

PRELUDE



I See Nothing Else Left

POTOMAC RIVER, TUESDAY, AUGUST 9, 1814

SAILING UNDER A white flag of truce, American agent John Stuart Skinner rounded Point Lookout and entered the broad mouth of the Potomac River, searching for the enemy fleet. The river was at its widest here, three miles from shore to shore where its water flowed lazily into the Chesapeake Bay. The sultry August weather had turned cool overnight, and the day was refreshingly crisp. Even from a distance it was easy to spot HMS *Albion*, anchored along the far Virginia shore. The 74-gun frigate, weighing nearly 1,700 tons and manned by a crew of 620, was one of the largest and most powerful British warships ever seen in these waters, and it was accompanied by nearly two dozen brigs, sloops, and tenders.

More daunting than the ships and weaponry was the man the agent had come to see: Rear Admiral George Cockburn. The “Great Bandit,” as the papers called him, was the most hated man in the United States, and the most feared. Americans compared him to the most notorious barbarians of ancient times, among them Attila the Hun.

For more than a year, the British squadron commander had waged a campaign of terror along the Chesapeake Bay, sacking Havre de

Grace, Maryland, at the mouth of the Susquehanna, ravaging Hampton, plundering the Virginia shoreline, and torching farms in Maryland, acts that had infuriated Americans. Ruthless, witty, and swashbuckling, the lowlands Scot was determined to make Americans pay a hard price for their ill-considered war with Great Britain.

“[T]here breathes not in any quarter of the globe a more savage monster than this same British Admiral,” the *Boston Gazette* declared. “He is a disgrace to England and to human nature.” A Fourth of July celebration in Talbot County, Maryland, included a toast to Cockburn, “a man in person but a brute in principle; may the Chesapeake be his watery grave.” One irate Virginian had offered a thousand dollars for the admiral’s head or “five hundred dollars for each of his ears, on delivery.”

Skinner had sailed from Baltimore on August 7, 1814, bearing official dispatches for the British. As the government’s designated prisoner of war agent, Skinner was a veteran of many such missions, routinely carrying communications from Washington or negotiating prisoner exchanges. He was as familiar as anyone in America with Cockburn and his depredations. Just three weeks previously, the British had burned the Maryland plantation in Prince Frederick where Skinner had been born, and earlier in the summer, they had torched his barn and property at nearby St. Leonard. But if he held a grudge, Skinner was too savvy to make it known to Cockburn.

As usual, Skinner was courteously welcomed aboard *Albion*. For all of Cockburn’s haughty bombast and undisputed ruthlessness, Skinner had found him to be a gracious host, always seating Skinner for a meal at the admiral’s table and ready “to mitigate the rigors of war” with hospitality. Skinner had a rough-and-tumble personality to match his pugilistic face, as well as an innate candor, all of which Cockburn appreciated.

The admiral, his Scottish complexion reddened by the relentless Chesapeake sun, was in a good mood, having just completed a series of successful raids that had terrified residents along the Potomac shores of Virginia’s Northern Neck. At 2 a.m. on August 3, Cockburn had headed up the Yeocomico River, probing the inlet off the Potomac with a force of 500 sailors and Royal Marines in twenty barges. Among them, dressed in red coats, were a special company of 120 Colonial

Marines—slaves who had escaped to the British from plantations in Virginia and Maryland, and trained to fight their former masters. Their use was a particularly brilliant and insidious stroke, unleashing deep-seated fears among the locals of a slave revolt.

A Virginia militia artillery company waiting at Mundy's Point fired on the British with six-pounder cannons, and the first shot beheaded a Royal Marine in the lead boat. But the Virginians soon ran low on ammunition, and the British swarmed ashore. Major Pemberton Claughton, a Virginia militia commander, was shocked to see a slave who had escaped from his plantation among the invaders. The admiral and his "gallant band" chased the retreating Americans ten miles almost at a run, burning every house they passed, including Major Claughton's home. Finally, the raiding party collapsed on the ground, exhausted in the 90-degree heat. But there was no time for rest—Cockburn learned that the Virginia militia was regrouping at the nearby village of Kinsale.

"What! Englishmen tired with a fine morning's walk like this," cried Cockburn. "Here, give me your musket; here, yours, my man. Your admiral will carry them for you." He placed a musket on each shoulder and began marching, rousing the men.

Returning to their boats, the British sailed to Kinsale, opened fire on the town, and scattered the militia. The village was burned and some thirty homes destroyed. A dead Virginia militiaman was dragged out, his pockets turned inside out and rifled. The British carried off five captured schooners brimming with hogsheads of tobacco, five prisoners, a field gun, and two horses belonging to a militia commander and his son.

