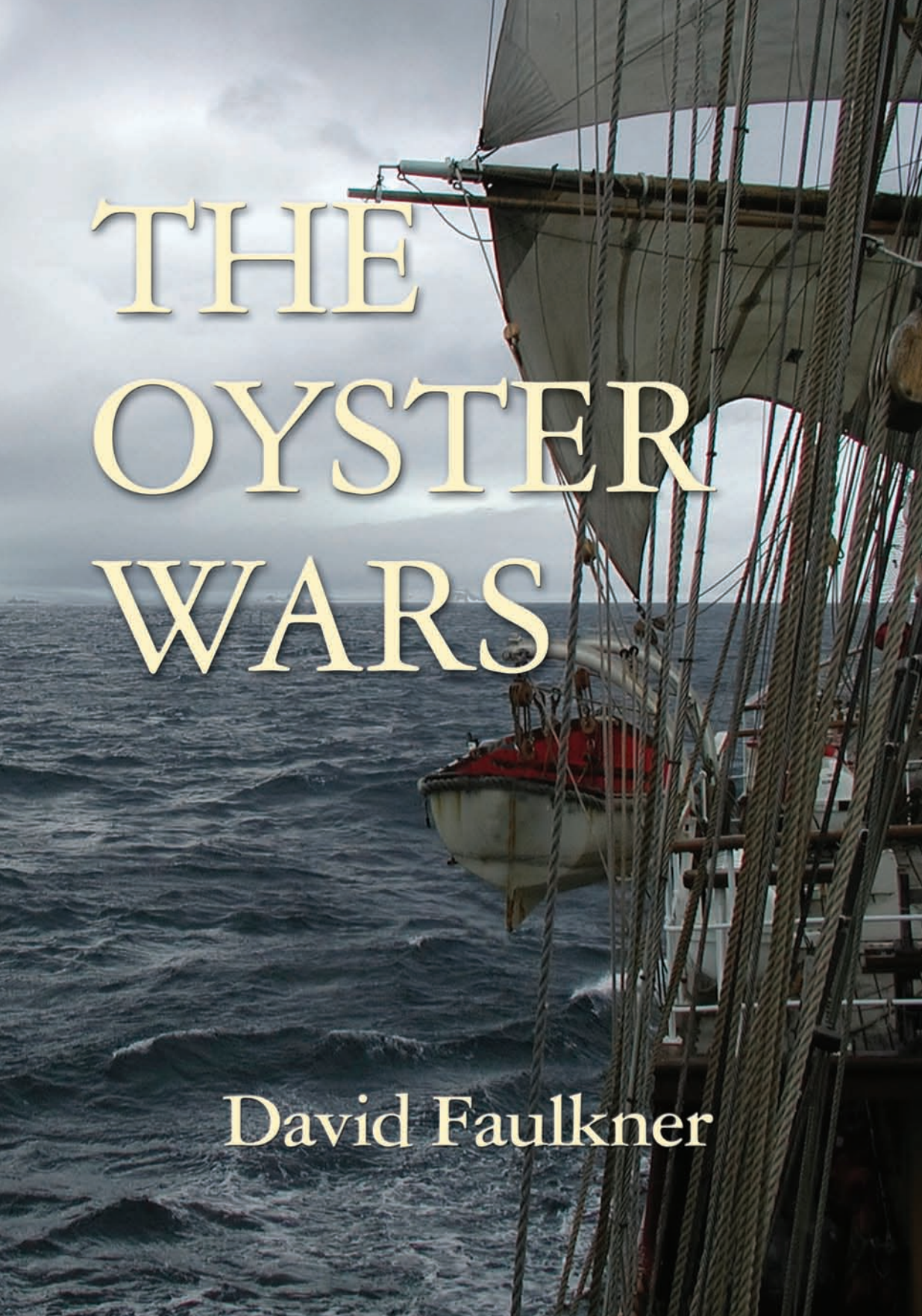


It's a time in our history when young men are shanghaied into servitude to ruthless boat captains. Haynie McKenna's search for one victim pits him against a sharpshooting assassin, a cabal of former Confederate officers and his own family ghosts.

The Oyster Wars

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# THE OYSTER WARS

David Faulkner

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# 3

## Somewhere on the Chesapeake Bay Friday, November 1, 1867

Landon Crockett Wallis awoke choking. The vomit in his mouth tasted sweet, while an acrid odor stung his nostrils. He tried to swallow but the chunks in his throat would not go down. The uncertainty of his whereabouts terrified him. He kept his eyes clamped shut as he groped for reality through his other senses.

Colored dots floated behind his eyelids; streaks of brilliant white flashed painfully through his head. His back was propped against something cold and hard, and his legs, stretching in front of him, rested in several inches of frigid water. He heard water slapping against the wall at his back while his prison rolled and tossed from side to side. He was unsure what had made him sick, the chloroform or the rough sea. He hated the sea.

Landon felt the front of his pants and found another wet spot, this one still warm. His neck and face heated as he understood that he had wet himself while unconscious.

Anger quickly replaced the embarrassment. *"You fool,"* he scolded himself. *"You got a lot bigger worries than peein' your pants."*

Now he sensed the warmth of human bodies pressing against him from either side. The air was smothering. He took a breath and his stomach reacted violently to the stench, but it had no more to give.

A voice at his right arm whispered, "Ya'll gonna be sick agin?"

Landon forced his eyes open. There was no light; he could still see nothing.

"I got nothing left," he said.

"That be good, that be damn good."

Landon turned his head to face the sound. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Luther."

Landon recognized the voice as that of a young, Negro boy.

"Luther what?"

"No one ever said two names to me. Luther is the only one I know."

Landon felt the boy shiver where their arms met. A chill penetrated his own body, which responded with a violent shudder.

"Any idea how long we been here?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hard to tell wif it bein' so dark. Seems like I was down here a good long time by masef, den they brought in the other two and after more time they brought you in, then we dun left out."

"Any idea where we are?"

"Naw. We been gone for some hours now, but even if I was up top with a spy glass I'd have no idee where we was. I's not from around here — you didn't tell me yo' name."

"Landon. Landon Wallis. Maybe you heard of my family."

"Nope. Like I says, not from around here."

"I know, but if you were around the Point — Fell's Point — for anytime you would have seen the name on our warehouses and other buildings along the waterfront."

"Cain't read."

