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SWAMP BANDIT: The Legend of John Ashley and Florida's Notorious Ashley Gang

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SWAMP BANDIT:
The Legend of John Ashley and Florida's Notorious Ashley Gang
By
CONSTANCE MARGARITE BANKS BRIGGS

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State
University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
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Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

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PROLOGUE

January 1924

In the small town of Pahokee, just off the east coast of Florida's great Lake Okeechobee, Henry is shaving a customer who had been in dire need of a haircut and shave. Two other men are waiting for their turn in the small wooden barber shop, chewing the gossip fat as well as dip. One of the customers, Ron, who is sitting on the bench and reading *The Palm Beach Post*, spits a plug into a tin can in the middle of the waiting area floor. "Y'all hear the latest news about the Ashley Gang?"

The man sitting beside him leans over to glance at the paper. "Yeah-up. Seems John Ashley kilt a man in a shootout at a moonshine camp. I hear tell they've sent a posse out for him but ain't been able to catch him yet. Made headlines."

Ron flicks the paper in front of him, "Kilt not just any man, Ralph. He kilt a deputy!"

Henry gently moves the razor across the customer's jawline and wipes the dirty shavings onto a towel. "Dadgum, that just burns my hide! Something's got to be done about that man. Just once I'd like to get that John Ashley in my chair." He swings the razor in the air. "I'd use this razor here and give him a shaving he'd never forget."

The men chuckle as Ron puts the newspaper aside and pulls out another plug to stuff down his lip. "So, Henry. What would you do to him if you had the chance?"

"Why, I'd lay him back in the chair like this gentleman here," Henry pats the man's shoulder, "wrap up his face real nice like, then take my razor, sink it in under his

ear, and slice up that foul neck from one ear to the other. Hoo boy, if I could just have him in this chair one time. One time! That'd be all I'd need, and John Ashley would be taken care of forever."

He spits.

He misses the can.

"Damn." Henry squints his eyes and continues shaving his customer.

Ralph leans back against the wall and crosses his arms. "Well, now, let's hope Ashley never comes in here. I mean, it'd be a shame to get your chair bloody and all."

Henry sniffs as he finishes the last shave and wipes the man's face with the towel. "There you are, mister. All done."

The man rises from his chair and reaches into his pants pocket. "How much I owe you, sir?"

"Oh, five cents'll be fine," Henry says as he puts the razor into a tin cup of soapy water.

The man reaches over and hands something green to Henry. Ron and Ralph raise their eyebrows.

The man says to Henry, "Here you go. There's something extra for you, too. Oh, and I hope you find that John Ashley."

Henry takes the money, looks down at it, and gives a toothy smile. "Well, I hope I didn't scare you with my talk, mister, but you're welcome back here any time. Any time!"

The man grabs his hat off a nail on the wall, nods at the men and leaves.

Ron grins, nudges Ralph in the ribs, and winks. He clears his throat. "Henry? Do you know that man you just shaved?"

Henry grabs a broom and begins sweeping hair away. "Never seen him before in my life, but he was mighty generous. Must have been afraid I would accidentally cut him when I was going on about Ashley, heh, heh."

Ron smiles, "That *was* John Ashley you just shaved."

Henry stops sweeping and looks at the men. They smile broader and nod. Their shoulders begin to shake with pent-up laughter.

Although sunburned, Henry's face drains of color. He faces the mirror and leans on the broom. The men's smirks turn to concern.

"Henry? Are you ok?" Ralph asks.

"Ah, gentlemen, I just remembered something I got to do. Ah, my wife needed me to come home early today, and I outright forgot."

The men rise and leave. Once they are gone, Henry puts on his hat, strides to the door, and steps out. He turns the sign on the door to "closed" before looking in every direction. Continuing to throw furtive glances around him, he runs home.

CHAPTER 1

In The Beginning

1904

Sweat spraying into his eye, fifteen-year-old John squeezes his eyelids shut against the sting. With his back against the hardwood floor and the weight of the hefty older boy sitting down on his stomach, John fights to inhale air as if he were sucking oxygen through a straw. His fingers fumble to find space between his neck and the circle of fingers clamped around his throat, tightening by the second. If only he can pry those leathery fingers apart. Kicking his legs as hard as he can, John tries to lift the boy off his stomach, but the suffocating weight remains, and the smell of blood permeates the air with the salty scent of musk.

Growing weaker, John feels the flesh over his cheekbones swell up over his eye sockets, causing his vision to blur. He no longer feels the blood flowing from his nose, nor does he care—all he wants is air. Wet with blood and sweat and trying to find a place to grab, his fingers slip over the leathery ridges of the hands clinched around his neck.

Hearing his father, Joe, yelling incoherently in the distance, John tries to scream for him, but the words will not escape from his tightening throat. *Dad! Where did you go? Can you see me? Help! I can't breathe anymore, Dad. I can't fight anymore...dad ...please....*

His eardrums pounding with pressure, John hears the sounds of a deep thump, crunch, and bursting like an arrow striking through an animal's flesh. The pressure

around his neck releases, but the weight on his stomach rolls heavier onto his chest and face.

Gasping for breath, John doesn't notice someone pulling the oppressive weight off him. He rolls to his side, retches, and feels his chest burn.

John's older brother Bill pulls him to a sitting position as Joe's large, warm hands grip each side of John's cheeks. "Easy, John. Take deep breaths, son."

Only when he is able to inhale a good, deep breath does John see the older boy, Daniel, lying in a heap beside them. Partially on his stomach, facing John, Daniel's green eyes are staring wide open, unblinking. Behind swollen slits, John's own brown eyes take in the pool of red underneath Daniel's body, the red-smeared face, the purple-soaked shirt, and the dirty wooden handle on top of and parallel to the boy's back. A hatchet handle. The iron blade buried.

John vomits.

Joe and twenty-one-year-old Bill Ashley were charged in the killing of Daniel Cash, but the charge was quickly reduced to involuntary manslaughter. Fined \$250 each, they paid bail and went home to help John's mother, Lugenia, nurse him back to health. No charges were brought against John.

Lugenia knew her husband wasn't proud of what he had done. In fact, he was damned sorry about it, but he didn't know how else to save his son's life. She didn't blame him and knew no one who did. Daniel worked as a tomato packer and was known

as a mean son-of-a-bitch who picked fights with other boys on a whim, especially while he was drunk—and he had been drunk when he picked a fight with John.

Lugenia got the gist of the story from Bill: Daniel was jealous of John being known as a crack shot. He had challenged John to a shooting contest, and when John beat him, Daniel was upset. Then while drinking white lightning at the local bar on a Saturday night with some other tomato packers, he heard Bill Ashley laughing at him because he couldn't hold a candle—or a gun—to John. Daniel laid back and punched Bill in the face, and quick as a snake striking its target, John chucked a right blow on the side of Daniel's head, yelling, "Don't hit my brother, you bastard!"

Nearby, finishing his weekend shift cutting wood for railroad ties on Florida's East Coast (FEC) Railroad, Joe heard the boys' shouting just outside the bar. John was bloodied and on the ground by the time Joe got there, and Bill was trying to pull Daniel off John, screaming, "He's going to kill John!"

Joe tried to make Daniel stop, but he couldn't. With fingers clinched like roped, twisted steel around John's neck, big Daniel was too strong and his brain too inebriated to limit his strength. Trying to pry those fingers apart proved futile, even when Joe thrust his fingers into Daniels' eyes. With precious seconds left before his son's life snuffed out, Joe used the only weapon he had with him—the hatchet he was using to chop wood.

CHAPTER 2

The Trouble with Seminoles

HOW ABOUT JOHN ASHLEY

It seems in these days of strife every time a gun is discharged or somebody is shot, the crime is fastened on John Ashley. John may be a bad man as the county organ alleges, but those who know him and see him almost daily near his home, state that he is attending strictly to his own business and that he rides up and down in the East Coast trains whenever it is necessary and also visits West Palm Beach. John Ashley is by no means an angel and he has roughed it considerably. Also he cannot be accused of the murder of the Indian until it is so proven.—

Stuart Times, 2/23/1915

Christmas Day 1911

John poles his light glade skiff to a Seminole camp just south of Lake Okeechobee. The camp is on an embankment in a hammock of oak, pine, and black mangrove trees in the middle of miles of saw grass and marshy land. Having just partied on the Caloosahatchee dredge boat with the workers who didn't make it home for Christmas because of continuing to dig the North New River canal from Lake Okeechobee to Fort Lauderdale, John turned down an offer of a bed on the dredge so he could get back to DeSoto's camp and finish his trade.

John smiles to himself as he remembers the surprised look on his friend Gus' face when John told him he'd rather be at the Seminole camp. *It's not that I don't trust the dredge boys, but with as much money as I'm carrying, I'd rather trust the Indians.* Not that he told Gus how much money he had nor his plan to buy furs from DeSoto. *No sirree, it's better to keep my mouth shut. Don't want them slipping in to buy them furs out from under me. Injuns'll bring their furs to the dredge for safe-keeping while they trap if I don't buy them quick, and then another hunter'll buy them. I've gone through hell to come up with the money to buy them furs, and I'll be damned if I let another hunter get 'em.*

It took John a very long time to save and borrow enough money for the hides. Even though getting together \$400 was mighty hard, the profits would help the family plant more vegetables in Ma's garden and perhaps get some calico cloth for a new dress for her. She hadn't had a new dress in years, always sewing ones for her daughters but going without for herself. *It's a damn shame I couldn't have made it back before Christmas so the little critters could have some nice presents from Santa. Well, what do they say? Better late than never.*

Spotting the light of a campfire in a small pine hammock along the side of the canal, John steers the skiff in that direction, slows down to make contact with the soft earth, and reaches out to grab a limb for stability. Sweeping his unkempt hair out of his eyes, John steps out of the skiff and drags it up onto the embankment. *Let's just see who had to stay behind to watch the furs while the other Injuns went to get drunk. Damn if they aren't smart enough not to bring the furs to the dredge while they drink.*

Figuring he'll see who is at camp before unpacking his gear—two large lard cans filled with food and tobacco, jugs and bottles of whiskey, a fly tent, cot, shotgun, and a rifle—he grabs his rifle and one jug of whiskey and walks beyond the palmetto bushes that partially hide the campfire, his boots sinking in the soft mud with each step.

John finds Naha Tiger in camp alone, sitting against a pine tree and throwing sticks into a campfire. Naha makes no reaction upon seeing John, but his face breaks into a wide smile as soon as he sees the whiskey.

“Es-ke-tv!”

John laughs as he lowers his tall, lean body to sit cross-legged next to Naha. *Sure, poor feller. Y'looked so forlorn until you saw the liquor jug. Probably know your friends wouldn't save any for you.* He places a jug on the ground alongside his rifle. “Yeah, I have drink. Y'want some?”

“Es-ke-tv!” Naha points to the jug.

John unplugs the jug and hefts it up to pour a drink into Naha's proffered tin cup. Naha brings the cup under his nose and inhales the sharp scent of whiskey. He coughs a little, creases his eyes in another smile, and gulps down the contents. Sputtering drops of liquor onto his colorful Seminole shirt, Naha leans forward, coughs violently, sneezes, and shakes his head like a wet dog.

Amused, John brushes away the whiskey droplets that sprayed onto his worn khaki pants. “Careful, ol' boy, that there is some strong drink. Best take your sips slowly and not as shots.”

Still coughing and gasping, Naha shoves his cup towards John, *“Es-ke-tv!”*

“Naw, I think you better wait 'til your eyes quit watering.”

Naha shoves the cup against John's arm again. "*Es-ke-tv! Es-ke-tv!*"

"Okay, okay! But sip this time!" John smirks and pours Naha another drink of whiskey. Naha drinks in one fell swoop and again commences to coughing and sneezing.

John shakes his own head. "Damn. No wonder it's illegal to give liquor to Indians."

Hearing a padded footstep against the nearby sand, John grabs his rifle and spins up onto his feet in the direction of the sound.

"Ya fast, John!" The dark figure approaching is Naha's nephew, DeSoto Tiger, holding his hands up. "Ya hear like *Se-mv-no-le*. Ya dark like *Se-mv-no-le*."

"Dammit, DeSoto. You gotta be careful coming up behind a man with a gun. You're lucky I figured it was you."

"I want *es-ke-tv*. I not cough like Naha." DeSoto smiles, and his teeth are white against his tan skin.

"Damnation, DeSoto, didn't you get enough of the stuff on the dredge?" John puts his gun down, sits, and pours DeSoto a drink using another cup by the fire.

DeSoto sits on the other side of Naha, who is still coughing, and pounds his back. Taking the cup from John, he brings it to his lips as he looks at Naha. "Sip, Naha. Sip!"

Naha shoves DeSoto and gets up. "Baaaah!" DeSoto chuckles as Naha walks into the darkness.

"Ya go to Fort Lauderdale? Get price on furs?"

