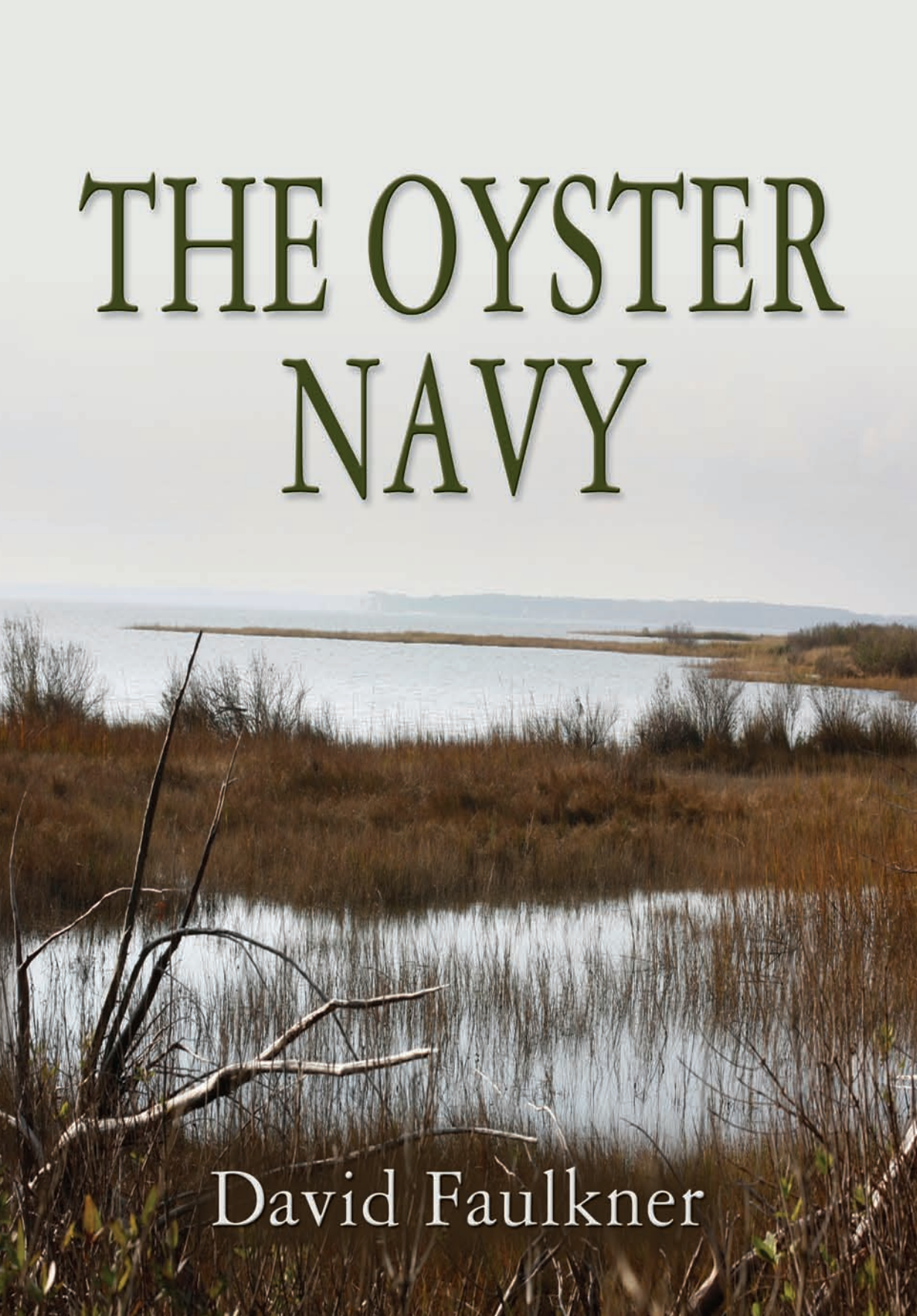
In 1868, Maryland's embryonic maritime law enforcement agency, the State Oyster Police, set out on its mission to enforce the states laws on the Chesapeake Bay. The force, quickly dubbed The Oyster Navy, met stubborn and often violent resistance. Haynie McKenna, the agency's deputy commander, serves as captain of the steamer Leila. With a crew of untested officers, he heads to the Honga River in search of a rogue waterman, Marrok Blanchard and his sons.