Landon immediately regretted his patronizing words. Anxious to move on he asked, "Where do you come from?"

"I came up from Noth Carlina, lookin' for my ma. Afore the war, she was sold to a family up to Balimore. 'Course the war set her free but she never came to home. I could'n wait no more, so I came to fetch her to home."

"You came all that way by yourself?"

"Had to. No one else to come. I had a older bruther, but he was sold off to Mississippi' an' we don't know where he be. Pa is ta cripple up an' my sisters are all ta young."

"You sound young. How old are you?"

"I reckon I am, but I dunno years. Wish I did."

Landon realized that the boat had ceased tossing and was slowing. Though he hated the sea and everything about it, Landon knew something about boats. According to Luther, four of them were jammed into this cramped space. There had been no sound of an

engine so they were traveling under sail. They were likely in the forepeake of a pungy, or brogan. Maybe a small schooner. Either way there was only two or three crewman up on deck. He knew immediately that any thought of rushing the crew and seizing the boat was a fantasy. They would likely be brought out of the hold one at a time, no other way it could be done. If it was daylight they wouldn't be able to see for several minutes; besides, they were too stiff and weakened to mount any fight against what are certain to be armed captors.

The boat struck something solid and stopped. There was movement on the deck above as men scurried around, undoubtedly to tie off the boat. Within moments, a deck hatch opened directly overhead and daylight flooded the hold. Landon struggled to stand, eyes blinking against the glare.

"Siddown 'til yer tole to move," a voice bellowed from overhead. "You try any tricks and you'll be floatin' away, dead as a mackerel." The voice waited until Landon had settled back into the icy water awash in the hold.

"You'll come out of there one at a time when you're tole to. See this here ladder?"

Landon shaded his eyes. Through the open hatch, he could make out a shack squatting several feet above the water on log pilings. Their boat was tied off, fore and aft, between two of the pilings. A ladder of rope and rough wood dangled from a trapdoor opening in the floor of the shack, ending a couple of feet above the boat deck.

The voice above snarled, "When I tell ya, come up on deck and climb up this here ladder. Oh, and welcome to the paddy shack." He cackled loudly and looked aft.

"Good 'un, Jake," a second voice said.

The one at the ladder abruptly stopped laughing and swung back to the men in the hold. "You, nigger boy, come on outta there and get up this ladder."

Luther stood on wobbly legs, climbed out of the hold and scurried to the ladder. As he started to climb, the one called Jake produced a wide strap of dark, worn leather and flailed the back of Luther's legs, tearing the thin pants he wore. Without a sound, Luther clamored up the ladder and disappeared through the trapdoor.

"Good 'un, Jake," the other repeated.

"They is used to it," Jake chortled. "If they don't get a whippin' everyday they don't guess ya luv 'em. Now, you – daddy's boy," he said shaking the leather strap toward Landon. "Get up here."

Landon grabbed the edge of the hatch to steady himself as he climbed onto the deck. He moved carefully to the ladder, fearing the sting of the strap across his own legs. Before reaching the rope ladder, he saw two men standing behind the one holding the whip. Each man was bearded and they looked related, displaying the same witless grins. Inbreeding immediately came to Landon's mind. Their obvious dimness was offset by the breech loading rifles they carried. Each wore a crumpled oilcloth hat and a ragged piece of canvas hanging from shoulders to knees.

Beyond the two armed guards, Landon glimpsed a wide swath of grey marsh grasses stretching to a stand of tall pines at the edge of dense woods. Overhead, a tern hesitated in mid-flight then dove out of sight behind the shack. Landon dared not look back, but was certain that they were in the midst of a great marsh and a considerable distance from dry land.

Landon reached the ladder, breathed deeply and turned to face Jake.

"You've made a mistake. Please contact my father, Colonel Silas Wallis of Fell's Point," he said, hoping the military title would somehow influence these violent men.

"He will pay a reward for my safe and immediate return." Landon almost shouted the words – 'safe-and-immediate'.

The one called Jake curled his lips revealing chipped teeth, darkly stained and uneven. He pushed his face at Landon until their noses joined.

"Yore daddy is gonna pay sure 'nuf, Mister Wallis. We gonna decide how – 'safe' – and how – 'immediate'. Now, get that fat ass of yours up that ladder, 'fore I whip it just like I did the nigger."

"Good 'un, Jake."

Landon, eyes tearing with rage and humiliation, scaled the ladder and pulled himself through the opening in the log floor.

He found the shack to be one room devoid of furniture or any other necessities of a civilized existence. He crawled to an empty corner where he situated himself with his back against the wall, legs splayed in front of him. Only a couple of feet separated Landon from a white man huddled in a corner his head perched on drawn up knees, hugging his legs with boney arms. Landon looked to his left and saw that Luther had gathered himself into a third corner in a similar fashion.

Quickly, Jake prodded the two remaining captives through the door and stuck his head in after them. "Aw right, listen up 'cause I ain't chewing my cabbage twiced." He picked up a clay jug and held it in front of him. "This here is ya drinkin' water. It's all there is 'til mornin'

when we bring yer grub. See that little hole in the floor?" He indicated a point between Landon and Luther where a square of light shown up through the floor.

"That there is for ya to do yer business. Course ya'll can shat in here if ya want." Landon heard loud giggles coming from the boat as Jake spoke.

"An' mind, ya'll now work for us'n. Don't go crazy and start killin' one 'nother, cause you is all a valable piece of propity. Our propity. An' we want ya' lookin' right smart when you get called to work." He shook his leather strap at Luther. "Hey, boy, you can tell 'em all 'bout how to be propity."

"Good 'un Jake," came from the boat as the trapdoor closed.

The windowless room grew dim and shadowy. Anemic rectangles of light leaked from small holes cut into the top log of each wall at the roofline. After sunset, their prison would become pitch black until sunrise the next morning.

The shack now held five men crowded into a space Landon judged to be no more than ten feet by ten feet and of equal height from floor to roof. Hastily constructed of rough-hewn logs packed with mud, light rays filtered through gaps where bits of dried mud had crumbled away.

Landon shifted slightly, affording himself a better view of his fellow prisoners. In the corner to his left, Luther sat facing him, his own eyes fixed on the floor. In the far corner, Landon strained to make out a form crouching in that dim recess. He recalled a fleeting glimpse as the other man had crawled through the open door. This man looked to be around Landon's age, reasonably well groomed, wearing clothes which, though rumpled, were precision tailored.