"Yeah, I did. I met with a trapper who's sold some furs, and the supply is just down enough to cut me a profit."

"What price ya want?"

John grabs Naha's abandoned cup and pours a drink. "I reckon five dollars a hide. You showed me eighty hides last week. At five dollars a hide, that'd be four hundred dollars coming to you."

DeSoto takes another sip of whiskey. He stares into the fire, watching the flames lick the sparking sticks. "How much whiskey ya have?"

"Not much."

DeSoto frowns and with a quick motion jerks his cup towards the fire, sprinkling the remaining whiskey into the blaze. Hissing whistles escape from the parched wood.

"No whiskey, no deal."

"Damn, DeSoto. I did bring some to camp knowing you'd want some."

"Yah, how much?"

"Enough," John says as he takes a drink. "I brought enough."

"I taste whiskey ya have in boat first."

A muscle in John's cheek spasms. Squinting his eyes, he looks at DeSoto.

"What?"

DeSoto stares at the fire and replies, "Good whiskey, deal. Bad whiskey, no deal."

"Damn, DeSoto. The other traders get you drunk off your ass on the hard stuff and then sell you the watered down shit later, is that what you're worried about? Have I ever done that to you?"

DeSoto turns his head slowly to look at John and delivers a penetrating stare, which sends shivers down John's spine.

John looks away and curses under his breath, "Damn. Okay. You test the whiskey I give to you. Enough to fill your belly 'til your *a-fvc-kē*."

The corners of DeSoto's lips curl upward. "Yes, if ya have drink, I be happy... *a-fvc-kē!* See? Ya are like *Se-mv-no-le*. Ya learn *Se-mv-no-le* words!"

John waves his hand as if swatting a fly. "Yeah, yeah. Four hundred dollars and I'll be on my way."

Firm and heavy, DeSoto's words come out slowly, "Four hundred dollar *and drink* and ya be on way."

John's face reddens, and he harshly rubs his head. He didn't plan to give all of the whiskey away. "Yeah, and fucking *es-ke-tv*. Next you be wanting my scalp."

DeSoto's smile fades. "No scalp if ya fair and not give water-down whiskey."

"Well, then, here's the deal. If I give you all the pure whiskey I have and the money, then I will get the hell out a' here."

DeSoto holds out his cup for more whiskey. "Why ya hurry? Ya not have wife and child waiting."

John gives a half-grin and pours DeSoto another drink. "True. But then, you have a wife and a baby girl. Why aren't you in a hurry to get back to them instead of drinking whiskey here? I think you'd be wanting me to pay, pack up, and leave so you can get back home to your pretty lil' thing."

DeSoto shrugs and looks away.

A smile spreads across John's face. "Ah, I see. That's why you go trapping so much. Gotta get away?"

DeSoto looks at John but makes no reaction.

John winks. "You can always come to the whorehouse with me to get away."

DeSoto's face darkens, and he makes a start towards John, but John holds up his hands. "I'm just kidding, DeSoto. Damn. Don't get so angry."

DeSoto sits back down again. "That why ya in hurry? To go to whorehouse?"

John pours himself another drink, chugs it down, and sighs, "Sure." He shakes his head. "Naw. I promised my sister's son I'd be back in time for Christmas."

"Too late."

"No, I can still make it before New Year's. Hanford follows me 'round everywhere when I'm home. He's a small John Ashley."

Rolling his eyes, DeSoto grunts. "Must be crazy white boy to follow John around."

"Yeah, well, at least he's a boy. You'll have a girl following you around. That's worse."

"No like girls, John? What's matter? Fear they'll out-shoot ya?"

John spits into the fire. "Shit, no one can out-shoot me. And I have my share of girls following me around." When DeSoto raises an eyebrow, John replies, "Them kind, too, but I mean lil' girls, like my kid sister. Ma tries to get Daisy to act like a girl, but all she wants to do is go hunting and fishing. Wants to wear overalls, too. Don't like acting as no lady at'all."

"Crazy white girl. She want to be small John Ashley, too?"

"Shit, no," John groans. "She just likes the outdoors is all. She's a *smart* girl. She wants to learn to shoot a gun and set a trap like her brothers."

"Should be *Se-mv·no·le*. Maybe ya trade her for furs instead of whiskey?"

This time it was John's turn to make no reaction. The muscle in his cheek tics again. "Listen, DeSoto, I need to get back home, and I need the furs to make money for the family. I don't want the price of hides to change while we're sitting here sissy-talking. Have we got a deal or not?"

"Wait til day and we go to Everglades dredge first. We take more furs to dredge."

"Why the Everglades and not the Caloosahatchee? The Caloose is closer."

"Men on that dredge drink too much at Christmas. Don't trust them."

"Sure. 'Course, it don't make sense to me why y'all get any dredge men to watch your furs. You don't have anyone watching your traps like that. How d'you know if someone steals animals from the traps?"

"Anyone mess with traps...we *know*. And no one want animal that have to be skinned. Easy way is steal hides tanned."

"Y'know, I ran across Horace Tindall in the woods a few days ago. He was right mad because he thought an Indian had stole an animal from one of his traps."

"No Seminole steal other man's animal out of trap."

"I know. I know that," John nods and shrugs his shoulders. "That's what I told Horace. I even pointed to him that the trap had fur on it, so I know whatever was caught there pulled away and left a bit of fur behind trying to escape. But Horace wouldn't listen. He was still mad. I'd turn away if you come across him in the woods any time soon."

"Yes. So, we leave furs at dredge for captain to watch them."

John rubs his beard stubble. "Well, why don't you go with me, and you can sell the extra furs you got?"

“No. I wait until we get more hides to tan.”

“Huh. Maybe if you get more otters in your traps, I’ll buy more skins when I get back.”

Raising his eyes to look at John, DeSoto asks, “Ya have any otters in yer traps yet?”

“Four so far, but I haven’t checked the rest of ’em yet. I figure if I don’t have any more, I can buy more from y’all, ’specially if the price don’t change.”

“If price change or not, we make ya pay more next time.”

“What the hell-?”

“Ya keep giving drink and I agree. Or else ya need to trade sister.”

John’s cheek muscle twitches as he squints his eyes and pours DeSoto another drink.

After drinking with the Seminoles for three days, John awakens at dawn, his head pounding at every heartbeat. The dim light filtering in through the flap in his tent makes his eyes blur, and the pounding in his ears grows louder. He regrets not leaving camp that first night but remembers DeSoto endlessly drinking whiskey and insisting John drink, too. Before long, neither of them could stand up to leave, because the sand on the embankment grew soggy and the firm land moved right out from under their feet, like someone pulling a rug out from under them. The decision to drink the hangover away by drinking again the next morning was not such a good idea either. With a sour taste in his mouth leaving a cottony residue, he resists the urge to vomit once more.

John can hear the Seminoles moving outside. *It's about damn time they sobered up.* Carefully sitting up, he slowly reaches for his scratched leather boots, pulls them on, and tucks his britches into them. Grabbing his jacket from under the cot, he carefully wraps it around two bottles of whiskey. *Good thing I didn't let 'em know I had these bottles or I wouldn't have any whiskey left at all.* Putting the concealed bottles under his arm, he braces for the bright light of the sun and steps out of the tent.

Naha and Willy Osceola load DeSoto's canoe and John's skiff with furs in what seems like slow motion. DeSoto spots John and walks up the bank towards him. All of them look as bad as John: puffy eyes squinting against the sun, creased foreheads holding back throbbing veins, and hunched shoulders stabilizing their bellies.

DeSoto's eyes graze over the bulging coat under John's arm. Eyebrows scrunched together, voice raw and hoarse, he barks, "John ready?"

"Damn right. Y'all have your money and whiskey, we're all sobered up—I think—and I'm ready to get out."

"Ya not pack tent?"

"No. As it is, I'll be lucky to make it down to the canoe without the tent and my gear. I'll leave 'em here 'til I get back. Make sure no one takes all my tobacco, you hear? Y'all drank my whiskey gone. I don't need to lose my smokes, too."

"No promise," DeSoto sneers, but John's head is pounding too hard to care.

The men make their way down the embankment and get into their boats. As DeSoto steps into his canoe with his pole, John settles onto the bow seat of his skiff and tucks the jacket-wrapped bottles underneath. He notices that the Seminoles have put his rifle in the boat beside him. *God love 'em, at least they're honest enough to give me my*

gun. The eighty furs are there piled in a big bundle, while DeSoto's canoe bears the weight of another pile of furs. *And at least DeSoto is a man of his word, even if he's irritating as hell about the whiskey.*

Naha reaches down to hand John his pole. "Es·ke·tv?"

"Hell no, es·ke·tv! No more whiskey left!"

Grabbing the pole, John looks back at DeSoto to see if he's ready and sees that DeSoto is scowling at him. *Probably has one helluva hangover. Serves him right for making me wait to leave.*

The dugout canoe wobbles as DeSoto pushes it off into the canal with his pole and John follows behind in his skiff. The Seminole-carved, wooden dugout floats to the center of the canal and disturbs a nearby flock of white and blue herons, which disperses in a blur of batting wings into the sky. The movement of the retreating birds makes waves across the water, which splashes up against the side of John's boat and causes both vessels to rock. The see-sawing motion brings up a wave of nausea in John's throat, but he fights it back down. He doesn't notice the whiskey bottles roll around the floor of the canoe, exposing one of the necks through the bottom of the jacket in which they are bound.

DeSoto turns and eyes the bottle from his vantage point and frowns. "More whiskey?" he says as he stops poling his canoe.

A slight dread rises in John's chest along with the residue of his drunken bile as he stops poling and realizes DeSoto sees the whiskey bottle. "Uh. Yeah."

A scowl creases DeSoto's brow. "I want drink."

“Yeah, well, maybe we should just be about our business first and then drink later, DeSoto.”

“No! I want drink. Ya hide whiskey and not give all to *Se-mv-no-le*. Ya son-of-bitch. Y’said ya give all whiskey to us. I want drink. I want drink now!”

“Okay, alright. I’ll give you a drink, sooner than be unpleasant. Just calm down and give me a minute.”

John leans over to work one of the bottles out from under his jacket and in the process uncovers both bottles. *Dammit o’hell! Now I’ve got to lose the last of my whiskey. Shit.* Grimacing, he reaches a bottle over to DeSoto.

DeSoto grabs the bottle out of John’s hand, yanks the cork off the top, and proceeds to take deep swigs, dribbling a stream down the corner of his mouth. He swipes his forearm across his mouth to wipe the whiskey away.

“Why ya not give whiskey to us?”

“What? Of course I gave whiskey to y’all. Remember, you’ve been drunk off your asses the past three days.”

“No. Ya not give all whiskey. Ya hide some. We be honest and you lie and hide some. Why ya take whiskey from camp? Fear we find out it water-down?”

“What the hell? Does it taste fuckin’ watered down? I wanted to save some for later. For myself. Y’know how your friends can get. If they saw more whiskey, we’d never’ve gotten away. I wanted to get away quicker is all.”

“Ya give me other bottle now.”

“Well, now, you just have to wait ‘til we get down to the dredge, and then I’ll give you both bottles.” *I gotta get out of here if I’m ever going to make it home by next*

week. John reaches over the side of his skiff to take the bottle and cork from DeSoto, plug it, and place it beside the other one, still peeking out from under his jacket. *Best damn whiskey in the south. Shit. So much for dad's present.*

DeSoto frowns but stretches up to start poling his canoe again, and John moves his skiff once more, rhythmically pushing through the smooth waters. As they travel down the canal, the sounds of the slushing water, reverberating cicadas, and squawking birds echo over the horizon. The watery land spreads out beyond the canal in all directions like a grassy ocean, with tall, sharp sawgrass blades blowing in the morning breeze. The putrid smell of rotting vegetation permeates the unsettled air, but the familiar odor doesn't bother John. In fact, it actually makes his head feel better.

The men follow the deep water trail made through the swamp by the dredge and see the dredge about a mile away. John hears the strength in DeSoto's poling and hears him grunting with every push. *Strange, Seminoles are usually silent even when working hard or tired. He's still angry.*

"I want more drink." Penetrating through John's thoughts, DeSoto's gruff voice demands attention.

"Damn it, DeSoto, you know I know what you are, and I can't give you another damn drink. Shouldn't-a given you any at all."

"I want more es-ke-tv!"

"DeSoto, you're an *Indian*, and you know it's illegal to give whiskey to an Indian. Now, I've been nice and pleasant and accommodating, but you're just gonna have to wait, just like I had to wait for y'all to sober up!"

DeSoto stops poling, but John keeps poling his skiff past the canoe, leaving DeSoto to stare after him. After a few moments, DeSoto follows him.

The Everglades—a large rectangular, mechanical boat, flat on the bottom with a two-story living block in the middle, with room enough for bunks and a kitchen and dining facility—looms large and grimy against the green sawgrass and blue sky. At the front, two steel bars join into a triangle high above the dredge, and a long, wide, steel arm juts out over the water, supporting a pulley that connects to large buckets which scoop out mud and dead vegetation from the canal bottom.