The Oyster Navy

THE OYSTER NAVY



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Honga River
Eastern Shore of Maryland
December 8, 1868

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

"Is that them, Mister Jacoby?"

"Aye, Captain. Marrok Blanchard and his boys with their morning salute. Sort of a warning to announce they are headin' out for a day of plunderin'. Telling everyone to get out of their way."

Haynie McKenna commanded the *Emma Dunn*, a screw steamer leased to the fledgling Maryland Oyster Navy. He peered across the ship's rail into a fog stacked thick as sodden cotton over the foredeck.

"They must be damn fools to be under sail in this weather."

"Aye. That'd be them, sir."

"Our orders are very clear: Find the Blanchards and arrest 'em, or sink 'em. They'd have to ram us before we could find them in this fog. We can't see our own rigging."

Haynie turned to the mate. "We need a plan."

"Aye, Captain, we'll need a good one. The Blanchards ain't ones to give up. They got cannon and we ain't gonna sink 'em with them old muskets and pistols stored below."

Haynie nodded. "We'll worry about that after we catch them poaching a rock."

Haynie McKenna, the deputy commander of the Maryland Oyster Navy, was being thrust into a battle not to his liking.

In August, he had accepted an appointment as second in command of Maryland's incipient seagoing law enforcement agency and moved his family from Crisfield, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, to Annapolis the state capital.

The Proceedings and Acts of The Maryland General Assembly for 1868 detailed powers of the State Oyster Police popularly called the

Oyster Navy. To the men of this naval police force, knowledge of the laws regulating watermen on the Chesapeake Bay was fundamental.

Haynie and Hunter Davidson, the Oyster Navy's newly appointed commander, spent their first weeks together laboring to understand the enforcement powers they were to assume. Huddled for endless hours in an ill-lit, cramped room in the lower reaches of a state office building, they struggled to understand the wording of the legislative acts.

Haynie looked across the stack of bound documents and grunted.

"They gave us the power to shoot poachers when we have to," he said. "But they didn't give us much to shoot with."

Hunter Davidson removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

"We'll keep that in mind when we hire officers," he said. "A man with a side-arm is more valuable than a man without one and a man with a musket or rifle is the most valuable."

Haynie laughed, "Maybe we'll get lucky and find somebody who brought a cannon home from the war."

Davidson got up, shook out the cramps, and edged his way between the desk and the wall. Both men were forced to a stooped posture when moving about the windowless room.

"That's not too far-fetched," Davidson said. "No doubt there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of cannon abandoned over the countryside, just rusting away. I have folks scouring both sides of the Potomac looking for any farmer who'd be happy to have such an eyesore toted off his land."

Davidson grew pensive, his tone grim.

"Sufficient arms will be hard to come by because some in the assembly are worried they have created a force of seagoing vigilantes. I'm issuing a strict protocol covering the use of firearms aboard our ships. For one thing, all weapons will be stored under lock and key. The captain is the sole authority to issue arms to the ship's crew."

Haynie agreed. "We have to be careful that we don't get a name for shooting without good cause. Some oystermen think nothing of shooting it out with each other over a rich bed. The question remains; will they be as quick to fire on law officers doing their duty? It's all uncharted waters; we'll have to sail among them before we know for certain."

"For now," Davidson replied, "all of our sailing has to be done aboard the *Kent* or the *Emma Dunn*." He stopped to make a quick note. "I'm going up to Baltimore Towne Thursday and see what's holding up delivery of the *Leila*. She was to be commissioned months ago. 'Spect I'll need to get coarse with that builder."