Landon's gaze continued along the far wall, resting on the fourth member from his prison voyage. Light trickled through one of the square holes and fell across the prisoner's head and shoulders. Landon took the lad to be a few years older than himself, likely in his mid twenties,; wearing the look and the clothes of someone newly arrived from the old country.

The fifth man, the white man Landon had glimpsed as he crawled to his corner, was watching the activity with dark eyes set deep in a bony skull. His gaunt look made it difficult to fix his age. Landon looked directly into those eyes and nodded. "Howdy," he said.

The eyes continued to watch Landon, then a raspy voice answered, "Howdy."



Landon saw more movement in the room and sensed that the others had taken an interest in their exchange. He asked, "How long you been in here?"

The other man cleared his throat and, when he spoke, his voice was stronger.

"'Cuse me, but Ah had no reason to talk for a while."

After swallowing, he continued. "Jake brings the slop and water ever mornin', just after sunup. Unhooks that trapped door and yells 'oink, oink', shoves the jars in here, cackles real loud and locks 'er up. Ah has counted sixteen of them mornin's. Hope Ah got it right, never had to count that much afore."

"Have you been alone, for all that time?"

"Naw. There's been others come through here. Most was gone in a day or two, a few stayed some longer."

"You have any idea why they are keeping — you?"

"It's likely 'cuz Ah'm a Reb. Jake and his brothers was guards at a Yankee prison camp. Ah was wearin' my uniform pants night they took me off the docks at Annapolis. My cousin Horton tole me and tole me I was askin' for trouble if'n Ah weared them to town. I knowed he was right, but they is the only town pants I got."

Landon paused before saying, "You have any notion of where the others we taken when they left here?"

"Not fer sure. When they come for 'em, Jake'd call out whatever name he'd given 'em, sayin' they was goin' sailin'. They was a few mornins' when Ah was in here alone, them ole boys would sit out there in that boat an' smoke an' talk. Smelt like they was smokin' cob pipes. Sure smelt good, but Ah never said nothing — knew it wouldn't do no good. Why shoot, some of them mornins' they didn't leave me no grub or water — it was for sure they wasn't gonna give me a smoke."

The prisoner paused, seemingly to catch his breath before continuing, "After they set there a good while Ah commenced to holler for 'em to give me' my grub. They'd just laugh an' holler back then bye n' bye they cast off and it got quiet. Then Ah knew they was gone."

"We must not be close to any roads or people, or they wouldn't have been so quick to let you holler out."

"For sure. The first days, when Ah knew they was gone, Ah'd sit in here an holler loud as Ah could 'til Ah couldn't hardly whisper. On days when they was others here with me, we'd all set ta holler'n, but nobody never come."

"What's your name?" Landon asked. The only response was labored gasps for breath coming from the corner. When the answer came, it was in a weak, raspy voice.

“Billy Ray. Billy Ray Washington. Sure good to have some company.”

After more silence, he continued. “All this excitement’s got me plumb tuckered.”

A question came from the far corner. The voice, pinched and edgy. “Are you going to tell us what happened to the others or not?”

“No call to be short with me,” Billy Ray replied. “Ain’t no rush, we dun got all night. ‘Sides, Ah only know what Ah heard from Jake and his kin. They is likely worse liars then them Yankee carpetbaggers down home.”

Billy Ray waited to make certain that it was understood he would proceed at his own pace, then continued, “They was talkin’ about sellin’ one of the boys back to his kin folks for a lot of money. Other’s they sell off to work on erster boats. Anyways, I heard ’em talkin’ about how it weren’t fair – them doin’ all the work and someone up to Baltimore took most of the money they got fer sellin’ us’n to some boat captain.”

Landon studied the pitiful figure, then said, “Pardon me for speaking so bluntly – but it looks like they are starving you.”

“I’m right hungry, sure nuf. Reckon Ah’m used to it, though. I was fourteen months in a Yankee prison camp. So far, this here ain’t as painful as that were.”

Landon was aware that he was, at least for the time being, better off than he had been roiling on the bay in the dark, cramped hold of that boat. The sweet taste of the chloroform was gone and he no longer felt the rumblings of nausea. In fact, the pains in his belly rose from hunger and not seasickness. “Any water in that jug, Billy Ray,” he asked.

Billy Ray hesitated then handed the jug across to Landon. “Easy, now. It’s all we got ‘til mornin’.”

The clay jug was damp to the touch. Landon sniffed at the opening before tilting it to his lips. The tepid water smelled of rotting vegetation and mold. He took in only enough to work between his teeth and flush the refuse from his mouth. Careful not to swallow any, he scooted himself over to the hole in the floor and spat it to the marsh below. The thought struck him that Jake and his half-wit kin probably dip the jug water right below this toilet hole, cackling the whole while. “Good ’un, Jake,” he could hear the one saying.

A voice, thin and halting, came from the shadowy form sitting next to the man in the tailored clothing. “*Wasser, bitte.*” An arm emerged from the shadows, its fingers working as if gripping air.

“You want the water,” Landon said and placed the jug in the grasping fingers. “Careful, that might make you sick.”

Billy Ray said, "What's yer name?"

"Landon. Landon Wallis."

"Howdy, Landon. Sorry ta meet ya like this here."

"Has the water made you sick?" Landon asked.

"It's not bothered me none," Billy Ray said. "But, ya see, ma belly ain't like ever body's. Ah lived through 14 months at Point Lookout. Now nuthin' bothers ma belly."

"The Union prison camp on the Potomac? You were there?"

"Ah was there from February '64 'til the end."

Landon asked, "Was that where Jake and his idiot kin were guards?"

"Naw. Least ways I never seen 'em there. They tole me how right proud they was of all the hurt they done us Rebs at the camp up to Elmira, New York."

Darkness began to impose its will on those in the prison. Advancing relentlessly from the recesses of each corner until it controlled every inch. Staking a claim over the spirit of everyone in the little room.

A new voice spoke out and Landon peered into the far corner, unable to see the man he had earlier glimpsed wearing rumpled tailored clothing. The voice was deep, authoritative, someone used to being obeyed.

"Pass that jug along," the voice ordered. An arm, sleeved in a black woolen sack coat, reached out impatiently. Landon saw movement in the gloom before him, as the jug was passed.

"I'm from Philadelphia," the voice offered. "And we heard up there that, of all the prison camps, you Rebs got the best treatment at Point Lookout."