Pulling up to the back of the dredge, John ties his skiff to a board sticking out of the flat back deck and waits for DeSoto to do the same. A white heron dive-bombs into the murky water for a fish, reminding John that he hasn't eaten all day, making him think a bit of food might clear his head.

“Come on, DeSoto, let's see if we can get ourselves an invite to dinner!” John hops up onto the deck.

“No, I stay here.”

“What about your furs? Aren't you gonna bring them aboard?”

“No. Change mind.”

Sensing the residue of anger in DeSoto's voice, John shrugs and walks away.

“Suit yourself.”

Climbing up a ladder to the main compartment of the dredge, John sees the dredge men inside the dining facility, and as he enters the room, several of the men look

up and grin at him. Working sporadically on the dredges as a mess boy, mechanic, or gopher, he knows many of the dredge hands onboard.

“Looky who’s back! Big ol’ John Ashley!” says Dave, who sports a red shock of hair on his head and face.

The cook, Will Albritton, bald with a rounded belly protruding against a food-splattered apron, swivels around with a ladle in his hand. He grins and scoops out some pork and beans onto a tin plate, along with a hunk of ham. “Hey, John! We miss you around here! I’d ask you to stay and eat, but seein’ as I lost a mess boy, I don’t have the time or the help.”

John grins, “What a damn sorry mess boy that was. Can’t find decent help in these glade swamps.”

Will hands the plate to John. “I guess I can spare a plate for the damn sorry son-of-a-bitch if he has any whiskey left on him.”

John’s smile fades as he groans. “Dammit. Not you, too?”

Laughter rings around the room while Dave scoots over on a bench and pipes in, “Who doesn’t want whiskey, my friend? If you quit a job, you damn sure better be bringing whiskey back if you don’t plan on staying!”

“Alright, alright,” John flicks Dave’s head as he sits down.

Dave gives him a biscuit. “You look rough, John. Been nippin’ at the bottle yourself, huh?”

“Trying to get a deal outta those Indians drove me to drink.”

The men laugh.

“DeSoto Tiger is in a canoe out in back. Didn’t want to come in. Mad as hell I wouldn’t give him a drink this morning.”

“Well, that’s mighty mean of you, John,” Will winks. “What’d an Indian ever do to you?” He slops another pile of beans on a clean plate and calls for his nephew, “Hey! John Lewis! Take this here plate down to the Indian out back.”

A sandy-blond, sunburned and gangly youth of about 15 stands up from another table and runs to grab the plate. “Yessir.”

Lewis grabs a fork, spoon, and knife on his way out while more laughter erupts from the men listening to John’s stories of living the past few days with drunk Seminoles. Lewis doesn’t want to miss hearing John’s stories, because he looks up to John—especially since John tends to take him under his wing and protect him from the older boys when fights break out onboard—but at the same time Lewis looks forward to seeing the Seminole, because he doesn’t get to see Seminoles very often by himself.

As he descends the ladder, Lewis sees DeSoto squatting in the canoe. Slowly, Lewis steps over and hands the plate to DeSoto, who grabs it and nods at the boy. Lewis watches the Seminole push the utensils away and eat with his hands. Fascinated, the boy stands in the shadow of the building and observes DeSoto’s every move.

“Drink?” DeSoto asks the boy.

Surprised at being spoken to, Lewis hightails it up the ladder. Inside, he hears John bidding his goodbye, so he slips over to his Uncle Will and whispers, “The Indian wants a drink.”

Overhearing the boy, John turns to Will and states in a grim voice, “Just give him water. Only water!” With a hoot of laughter from the men, Lewis follows John to the deck below with a cup of water.

“Well, I’m heading off. Are you leaving, too?” John asks DeSoto as he unties the canoe and skiff. DeSoto nods, drinks the water, and hands the cup back to Lewis, who watches the men pole their hide-laden boats south, away from the dredge. Lewis wonders what it would be like to go hunting and trading with the wild Seminoles.

January 1912

“You’re right, Forrey, I imagine it was not a pretty sight, but your examination of the bullet holes in the body has been recorded in our notes, and we will find you if we need more information.”

Anxious to get his visitor out of the office so he can get back to the investigation, Palm Beach County Sheriff George Baker—referred to as “captain”—rises from his desk to shake Forrey’s hand. Melville Forrey, the commander of the Caloosahatchee dredge, remains seated on the other side of the desk, his back held rod-straight, hat in his lap.

“Captain, I have some things I need to know. I can’t go back to my dredge without something to tell the boys. They want to put a sign on the grave they dugged for the Indian. Want to know who he is. Who killed him.”

Sighing, Captain sits down and leans back in his wooden swivel chair, his white shirt and dark striped vest stretched tightly over his protruding, rounded belly. Resting an elbow on his chair arm and twisting one end of his white handle-bar mustache, Captain glances off into the distance beyond the room’s sole window, which overlooks several

blocks of flat, sandy scrub grass that covers the ground all the way down to the dock at Lake Worth. *How the hell should I get this man out of here without appearing bored or, worse, too concerned with the subject? Arrest him for loitering?* Captain knew Forrey would get the information sooner or later, but he had to be careful not to sound an alarm. The county, barely a few years old, was growing and bursting at the seams with rich backers from the north. It wouldn't pay to draw too much negative attention right now, especially when pressure loomed overhead to keep an even keel between the rich, the poor, the powerful, and the Seminoles. The walls of the small bead-boarded office, only big enough to hold a desk, two chairs, and a bookcase, seemed to be closing in on him.

Inhaling a deep breath, Captain leans forward to open his desk drawer and pulls out a wooden cigar box with the words *Bradentown Ciagr Company* burned inside a circle on the top. Opening the lid, Captain pulls out a cigar, passes it under his nose, and proffers the box to his visitor.

“Cigar, Forrey? These here'll give the Cuban cigars in Tampa a run for their money.”

“No, thank you, Sheriff. I don't right feel like smoking at this minute.”

“Are you sure? These are Manatee Straights cigars from Bradentown. Y'know, near Sarasota. One of my deputies was in that area last month and brought back this box for the ol' captain. These folks make some nice-smoking cigars, even if they can't spell 'cigar' worth a damn.”

Forrey fumbles with his hat and clears his throat before answering, “No, thank you all the same, Sheriff.”

“Alright,” Captain shrugs. Taking his time, hoping to make Forrey uncomfortable enough to leave, he bites off the end of the cigar and spits it into the tin trash can by his desk. Putting the box back in the drawer, he pulls out a box of matches, strikes a light, and puffs on the cigar until a cloud of smoke rises up. The smell of burnt sulfur tickles his nose as he shakes the match flame out and tosses it into the trash. Throwing a furtive glance at Forrey, who is sitting as rigidly as ever, Captain frowns.

He again leans back in the squeaky swivel chair, turns his face upward and blows out white ring clouds, the exact color of his thinning hair. Still looking at the ceiling, he says, “The Indian’s name is DeSoto Tiger, the son of a Seminole Chief.”

“Wh-what?” Forrey widens his eyes.

Lowering his head, Captain looks Forrey in the eye. “The body your dredge pulled up outta the canal is that of DeSoto Tiger.”

“Yes, but...an Indian chief’s son?” Forrey’s voice hits a shrill pitch. Captain nods and Forrey shakes his head at the same time. Both men are quiet for a moment, with nothing to be heard but the sound of Captain puffing on the cigar and a few men talking outside the door. The sweet, spicy smell of the cigar circles with the smoke around the room.

Forrey blinks rapidly as if to clear the air and leans forward to tap his index finger on Captain Baker’s desk. “You realize, of course, that the reservation won’t stand for this crime going unsolved, Sheriff. The Seminoles will understandably raise a racket about this investigation. And with the fear of Indians in this country, an uprising from the local reservation will do nothing but harm Florida’s land values.”

“Now, Forrey, don’t get your head in the muck.” Captain waves around his hand with the cigar, “No-one around here will be afraid of no Indian uprising in Palm Beach County. Not with Henry Flagler and his railroad and millionaire friends here. Everyone wants to get near the rich, Indian uprising or not.”

Forrey wags his pointer finger. “No, Sheriff, it’ll be just the opposite. No-one will want to leave the comforts of their state to come to the wilds of Florida with the additional threat of an Indian situation. All the land reclamations will be for nothing if land values drop because of this. Why, even my wife is scared shitless the Indians will attack the Caloosahatchee and kill all of us. No, sir, our county don’t need the trouble. The murderer has to be found, Sheriff.”

Captain Baker again blows smoke rings above his head. “Maybe,” he responds at length. *Ahh, what the hell? If Forrey wants to play with fire, let him get burned.* “The tribe is also claiming the murderer stole a mess of furs to boot. As it is, we have no real evidence on the case. I have a lead, but nothing else.”

“Lead? What lead, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Captain swivels his chair to face Forrey, knowing the reaction it will bring from Forrey and not wanting to miss the sight. “It’s been brought to my attention that the last person seen with DeSoto was a Salerno boy. John Ashley.”

Forrey’s eyes squint just a bit. “John Ashley? Are you sure?”

“How the hell can I be sure with no hard evidence? It’s the only thing we have to go on right now. I’m investigating the matter—”

A quick knock on the door and Jailer Robert, Captain’s son, cracks the door open to peek his head through. “Sheriff?”

Captain motions for him to come in the room, so Robert steps to the desk and hands Captain a piece of paper. “Sheriff, we just received a wire from Girtman Brothers in Miami. They bought a shipment of furs worth \$1,100 from a young man whose signature on the receipt is ‘J. Ashley.’”

Keeping the cigar between his fingers, Captain reaches for his round reading glasses on the desk and puts them on. He reads the paper in one hand while bringing his cigar to his mouth with the other. This time he just exhales white clouds into the air through his nose and mouth. “Damn.”

Forrey stands up holding his hat in his hands. “Sheriff, the Ashley family has many friends in this area. They’ll not stand for an accusation against John.”

Captain grunts and looks over the top of his glasses at Forrey. “I’m aware, Forrey, that your wife is a distant relative of Ashley’s?”

Forrey raises his chin and looks the sheriff in the eye. “Yessir.”

“So I understand your...*concern*.” Looking at Robert, Forrey frowns. “Robert, you’re friends with John. What do you make of it?”

Robert rubs his bare chin and shakes his head. “I don’t know. I don’t want to believe it. If John did kill him, there had to be a reason for it. I mean, hell, he was in town just last Saturday and paid a \$25 fine for being reckless with his gun and shooting the wall at the whorehouse. If he’d really killed the Indian, he wouldn’t of been so careless by drawing attention to himself.”

Captain looks up at Robert and asks, “Where is John now?”

Robert shrugs his shoulders. “My best guess is back home or trapping in the woods.”

Captain leans back and swivels his chair to face the lone window. Just beyond, the belfry of St. Ann's Catholic Church rises high over the sandy flat land. Sometimes he likes to look at the spire when he ponders a prisoner's fate, such as now.

Sighing and turning to Robert, Captain tosses the paper onto the desk and hefts himself out of the chair. Pulling up his belt for adjustment, Captain barks, "Come on, Robert. You're going with me to find and question John."

1904

Lugenia didn't want to admit it, but both she and Joe were superstitious. They were afraid of losing their son John just like Joe lost his brother, John's namesake. The elder John Ashley had been murdered by his business partner on the West Coast of Florida, near Buckingham, shot in the back beside the fence outside his home. Staggering into the house, he fell dead just inside the door in front of his mother, father, sister Mary Jane, and brother Joe. Neighbor Tillett Whidden was charged with the murder, and the Whiddens were afraid the Ashleys would seek revenge.

Instead, Joe moved his wife and large family of eight children to Pompano along Florida's East Coast to work on Henry Flagler's FEC railroad, around 1900.

Within a year of their ninth child Daisy's birth in 1904, Lugenia and Joe moved their family north of Stuart, Florida, near a FEC train stop called Fruita, along the Dixie Highway. They built a white, wooden, square-framed house in the middle of a piney woods scrub about a half mile from the Dixie Highway, with a sandy, horse-shoe rutted "dog-path" leading from the highway to the house in the woods.

Space was not lacking in this part of Florida, and the Ashleys did not have another neighbor for miles. Even so, the Fruita train stop made it convenient to catch a train car into downtown Stuart for necessities and social gatherings. The Ashley children liked to take the train into Stuart to meet friends from school or hang out on the ocean docks, or take the train further to West Palm Beach for schooling at West Palm Beach High School or visit Bill, who had married a local girl named Bertha Rogers, and stayed in West Palm.

Young John, in particular, loved hanging out at Bill and Bertha's place, tagging along on fishing and hunting trips and learning to trade with the Seminoles. Bertha's father Edward was fond of his son-in-law, but he was particularly fond of Bill's younger brother John, who stayed with them when he got a job working at a tomato packing house. John was a very well-mannered boy who, like Bill, loved to live in the woods hunting, trapping, and fishing for days at a time. As everyone else at the time, Mr. Rogers was very impressed with John's marksmanship.