Haynie nodded. “Even when the Leila is commissioned, we’ll still have trouble covering all the bay waters, rivers, coves and inlets. Drudge boats are going to be our biggest problem. It’s not likely one or two tongers in a log canoe will fight us and they won’t be able to outrun us. But when we run up against a big drudge boat with a crew of armed rascals…”

Davidson lifted a sheaf of bound papers, held it at arm’s length before releasing it heavily onto the desk. “The legislation creating the Oyster Navy was passed by a narrow margin and some delegates would be happy to give our budget to their cronies in other departments. We have near as many enemies in Annapolis as we will have on the bay; and both are going to give us a fight.”

Hunter Davidson sported a full head of black hair, parted on the left and heavily oiled. Bushy side-whiskers joined a full mustache at the corners of his mouth. Thick brows crowned dark, vigilant eyes.

He scratched at his facial hair. “One thing we have going for us,” he said, “The Oyster Navy has the ability to turn a profit, which most other state agencies don’t.”

“You mean by bringing in more in fines than our budget.”

Davidson nodded. “And seizures. The law says we can bring in a boat, the catch and gear, along with the crew. If the captain is found guilty, the court can sell his boat and gear; the money goes into the state Treasury along with the fine. It is only fitting the brigands should pay our keep. If we account for enough revenue the assembly will be hard-pressed not to increase our budget next year.”

Haynie shook his head. “I never thought it would be so troublesome to do the right thing. We will make it work. I’ll fight the sea battles, if you fight those on land. And,” he grinned, “I’ll have the best of it. It’s been my experience that a waterman will let you know, right up front, where you stand with him. But, you can never be certain with a politician.”

Davidson nodded. “Don’t turn your back on either one.”

During the weeks that the two men worked in close confinement, the fact that they fought on opposing sides during the recent war was never an issue.

Hunter Davidson graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1847, resigning his commission in 1861 to accept the rank of lieutenant commander in the Confederate Navy. Following the war, he returned to Maryland and worked as a journal clerk for the Maryland Senate.

Haynie McKenna enlisted in the 1st East Virginia Loyal Volunteers and spent the war marching across Maryland and Virginia. Though well read, with intelligence equal to any of his peers, he failed to rise above the rank of corporal.

Following the war, he returned home, angst-driven and unsettled; still haunted by his father's murder on the bay, fourteen years earlier. His anger was focused on his father's unknown killers; and the state of Maryland, which in 1853 had no lawmen to pursue outlaws who menaced the bay waters and shore towns.

For years, Tench McKenna scraped out a living tonging oysters in the creek beds and shallow waters along Maryland's Eastern Shore. He worked the oyster beds alone in a log canoe he fashioned from a loblolly pine tree and named *Miss Letty* for Haynie's mother. The hours were long and the work arduous, but he chose working alone, to the whimsy and prattle that came with having someone else on board the small boat.

He had been shot and killed while tonging a bed in Tangier Sound at the Maryland-Virginia state line. Haynie was twelve years old and in his second year at the Chesapeake Academy, on the outskirts of Baltimore Towne, when he learned of his father's murder.

"Tench was a good man," some said, "likely cut down by some Virginia poachers, or a drudge boat crew ravaging the bed."

Others believed Tench McKenna may have drifted into Virginia waters, making him the poacher.

The death of a lone tonger was of little concern to anyone outside of the man's family. Tench's family consisted of his wife, Lettie, and two sons, Haynie and Caleb.

Haynie's older sister Mattie had married in haste and move to Baltimore Towne a few years before her father's killing.

"I am escaping this dreadful place," Mattie had confided to Haynie. "Get out if you can."

She had returned for Tench's funeral and then quickly boarded the next packet off the island.

"She fled," Lettie McKenna would say of her daughter.

Tench McKenna was a stubborn man, determined that his sons should not endure the perils of a waterman's existence. He understood that a good education was necessary if Haynie and Caleb were to have a better life. Schooling on Smith Island was sporadic at best, so Tench and Lettie sacrificed to send Haynie to a proper school at the edge of Baltimore Towne.