Billy Ray hooted. "Mebbe. But, if that were the best, the worst must a bin real hell."

"Point Lookout is smack on the water. I know your kind got to go swimming and had lots of fish and fresh vegetables from the farms. Must of had plenty of fresh water."

"Yore Yankee newspaper sure 'nuf had a strange idea of a good time. Ya think they give us a pole an' a can of crawlers an' said, 'take a boat out an' catch ya some fish for supper'? 'Time vittles got to us'n they was rotted side meat and taters stinkin' up a plate, or greens rottin' in a bowl of lukewarm water. Only went to swim twiced. Ya'lls papers tell ya about the dead-line?" Billy Ray waited for an answer that was slow in coming.

"Could have, I guess. I might have missed it."

"Point Lookout is a strip o' land what sticks out where the Potomac joins up with the Chesapeake Bay. River is ten mile across an' the bay is

– well – the bay. Not likely a body could swim either one, but they wasn't takin' no chances. Yanks drove a row of pilings into the river bottom. Big un's that stuck up above the water. Called it the dead-line. Anybody that swum passed it could expect to get shot."

"Nothing wrong with that. Same as if you went beyond a fence on land."

"We had these negrah guards. Meaner'n snakes they was. 'Course they hated us'n. They would all the time get their face up real close, glare at us for a minute, then say 'Better watch it – boy, we on the top now.' The white guards was purty decent. Anyhow, soon as we got into the water, these negrahs would up an start a shootin' at 'us. Swore to the white officers that we was tryin' to escape. Got so it was worth your life to get a bath."

The voice from Philadelphia spoke with disdain. "I don't know – I never heard of anything like that. Hey, you, Landon you say your name was?"

The room was filled with the night now. There was nothing to do but talk or sit silently in the gloom and shiver with fear and cold.

"Yes – Landon. What is it you want?"

"Where you hail from?"

"Fell's Point, next to Baltimore Town."

"You ever hear of such goings on at Point Lookout?"

"Can't say as I have. But, I didn't pay much attention to war news. Stories about all the killing and suffering made me sad. I didn't want to hear about it. But, I'm not calling Billy Ray here, a liar. He says he was there and saw it. Why would he lie about it, it's over and done with."

Billy Ray spoke up, "That's not near the worst of it," he said. "They was more than twelve thousand of us jammed in there, some had tents most didn't. Even in the cole weather. Only the rags they come with." His voice softened, "Lots of them boys died just from bein' there. Good 'ole boys they was too." Now, the voice quickened, harder. "Landon, you axed me 'bout this here jug o' water. Reason it don't bother me, is they pumped our drinkin' water direct out of the river jus' next to the camp. It smelled an tasted worst than this here water. Lots a boys got real sick from it, sure 'nuf."

"He's lying. He must be lying." The words came from the dark area occupied by the man from Philadelphia. "And, you – Landon, don't ask why would he lie. He's a Reb. They all lie, that's where the darkies learned it."

Landon had little energy for an argument. He tried to keep his voice even, without rancor. "How are you called, other than Philadelphia?"

“The name is Arthur, Arthur Prescott. I come from a Mainline Philadelphia family. A long line of lawyers. Perhaps you know of the law firm Prescott & Bowles.”

“Sorry, no.”

“Would not think so,” Prescott snorted.

“Betcha didn’t get yore hands dirty fightin’ in the war,” Billy Ray said.

“I have studied law and am preparing for the bar. Please don’t try to engage me in an argument or ethical discussion concerning the war. You will lose. Again.”

The room became silent. The cold penetrated the floor, chilling Landon’s legs and buttocks. He remembered the tattered, thin pants worn by Luther, concerned that the boy from North Carolina would languish through the cold night ahead.

“How about you, Luther, you thirsty?” Landon asked.

There was restless movement in the room before Luther answered.

“What you mean’ Mister Landon? Mister Lincoln, God rest his soul, set us free, but didn’t say that we could drink from the same jug as white folks.”

“I’m certain that if he had lived, he would have seen to it,” Landon said.

“This is Arthur Prescott. Your point regarding Mister Lincoln’s intentions is moot, as the water jug is empty.”

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Landon cried.

# 11

Somerset County, Maryland  
Early morning, Tuesday, November 5, 1867

Jeremy Coates repeatedly drew the large, bone handled Bowie knife carefully over the small whetstone he held in his left hand. This he did ritualistically every morning, waiting for the campfire to boil his coffee. The great knife gleamed in his hand, always sharp enough to cleave a hair from a man's head in one motion.

"Never can be too sharp," he said to no one.

Jeremy stuck the razor thin knife point into his palm and smiled at the blood oozing from the wound. This too was part of his daily ritual. He liked to be reminded of the pain he and his knife rapturously inflicted on others. The sight of his own blood slaked his needs until he could draw someone else's. After wiping the blade with an oiled cloth, he settled the Bowie into a sheath strung on a leather belt under his buffalo robe coat.

The coffee pot sat on a flat rock, heated by the breakfast fire. Jeremy poured a cupful and drank noisily, anxious to complete his ritual. Next, he unfolded the Indian blanket lying beside him, removed the large bore Prussian Musket and laid it across his lap. As always, Jeremy was seduced by the beauty and precision of the weapon. He stroked the blonde wood stock gently with a piece of soft cloth. The ceremony continued as he burnished the brass fittings and long iron barrel that made the .72 caliber gun so distinctive.

When fired, the weapon's jarring recoil was like that of a shoulder-fired cannon. Jeremy Coates enjoyed the pain, believing it gave him a kinship with his target, who, at the same time would be dying a horrible death mere yards away. He cared more for that gun than anything else in his life. Certainly more than any feeling he had for his mother and father.

They had named him Jeremy, and he hated them for it. At age twelve, he decided they were of no further use to anyone and cut their throats while they slept. After setting fire to the house, he had worked up real tears for the neighbors who arrived, too late to save the house or its occupants. Homeless, Jeremy left Virginia's Eastern Shore for a brief stay with a spindly, maiden aunt in Roanoke. With only weeks left in the school year, she insisted he enroll in a nearby grade school. At home, he had achieved little in the way of formal education, here he was in a classroom of children much younger and smaller than himself. Initially, Jeremy enthralled his classmates with stories of his own bravery and daring, so that he actually enjoyed his few days at the school.