Spreading fear was Cockburn's mission, and the sack of Kinsale had served this goal quite well. Back on the ships, Cockburn was even more pleased by the news brought to him August 7 by two British frigates, freshly arrived in the Potomac from Bermuda: Troopships carrying 4,000 battle-hardened British army soldiers would soon sail into the Chesapeake.

Captain Robert Rowley, commander of one of the squadron's ships, mused about the news in a letter home to England. "I suppose some grand attack will be meditated," he wrote.

A grand attack was precisely what Cockburn had in mind.



Three weeks earlier, on July 17, Cockburn had submitted a secret plan to capture the capital of the United States. All he needed were army troops that he could bring up the Patuxent River, a Maryland tributary of the Chesapeake providing a back route to Washington. “Within forty-eight hours after arrival in the Patuxent of such a force, the city of Washington might be possessed without difficulty or opposition of any kind,” Cockburn had written to Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, the fleet commander, then in Bermuda assembling reinforcements.

The British invasion of the Chesapeake was meant to force the United States to divert troops it had sent to attack British colonies in Canada. But Cockburn saw the possibility for more. The fall of the American capital could be the strategic blow that brought Britain victory. The government of James Madison, or “Jemmy,” as Cockburn contemptuously called the five-foot, four-inch president, would be scattered and disgraced, and perhaps even fall. “It is quite impossible for any country to be in a more unfit state for war than this now is,” he told Cochrane. Even if the Americans learned every detail of the British plan of attack, Cockburn added, they were too weak to “avert the blow.”

Now in its third year, America’s war with Great Britain was about to take a dangerous turn for the United States.

The War of 1812 was an outgrowth of the titanic struggle that had raged between England and France almost continuously since 1793, when the French Revolutionary government declared war on Great Britain. That conflict had only grown more desperate with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte as emperor of France and his dominance over much of Europe by 1811. Fighting in their mind for England’s survival—and even the survival of civilization—the British never hesitated to trample on American sovereignty to support the war’s ends. They seized American sailors of suspected British origin to man Royal Navy ships, and they severely restricted U.S. trade with Europe.

One generation removed from the Revolutionary War, the United States seethed with resentment against her former colonial master. For many Americans in 1812, the belief was strong that the revolution was

not complete, that the United States had won its freedom, but not its independence. Bowing to the arrogant British behavior would leave Americans “not an independent people, but colonists and vassals,” President Madison believed. In Congress, the war hawks—an aptly named band of representatives from the South and West—were eager to see North America cleared of the British, allowing unimpeded expansion to the west, and, some hoped, to the north. In June 1812, a bitterly divided Congress, split on both party and geographic lines, had narrowly agreed to declare war.

Already fighting a war in Europe, Britain had not sought the conflict with America. But it had no interest in allowing the United States unfettered sovereignty, nor did it wish to cede any measure of control in North America. The Americans and the Loyalists who had moved across the border into Canadian territory after the American Revolution had competing visions for the future of the North American continent, neither involving the other.

The American war against one of the world’s great powers had gone badly from the start for the United States and its small, unprepared military forces. Multiple invasions of the British colonies of Upper and Lower Canada had ended in humiliating failure in 1812 and 1813.

Now, driven by events across the ocean, 1814 was shaping up to be the darkest year in the young nation’s history. Napoleon’s abdication of power in April appeared to have ended two decades of hostilities in Europe. The British had been left in a commanding position to end the festering war in North America. Troops from the Duke of Wellington’s victorious army were being sent across the ocean to punish America for its treachery, and to force a humiliating peace on the country. The United States, its military forces spread thin, its economy in ruins, and its people bitterly divided by the war, was ripe for defeat. The American experiment was in danger of dying in its infancy.

Walking the deck of *Albion*, Cockburn chatted amiably with Skinner. Cockburn handed the American agent a dispatch for Secretary of State James Monroe and a message for the Russian minister in Washington. As a courtesy, he also passed along a bundle of the latest English newspapers, though the most recent was already more

than two months old. Skinner brought Cockburn news of “severe” fighting in July on the Niagara frontier between the United States and Canada, where American and British armies at Chippewa and Lundy’s Lane had clashed in the bloodiest battles the war had yet seen.

They spoke about peace negotiations in the Flemish city of Ghent, where ministers from the United States and Britain had just convened. Few held much hope for peace. Cockburn knew all the British commissioners and complained to Skinner that they were a decidedly mediocre lot. The admiral posed a question: What did the American ministers think of the prospects for peace? Skinner replied that there had been no recent word from them.

Cockburn could not resist smiling as he replied. The admiral was well aware that his words would soon make their way back to Washington, and almost certainly to the president himself.

“I believe, Mr. Skinner, that Mr. Madison will have to put on his armor and fight it out,” Cockburn said. “I see nothing else left.”