"What are we going to do about Caleb?" Lettie asked. "We're scrimping to send Haynie."

Tench had responded with a shrug. "Caleb's young. We have time. God will see to it, He always does."

Haynie knew that he could not return to the academy following his father's funeral. Even if money were not an issue, he was needed on the island. After all, he was the man of the house.

A chill breeze rose out of the northeast, stirring the fog bank, which began its retreat across the *Emma Dunn's* foredeck. Haynie shrugged deeper into his greatcoat and moved away from the railing.

"Let's see the charts, Mister Jacoby."

"Aye captain." The mate followed Haynie amidships and unfurled a map of the Chesapeake Bay across a hatch cover.

Haynie pressed a forefinger on a dot marked Lower Hooper Island at the mouth of the Honga River, then pushed it across the river toward the land mass marked Dorchester County; stopping just offshore at Fox Creek.

"We're told the Blanchards come out of Fox Creek."

Haynie drew his finger back to Lower Hooper's Island, the *Emma Dunn's* present position.

"It's impossible to guess where they're headed on a given day. Around Pack's Head into Fishing Bay, or south to Tangier Sound. Either way, it looks like they'd be sailing past us, here."

The mate leaned forward and removed a glove. "If I may, captain," he said, pointing a stubby finger at the map. Years before, that finger had been mashed to the first joint by an anchor chain. Now, the mangled tip quivered over the chart as Jacoby spoke.

"If you recollect sir, while it appears that the Honga is separated from the bay by a long point of land, this stretch is really three islands; Upper Hooper, Middle Hooper and Lower Hooper, where we are. They could head up river and duck out between islands. If they're headed out for a day of mischief, they could go in any direction."

Haynie peered at the fog bank, still dense as fresh-poured concrete beyond the starboard rail.

"If the fog lifted and we saw a boat, we'd have to make certain it was the Blanchards. Even using a glass, we'd be close enough they could just as easy see the *Emma Dunn*."

"We could strike the flag. There's a chance they wouldn't know it was us, 'til it was too late."

"It's likely *Emma Dunn's* the only screw steamer in these waters. We would have to trail their wake to catch 'em in an act. It is doubtful they'd lead us direct to where they were going to plunder."

Jacoby shrugged.

Haynie said, "They'd be damn brazen to plunder while we watched."

"That'd be them, sir. But from what I heard, it's likely that most times they don't have a set place. They sail along until they come upon easy pickin's."

Haynie shook his head. "It's one thing for us to cruise the bay until we come upon poachers or buccaneers. It is quite another matter to find and track a particular boat hoping to catch them in the act."

The mate, whose stocky frame was ideal for maneuvering along a deck in the roughest of seas, now shifted uneasily and looked up at his captain.

"What you expect we're to do about the Blanchards, sir?"

Haynie headed aft toward the galley. "First," he said over his shoulder, "we're going to be smart enough to sit inside drinking hot coffee while we talk about it."

The mate smiled and grabbed up the charts. "Sounds like the beginning of an excellent plan, sir."

Inside the cabin, Haynie shed his greatcoat, hung it on a wall peg and grabbed a tin cup.

Skillets, the ship's cook, shook his head resisting an impulse to snatch up the battered coffee pot and fill the captain's cup. Other captains with whom he sailed demanded to be served. Whether a cup of coffee or a full meal, such men seized every opportunity to set themselves apart from the crew. Many brought their own china and flatware aboard, insisting Skillets keep their service separate from the crew's tin ware. Certain captains became enraged if their dinnerware was washed in the same tepid water as that of the crew's.

The first day out of port Haynie had waved away the cook's attempt to serve him. "Thanks, Skillets," he said, "I'll dish my own, as will all the crew. You have enough to do without coddling me."

Haynie filled his cup, nodded to Skillets and sat at the table. While waiting for the mate, he reflected on how little he knew about the other men aboard the *Emma Dunn*. How would they behave under gunfire? Which of them could he rely on when bullets started hitting the deck around them? Was there a traitor in his crew? He

resolved to find a billet for Gerhard and persuade him to come aboard.