One chilly morning, a crowd had gathered in the schoolyard to hear Jeremy describe, in gory detail, how his parents were hacked to death and scalped by savages while he barely escaped with his own hair. The next day a classmate disrupted another of Jeremy's tales, shouting out that the new boy was a liar. It was a fact, the other boy yelled, that there hadn't been any savages in Virginia for a hundred years.

Jeremy erupted in a rage, hitting the smaller boy so hard the lad squealed in pain as blood gushed from his nose and mouth. Following that incident, the other children kept their distance, whispering that Jeremy was a "liar" and "the rat face boy".

On a night in early June, Jeremy quietly left his aunt's house and returned to the amicable surroundings of the Eastern Shore. He had given considerable thought to killing her and burning her house down, but decided it was too much trouble.

Back on familiar ground, he built a small lean-to near the mouth of Messongo Creek, just below the Maryland state line. There he spent his teenage years roaming the forest, living by cunning and guile.

What Jeremy couldn't get by hunting, fishing, and trapping, he stole. He avoided other people, always careful to make sure no one was around when he helped himself to a blanket, a frying pan, or a pair of boots.

Jeremy considered himself a frontiersman. Now, as he buffed the barrel of his long gun, he scoffed at the thought of those men along the

bay's Eastern shore, who prided themselves on being accomplished proggers. He had lived a decidedly more rugged existence than a mere progger.

"A progger ain't nuthin' more than a momma's boy," he'd argue to himself.

"Spends a couple a days out in the woods huntin' and thinks he's done somethin'. If he gets cold or hungry he can always crawl home to his momma."

Jeremy looked at his spavined horse nibbling at weeds and grass.

"Meantime, a real frontiersman lives by his wits, 'cause he's got no momma to run to."

Jeremy spent most of the autumn of 1861 avoiding the federal patrols who scoured the region for able-bodied men to be pressed into the service of the Union army. One morning, while moving quickly to evade a cavalry troop, he stumbled into a clearing, in the middle of which sat a log cabin. A wisp of grey smoke curled above the chimney, signaling that someone was likely at home. He had no choice but to try for the cabin. Anyone inside would have to be silenced before they could cry out.

Jeremy drew his hunting knife with his right hand as he hit the cabin's door with his left shoulder. The door was unlatched and banged hard against the wall before hurtling back into Jeremy. He slammed into a small wooden table, sending a bucket of water crashing to the floor.

Jeremy scrambled to his feet, crouched low, his knife in front of him to fend off any attack. Quickly, he realized he was alone in the one room cabin and sheathed the knife.

He heard shouting as horses and riders emerged from the woods and galloped toward the cabin. Glancing around, Jeremy was satisfied there was no point in trying to conceal himself under the cot against the far wall. The wisps of smoke he had seen were the remnants of a cooking fire smoldering in the fireplace.

With two strides he was at the fireplace, looking up into the rough sooty stone interior. With the fire below dying, the chimney was barely warm. Grabbing protruding stones on either side, he hunched his shoulders, pulling himself up into the chimney. He bent both legs and jammed his knees into the wall he faced, while digging boot heels into the wall at his back.

Within moments he heard soldiers enter the cabin. They cursed and began smashing everything in the room.



“You think this is a Reb hideout, Sarge?” One of them grunted to the sound of dishes being smashed.

“I doubt it. I don’t think even a Reb would live like this,” said a second voice.

“Let’s burn her anyway,” said a third.

Jeremy recalled how the chimney was the only thing standing after the flames consumed the rest of his own house. He wondered how hot these stones would get if those damn blue bellies set fire to the tiny cabin. It was in his favor that the house was small and tinder dry. It would burn quickly, affording little time to heat the stones around him. With clenched teeth, he determined to hold out until the pain became unbearable.

“We’re not burnin’ the damn house,” said the sergeant’s voice. “We got to round us up some reecruits, ’fore we can get supper.”

Army boots stomped to the door and the cabin became quiet. It would be another seven months before the Union army learned that young men all along the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay had taken to their chimneys to avoid conscription.

After several minutes of quiet, Jeremy lowered himself onto the grey ashes and stepped back into the room. He waited until well after dark, and then headed south, deeper into the Confederacy; eventually joining up with an artillery unit at Blacksburg, Virginia.

Within weeks of his enlistment, it was apparent to anyone who encountered Jeremy Coates, that he was ill suited for the structured discipline of an organized military.

One morning he was approached by his sergeant and a captain he did not recognize. The captain stood to one side while the sergeant spoke.

“Private Jeremy Coates, you are ordered to head west to Kansas and join up with Quantrill’s Raiders. If you choose to remain in this unit, you will be court-martialed and likely sent to the stockade.”

The exploits of William Quantrill and his raiders were cheered throughout the Confederacy. Jeremy could not believe his good fortune at being asked to join them. The idea of being a force in the wanton destruction of others thrilled him. He left immediately for Kansas by horseback; wanting neither to wait for a westbound train nor put up with the humanity he would encounter in a crowded passenger car.

It was while riding through Tennessee that Jeremy secured his beloved Prussian rifle.

He emerged from a copse of small trees onto a sprawling meadow, thick with smoke and the acrid smell of a recent battle. The land was

littered to the rise ahead with the lifeless remains of horses, and men clad in uniform remnants, both blue and grey. The sounds of battle moved to the south as he guided his horse between the dead and dying at his feet.

Along the hill line to his left, men in grey uniforms loaded stretchers. On the horizon to his right, blue uniforms did the same. Jeremy knew that, even if he was seen, those moving about were too busy to concern themselves with a lone rider. He was in no hurry to pass into the woods across the meadow. It pleased him to gaze down upon these fallen men and revel in the thought that he was a better man than any of them. He was, after all, still alive.

About half way across the field, Jeremy came upon a young soldier lying on his back. Bright red blood spurted from a hole in his chest, soaking his grey uniform jacket. The boy's eyes were cloudy, almost lifeless, his mouth moved silently. Cradled in the boy's arms and running the length of his body, was the most magnificent long gun Jeremy had ever seen. The young soldier desperately gripped the barrel with both hands.

Jeremy dismounted and squatted down next to the boy.

"Don't expect you'll be needin' this anymore," he said taking hold of the rifle barrel and giving a tug. The boy tightened his grip, his head turned toward the sound of Jeremy's voice.

A soft, "No," his only response as he mustered his remaining strength to resist the efforts to take his beloved weapon.

