah made a turn. He was headed for the canal, so either we were close or he was going for the bridge to take us to the other side. No clues either way. It could be anything, and knowing Noah the way I did, it also could be nothing.

I'd been friends with Noah longer than I had memories. He, his three brothers and his parents lived one street over. There were pictures of us playing together that were pretty much as old as me. We shared school, hockey and baseball teams, friends, likes, hates, interests and enemies. Noah had a strange sense of humor, and that was part of the reason he was my friend.

I turned the corner and caught sight of the canal. Or really, a ship passing through. It was big, soaring up into the air. It was definitely an oceangoing ship, or “salty,” and it had shipping containers piled up on its deck. I saw the name on the side—*Zanzibar Queen*. I didn't recognize it, but that wasn't surprising. I knew a lot of the lakers by name because they traveled the canal all the time, but a salty might come through only once in its lifetime. Okay, maybe twice. Once to deliver goods and then a second time heading back out to the ocean. It could have come from halfway around the world.

As we moved down the street, the scene opened up. This was a big ship, stretching out farther than I could see—right now my view was blocked by houses on both sides of the road. And then a police car zipped by, lights flashing, siren on.

Now that was a clue. Something was happening, and with any luck my father might be part of it. It could have even been him in that car.

I was gaining on Noah, but he took a left turn, disappearing on the street parallel to the canal before I could catch him. I turned and then skidded to a stop. There were three police cars, and a crowd had gathered on both sides of the waterway. What was so special about this particular ship? It was big, probably as big as a ship could be to get through the locks, but there wasn't anything noticeably special about it. As soon as I got there, I'd see if my father was in one of the police cars. Even if he wasn't here, I'd know one of the officers for sure. They could fill me in.

Then I noticed that it wasn't just the *Zanzibar Queen*. There was another ship, a lake freighter, or laker, not as big but still pretty huge. It was headed downstream, and the *Zanzibar Queen* upstream. They were passing in the section between two of the locks. There really wasn't a lot of space between the two ships. I did a quick double take.

The lift bridge, which was raised to allow ships to pass, was only partway up, and it looked like the wheelhouse of the laker—the place where the captain or pilot controlled the ship—had caught the bridge! I could see jagged metal and that the very top of the wheelhouse had been sheared off!

The two ships were so close together it looked like they were touching...no, wait...they were. It wasn't just that the ship had hit the bridge. The two ships had collided!

TWO

I skidded to a stop beside Noah. We were at the back of a small crowd that had formed. I recognized a few kids from my class—Julia, Rebecca and Jaimie. In a place this size it was impossible not to run into somebody you knew. The police were keeping everybody back from the edge of the canal. There were five officers, and my father wasn't one of them. I recognized two of them, one of whom I sort of knew, but not well enough to just go up and start talking to him. Which, of course, didn't mean I couldn't listen in on what other people were saying.

I leaned in close to overhear a couple of men who were discussing what had happened. From what I could gather, neither of them had actually seen the collision take place, but they'd heard that the lift bridge jammed before it could go all the way up. They figured the captain of the laker had seen

that they weren't going to clear it but was helpless to stop—it wasn't like a big freighter could stop or start on a dime. The laker had plowed into the bridge, shearing off the wheelhouse. I had to hope that the captain, the canal pilot and anybody else up there had gotten out before impact.

“This is like something out of the movies,” Noah said.

“A horror movie. This is going to tie up the whole canal for days at least.”

The Welland Canal runs from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario and allows ships and cargo to travel between the two lakes and bypass Niagara Falls. It takes between ten and twelve hours to make the trip from one lake to the other, and every year about 3,000 freighters pass through, carrying almost 50,000 tons of cargo. Since it's closed for three months a year, during the winter, that means about a dozen ships travel it each day. Right now there would be eight or nine ships making the trip through the canal, and dozens more would be stranded at both ends, waiting for the canal to be cleared. Like everybody in this town, I knew lots about the canal and the ships that went through. I figured I knew even more than most people because my grandfather had worked his whole life as a canal pilot until he retired.

The crowd around us continued to grow. “It looks like everybody in town is going to be here before long,” I said.

“For sure,” Noah said. “It's the canal. It's the center of town. Besides, what could be bigger news than two ships colliding?”

As if on cue, a truck with flashing lights, *CHCH NEWS* written on its side, squealed to a stop. Almost before it had

stopped, three men—one carrying a big camera and a second a large case—jumped out and started running forward.

Noah raised his eyebrows. “Like I said, it’s big news.”

As we watched, two of the men set up the camera so the reporter could talk with the ships in the background. The third man stayed off to the side, away from everybody else. He was kneeling, with the case now open. He pulled something out. It was a big drone! How cool was that?

He began extending the rotors. There were four sets of blades. He put the drone onto the pavement, and almost instantly it soared straight up and into the sky. It buzzed like a gigantic mosquito as it passed over our heads and went toward the ships.

“That’s one way to get a closer look,” I said.

“And a great way for us to get a closer look too,” Noah replied. “Come on.”

Noah walked his bike toward the drone operator. I was on his tail again. The man was working the controls, and in the middle of the control panel in front of him was a big screen that displayed the drone’s view. We dropped our bikes so we could get closer for a better look. The operator looked up at us. We’d gotten too close, and I was sure he was going to chase us away.