For now, circumstances compelled him to place his trust in *some* members of this crew. His instincts told him that Jacoby and Skillets were logical choices for that trust.

The case for the first mate was uncomplicated. Nathan Jacoby had served with Hunter Davidson aboard the ironclad Confederate ship, the *CSS Virginia*. Haynie trusted Commander Davidson, therefore he trusted Jacoby. Moreover, he had taken a liking to the mate.

Life aboard an oyster boat or small freighter was grueling, dreary and, above all, dangerous. Unless ashore, drinking in a tavern, crewmen were invariably sullen and morose. Jacoby was an exception, ever cheerful with a wide smile atop his bandy-legged swagger.

As for the cook, Haynie judged his age at near 50. From accounts, Skillets had spent years in the galleys of passenger ships and freighters plying the world's seas. Unlikely such a man would be in league with local brigands.

Of the others, Haynie knew little more than their names. Though each one hailed from a different region of the state, they shared one thing: Each was there because of his relationship to some politician.

From the outset, Haynie and Commander Davidson agreed that sworn crewmen on ships of the Oyster Navy would be addressed as Peace Officers. It would serve as a reminder to each of them, and all within hearing, that this was a law-enforcement agency.

Smokey Noble, the ship's engineer, arrived with the *Emma Dunn* and was not a sworn peace officer. Haynie did not count on him for help when the shooting started.

Zachariah Bramble, in his early twenties, was sworn in within the past month. Though nominated for the job by his brother-in-law, a state senator from Talbot County, he seemed energetic and anxious for a fight. Likely, he would get one shortly.

Peace Officer Bryce Tydings, near Bramble's age, had worked on a small fishing boat, a bugeye out of Annapolis. Tydings kept to himself, saying little, and Haynie had no inclination how he would behave in a gun battle.

Stavros Dimitri, several years older than the others, came from Snake Hill on the edge of Baltimore Towne itself. When introduced to Haynie, Dimitri had mumbled that he preferred to be called Steve. That was the extent of their communication thus far.

Commander Davidson identified Dimitri as the nephew of a small time political boss. The politician had boasted that he would soon know everything the Oyster Navy did. When Haynie questioned Davidson about Dimitri, the commander shrugged.

"Nothing we can do; just be careful around him."

Devil Furniss, was a rugged waterman from Deal Island. In a brief meeting with his captain, Furniss said he was sick of being run off a good rock by drudgers and was ready to fight them. If the Oyster Navy did its job, he would be able to return to tonging, with only Mother Nature to worry about.

Furniss had cheerfully admitted that Devil was his given name.

"As you may know, sir, years ago Deal Island was called Devil's Island. Mainly 'cause it was the home of pirates and English criminals. When I was born, my pap believed I would measure up to the name. So far I have not disappointed."

Haynie was pleased to have him aboard.

Peace Officer Clyde Stainbrook was another matter. Discipline of the crew would be difficult due to each man's political connections, but that fact was especially troubling in Stainbrook's case. Haynie had asked Jacoby to pay particular attention to the man's performance of his duties.

3

Fox Creek
Dorchester County, Maryland
December 10, 1868

"You boys must never forget: The name Blanchard means white and brave—in the French."

Marrok Blanchard's tone was crisp; as if this were the first time he had said those words. His sons, in turn, nodded intently, pretending they had not heard the same sentiment repeated as far back as they could remember.

The Blanchard men were seated at one end of a hewn oak dining table, which could comfortably seat sixteen diners. Marrok Blanchard sucked on a cigarette and dominated the room at the table's head. His chair, handcrafted of sturdy maple, boasted a high, ornate back, thick polished arms and a bulky brocade cushion to boost his small frame. Some years ago, the boys had named the chair, Papa's Throne, which pleased him.

As was their custom, the Blanchard men spoke in the French tongue and fumed as they waited for dinner to be served, by their women.

In some families, Edith Blanchard would be deemed the mistress of the house if not, indeed, the family matriarch. Being the wife of Marrok Blanchard and the mother of his three sons, offered no such distinction.