"Look boy, you're good as dead – give it up. 'Sides it didn't do you no good anyways. Likely too much gun for ya." Jeremy yanked the gun while the boy hung on.

Quickly scanning the battlefield, Jeremy drew his hunting knife. "You were a tough little shit, I'll give you that much," he said, slitting the boy's throat in one motion.

Jeremy set the rifle aside while he went through the boy's pockets. Finding a few Confederate dollars, he jammed them into his own pocket. Grinning, he held up a nearly full bottle of laudanum. He took a swig of the drug, corked the bottle and secured it in his jacket.

"Now, ain't that a fine howdy do," he laughed. "Wish that old lady of a sergeant was here, so I could wave this under his nose."

Being caught stealing laudanum from a medical unit was one of the reasons Jeremy was riding to join Quantrill.

"Better yet, if he was here, I'd lay him out right next to that dead soldier boy there."

Jeremy mounted his horse and laid his new gun across the saddle in front of him. His eyes shone, "You'll be a real beaut as soon as I can get ya cleaned up," he said aloud.

Now, drinking his breakfast coffee, he remembered his days with Quantrill as the best of his life.

Jeremy had caught up with the fabled raider near Joplin, Missouri, making a splendid entrance, according to his plan. After proving himself to the outriders securing Quantrill's headquarters, Jeremy rode slowly into camp, ahead of his escort. He held the great gun upright with his right hand, the butt of the weapon resting on his right thigh. Sitting ramrod straight in the saddle, he passed knots of hard looking men who interrupted their duties to follow him with menacing looks.

Jeremy felt their eyes on him and imagined them filled with envy when they saw the great gun. Later, he learned that among those who witnessed his arrival, stood young Jesse James and his brother Frank, along side Cole Younger. When Coates eventually met these legendary men face to face, he was not going to tell them his name was Jeremy. "You can call me, Rat," he would say.

Over the months with Quantrill, Jeremy and his gun gained the respect of those with whom he rode. Many of these men were deadly with a six-shooter, quickly drawn and fired from the hip, but none could match his marksmanship at a distance. He soon became the one Quantrill called upon to bring down a Yankee officer, or Kansas lawman, from long range. What he aimed at – he hit – and what he hit, died. He proudly recalled the raiders' praising his marksmanship.

"Good shootin' Rat", or, "Rat, you sure emptied some Yankee saddles, this mornin'."

Today, as he finished polishing the great gun, he grew more sullen than usual, realizing that he would never again have the admiration of such great men. By the war's end, Quantrill's raiders were scattered from Missouri to Texas. It seemed to Jeremy that one night they were all together, then suddenly, the others were gone and he was alone again.

After the war, Jeremy drifted aimlessly over the countryside. At a saloon in Kentucky, he found himself standing next to an ex-Reb captain who admired the great gun leaning against the bar.

The captain laughed, "Gun's almost as tall as you," he said. "You hit anything with it?"

"Only, whatever I aim at," Jeremy grunted.

"What're you drinkin'?"

"What're you buyin'?"

“Name your poison.”

Jeremy smiled for the first time all day. “Whiskey — the good stuff.”

The captain bought a bottle, grabbed two glasses and nodded to an empty table in the corner. “Might as well sit while we drink. Bring your field piece, there,” he added.

Jeremy grabbed the gun. “Don’t go nowhere without it,” he said.

Once settled at the table with glasses filled, the captain raised his own glass in salute. “Here’s to Jeff Davis and Robert E. Lee, may God bless ‘em.”

Jeremy took a long pull at his glass. *Long as he’s buyin’, he can drink to any damn fool he wants to*, he thought.

The captain raised his glass to eye level, “And here’s to makin’ some damn good money for ourselves,” he said, draining it in one motion.

Jeremy agreed that he would like to make some “damn good money”. Did the captain have anything in mind?

“I might,” he said, and asked a lot of questions about Jeremy’s background.

Jeremy was wary of talking too much about himself, particularly the years before the war. But, as the other man poured drinks, he reasoned that it would do no harm to let the man know that he was drinkin’ with one of Quantrill’s top men. After all, they had both fought the same enemy.

Jeremy slouched in his chair, tilted the beaver hat back on his head and bragged at length about having been an orphan, forced to survive as a frontiersman in the forests along the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

Jeremy made no mention of setting fire to his own home, and the two men laughed heartily as he told of a Union patrol searching in vain while he hid inches from them, in a chimney.

He touched the great gun standing sentinel at his side. “If I’d a had ‘General Jackson’ back then, I wouldn’t had to hide out.”

“You must admire the late Stonewall Jackson.”

“Where I come from, ever body has a name for their long gun. I thought on namin’ it after Will Quantrill, but far as I know he’s still alive.”

The captain listened absently while Jeremy bragged of being Quantrill’s right hand man. He poured generous drinks and pressed for more detail of Jeremy’s life on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

“I’m from Virginia, myself,” he said. “Down around Richmond though. Never spent any time up to the bay.”

Jeremy gulped his whiskey without comment.

The captain wondered if this man would be a nasty drunk and tried again.

“You heading back home?”

“Guess you wasn’t listening. Home is wherever I drop my bedroll.”

Jeremy emptied his glass and shoved it across the table for a refill.

The captain tilted the bottle, pouring only enough to cover the bottom of the glass.

Jeremy pushed his glass closer to the bottle. “What the hell’s that?” he asked.

The captain splashed more whiskey into the glass, and then filled his own.

“Being from the Chesapeake Bay area,” he said, “you must a heard about the killings over oysters goin’ on back there, same as I have.”

Jeremy dragged his glass back across the table and eyed the other man with mistrust.

“What bizness is that of yours? You the law?”

“Just curious.”

Jeremy shrugged. “I reckon any body who lives there knows that there’s been some shootin’ going on. Ain’t heard nuthin’ since I left for the war.”

“I hear from folks back there. They say now this war’s over, it’s getting fired back up.”

The captain sat back, studying Jeremy as he sipped slowly from his glass. “I’m also told that a man can make good money, if he’s working’ for the right side — and a man’s not too picky about what he does.”

Jeremy thrust his face closer, “Do I strike you as a picky man?” he said.

“No. No you don’t.”

“Well then, tell me who’s doin’ the payin’ an’ I’ll go see ‘em, straight away.”