"Yep," Mr. Rogers was fond of telling people, "I saw that Ashley boy lay a Coke bottle sideways on a tree stump. With his rifle, he walked about 50 feet away, turned around, and shot a bullet through the neck and out the bottom of the bottle."

A close examination of the bottomed-out bottle didn't find a scratch on the neck or sides of the bottle. A good shot. A damn good shot.

January 1912

The shiny hand pump sticking up from a hole in the floor pours out fresh water into a ceramic pitcher that Lugenia holds in one hand while pumping with the other. She is proud of her in-door plumbing, the only one of its kind for miles around. Most people

have to get their water from an outside well, pump, or rain barrel, but thanks to her husband, Lugenia enjoys getting a drink inside, without the nuisance of critters and horrendous biting bugs.

Setting the pitcher on the table, she grabs a worn hand towel to rub the sweat off the back of her neck. With her salt-and-pepper hair twisted into a tight bun on her head, she feels the cool breeze blowing through the windows on the opposite ends of the room waft over her damp neck, quenching it before beads of sweat reappear. The room is hot from her cooking, and every now and then she suffers a hot flash for no apparent reason. She returns to kneading dough for biscuits, a fresh plate of them already on the table, covered in cheesecloth against any flies caught inside the house.

No sooner than covering her hands in flour, Lugenia hears the dogs barking in the backyard and moving around to the front. Through the front window she sees two men on horseback approaching from the sandy dog-path. *Visitors! What a pleasant surprise!*

Too excited to wake him herself, Lugenia tells Daisy, “Go wake up your daddy. Tell him company is here to see us.” As the little girl with the curly auburn hair runs into a side room, Lugenia steps outside, through the front screened porch, and stops on the top step of the small porch. She wipes her hands on the flour-sack apron tied around her waist. “Land sakes! Captain Baker, is that you?”

Her brow wrinkles as she realizes the dogs are barking at them and preventing their dismount. “Shine! Gator! Blackie! Go on! Go on and let the gentlemen get down! Go on!” climbing down the front steps, she tries to shoo them off with her apron.

As if on cue, John and Bob appear from around the corner of the house, carrying rifles.

Aunt Lou had a soft spot for her son, Bob, who was the reckless one in the Ashley family. Like John, he had a temper, but his anger usually got the best of him. His anger flared quicker than his brother's, and Bob found it more difficult to calm his aggression once incited. Only his mother seemed to extinguish the fuse, and he was fiercely protective of her, as she was of him.

Bob and John were best friends, being three years apart and the closest in age to each other than their brothers. They usually camped in the woods together, worked together, drank together, and raised hell together. They almost fed on each other: apart from Bob, John acted calmer; apart from John, Bob acted wilder. Bob instigated adventures, and John settled them. They were ying and yang.

"Boys! Git these dogs outta here," Lugenia yells over the infernal barking.
"Captain and Bob are here and the dadburned dogs won't let them down."

Recognizing their visitors, the brothers run at the dogs, kicking dirt and sand up into the air.

"Git! Git, ya nasty rebels!"

"Go bark at some real trouble."

"Go on, git!"

Whimpering, the dogs tuck in their tails and beat it towards the back of the house. Once a safe distance away, they turn around and sniff the air, growling yet wagging their tails.

"Thank you, boys," Captain says, dismounting his horse. "I sure would like to know where you get them nice-looking dogs. Like to have a few of those myself for the jail."

John shakes Captain's hand and smiles, "Go on and take the pick of the next litter, Captain. It'll be on me."

"But be warned," Bob winks. "They don't take too kindly to the law."

"Don't worry," Robert says. "Dad'll break 'em in real well."

"Better than the prisoners, I hope," John blurts under his breath.

The men chuckle as Lugenia waves them up the front steps, through the screened porch and into the house. "Come on, now. Come on in and have a seat and I'll serve up some biscuits. I just made some hot coffee, strong the way you like it, Captain."

"Thank you, Lude," Captain grins as he follows her into the house. "It's nice to know you remember." He turns to Bob, who is walking behind him. "How're you doing, Bob?"

"I'd be a lot better if I knew why we have the honor of your presence, sir."

John guffaws. "Hell, Bob, be polite or I'll tell him some things about you that'll make him arrest you right now and lock you up."

"Oh, like getting arrested for shooting up a whorehouse? Like that, John?"

"Boys! Behave around company," Lugenia shouts from the stove, where she begins to pour several cups of coffee.

Captain and Robert settle across from each other at the large wooden table in the middle of the front room. A fire crackles in the iron stove and the aroma of coffee drifts over the smell of fresh-baked biscuits, which lie beside a mason jar of jelly on the table in front of the men.

Lugenia looks back and the men staring at the food. "That's some of my good guava jelly there, Captain. Help yourself."

“Don’t mind if I do, Lude.”

Joe Ashley walks in from an adjoining room, bending his broad frame slightly to avoid bumping his head on the door frame, reaches his hand out and nods.

“Captain. Robert.”

“Joe.” Captain smiles. “Nice to see you again.”

Joe settles himself into the chair at the head of the table. “How’s the law business been treating you, Captain?”

“Can’t complain. Sure is better than killing our balls building Flagler’s railroad in the old days,” Captain laughs, then abruptly stops, hunches his shoulders, and looks at Lugenia. “Oops. Sorry, Ma’am. Forgot there was a lady in the room. Did I ruin my chances for coffee and biscuits?”

Lugenia glances back from the stove, wipes her forehead with her arm and answers, “Captain, I’ll just hold you to forgiveness if need be in the future.”

Captain laughs and follows Joe’s lead by grabbing a biscuit and spreading jelly over it.

Joe talks through his food. “What brings y’all around to our neck of the woods, Captain?”

“Well, Joe. We actually came to see John. Need to ask him some questions.”

Lugenia pauses in her motion to pour coffee into several cups and glances upward. *Lord, help me, what now? When will my boys settle down? Can I ever get the wildness out of them?*

“Anything that can’t be spoken in front of me and Lude?”

“Not that I can see, Joe.” Captain looks around for John, who sits down beside Robert, while Bob leans against the front door frame.

Lugenia approaches the table, shaking her head and carrying a tray with coffee cups. Her mind is racing as she sets a cup down in front of Captain and one in front of Robert. *I knew it. I knew it! The rooster's come home to roost. Knew it would.* Concern etching across her face, she sits beside Captain and points to Joe. “I told you we hadn’t heard the last about John shooting in that awful girlie place in West Palm.”

The men shift in their seats, a bit uncomfortable.

“No, Lude, it’s not that,” begins Captain. “I’m here to ask John about a situation that has come up regarding an Indian’s body that has been found in the canal.

“Land sakes, is that all? Poor feller, but what have we got to do with any Indian dead in the canal?”

To avoid her stare, Captain continues, “Is there anything you’d like to tell me, John?”

John leans forward with his elbows on the table and looks Captain directly in the eye. “No, sir. Nothing that comes to mind.”

“Well, how about some furs you sold in Miami? Furs sold to the Girtman Brothers?”

“Yep. I sold some furs in Miami.”

“Furs you trapped yourself?”

“No. Furs I bought from the Seminoles.”

“Any Seminole in particular?”

John shrugs. “From a tribe that I was camping with.”

“Who did you make dealings with? You can’t speak more than a few words in Seminole, and most of them can’t speak English. So, who did you talk to?”

John’s brows frown and his lips grow thin. “DeSoto Tiger.”

“And you’re aware, John, that this DeSoto is the son of Tommy Tiger, the late chief?”

“Yessir. I guess.”

Captain nods and takes a bite of his biscuit. “DeSoto’s body was the one found dead in the canal.”

The fire crackles.

Captain chews.

The dogs bark outside.

Bob scratches his back on the door frame.

Lugenia can’t stand it any longer, so she rephrases her last question. “What do the furs John bought from the Indians have to do with finding DeSoto’s body?”

“Well, now,” Captain continues after taking a sip of coffee. “The Indians claim John was the last one seen with DeSoto alive. They also claim DeSoto was killed for some furs.”

“What the hell—?” Bob starts.

“What?” John stands up so abruptly his chair topples over backwards. “Captain, I didn’t no more steal them furs than that sum-bitch Indian tried to friend me! Fu—,” John starts to say, then remembers his mother is in the room. “Damn Indian was mad because I wouldn’t let him drink any whiskey. I paid DeSoto for those furs. Ask Bill. I borrowed most of the money from Bill to buy those damn furs!”

Joe holds his hand up and catches John's eye with a stern look. "Sit down, John. Go on, Captain."

"Did you kill DeSoto, John?"

"Hell, no, sir, I did not. I bought the furs, said goodbye and went on my way to Miami to sell them to Girtman Brothers."

"Do you know anything about why the Indians claim their furs were stolen?"

"Not the ones I bought. But DeSoto did have more furs on his canoe with him when I went away. Said he was gonna drop them off at the dredge, although it looked like he left there without dropping them off."

"Where was he going, then?"

"Hell if I know."

"John!" Lugenia shoots a dagger look at John, who glances at her before looking away. "Are you going to arrest John, Captain? Is that why you're here?"

Captain takes another bite of biscuit. "No, Lude. I believe John. I didn't think he killed the Indian anyway, but I wanted to get it straight from him." He takes another sip of coffee. "I'm here to tell you to lay low for a while, John. Hell, I know if this had been any other Indian at all, this racket wouldn't be brewing. But a son of a former chief..." He shakes his head.

Lugenia burrows her eyebrows. "Do you think there will be an uprising because of this, Captain?"

Captain again shakes his head. "Don't know, Lugenia. But I think it's best for John to leave town for a bit. Stay clear until it all settles down. I'm sure before too long either the killer will be found out or the matter will die down. John?"

“Yessir?”

“Take that money you made and take a little trip. Hell, enjoy yourself! Don’t think no more about it.”

“But that money is supposed to go to the family for Ma’s garden and presents for the little kids...” John begins to protest.

“Don’t you be worrying about us, John. Listen to the Captain.” Lugenia reaches over to pat John’s arm as Joe asks, “You sure this will all blow over? What if it doesn’t?”

“Joe, I don’t know the future any more than you, but the way I see it, if John stays here and the Indians think he killed DeSoto, he’s liable to be killed. On the other hand, if the land owners who resent an Indian racket see John, they will get on my ass about not arresting him. But if John goes away for a while?” Captain shrugs. “Out of sight, out of mind. Let’s just let the embers burn their course. They’ll eventually forget all about it.”

CHAPTER 3

Wheeling and Dealing

February 1913

Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast (FEC) railroad, which he had been building along the coast all the way to the Florida Keys, and his Breakers Hotel, in Palm Beach, brought his millionaire friends to Florida's warm beaches during the winter months. Eventually, the high society of the northern states—including Boston Mayor John F. Fitzgerald, Joseph P. Kennedy, Financier J. P. Morgan, and the Vanderbilt and Astor families—vacationed in Palm Beach every winter season. The season began each year in December and ended in February, when Flagler hosted the Washington's Ball at his Palm Beach mansion for the social elite before they traveled back north.

The building of Flagler's railroad and hotels brought many jobs to the area for the Florida pioneers. Joe Ashley and his sons, along with their neighbors, benefitted from this work. The fever of the first Florida "land boom" also brought Edward Riley "E. R." Bradley and his brother Jack to the area, where they opened an exclusive dining club in Palm Beach called The Beach Club, and permitted membership only to out-of-town elite guests staying at the nearby Poinciana and Breakers hotels.

THAT PALM BEACH COUNTY GRAND JURY.

There is not an intelligent citizen in Palm Beach county [sic] but what knows that under the eyes of Sheriff Baker, the Beach Club runs in defiance of all law. The

Beach Club is known to be one of the most notorious gambling establishments in the country and—we say it again—it is run under the protection of the sheriff, whom that grand jury found was doing his duty. When grand juries undertake to prevent a newspaper from exposing evils in the conduct of public affairs, it is high time for them to receive the public criticism that the editorial writer of the Palm Beach Tropical Sun is quite able to administer and which we hope to see done in full measure.

—The Miami News, 1/30/1913

Captain Baker climbs out of his shiny Model T and strides across the sandy lot towards the pristine white stucco building with the green roof and green-and-white striped awning. He enjoys visiting the Beach Club, the reigning gathering place of New York society, who largely make up the high society of Palm Beach during the winter season. Exquisite foods shipped down from New York and sold for even higher prices in Palm Beach serve Captain's tastes just fine, especially when it's free for his services. His mouth waters just thinking about the delectable green turtle soup.

Captain nods at the doorman as he walks through the door held open for him. Once in the foyer, he turns right to a room set up as an office, which holds a large mahogany desk, bookshelves, and upholstered chairs. On closer inspection, Captain knows a ready eye would notice that the standard fare of a restaurant owner's office—management books, accounting ledgers, employee schedules—is missing. What's not missing around the room is an array of motionless animals, frozen in time by a taxidermist's hand, ranging from a black Florida panther and a rattler to a 12-foot gator.