When Benoit, their first-born, was old enough to eat at the table, Edith asked her husband not to smoke during the meal. In a fury, Marrok struck her across the face and ground his cigarette into her food.

"As you wish," he snarled, and chewed noisily while she sobbed.

Edith Corkin was sixteen when Marrok Blanchard strode into her father's general store in Church Creek. Having left school years before, her days were filled by clerking in the store, while her father and brothers fished and hunted game. Edith was short, "tiny", some said, her stringy hair the color and texture of thirsty grass. Though she was as plain as one of the empty potato sacks lying in the corner behind her, Marrok Blanchard saw something he wanted. She wasted no motion while filling his order and an agile mind tallied the bill without use of pen and paper.

She's a worker, he thought. *Smart, too*.

Marrok Blanchard stood only five and a half feet tall and understood that dominating a wife, as was his intent, required that he be physically superior to her. His mate, though necessarily smaller, must be sturdy enough to bear his sons with a resilience that would return her quickly to her chores.

It was Blanchard's assessment that this girl would serve his needs as a wife. With her looks, it was unlikely she had a beau, or ever received much attention from any boy.

As he collected his goods, Blanchard said, "You're a pretty little thing. What's your name?"

Edith reddened and twisted furiously on her apron.

"Oh. My—its—I'm, Edith. Edith Corkin."

Blanchard, arms laden with his purchases, nodded.

"Edith Corkin," he said, "My name's Marrok Blanchard." He indicated the black beret cocked low, just over his left eye. "Marrok means—"of the sea"—in the French. I'll be back for you. Be ready."

He turned and marched out the door. Edith, red-faced and mouth agape, worked her apron with both hands as she watched him leave. She turned to madly straightening shelves while her mind raced over his words. When her initial giddiness subsided and reason returned, she shook her head.

"Likely he tells that fish tale to all the girls," she said aloud. Then, to herself, *He ain't very big, but ever inch is all man*.

Moving along the shelves, she giggled. *Even though he wears that floppy cap, it was nice to have a man pay some mind to Edith the woman, not just Edith, the Corkin family slave*.

She hurried to the door and looked up and down the street, hoping for a glimpse of this mysterious man. Disappointed, she shuffled back to the counter.

Likely, he's all talk. Still, I'd feel real foolish, and—just awful—if he was to come for me and me not being ready. Believe I'll wrap some things up and keep 'em 'neath my mattress.

Marrok Blanchard came for her three mornings later. When he appeared in the doorway, Edith was cutting dress cloth for Mrs. Pattison.

"Edith Corkin," he called out.

Startled, she looked up from the bolt of cloth and scissored a large chunk out of Mrs. Pattison's order.

"I got business at the hardware store," he said. "I'll be walking past your door in the next few minutes. If yer out here on the porch, you can fall in with me. If yer not there, I won't be by again."

When he was gone, Edith, hands shaking, laid the scissors on the counter next to the cloth.

Her voice quaked. "Mrs. Pattison, you'll have to finish cuttin' this cloth."

Edith took off her apron and folded it neatly on the counter. She started for the front door, then stopped and looked back.

Mrs. Pattison, arms folded across her breasts, followed Edith with her eyes.

Edith said, "I'm trusting you to leave the money on the counter. That's quality cloth and its 35 cents a yard."

"Look-a-here, young Miss Corkin, what's going on? What am I supposed to tell your father?" She stamped a foot. "What kind of man wears a funny-looking' cap like that?"

"What's goin' on here is Edith Corkin's startin' a new life. As for Daddy, the old bastard can figure it out for himself."

The morning after their first son was born, Marrok stood at the bedstead and scowled down at Edith.

"It's near 7 o'clock. You're not layin' around all the day. Get yourself out to that stove and fix my breakfast."

Marrok started for the door, "I told the midwife the boy's name is Benoit," he said over his shoulder. "Means 'Blessed' in the French."

He closed the door behind him.