The captain pulled a piece of paper and the stub of a pencil from his pocket, “I’m gonna write down the name and where to find him. You can read can’t you?”

“Well, course I can, but you better say the name, easy for that little bitty piece o’ paper to get lost.”

Jeremy swirled the remaining whiskey in the bottom of his glass. When he looked up the other man was watching him.

“I can read pictures — good as any man — I have some trouble with writin’ though.” The captain wrote a name and the town where the man could be found.

“I’m gonna send a wire, tell ’em someone’s on the way. What’s your name?”

Jeremy held his glass high in salute. “Tell ’em — Rat’s a comin’,” he said and emptied his glass.

The captain smiled at how much the man resembled the epithet and read the name on the paper aloud.

Jeremy finished caressing the great gun and set it aside, then pulled a laudanum bottle from his shirt pocket. He poured a generous dose into the remaining coffee in his cup and gulped it down.

He sat quietly, waiting for the drug to deaden the persistent pain in his back. Gazing at the nearly empty bottle, he realized that it took an increasing amount of the opiate for him to get through each day. *Reckon I need to quit sleepin’ on this cold ground. Should find me an old woman to stay with ‘til spring.*

Eventually, he forced himself to his feet, poured the coffee pot dregs over the fire and began saddling his horse.

The work was easy enough. So easy it made him long, even more, for the days with Quantrill. So far, there had been no one to kill.

His orders were to make sure nobody found the old stockade where his employer’s brought shanghaied men. Hidden in a secluded marshy area, the prison was well away from any deep water. No danger of it being spotted from a passing boat. Only fellow likely to come across the prison would be a progger out ‘tarpenin’, for Jeremy had seen some big turtles in the marshy area around the building. And it wasn’t likely anyone could escape it.

When he was shown the paddy shack, Jeremy was told he could shoot anyone who might escape, and scare off anyone who stumbled onto it.

“With that long gun, you can hide in the woods and they won’t know where it’s coming from. Aim just close enough to scare ‘em off.”

*Not likely. I don’t miss what I shoot at.*

“Now, in the unlikely event anyone could get free of the place, you need to kill ‘em.”

Jeremy sulked that no chance for killing had presented itself.

He grabbed up the great gun and swung himself into the saddle. Laying the rifle across the saddle, he pointed the horse toward Crisfield.

Jeremy was in no hurry to get anywhere he would encounter other people and allowed the horse to set a leisurely pace while he dozed in the saddle. He used a soldier’s trick of lapsing into a sleep like state on

long, tedious marches, while maintaining an awareness of his surroundings. At this pace, it would take close to an hour to reach Crisfield.

Jeremy Coates had just finished stuffing his saddlebags with provisions from Blades's General Store when he heard yelling nearby followed by a single pistol shot. He untied his horse and led it around the corner, stopping at the edge of the crowd converging in the middle of the street.

It was impossible for him to see the action, so he mounted his horse and sat in the saddle.

What he saw did not surprise him; it did however enrage him. Jake and Rodney Drumm being led off to jail at gun point by two men. A third man limped along beside the lawmen.

"Now look what those two fool brothers went and done. Dumb brothers' is a good name for 'em," he grumbled.

Realizing that on horseback he stood out above the crowd, Jeremy dismounted and followed along on foot. "I didn't hire on to baby sit the Dumb brothers. Those two sit in jail and one of 'em, likely that idiot Rodney, will blab fer sure."

Jeremy watched from a distance as the fat lawman unlocked the jail car and the Drumm brothers disappeared inside.

"I'm gonna have to do something about this. And it's gonna cost 'em extra."

# 25

Ape Hole Creek  
Somerset County, Maryland  
Saturday, November 9, 1867

Jake Drumm slammed his whiskey glass on the table sloshing precious drops in the process.

“Damn it, Roy, damnit, now see what you made me do,” he snarled, swiping a finger through the liquid, then licking it dry.

Rodney Drumm glanced hastily around the cramped cabin. “You drunk or somethin’? I’m the only one here; you sent Roy into town ’cause you and me can’t show our faces. That’s why we laid up in this creek.”

Jake reached for the bottle and filled his glass. “No, I ain’t drunk, you idiot. But, it’s Roy’s fault I spilt my whiskey. If he’d got hisself back here like he was told, I wouldn’t had to go and do that.”

Rodney studied that for a moment then shrugged and said, “I reckon you’ll see to it that he’s sorry about it when he does come in.”

“Damn straight.”

Jake took a long drink and smacked his lips.

Rodney said, “It’s been a long time since Roy’s been to town. Likely he’s had trouble finding ever thing you tole him to get.”

Jake straightened, giving his brother a hard look. “I didn’t tell him to take the whole damn day, now, did I?”

Rodney looked into his own drink and shook his head.

“Now, Rod you know what happens when you argue with me.”



Rodney Drumm nodded without looking up.

Jake went on, "I have to take time away from my drinkin' to knock you down. If I have to put my glass down to whip you, it takes all the fun out of it."

"Sorry Jake."

"Sides, we should be talkin' about how we're gonna get rich."

Rodney raised his glass in salute and swallowed a mouthful of whiskey.

Jake smiled. "Then we'll buy us a nigger to do all our chores and fetch us our whiskey," he said.

"I don't think they is for sale anymore, Jake."

Jake scowled.

Rodney brightened. "If I had my say, I'd get me another pair of britches."

"Jesus Rod, Jesus. You're thinkin' small, boy. Small. When we hit it big, we'll all get new britches with plenty left over for the nigger."

Rodney hesitated, deciding if he was supposed to already know the answer, "What are we hittin' big, Jake?"

Jake leaned back in his chair carefully pulling his glass across the table toward him. "Pearls," he said.

"Pearls?"

"You heard me right, Rod. Pearls. You know what they is, don'tcha?"

"Course I do. They's them little stones rich women wear on a string around theys necks."

"Stones! They ain't stones. Fer Chrissake, Rod. You even know where they come from?"

Rodney Drumm thought a minute, shrugged and said. "I never studied on it. I guess theys laying around – amongst the other stones."

Jake leaned his chair back on two legs, tilted his head back and roared. "Jesus, Rod, Jesus, how'd you get so stupid?"

Rodney felt his face and neck heating up, but thought better of saying anything that Jake might take as sass. "Sorry Jake."

"If you went out on deck and looked over the side there's likely a bunch of 'em on the bottom of this here creek bed."