“Hey, boys,” he said. “It’s okay—you can watch what I’m doing.”

Neither of us needed a second invitation. We crowded in, one on each side, so that we could see the display even better.

“Either of you ever flown a drone before?” he asked.

“Little ones, but never one as big as this one,” I said, and Noah nodded in agreement.

“It’s as easy to fly as the smaller versions. It gives us an up-close bird’s-eye view for a fraction of the cost of putting a helicopter in the air, and it can all happen much faster too.”

I couldn’t see the drone anymore, but I could see what it was seeing. It was positioned high above the laker. It was flying over the bow and making its way along the length of the ship, heading to the stern where the wheelhouse was and where the collision had taken place.

“Either of you boys see it happen?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I answered.

“I wish I had,” Noah added.

“We just live a couple of blocks over,” I said.

“And I heard about it first and got him, and we rode our bikes here,” Noah explained.

The drone came up to the wheelhouse and slowed down. I gasped. “Wow! The whole top has been sliced off.”

“I heard the crew got out of the wheelhouse, so nobody was killed or even injured,” he said.

“Can you imagine seeing that bridge coming right toward you?” Noah said.

“When you’re in the wheelhouse and heading toward the bridge, even when it’s all the way up, it still feels like you won’t fit under it,” I said.

“You’ve been in the wheelhouse before?” the man asked.

I nodded. “Dozens of times.”

The man looked puzzled. “Is that common for children here in Welland?”

“I’ve never been on one of the ships,” Noah said. “Daniel has an in.”

The drone operator looked toward me like he was waiting for an explanation.

“I was with my grandfather. He was a canal pilot. He took a lot of ships through the canal.”

“Thousands, right?” Noah said.

“More than almost anybody,” I said. “He did more than 6,000 trips. I think he still has the record.” I loved talking about my grandpa, and that was why I knew he’d be a great subject for my school assignment.

“Do you think he could have been piloting one of these two ships?” the drone operator asked.

“Not a chance,” I said. “He’s retired...almost five years ago now. He used to take me when I was little.”

“His grandfather knows more about ships going through the canal than almost anybody else,” Noah said.

I was glad my grandfather wasn’t there to hear the “*almost anybody else*” or he would have objected strongly. Grandpa was very good—or bad—about letting people know what he was thinking. My mother said that being shy wasn’t one of his faults. My father said it more bluntly. He remembered his father being in more than a few fistfights over the years. The last one was only a few years ago, and if it weren’t for my father being a police officer, Grandpa would have spent the night in jail.

“My grandfather is an expert on everything about the canal, including when and how it was built,” I said. “His father, my great-grandfather, helped dig and engineer it.”

“That’s amazing,” the man said. “Is he here? Would he be available for an interview?”

I turned back toward the crowd and looked hard. If he was there, I didn’t see him.

“He’d be here if he heard about the collision, but maybe he hasn’t yet,” I said.

“Could we get in touch with him, give him a call?”

He *would* make a good source for their news story. “Sure,” I said. “There’s nothing he likes better than talking about the canal.”

I gave him Grandpa’s phone number, and he relayed it into a headset he was wearing. He started talking to somebody else at the other end.

“Yes, I can do that,” he said into the microphone. “No problem. Let me reposition the drone.”

He turned back to me. “My producer is going to give him a call. If he can get down here, he’ll be interviewed and be part of the six o’clock news. Now, let’s get the new shots.”

He started adjusting the controls. I squinted into the distance and could just barely see the drone hovering above the ship and then picking up speed as it left the laker and went over to the salty.

“Did you see that?” Noah exclaimed. “The ship has got a gash in the side!”

“Are you sure?” the drone operator asked.

“Positive...well, pretty sure...maybe,” Noah replied.

I looked at the screen. The operator, who didn't look too convinced, still turned the drone around, and we could see on the screen that he was bringing it back to where it had been. Instead of flying it over the top, he had reduced the elevation so the drone was flying right along the side of the ship.

“There it is!” Noah exclaimed, although there was no need. I could see it. We all could see it.

There was a gash in the metal, maybe ten or twelve feet long, probably caused when the bow of the smaller ship had plowed into the bigger one.

“It's up high,” the man said. “Way, way above the waterline, so there's no danger of it sinking, at least.”

“But it's still serious,” I said. “It can get through the canal, but there's no way it can go out on open water, into the lake.”

The sound of more sirens caught my attention. Probably more police to control the crowd, which was becoming larger and larger. That was good. The more police, the more likely my father would be here, and I could get more information and maybe even an up-close, in-person view. I saw lights in the distance on the other side of the canal. Lots of lights. As they closed in, I could see a fire truck and an ambulance. And then a second and third ambulance. Somebody must have been hurt when the wheelhouse was sheared off. It was almost certain my grandfather would know the person who'd been piloting that ship.

“I can't believe how many ambulances are coming,” Noah said.

I turned my head in the direction he was looking. More ambulances—three, no, four—were coming from the east, from St. Catharines. Roaring behind them were another two fire trucks and another three police cars. They all had their lights flashing and sirens blazing.

“Why would they need that many ambulances?” Noah asked.

“There can only be one reason,” the drone operator said. “There must be a lot of injuries.”