Edith sobbed quietly into her pillow, and then did what she had done every morning since: got out of bed and endured another dreadful day as the wife of Marrok Blanchard.

Thirty-one years later, little had changed for Edith Blanchard, except now she had the wives of her two older sons to help with the chores. Though Benoit and their second son, Renard, had built houses on either side of the family home, they took their meals in the main house.

The Blanchard property stretched for 2,000 feet along the north bank of Fox Creek and deep into thick woods, covering 120 acres. Four baying bloodhounds roamed the grounds discouraging the occasional hunter from straying to close to the houses.

The family compound was secluded among forty-foot pawpaw trees and towering chestnuts. A wall of white pines anchored the north bank of Fox Creek and screened the compound from passing boats.

The three houses rimmed a large spring-fed pond sitting more than 100 feet back from the creek. The pond accessed Fox Creek through a channel, hand-dug by the Blanchard men and big enough to accommodate Marrok's bugeye, the largest boat in the family's expanding fleet. Dense stands of cattails grew along the bank, serving to mask the mouth of the channel.

Marrok's boat, a forty-two-foot, two-masted bugeye named *Ville de Paris*, was docked in front of the main house.

Tied to a pier at Renard's house was a sleek twenty-four-foot fore-and-aft rigged schooner, the *Souverain*.

Benoit's twenty-foot gaff rigged sloop, the *Saint-Esprit,* was moored in front of his house.

Marrok Blanchard celebrated each of his son's majority birthdays with the gift of a boat, and a ritual, naming the young man a captain in the Blanchard family fleet. These festivities included a banquet dinner, attended solely by the Blanchard men; followed by a detailed accounting of the role of the French Navy in America's struggle for independence, less than one hundred years before. After each dinner, over port and cigars, Marrok, speaking French, invariably began his speech the same way.

"*Mes fils*, it is to the shame of the United States that no one teaches the true history of its war for independence. *C'est vrai,* it is true that, if it were not for the heroics of the Royal French Navy, the King of England would still rule this nation. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would have been quickly hung and long forgotten.

"*Oui,* these Americans are eager to make George Washington a hero for defeating the English at Yorktown, but," Marrok paused for

effect and jabbed his cigar toward the Chesapeake Bay, "on September 5, 1781, Admiral Compte de Grasse, with twenty-four ships of the line, defeated the British Admiral, Sir Thomas Graves, in the Battle of the Chesapeake. The brave French Navy stopped the Redcoats from aiding Cornwallis, ensuring his defeat at Yorktown. Sadly, it is only the living men of the Blanchard family, who honor the memory of *les sacrifices* in this country. Each boat we sail will be named in honor of one of those twenty-four gallant vessels."

At the first such tribute, for his eldest, Benoit, Marrok proclaimed, "*Mes fils*, as you know, the flagship of our own fleet is named the *Ville de Paris*. In 1781, the *Ville de Paris*, A three-deck, 104-gun ship of the line, was Admiral Compte de Grasse's flagship. It imposed its will on the Chesapeake Bay and all who dared oppose her. It is again so."

Marrok lifted his glass and saluted his eldest. "Benoit, it is with great pride that I name you captain of the *Saint-Esprit*—the Holy Ghost. During the great sea battle, the *Saint-Esprit*, an 80-gun ship of the line, fought valiantly alongside the *Ville de Paris,* as will you, *Mon fils*."

Marrok presented Benoit with a black beret. "Wear it with honor. You may cross."

Four years later, Renard Blanchard received a salute and his own beret. His father said, "Renard means 'wise and strong' in the French. Now, Captain Blanchard, I award to you the third ship in our family's fleet, *Souverain*—Sovereign in the English. The *Souverain* was a 74-gun ship of the line that served honorably in the fleet of Admiral Compte de Grasse. You will do no less for the Blanchard fleet."

With a wave of the hand, Marrok said, "You may cross."

Renard proudly set his new cap at the same jaunty angle sported by his father and brother, before moving to take his seat in the area Marrok had named: "The Captain's Table."