Rodney stared at Jake, "How come this is the first I heard about these here pearls, if theys been right there all along?"

"Cause it's a secret. Most folks don't know about it. The bastards who sell 'em, want a body to believe they come from far away – over to Jap an, such places as that. That a way they can make the rich bitches pay more."

"But, they really come from right here?"

Jake nodded. "Ever so many of these oysters which get dragged off the bottom has one of these pearls inside it. No tellin' how many of 'em they is in a boat load."

"How come it is that these tongers around here keep so poorly, if ever boat load has enough of these here pearls to make 'em rich?"

"They're dumb is why. Years ago, the tongers who first found these pearls hidin' inside an eryster, tried sellin' up to Baltimore. Well sir, the city boys was too smart for 'em. Told 'em that their pearls weren't worth nuthin'. And, the tongers, they believed it."

Rodney sat motionless, dumfounded by what he was hearing. "How come you know about it?"

Jake motioned him to pay close attention.

Rodney, figuring Jake wanted him closer for easier slapping, busied himself pouring a drink.

Jake said, "Another captain who sails regular to Baltimore Towne told me that all these packin' houses has got secret rooms where the pearl oysters get took to. Shuckers who work in these rooms are sworn to never tell no one, on penalty of death. These rooms are run by real rough looking men, men like me, to see that no pearls fall into a shucker's pocket but get turned in to the company."

Rodney nodded. "So, you and me and Roy is gonna get hired into one of them rooms and steal the pearls from the shuckers. Right Jake?"

"Jesus, Rod, Jesus. There ya go thinkin' small again. We can't get rich stealin' a few pearls from some fool oyster shuckers. Damn good thing you ain't in charge of us, we'd be done fer sure."

Rodney gritted his teeth, grabbed the whiskey bottle off the table and put it to his lips. The heat from the alcohol radiated through his chest and back, quickly reaching his neck and flushing his face.

"And you doin' such a real good job of it," he growled. "They's huntin' us for a murder we didn't do, nor want done, and we daren't go near town."

Jake jammed a thumb in his own chest. "That weren't my doin'," he shot back. "That was that damn Reb, Rat."

Jake eased back and took a quick drink. "Look here, Rod, we three Drumms are all we got. We're family and family sticks together."

Jake poked a finger in the air. "We stick together and follow my plan, we can hit 'er big. Then we'll head off, somewheres nobody knows us."

"Now that there is a plan, Jake. A damn good one. I want shut of this place. How 'bout we leave as soon as Roy gets back."

Jake was silent, his head shaking slowly as he stared at Rodney. The smile faded from Rodney's face and he diverted his eyes to the table, then the floor.

Rodney, unable to endure the silence, blurted out, "What'd I do now? I said it were a good plan."

"Jesus, Rod, Jesus. That weren't the plan at all. It were just the idea. Don't you know the difference between a idea and a plan? The plan is how a body gets to the idea. Our idea is to get rich and leave, the plan is how we do, it. We can't run off when Roy gets back 'cause we ain't rich yet. You unnerstand?"

"Course I do, now. If you'd put it thataway in the first place, I'd a knowd right off. Tell me the plan."

"We need to get our hands on a mess of them pearls and real quick too. I reckoned we could catch our own batch, but we don't have the tools fer it and this here tub is too small to hold enough to get us rich. 'Sides it's a lot of work — that's not our style."

Rodney nodded.

"So, we have to take someone's load and get the pearls out of it."

"How we gonna do that, Jake?"

Jake chortled and swallowed some whiskey. "This is where the plan starts," he said, then paused a long moment for effect. "We wait around a oyster bed at the mouth of one of the big rivers, maybe the Big Annie, pretendin' to be tongers ourselves. About the time when one of them tongers is fixin to leave with a full load of pearls, we come along side, hit him in his head and take the boat."

"Sometimes, there's two of 'em in one boat. Did you think about that?"

"Course I did, you idiot. We hit 'em both in the head."

"What happens when them tongers wake up?"

"Jesus, Rod, Jesus. We dump 'em over the side. If they wake up 'fore they are drowned, they'll have to swim for it."

Rodney looked stricken. "Chrissakes, Jake. If they drown that would be murder. We'd be killers."

"They already got us down for killin' that lawman. They can only hang us once, Rod."

Rodney jumped up, his chair skittering into the cabin wall. "They can't hang us, Jake." he cried. "We didn't do that one. It were Rat. We're not killers. I didn't even shoot nobody in the war — that I know of. If I did, it were on an accident."

"Face it Rod, ever body knows we was there 'fore that fat lawman was kilt, and we was gone, afterwards. Nobody — but us — knows Rat

was there. Oh they catch us, they's gonna hang us all right. That's why we gotta follow the plan and then get outta here. We got no time to fret over a couple of tongers who might get in our way."

Rodney sat heavily, hands shaking, his right leg trembling hard against the table leg.

Jake grabbed the wobbling whiskey bottle. "Watch, you don't be spilling this juice."

"If'n we only hit 'em in the head, and they is still alive when we leave out o' there, then what happens to them after we're gone, ain't no fault of ours. Is it, Jake? Then we ain't killers, right Jake?"

"Course we ain't killers, Rod. We just run on a spell of bad luck, is all. We get to a new place, maybe out west sommers, our luck'll change, for sure. I hear Californy is nice. Would you like to see, Californy, Rod?"

Rodney fidgeted in his chair, then looked straight at his brother.

"After we get this load of oysters," he said, "who's gonna get them pearls out? Likely that's what you got me and Roy along for."

"You don't give me no credit for nuthin', do ya? I got that took care of too."

"I'm listenin'."

"I know a couple of negra boys up along the Big Anny, we'll get them to open up them erysters and we'll be right there to make sure they don't help themselves to our pearls."

"What's in it for them?"

"They can have the damn oysters for themselves; we sure as hell ain't takin' 'em with us."

Jake laughed. "Ya know them boys'll think they died and gone on to white man's heaven, havin' all them oysters to eat. Personal, it's the same to me as eatin' snot."

Rodney tried to laugh along with Jake, but failed. "When do you figure we're gonna do 'er, Jake?"

"The sooner, the better."

It's a time in our history when young men are shanghaied into servitude to ruthless boat captains. Haynie McKenna's search for one victim pits him against a sharpshooting assassin, a cabal of former Confederate officers and his own family ghosts.

The Oyster Wars

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