Captain, in fact, helped Bradley catch the gator using bait on a large hook so that once the gator swallowed the hook, they were able to pull it out of the water after shooting it.

“Come in, Sheriff!” Owner Edward Riley “E. R.” Bradley calls as he stands up to shake Captain’s hand. “Glad you could make it today.”

“Colonel,” Captain says as he takes off his hat and takes Bradley’s hand. “I wouldn’t miss an offer of lunch here for anything in the world.”

“Well, then, shall we cut the pleasantries and go eat?”

Bradley gestures back out into the foyer and leads the way down a hallway to a bright dining room.

Like every other room in the building, the dining area has white walls with forest green trim—Bradley’s trademark colors from his racing horses in Kentucky. Made from dark mahogany wood, the tables are covered with white linen tablecloths and set with bone china, crystal, and silverware. The crystal chandeliers boast bright electricity, which make the walls and linens even whiter. The broad windows, facing Lake Worth, reveal a picturesque scene of sunlight sparkling off the rolling waters.

“Here we are,” said Bradley as he leads Baker to a far table near a large picture window overlooking the ocean. A man sitting at a nearby table stands up as Bradley and Baker approach. Captain thinks he remembers the man’s face but isn’t quite sure. *I’ve probably seen him in one of the back gaming rooms before, another of Bradley’s top payers.*

“Sheriff, I would like you to meet a friend of mine, John Fitzpatrick, Mayor of Boston. Fitz, this is Captain George Baker, sheriff of our fine county of Palm Beach.”

“An honor, sir,” Captain says, shaking the mayor’s hand and realizing the face he remembered was one he had seen in the papers up north.

“Likewise, I’m sure,” Fitzpatrick smiles under his bushy, brown, handlebar mustache. “I hear you’re taking good care of this town, and especially of my friend Bradley!”

“I try, sir. I try.”

The men chuckle, and then Fitzpatrick points to a nearby chair, “Won’t you gentlemen join me for lunch?”

Bradley shakes his head, “Thank you, Fitz, but the sheriff and I have some business to discuss, and I don’t think you would find it very interesting. I wouldn’t want to subject you to political talk while you are on vacation from it.”

Fitzgerald nods, “Well, be it far from me to interfere in the business of this fine establishment and town. If you’re sure, then I am about finished with lunch anyhow. I will be off fishing up in Stuart this afternoon. Want to catch a nice swordfish.”

“Stuart is just the place for that, Fitz. Good luck!” Bradley pats Fitzgerald’s back as Captain and Fitzgerald nod to each other.

Bradley leads the way to a private table in a far corner of the room. After ordering from the luncheon menu, Bradley offers Captain a cigar.

“Now, Captain, I gather you know why I’ve called you here today.”

Dreading the impending conversation, Captain shifts in his seat and leans his elbow on the table. “Yes. I presume you mean the garbage that the newspapers have been grinding out about my involvement in your so-called ‘establishment.’”

“Exactly,” replies Bradley. “I appreciate what you have done for me, Captain, but I wonder how the newspaper editors get their information. After all, this club is exclusive to its members, and no one living in Palm Beach can be a member, millionaire or not. Only those gentlemen who live out of state are allowed membership.”

Captain’s lips curl up at one end. *Hell, he won’t even allow his own employees here to be married so that they won’t gossip club details with their wives and husbands! If I weren’t sheriff, my feet would never be able to graze the doorway.*

“I don’t allow photographs inside the club. So, where do the details come from, sheriff? I ask you. Where?”

“Rumors, Bradley. Just rumors.”

“Sure. But they have ways of sparking interest where interest doesn’t belong. My customers come here specifically because they know their identities will be safe. It could be damaging to their reputations, you understand.”

“I understand, Bradley.”

“So I expect that *The Tropical Sun* will not go through with any threatened expose on my establishment...or your involvement in the same?”

Captain coughs and takes a sip of water out of the crystal glass in front of him. *Why is this man so concerned with the issue at this point? Everything has already blown over.* He measures his words before replying, “I will make sure they don’t. And you don’t really have to worry, Bradley. The grand jury cleared me of any wrongdoing in the matter. The suspicions are down.”

“I will choose to trust you on this, Sheriff. But with the election coming up, and your opponent promising to keep liquor legal, there is a possibility that sometime in the

future, I may not be able to accommodate—or afford—the good works I’ve been bestowing upon this town. That would be very...unfortunate, sheriff.”

Feeling hot, Baker takes another sip of water. *If this son-of-a-bitch thinks he can ride my ass like a dog to a bitch in heat, he has a rude surprise in store for him. His ruse can be blown with a flick of my hat to the governor.* “Yes, I agree, Bradley. I assure you, I have the situation under control. Like I said, you know how these newspaper editors are, after all. Trying to entertain the people to sell their papers. I wouldn’t put much stock into what they say.”

“All the same, sheriff, the people tend to believe what they read in the papers, and I’m concerned that if you lose the election, more than just liquor will be at stake. Hell, it really makes no difference to me if liquor is legal or not. Wouldn’t hurt my club any. It’s the other, more profitable business I’m worried about. We both know I don’t make money on this dining room or liquor. Let’s not roll the dice ourselves on this matter, sheriff. Put an end to it. *You* can’t afford for these suspicions to go on.”

Waiters approach and place bowls of clear green turtle soup and crystal glasses of red wine before them on the table. Captain welcomes the interruption and takes the opportunity to breathe in the aroma of the freshly baked bread. “I certainly can say that the excellent quality of food here is not just rumor!”

As the two men begin to eat, Bradley replies, “Just make sure you are able to keep eating the good stuff, Baker.”

His surname being used not lost on him, Captain takes advantage of the flow of wine at the table.

THE USUAL RESULT

Two of the papers of the county have been especially bitter in their attacks on what they call the liquor interest...Sheriff Baker has been the subject of much attack, and as the campaign developed it became evident that he was to become the storm center of the attack...The election was a victory for the sheriff, and had little to do with the real moral questions involved in a wet or dry election. The very narrowness and hypocrisy of the hot-headed abuse probably contributed very largely to the result. —The Miami Herald, 5/3/1913

December 1913

Thirteen-year-old Charlie and his friend Pete enjoy the mild, dry weather while poling their glade skiff through the underbrush of a swamp behind Lake Worth. They duck under the overhanging canopy of tree limbs while avoiding the thick, spidery roots of the mangrove tunnel. Water moccasins slither beside the banks, indistinguishable from the twisted mangrove roots.

The skiff floats into a small clearing, and the boys pole onto a brown sandbar rising just beyond some mangrove roots. Sitting down on the canoe bottom, Charlie pulls out a canteen to drink a swig of water. Pete lies half-way down on his side of the skiff and rests his elbows on the side of the boat. The sounds of the swamp surround them, with bird wings flapping in the air, fish splashing in the waters, and small animals scurrying over fallen leaves. Not another soul in sight amidst this putrid-smelling swampland.

Charlie sighs. "How long have we been out here with no sign of no turkey?"

“Bout three days,” Pete drawls, “and we should be heading back home tomorrow.”

“Damn,” Charlie shakes his head. “I told Ma we’d get a good, big turkey for Christmas dinner, and it looks like we’ll just have to fish again.”

A strong voice echoes from behind a mangrove trunk, “Fishing? Who wants to go fishing?”

Both boys jerk their heads toward a tall man approaching their skiff. Grabbing their paddles, they stare at the stranger. With dirty clothes, unshaven face, and unkempt hair, he looks like he has been out here a lot longer than the boys.

“Hi, boys. Where you from?”

“Uh,” Charlie stammers. “From Boynton, sir.”

Pete swallows and replies, “And I’m from Delray.”

“Aren’t you boys in school?” the stranger asks.

“Uh,” Charlie repeats. “No, sir. We’re out for the Christmas holiday.”

“Oh, so you go to West Palm High School?”

Charlie looks at Pete with an unspoken question. *Should we trust this man? He seems pleasant and all.* Pete shrugs, so Charlie looks back at the man and replies, “Yessir.”

“Well, now, I have a younger brother who goes to that school,” the man smiles.

Charlie and Pete look at each other again, relaxing their shoulders, but the man interrupts their silent communication. “Like to kill a turkey?” he asks.

Both boys swing their gazes back to the stranger. Pete blurts, “Yeah, but we’ve been out here three days and can’t seem to find any, much less shoot at any.”

The man smiles wide. "I'm kinda lucky at getting turkeys!"

Not knowing what's got into himself, Pete croaks, "Okay, get in the canoe!"

Charlie casts a quick glance at Pete as the man climbs into the boat. Again, Pete shrugs. Facing the man, the boys pole back out into the canal and towards the deeper part of the swamp. The man says nothing as they pole about a mile down the canal, but when the canal narrows into a dense section of swamp, he commands to Charlie, "Give me your gun, son."

The boys stop poling, and Charlie slowly reaches for the brand-new double-barreled Remington Shotgun that his father let him borrow to get a turkey. Biting his lip, Charlie hands the gun to the stranger.

"Now stay in the canoe, so you don't scare the turkeys away," the stranger says and leaps out of the canoe into the shallow water on the low side bank, wades into an opening between some swamp trees, and disappears.

The boys wait.

Too afraid to say anything, the boys cast furtive glances to each other every few seconds. They strain to hear any noise that might tell them where the man had gone, but there is no splashing of water, no rustling of underbrush, no shooting of a shotgun. Nothing.

"Damn," Charlie whispers. "I bet he's done stole my gun. My dad's gonna kill me for letting a stranger take his gun!"

"Maybe he'll come back," Pete whispers back.

Charlie gives him a grave look and rolls his eyes. “Yeah, and maybe he’ll have a great, big, fat turkey, too. One for each of us.”

Pete shrugs and looks away.

Charlie takes a deep breath and steps out of the canoe into the water.

“Wait!” Pete grabs his arm. “Where’re you going?”

“Out to find him.”

“You can’t! What if he shoots you?”

“He ain’t gonna shoot me!” Charlie says, his soft voice belying his fear.

No sooner does Charlie take a few steps than a gunshot cracks through the trees, causing Charlie to spin around and air-dive into the canoe, almost overturning it. Pete grabs Charlie’s arm again, and both boys look toward the opening where the stranger disappeared twenty minutes before.

With bated breath, they see the man reappear from behind a clump of saw palmetto with a huge turkey thrown over his shoulder. The boys’ mouths fall open.

“Now put me across,” the stranger says as he gets back into the boat and lays the shotgun and turkey down. The boys scurry to get their poles and take the man to the other side of the canal.

When they reach the destination and the man jumps out of the boat, Charlie feels guilty for thinking the man was a liar and had stolen his gun. He hoarsely asks, “Do you need anything else, mister?”

The stranger swings around quicker than a gator and in a deep, loud voice asks, “No! Why?”

“Uh,” Charlie stammers. “Well, we got plenty of grub to spare.”

“No, thanks,” the stranger replies in a calmer voice. “I’m waiting to meet a feller.”

“Okay,” Charlie says. “Well, thank you for the turkey.”

The man nods and turns away as the boys pole back up the canal.

Several hours later, the sinking sun casts a pale orange and pink across the far horizon as Charlie and Pete turn their glade skiff back south after field dressing the turkey. When they pass the place where they had left the stranger, they see him sitting with another, older man on the canal bank. The older man waves as the boys pass by; Pete waves back, but Charlie stares straight ahead and poles a little faster.

The mangroves throw lengthening shadows across the water while crickets and frogs begin to chirp and belch. A chill moves through the air, so the boys roll down their long sleeves.

“I think I know that old man,” Charlie shivers.

“Yeah? Who is he?”

“Old man Ashley. John Ashley’s dad!”

Pete’s eyes widen. “You gotta be kidding me! Do you think--?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think...yes. Maybe. Maybe that was John Ashley that shot us that turkey!”

“But John Ashley isn’t in these parts no more! All the newspapers say he ran out of the state last year.”

“Like my grandpappy says, don’t believe everything you read. Maybe he’s back to see his family.”

“Oh boy, wait’ll we tell the fellas at school that we met a fugitive with a thousand-dollar reward on his head!” Pete hoots.

“Yeah, well, have you thought that maybe there’s a reason for the reward? I mean, he’s a wanted man who nobody can find. And he seemed mighty funny-acting when we dropped him off. There has to be a reason nobody can find him when we found him pretty easy.”

Pete, still hooting, whistles, “O’course there’s a reason! He can shoot the head off a quail from a hundred feet while sitting in a moving wagon! No one wants to touch him! And *we* met him and he didn’t even have no gun and—“

“Listen!” Charlie puts his hand up. They listen as a pack of dogs yammer in the woods alongside the canal, getting closer.

“I know them dogs,” Charlie whispers.