Guy, the youngest, sat alone across the table from his gloating brothers.

Marrok grew angrier at being denied his dinner and slammed the table with a fist. He winked at his sons and, in English, yelled, "How long does it take to cook a couple of sea bass?"

Benoit's wife, Marie, appeared in the doorway. "Sorry, Papa Blanchard. The stove wood was still wet and we're having trouble getting a hot fire."

Marrok cursed her in French and she ducked back into the kitchen.

The first time Benoit Blanchard brought Mary Lashier to Fox Creek, they were already married. When Marrok saw her, he knocked Benoit down in a rage.

"You bring me a cripple!" he screamed and stomped into the house.

Later, Edith told Benoit that his father was angered because Benoit had married a woman who was taller than was his own father.

Benoit moved Mary into the house next door and took to calling her Marie to please Marrok.

Marie Blanchard walked with a visible limp, the result of a broken leg suffered in a fall from an apple tree at age ten. Marrok delighted in ridiculing the girl's weakness, yelling out "*l'infirme,*" while laughing as she limped across the floor, or labored to cover the ground between the houses.

When Benoit and Marie produced a son, Marrok smiled broadly proclaiming, "He will be called Louie. It means 'famous warrior' in the French."

Louie, now age six, adored his grandfather. Marrok had fashioned a cushioned chair tall enough to allow his grandson to eat his meals at the big table. The boy's chair occupied a place of honor alongside his grandfather's throne.

When Marrok shouted, "*l'infirme",* as the boy's mother passed through the room, Louie echoed the taunt. "*L'infirme*" he squealed, and the Blanchard men chortled.

Louie's blonde hair grew long and curly; his body seemed to be all arms and legs. It was already apparent that he would quickly grow to be taller than his grandfather. This worried Edith, but seemed not to trouble Marrok, who had the boy at his side whenever possible.

They often sailed together aboard the *Ville de Paris*. Marrok dismissed any protests regarding the perils of having a small boy aboard an oyster dredger. "He is a Blanchard," was Marrok's reply.

Finally, Edith sat a platter of fried fish in front of the Blanchard men. The other women followed with steaming bowls of boiled potatoes and root vegetables.

Marrok filled his plate and fixed a portion for his grandson. As he passed the food along to his sons, he glared at the three women now seated at the far end of the long table.

"You womenfolk," he said, his voice rising to a shout, "need to keep in mind what would happen if you let us men starve to death.

The three of you together couldn't do the work of one scrawny boy like Louie here."

The women sat impassive, hands folded in their laps, as they waited their turn at the serving dishes. Marrok held his gaze on them and chewed noisily, while his sons filled their plates. When satisfied that the women had learned their lesson, he tilted his head slightly.

Renard's wife, Nellie, waited for Edith's nod before retrieving the serving dishes.

The women ate in silence, ignored by the men who spoke French.

Years earlier, Edith, angered at being excluded from his conversations, begged Marrok to speak English, or teach her the French tongue.

"The French is for business. I'll tell you what you need to know," he sneered. "And that won't be much."

As her sons grew, it became evident that Marrok was teaching them the language while at sea. Once, when a younger Renard tried to speak to his mother in halting French, Marrok stung his cheek with the back of a gnarled hand.

Edith pulled Renard to her.

"The French is only for men," Marrok snapped. "We must not let women have their noses in our business."

In his arrogance, Marrok Blanchard had failed to realize that the Edith Corkin he married would not accept his churlish behavior unchallenged.

Eating in silence, she was pleased that she understood everything being said by the Blanchard men.

In 1868, Maryland's embryonic maritime law enforcement agency, the State Oyster Police, set out on its mission to enforce the states laws on the Chesapeake Bay. The force, quickly dubbed The Oyster Navy, met stubborn and often violent resistance. Haynie McKenna, the agency's deputy commander, serves as captain of the steamer Leila. With a crew of untested officers, he heads to the Honga River in search of a rogue waterman, Marrok Blanchard and his sons.

The Oyster Navy