“What?” Pete cracks, “How would you know one dog’s bark from another’s—“

“Shut up!” Charlie whispers louder. “I know dogs, and I’m telling you, I know them dogs! They belong to Bill Ashley.”

Pete’s smile grows into a smirk. “Oh, yeah, now you’re gonna tell me you know John Ashley’s brother’s dogs, har, har?”

“Yep, and I know his brother.”

“But you still don’t know what John looks like? Oh, come on, Charlie. I’m not dumb, ya know. If you really knew old man Ashley and Bill Ashley, then you sure as hell would’a known if that stranger was John Ashley or not. Don’t tell me different.” Pete sticks his chest out and raises his chin.

“How could I know John when he’s a man at large? I only met Bill while camping after John went missing. Met his old man, too, with Bill.”

“Well, if you know his brother and dad, why are you so scared of John Ashley then?”

“Are you kiddin’? Like you said, he’s a crack shot, and I heard he has a mean streak in him.” He spits into the water. “So, you’re not afraid of John Ashley? You want to go back and ask that man who he is? Come on. I dare ya! Let’s turn this boat around and go back right now, if you’re so tough!”

Pete blanches.

“Just as I thought,” Charlie nods. Mimicking Pete, he squeals, ““You sure as hell would’a known if that stranger was John Ashley or not. Don’t tell me different!”” He looks Pete squarely in the eye, and his voice returns to normal. “My ass.”

The moon cuts a silver streak across the water as the boys pull into their camp where they left their gear. Before they went hunting, they buried two large lard cans, because these parts are known to have mean men stealing supplies. Now the boys dig up the cans, filled with food staples.

Charlie lights the pile of black mangrove wood to smoke any lingering mosquitoes out of camp. Even in December, those pesky bugs like to steal a bite of supper, although there aren’t nearly as many mosquitoes now as in summer. After lighting the fire, Charlie helps Pete unload the turkey and the fish they caught that day.

Later, while Charlie covers the fish in corn meal and cooks it in the frying pan with pork fat from the lard can, Pete drags out the other can that holds a couple of water jugs.

“Boy, I am starving,” Pete salivates as he watches Charlie flip the fish.

Just then, Pete sees a familiar face approaching in the dark.

“Hey, boys. Want some biscuits?” The man they know as “Cuban” Meyers holds out a pan of fresh bread to them with a smile.

“Sure!” Pete yells and scrambles to his feet to grab the bread.

“Hi, Meyers!” Charlie says. “Are we glad to see you! Y’want some fish?”

“No, thanks, I got my own supper, but seems I made extra biscuits. Silly me.”

The boys eat the biscuits ravenously, not waiting for the fish to be done.

“Slow down, fellers, or you’re gonna choke!” Meyers laughs. “I guess that’s why you’re glad to see me, huh? I carry hot biscuits!”

“No, that’s not it,” mumbles Charlie, his mouth full of bread, “It’s just that we saw John Ashley today, and—“

“John Ashley? Where might have you seen *him*?”

Pete brushes his hand in the air as if he’s throwing a rock. “Naw, we don’t know for sure it was John Ashley. Just some stranger alone along the canal back a ways, and Charlie here thinks it was him because we later saw him sitting beside old man Ashley.” Pete snickers.

“Well, I heard Bill Ashley’s dogs, too,” Charlie says quickly. “I know them dogs anywhere! You believe me, don’t you, Meyers?”

The older man shrugs. "Could be, boys. Could be. But don't worry about him none. I'm sure he'd have nothing to do with two lads like you just hunting in the woods."

"He sure did have something to do with us," Pete says as he grabs another biscuit.

"Huh?" Meyers questions. "How?"

Pete takes a swig of water and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, Charlie gave him his dad's gun and..."

"What you giving someone your dad's gun for?" croaks Meyers. "Especially if you think it's John Ashley?"

Charlie shakes his head. "It wasn't like that, Meyers. This man was pretty nice. I mean, he went and shot us a turkey!"

Meyers whistles. "My, my. What a generous man. Pretty nice man to be an Indian-killer, don'tcha think?"

Charlie and Pete look at each other. Charlie leans his head to one side, thinking. "Yeah, maybe. I guess."

"Naw," says Meyers. "Probably just another hunter wandering through."

The boys smile, relax their shoulders, and stuff more bread into their mouths.

"So, how long you boys out here for?" Meyers asks.

"We got here several days ago," Pete answers, "but the hunting's been bad, at least for us. Fishing's not too bad, though. How long you out here for, Meyers?"

"Oh, a few days to hunt some deer. Just got here earlier. Sorry to hear the hunting's not too good." Meyers watches the boys eat the last of the bread. "How 'bout you fellers go out with me tomorrow? We can try to find a deer together."

Charlie finishes the last of the bread and reaches to take the fish off the fire. “Oh, boy, yeah! I’ve never shot a deer before.”

“A turkey and a deer! Our moms will be over the moon!” Pete jumps up and spreads his arms towards the moon, as if he were a ballerina. Charlie bursts into peals of laughter, and Meyers joins in their mirth.

The next morning, Charlie lifts the fly-tent flap and the skeeter bar, made of cheesecloth to keep out mosquitoes, and enters the tent to awaken Pete, who is lying on one of the two mounds of grass piles covered with a sheet.

“Tarnation, how late is it?” Pete rubs his eyes.

“You mean how early,” Charlie flicks Pete’s head.

“Ow! Cut it out!” Pete slaps the air where Charlie was a second ago. “Where were you?”

“I went over to Meyer’s camp—he’s right around that big clump of saw palmetto—to see when he wanted us to leave. And I wanted to check to see if he had any more biscuits left.”

“Did he?”

“No,” Charlie moaned. “So, it’s just oatmeal again today.”

Pete sits up and yawns. Charlie leans towards him and whispers, “I got a good look at his camp. He’s got enough supplies to last weeks out here.”

“So?”

“So...why did he say last night that he was only gonna be camping a few days? And why did he bake all those biscuits?”

Pete stretches. "Who cares? We got to eat them, didn't we?"

"Yeah, but it seems funny to me. I don't see anyone else out here, and when I asked him this morning if he was expecting anyone else, he looked at me kinda funny and said, no, he just likes to be prepared."

"Well, there you go," Pete said with a head nod. "Now get out of the tent so I can change my clothes. I've been in these here pants for three days, and I'm beginning to itch. Whether we get a deer or not, we have to leave this afternoon for home. I'm tired of these suspicions. Besides, we don't want this turkey to go bad before we get home."

John Ashley and Cuban Meyers amble through the mangrove trees in the cool evening, getting closer to the light they see flickering up ahead through the thick brush. John carries his rifle, while Meyers holds a pistol. They hear a couple of hounds whining and men talking. The wind is blowing on this dark night, so they can't hear exactly what the men are saying, just words here and there: "Ashley...fugitive...bloodhounds...around these parts...couple weeks ago...."

Meyers nudges John. "More of them deputies, you think?"

"Yeah-up," replies John in a low voice. "And not the nice ones neither."

"There are nice ones?" Meyers looks at John agape.

John blinks and shakes his head at Meyers. "Bob Baker told me some of them are telling Captain they can get me and bring me in. Seems they're mad 'cause he says he don't want me brought in. Sons-of-bitches going behind his back trying to get that reward." John stops walking and sticks his arm out to stop Meyer. "Shhhh."

John leans down and spies between two branches.

Meyers follows John's lead and watches the deputies. He can hear the men's voices more clearly now:

"The sheriff wants him brought in, y'know. He just don't want *us* to find him. Wants that big, fat reward for hisself. No, sir, it won't do to have deputies bring in the bad man. Jealous. Just jealous is what he is." The heavy-set man wearing the star badge is lying back on the ground, head propped on a meal sack, fingers laced together over his bulging stomach, hat over his head and covering his eyes. His stubbly mouth, which sticks out from under the hat, drawls, "Mmmm-mmm, that smells damn, good, Whit. Where'd you learn to cook like that? Never took you to be no outdoorsy man. Not like the rest of us. No offense, you understand."

The slender deputy squats near the fire. Holding a cast-iron frying pan with one hand, he shoos a dog away with the other. Sporting the style of the day, his sandy hair is long on top but shaved around the head, so his bangs fall over his eyes as he bobs his head up and down. "None taken, as I don't like being out in these hell holes anyway. The damn serpents from hell themselves are lying in wait for us on either side of this road grade."

The bigger man roars with laughter, "You mean those water moccasins? Just stay out of the water and you'll be fine."

The brown hound with the white face inches towards the pan again, sniffs the air, then reaches his neck to sniff Whit's face. Whit shoos him away.

"Don't you worry, Fred. I do believe I'm sleeping by this fire all night to keep those snakes away."

“You shouldn’t be afraid of no moccasins, Whit. They don’t care ‘bout you. Be afraid of Ashley. He cares enough ‘bout us to shoot us to Kingdom Come.”

“I’m not afraid of Ashley,” sniffs Whit. “I can handle a man. I just can’t handle some serpent from hell.”

“Depends on who you think is the serpent, Whit,” smiles Ted as the brown hound walks over and licks his chin.

“Bastards,” John breathes.

“What are you gonna do, John?” asks Meyers.

“Why, I’m gonna have me some fun, Cube,” John replies in a smooth voice, as he raises his rifle butt against his shoulder and takes aim.

“How long is that meat gonna cook?” barks Ted.

“If you’d get up off your fat ass and help, it’d cook a lot faster,” snips Whit.

A loud crack simultaneously pierces the air while a force like a hammer hitting steel knocks the frying pan out of Whit’s hand.

“What the hell was *that*?” yells Ted, jumping up and fumbling for his gun lying on the ground.

“Careful, John,” says Meyers in a rush, “the big one’s going for his gun!”

John adjusts his aim.

The hounds bark and howl, dark lines of hair standing straight up on their backs. Each bark pushes them a little more backwards, away from where the noise originated. Ted and Whit fumble to get their guns.

Two loud cracks in succession. Whit feels the hairs on his head swoosh, and Ted feels his belt tug as a bullet grazes his side without marking him.

Both men forget their guns and roll into the water ditches on either side of the road grade. The howling dogs follow them, their tails straight down between their legs.

The last noise John and Meyers hear is a voice droning in the darkness about Hell-serpents-and-that-son-of-a-bitch-John-Ashley.

May 1914

Rising high, the sun shoots splintering rays through the thick humidity that envelopes the piney woods near Stuart. Deputies Sam Barfield and Roy Hannon both wipe the sweat from their foreheads as they walk along a narrow, sandy dog path lined with thick palmetto brush and pine trees.

Sam carries a rifle, leaning it against his right forearm and pointing it towards the ground. Striding gangly with his long, lean body, he brings his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun. "The Ashley house should be up around that bend in the path, according to Captain."

Roy is sweating more profusely than Sam and pulls at his uniform shirt to air the sweat off his pudgy waist. He looks up at Sam and shakes his head. "About damn time.

We should'a driven the police car down here instead of leaving it back on Dixie Highway. I didn't know we were gonna be walking for a mile or two down here."

"Haven't you ever been to the Ashley's before, Roy?"

"No, and neither have you."

Sam lowers his left hand and swings his long arm to and fro as he walks. "Nah, but I've seen a few of them at one time or another. I reckon we'll find John alright. Captain didn't seem too concerned about getting him to come back with us."

Touching the pistol in his hip holster, Roy keeps an eye on the underbrush at each side of the road. "I've never met them, but I have a few friends that know them. Hear they're a big clan."

"Yeah, I believe they've nine kids altogether and some grandkids." Sam slows down as they round the bend and see the small wooden house about 100 feet away. "With a little house like that, it's no wonder they live in the woods."

Roy snorts.

As the deputies near the front porch, a dog barks and runs around the house to greet them. Both men freeze near the steps as Sam raises his rifle to the dog. The tan hound stops just short of the men's legs and barks even louder. The screen door squeaks open, and Lugenia steps forward, wiping her hands on a flour-sack apron. "Can I help you fellers?"

The dog continues to bark, and Lugenia yells, "Shine! Go on, get outta here. These are the lawmen coming to visit. Go on!" She shakes her apron towards Shine. He lowers his head, sits, and growls at the strangers.

Sam lowers his rifle and tips his hat to the lady.

“Mrs. Ashley?”

“That’s right,” answers Lugenia, squinting her eyes at the men.

“Captain Baker sent us to get John.”

“What for?” Lugenia asks as she steps forward, a frown crinkling her forehead.

“Just for questioning, ma’am,” Sam answers.

“Questioning?” She takes another step forward, wringing her hands.

Roy speaks this time, louder than Sam. “Yes, ma’am. Seems some people have seen John around West Palm and think the sheriff should bring him in.”

Hands on her hips, Lugenia looks down on the men. “And this is why y’all bring guns? Can’t Captain come talk to John himself? He knows better than to stick a rifle out like you’re ready to shoot somebody. Might be taken as a threat, deputies.”

Sweat trickles down from under Roy’s hat, and he swipes his forehead. “Well, ma’am, it’s just procedure for us to wear guns, and Captain just said go get John and bring him back for questioning is all.”

“Well, if you wanna see John, he’s down at the campsite, about a half mile up that way.” She points to the woods at the right of the house.

Sam tips his hat again. “Thank you, kindly, ma’am.”

Both men’s gazes follow her finger over white and gray sand that leads to a wall of dense scrub brush packed between tall, spindly pine trees and fat cabbage palms. Their shoulders slumping, both men stare blankly for a few moments before trudging towards the unknown behind the green wall.

Shine growls as they pass by, so Sam glances back at him and notices that Mrs. Ashley is still on her porch watching them. “I guess we take this here path. Leastways it looks like a path.”

The path narrows until the men have to push through the bushes and sharp saw-like palmetto fronds to make their way. Shine abandons them as soon as the path disappears. Even though the tangled vines, palm leaves, and pine needles block the sun’s rays, they also obstruct any breeze, making the air stifling hot.

Sam walks ahead, moving bush limbs aside. He releases a wayward branch, which hits Roy in the face. Roy yanks it aside, pulls a handkerchief out of his pants pocket and wipes his eyes. “Dammit. Why didn’t Captain come himself, like Mrs. Ashley said? I don’t like the idea of poking through this pest-infested scrub to find a man suspected of murder.”

“I dunno. I hear tell John’s a crack shot, too. Can shoot the head off a bird 500 feet away while riding in an auto machine.”

Just ahead of Sam, a large diamondback raises its tail and starts rattling. Sam stops dead in his tracks, but Roy keeps walking, still a few paces behind Sam. “Did you have to tell me tha—”

Roy runs into Sam’s back, his nose hitting Sam between the shoulder blades. Sam raises his rifle to shoot, but Roy is fast on the draw, raises his pistol around Sam, and shoots the snake’s head.

Startled, Sam looks at Roy then crinkles his eyes. “Bullseye! I wouldn’t be so worried if I was you. You’re a pretty good crack-shot yourself, taking that Bell Boy’s head clean off!”

Roy's cheeks redden. Punching Sam on, he says, "Keep goin'."

The deputies fight the brush and creep their way deep into the woods. Swatting his neck and looking at a dead sand fly on his hand, Sam shakes his head. "Damn! How can anyone live in these here God-forsaken woods?"

They come across a clearing where the scrub brush thins out to reveal patches of white sand interspersed with clumps of palmetto brush, Florida rosemary, and yellow blooms of aster. Stopping at the edge of this clearing to take surveillance, the deputies see no one. As they crawl over the horizontal trunk of a large fallen tree, they land beside two rugged-looking men sitting against the other side, who rise up to face the deputies. Wearing trousers tucked into their boots, they sport dingy-white, collared long-sleeve shirts rolled up to their elbows. The two men look straight at Sam and Roy as if expecting them.

Sam raises his rifle and clears his throat. "Excuse me fellers, we're looking for John Ashley."

The man wearing the short sleeves nods. "You're looking at him."

CHAPTER 4

Trials and Jurors

John raises a Winchester rifle to meet Sam's, and Bob Ashley raises two pistols. John has spent the last year avoiding deputies and deputy-wanna-bees trying to capture him "for the sheriff," when in fact, John knew the Captain no more wanted him brought in than his own mother. *Them assholes just want to be "the one who captured John Ashley" and get their names in the newspapers, and I'm mighty tired of them trying to ambush me. Like they can catch me if I don't want to be caught. Like these two little shits. Heard their stupid asses coming from a mile away. Just too damn easy for me and Bob to let them go. Gotta have some fun with them for a change.*

"You can stop right there, fellers," John says. "You boys are looking for me, but I don't feel right disposed to be arrested."

"I don't demand you to be arrested, John," replies Sam. "I don't have an arrest warrant, and I didn't even know it was you. Being that it is, I'd like to talk to you a little."

"I don't want to talk, and I don't want you damn sons-a-bitches to follow me anymore." John raises his Winchester a little higher. "If you hunt me again, I'll shoot your heads off."

Roy reaches for his gun.

"Hands up!" John shouts, even though he wants to laugh. *Did he really think I wouldn't see him reach for his gun?*

“Damn, that wasn’t a right smart move there, deputy,” Bob sneers. “Go on, John, shoot him. Shoot him for having the nerve to go for his gun in front of you. If you won’t, I will.”

Only wanting to have a little fun with the deputies, but knowing his brother’s hot temper, John thinks of a compromise. “Drop those guns and let’s see if you can dance!” He shoots at the ground, making Sam and Roy drop their guns and hop to avoid the bullets popping around their feet. Surprised, Bob laughs as the bullets make sand clouds around the men.

When John stops shooting, he sees streams of sweat running down Sam and Roy’s red faces and their chests heaving up and down with each breath they take. Bob continues to laugh even harder, until John yells, “Shut up, Bob. You fellers go on now. Go back home to your families.”

The deputies bend down to pick up their guns but jump back when Bob fires shots near their hands.

“Leave those guns right there, fellers,” Bob demands.

The law men back away and turn to leave, keeping an eye over their shoulders at the Ashley boys.

John lowers his rifle and calls out, “Go on back to the sheriff and tell him don’t be sending no more chicken-hearted deputies, or someone’s apt to get hurt.”

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The next day, Joe Ashley walks into Fred Cabot’s bait and tackle store carrying a rifle and two pistols.

“Morning, Joe,” says Fred, pushing worms into a can of dirt.

“Fred,” nods Joe as he lays the weapons on the counter.

Fred eyes the guns, squishes a worm in two, and asks, “What can I help you with today, my friend?”

“Seems we had some visitors in our parts yesterday,” replies Joe.

Fred returns his gaze to the bait can and watches the two halves of the worm wiggle back into the dirt. “Is that right?”

“Yep. But we took care of ‘em. See here,” Joe points to the guns as Fred looks at them again. “Give these to the sheriff for us. Tell him we got all the guns we need.”

Joe turns away, walks a few steps, then turns back to Fred and tips his hat. “Thank you kindly, Fred.”

As Joe walks out the door, Fred chuckles and scratches his head. He looks at the guns again, and it dawns on him whom they belong to and who the “visitors” were—deputies. He looks up to the door with eyebrows high and mouth open, then looks at the guns again.

“Damn worms are lucky to be alive,” he mumbles as he shakes his head and picks up the weapons.

November 1914, West Palm Beach, Florida

A light rain is falling in the waning light of the evening. Walking from the courthouse next door, Robert Baker escorts John to the separate, wooden jail building, which locals call “the calaboose.” An electric light bulb over the only door buzzes and blinks, barely illuminating the shadows in the fast-growing darkness. Despite the drizzle, moths dance circles around the light, flittering through the warm and moist tropical air.

Robert glances at John, who wears a clean, white shirt and old brown pants. He wonders that John has any clothes good enough to wear in court, considering the time he spends in the ‘glades.

Joe Ashley walks over from the road in the slow, steady mist and hands a plate of food, covered with cheesecloth, to John. The smell of fried chicken wafts through the air.

“Ma made some supper for you, son. Might not want to trust the jail food here.”

Joe looks over at Robert and gives a wink. Robert manages a weak smile.

John takes the plate of food and nods to Joe. The two men look at each other with frowns before Joe walks away and rejoins Lugenia near the road.

Robert shifts his weight from his wooden leg over to his good one. “It don’t look good for you, John. If the trial is moved to Miami, we can’t help you. We don’t have jurisdiction in Dade County.”

Robert looks over at Lugenia standing in the rain, deep lines etched across her face. Joe is next to her with his arm around her shoulders, rubbing her arm. She stares at Robert, who looks down at the rain drops bouncing off his shoe and slumps his shoulders. He turns to John again.

“If I was you—”

The breath catches in his throat, so he pauses to look away and draws a heavy sigh.

“If I was you, John, I’d drop that plate and run.”

Lifting his wooden leg up a few inches, he says, “This crippled jailer won’t be able to catch you if you run.” He gives John a wry smile. “Bet he won’t be able to shoot straight in this dark and rain neither.”

John draws his eyebrows together and searches Robert's eyes.

Robert clears his throat, looks down at his shaking hands, and fiddles with his keys like he's trying to find the correct one to the jail door. Beads of sweat ooze out of his pores as he feels the seconds ticking away. Being the same age as John, he wonders how their lives have taken such different turns.

It seems only yesterday they were scoping out the pretty girls together at the town picnic celebrating the creation of Palm Beach County and the appointment of Robert's dad as the first county sheriff. Fresh hope and a promise of new beginnings were in the air that summer day in 1909.

July 1909

The times had been fast approaching for change across the state of Florida, but especially in Dade County, which spread across much of the south part of the state. The citizens of the City of West Palm Beach became fed up with paying taxes that were used to improve new gravel roads and construct new buildings in the county seat of Miami. After petitioning the governor and a long fight, they finally won their right to a new county—Palm Beach—with West Palm as the county seat. To celebrate the new county, citizens attended a grand picnic in the park off the shore of Lake Worth to announce the county's new officials, including the sheriff, who had previously been the mayor of the former City of West Palm.

Having met the Bakers shortly after moving to Pompano in 1900, the Ashleys attended the picnic to help their friends celebrate. Joe Ashley and Captain Baker worked together for Flagler's railroad in those early days, but Captain chose to pursue a career in

politics in West Palm while Joe chose to move away from the city and homestead on drier land further north. John and Robert Baker attended West Palm Beach High School together and, being the same age, both enjoyed hunting together, drinking together, and flirting with the pretty girls, although neither had the courage nor the money to date yet; rather, they spent their money on the sure bets at the local whorehouse and drinks at the local watering holes.

The weather that day was perfect for a town picnic, with sunny, blue skies dotted with white puff clouds, and a breeze blowing in from the Atlantic. Ladies dressed in white frocks and dark skirts kept their fair faces out of the sun under parasols and banyan trees, while the men wore straw boater hats and white suits or anything light and cool enough for the warm weather. Boys in knickers and pageboy hats chased each other across the sandy grass, and girls in short dresses and bows in their hair stepped on a stool to get a drink of cool water from the fountain shaped like a pawn on a chessboard.

Sitting on a blanket in the park, shelling and popping the rare treats of boiled peanuts into his mouth, John could not believe his ears: his old pal Robert Baker had agreed to be a jailer under his dad for the new county jail.

“How can you do that?” he asked Robert while opening a boiled peanut. “You won’t be able to go hunting no more.”

“Yes, I will. What makes you think I can’t?”

“Well, you might be able to camp a day or two here and there, but forget camping in the woods for days or weeks like a normal person. You won’t be able to work when you want to and quit when you have enough money to live on. You’re gonna be TIED DOWN! Next thing you know, you’ll be getting married to boot.”

Robert smiles as his ears turn pink.

“Awww, hell, no!” John sputtered his Royal Crown Soda through his nose. “Old ball and chain? Not with Annie?”

“Who the hell else would I marry?” Robert spat a peanut shell out of his mouth.

“Well, now, I guess there ain’t nobody else, seeing as how you had to become an officer of the law to get her!”

Robert punched John in the arm, which started a punching match with the young men rolling around in the sand, scattering their peanut shells to the marauding scrub-jay birds looking for abandoned treats.

November 1914

Robert continued to jingle the jail keys in an attempt to shake the memories from his head, but they poured into his brain nonetheless. *How could so much have happened in such a short time? Those carefree days seem so long ago.* The days before Robert knew the stressfulness of being a jailer; before the taunts of nepotism surfaced because he was the son of the sheriff; before a prisoner shot his foot off and caused him to lose his lower leg; before marriage and a baby added more responsibility to his life.

And what about John? Those days were carefree for him, too, when he went hunting, trapping, and trading in the Everglades with friends, family, and even the Seminole Indians; before his trial in which Sheriff Baker practically guaranteed his acquittal; and before the unexpected mistrial, with one juror who—fresh from the “insane asylum”—refused to vote not-guilty. *That lucky bastard disappeared after the trial, much to his credit...or cowardice.*

Of course, the days since John turned himself in had not been so bad. They shared their good-natured banter, and John was even allowed to help out around the jail. In fact, the sheriff gave him free rein of the place, giving the jail keys to him whenever Robert was away. They trusted him, and why shouldn't they? Old friends, shared pasts. John even watched the younger Baker kids at their home when the sheriff took his wife out to dinner, all while John was a "prisoner." The Ashleys never breathed a word of his freedom at the jail to anyone. When Joe asked the sheriff not to handcuff his son, the sheriff consented, allowing John to remain uncuffed to and from the courthouse each day during the trial. No reason not to. Everyone just went about their business and believed that everything would turn out alright.

And everything would have turned out alright if the prosecutor didn't insist on moving the next trial to Miami, in Dade County, so that John will be away from friends here; away from having free rein about the jail; away from obtaining a possible acquittal; but not far enough away from facing a possible verdict of guilt—and death by hanging.

Robert stares at his wooden leg as he continues to shake his keys. *What would John do if our roles were reversed?*

Under his breath, Robert curses and flicks his head to the side.

"Go on, John! Beat it! Get outta here before I change my mind."

Aware of the gravity of Robert's words and not needing further encouragement, John drops the plate of food and takes off running around the corner of the jail, disappearing into the darkness. A little startled at the suddenness of John's departure, Robert looks down at the shattered plate and scattered food, then turns to the Ashleys

standing nearby. Joe and Lugenia are watching him with their eyes wide and mouths open. Robert gives a nod to them before he draws up his shoulders and yells, “John?”

Beginning to move, he hobbles around the corner where John disappeared.

“John!”

Robert squints his eyes to peer into the darkness and sees a shadow moving away. He smiles. He pauses a few seconds.

Finally, he draws his pistol and fires into the air. Walking back around the corner, he yells, “Prisoner escape! Prisoner escape!”

REWARD OF \$500 HAS BEEN OFFERED FOR JOHN ASHLEY

John Ashley, alleged slayer of DeSoto Tiger, a Seminole Indian...escaped from the jail at West Palm Beach Saturday night [and] is still at liberty...Deputy Sheriff Robert Baker was escorting the alleged murderer to his cell and, arriving there, was unlocking the cell door, when Ashley turned and ran...out into the jail yard...Sheriff Baker fired at him, but the bullet missed its mark, crashing into the fence...It is believed that Ashley was assisted in getting out of West Palm Beach.

—*The Miami Herald, 11/16/1914*

CHAPTER 5

A Very Daring Raid

February 1915

The Florida East Coast Railroad passenger train chugs to a stop in downtown Stuart, where three young men climb down from one of the cars and step up onto the pavilion. As usual, not many people are on the train, so the station is empty.

John looks across the street, over the white sand-dusted road to the green, square park lined with palm trees, then past the park to the white-washed exterior of the main street buildings. *Not many people in town today. Maybe Captain's right and this will go off without a hitch.* A wooden bench on the corner beckons to him in welcome. *Not today,* he thinks in reply. *No time to relax today.* He takes a deep breath and calls to the other two, "Ready, boys?"

Bob Ashley, dressed like John in pressed brown pants, a clean shirt, and a newsboy hat, is bobbing up and down. "Yes, and not a minute too soon. C'mon, let's go!" He sets off across the street without waiting for the others. John frowns. *Brother, you're the only one I trust to pull this caper off with me, but don't make me regret bringing you with your nervous energy. If you give us away, Captain will have our hides for not following plan.* "Kid" Lowe waits for John to move before following behind.

"Bob, remember what I told you," John says through clenched teeth, his voice low as he catches up to his brother. "Don't get excited, follow the plan."

“I know, I know,” Bob rolls his eyes. “We’ve been over it a hundred times! Follow the plan, follow the rules, keep calm, don’t lose my head, don’t get angry, no shooting, no cussing...anything else?”

Lowe points at Bob and looks at John, “I think he’s got it.”

“Smartasses,” John replies.

Bob smiles back at his brother, but John stares ahead with no expression on his face and strides past Bob. Ignoring the beckoning park bench as he passes it, he turns a corner and heads towards Main Street. The St. Lucie River looms straight ahead, the white tips of cresting water sparkling just beyond the buildings ahead. *My stomach feels just like them waves.* He abruptly stops and pivots right to face the bank across the road. Lowe and Bob stop beside him.

Bouncing up and down, Bob murmurs, “Good! There’s Coventry’s car in front. We are right on time. Yessiree!”

John puts his hand on the revolver hanging in his buckskin holster. *God help us.* “Let’s go.”

Taking long strides, John crosses the street and is pleased to see that no one is hanging around the doors of the drug store next door. He heads for the door near the corner of the brick building and opens the glass door with Bank of Stuart painted onto the glass. He is thankful the weather is cool enough to allow the doors to be closed and not open for the breeze—and ready eyes—to flow through.

The bank is a small room with a half-wall in the middle, two teller windows, and a swinging half-door. Tiny, diamond-shaped ceramic tiles shine on the floor. Local hotel owner, Frank Coventry is standing in front of Cashier Wallace at one teller window, a

local man is standing at a small table by the front door, and Cashier Jack Taylor is sitting behind the other teller window and looks up as John walks in. Blinking rapidly, he shows a small, tight smile. "Hey, John. How can I help you today?"

John walks up to Jack's window, leans against the counter, and says, "Well, y'know why I'm here today, Jack. My family is on right hard times now, and I've just got to have some money."

Jack's smile falls slightly. "Do you have a check?"

John smiles back at him. *I guess he wants to play this thing up. Well, I'm game.* "Y'know I don't have no check, Jack. Don't make this harder than it is."

"I don't know what you mean, John."

John sighs, turns to look at Lowe and Bob, who looks like he is going to bounce up to the ceiling, and turns back to Jack. "I hate to have to do this, Jack, but..." and he pulls out his gun to point at Jack. "I need you to get your hands up."

Bob and Lowe grab their own guns out of their pockets, which Lowe pulls on Coventry and Wallace, and Bob points at the customer in the corner.

Jack keeps his hands flat on the counter. "Now, John, let me talk to you for a minute. You know you don't have to do this."

A muscle in John's cheek starts to twitch. *Dammit, who told him he could stop this thing? He knows the plan as well as I do.* John shakes his head, "Get your hands up, Jack."

"John, I've known you and your family for years. You don't mean this. You can turn around and—"

"He *means* it, Jack!" pressures Wallace. "Get your hands up!"

Jack looks at Wallace, who tightens his lips and nudges his head towards his hands. Jack turns back to John and raises his hands. “Okay, then. What else do I have to do?”

John points his gun towards a door in back and says, “Jack, lead the way into the vault and grab a bag to put the money in.”

A small window near the ceiling provides dim but sufficient light into the tiny back room, revealing bundled stacks of bills lining wooden shelves along the walls. Jack grabs a folded cloth sack from one shelf and hands it to John, who shakes his head.

“Open the bag and load all the money into it.”

Jack’s shoulders fall as he pulls the stacks of money from the shelves and drops them into the bag.

John’s eyes squint as he watches Jack. *Humph. I wonder if he really doesn’t know what’s going on. Maybe it’s just regret. Hell, I’ve had second thoughts myself.*

“Y’know, Jack,” muses John, “we’re just getting back at them damn Yankees. The way I was told, this here bank is insured, and the Yankee banks’ll pay the federal insurance for this missing money. We’re not really stealing from our friends. They’ll get their money back. We’re taking back what was rightly ours from the North.” He nudges Jack’s arm. “We get to enjoy the spoils. Imagine that!”

Jack finishes loading the bags and stops to look at John. “Your grandfathers both fought in the *Union* armies, didn’t they, John?”

How the hell did he know that? John’s smile fades, and he pushes Jack back out into the teller station. He motions to Wallace. “Okay, open those drawers and give us all your change.”

Wallace opens his drawer and explains, "Mostly what we got is pennies here."

"What?" John yells as he pulls the drawer all the way out and sees rolls of pennies and some loose change. "Well, throw them in anyway."

"Which one of you fellers can drive an automobile?" Lowe demands from the customers lined along the wall.

"Not me," volunteers Wallace, emptying the pennies into the sack. "I don't even own one."

"I didn't ask you!" spits Lowe.

John backs out of the tellers' station with his gun still on Jack. He looks point-blank at Coventry. "Who owns that car running outside?"

Coventry's shoulders jump as if touched with an electric socket and blurts, "I do."

John smiles. *Of course you do, you son-of-a-bitch. You lily-livered jackasses need to follow the plan! It's not like you won't get your share, dammit.*

"Well, funny man, get out and take us out of town," Lowe says as he pushes Coventry out the front door.

Bob goes into the tellers' station to grab the sagging sackcloth full of money as John yells at the tellers, "Get out here and face the wall with this customer."

Once all the men are lined up against a wall, John and Bob back out of the bank together, Bob waving his gun in the air. "One move and I'll shoot your damn heads off! Stay here until you hear the car good and gone!"

Outside, Lowe pushes Coventry towards the driver's seat of the open convertible Model T and jumps over the seat behind him to keep his gun pointing at the back of Coventry's head.

John jumps into the back seat beside Lowe, and Bob slides in beside Coventry.

“Drive straight over the railroad tracks, turn the corner south, and fly like hell, Coventry,” says Bob. “Like John says, follow the plan.”

Coventry’s hands shake as he maneuvers the heavy gears of the car machine. As the car bumps over the tracks, John and Lowe turn onto their knees on the backseat and face the rear to make sure they are not being followed. The car squeals as it speeds left around the corner, and John turns back around to lean in to Bob. An ear-splitting explosion pierces John’s left jaw, blood splatters in a spray of red, and his head snaps back. Crashing onto the back seat, he slumps against Lowe, the vision in his right eye clouding over in a bright red blur. His head spinning in pain, he barely hears the commotion around him.

“Damn!” shouts Lowe. “John’s been shot!”

John hears himself moaning.

Bob leans over the back of the front seat. “What the hell happened? What did you do?”

“I don’t know!” Lowe screams. “I didn’t mean to pull the trigger! I swear!”

“Quick!” Bob yells. “We’ve gotta stop the bleedin’. Come on, John. Stop bleedin’!”

The voices grow distant in John’s ears as he feels cloth pressed against his neck and warm blood flow down his shirt. Not wanting to succumb to the encroaching blackness, he struggles to hang on to the voices as long as he can.

Coventry looks back and sees John's body slumping towards the car floor. The touring car bumps heavily along the crushed-shell road as blood, pouring from the open wound, soaks the cloths and spills over onto the floorboards.

"Are we there yet?" Bob screams at Coventry.

"Y-Yes."

Bob looks ahead. "Shit. Where are they? They were supposed to be here!"

"D-do you want me to stop?" asks Coventry.

"Hell, yes! We gotta get him help. This is *not* going to plan."

Just as Coventry slows the car down to a stop, three men appear with horses out of the piney woods. Bill Ashley walks in front with deputies Elmer and Whit following behind.

"Bill!" yells Bob. "John's been shot! Help us get him out!"

Bill runs to the car and helps Lowe and Bob pull John from the back seat and lay him on the grass beside the road.

"What happened?" Bill asks.

"Lowe shot John." Bob rumbles.

"It was an accident!" screams Lowe.

Bob ignores him. "I think the bleeding's slowed down. He needs a doctor."

"What?" Lowe stands up. "We can't get a doctor now! We are supposed to split the money and get away."

"Are you fucking crazy?" Bob strains to stand without letting go of the cloths pressing against John's neck. "We can't get away now that John needs help."

"We sure as hell can. I'm still following the plan."

“You fucking bastard!” Bob stands up as Bill presses the cloths around John’s neck. “You’re the one who didn’t follow the fucking-ass plan! Were you trying to kill John on purpose? I’ll kill you now, you son-of-a-bitch.” Bob leaps onto Lowe and pummels him with his fists, tears flowing out of his eyes.

Elmer and Whit pull Bob off Lowe. “Calm down, Bob, you’re not helping your brother this way,” Whit yells.

Bob continues to struggle against them.

“You’re the crazy one,” murmurs Lowe as he tastes the blood from his split lip.

“Shut up! Both of you, just shut up!” shouts Elmer. “Lowe, get the money and divide it out as planned. Whit, help Bill and Bob get John home. We can’t take him to the hospital because our cover will be ruined. I’ll go with Lowe into town in Coventry’s car and send a doctor back for John.”

Whit and the Ashley brothers heave John onto a horse and guide him home in the piney woods, John slipping in and out of consciousness.

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	<p>Technical Writer, Part-time – <i>Law Engineering & Environmental Svcs., Inc. (now AMEC), Kennesaw, GA</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued same duties as full-time technical writer, listed below Requested part-time employment after birth of first child Resigned to become stay-at-home parent after birth of second child 	1/00 - 5/02
	<p>Technical Writer, Full-time – <i>Law Engineering & Environmental Svcs., Inc. (now AMEC), Kennesaw, GA</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with engineers and scientists in writing and editing reports and proposals Created and taught writing seminars Wrote and edited marketing brochures and statements of qualification Edited and wrote articles for global company newsletter Supervised the Publications Dept. for one year, including supervision of technical writers, graphic artists, and word processing employees 	4/96 - 1/00
Conference Presentations	<p>“Saving Sacred Sources: Guiding the Bible Belt Faithful toward Explanation and away from Proclamation” (Collaborative panel with Jeff Cebulski, Julia Reidy, Jonathan Maxfield, and Carolyn Buonomo). <i>Identities in Consultation: Diversity in the South and Beyond – Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) 2015 Conference</i>. Nashville, TN. February 20, 2015.</p>	2/15
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Memberships/Organizations	<p>Golden Key National Honor Society—1988 Blue Key National Honor Society—1988</p>	