

# Family Business:

## An Outer Banks Crime Mystery

### Prologue

The intruder arrived in the late afternoon on a sunny Thursday in the middle of May. He turned the white panel van onto the gravel driveway of a quiet seaside subdivision of the Northern Outer Banks and parked in a covered carport. He turned off the ignition and grabbed a navy-colored duffel bag that lay next to him on the passenger seat. He got out and walked the short stretch south along the nature trail path through hedges of bayberry to the cottage that was owned by his intended victim. Once there, he climbed the outside stairs to the upper level of the dwelling. When he reached the top, he looked briefly over his shoulder to see the deep aquamarine blue of the Atlantic beyond the dune line that was about one hundred yards away.

The subdivision was silent. A small gray rabbit jumped into the middle of the driveway and looked up at him before it hopped back under the cover of the bayberry bushes. He turned back, cupped his hands over his eyes, and looked into the windows of the home and spotted no one. Not just yet. He put on a pair of blue latex examination gloves that are commonly used in hospitals and he chuckled at the irony of it. He placed his hands on the steel handle of the sliding glass entryway and jerked the heavy door hard up and to the left. Sure enough, it gave way just as he had practiced and he was inside.

He looked about the tidy space as he ran through the mental checklist that he had prepared for this visit, and then he went about his tasks. He was wearing his work uniform with a company's logo emblazoned across the left breast of the pale blue, long-sleeved shirt. Below the company's name and logo an embroidered line read, *Excellence In Service*. He was also wearing his nameplate. Why not? He wasn't planning on allowing her to identify him to anyone later. Besides, his nameplate and uniform were intended to provide his victim with a

very, very, brief sense of security. The 9mm Browning semiautomatic pistol that he had in the duffel bag was intended to terrorize her. Hope and despair; balance and off-balance; order and chaos. He allowed himself to briefly remember the roller coaster set of emotions that he had endured only a few years ago, and then got back to the matter at hand.

He moved across the living room and proceeded down the spiral metal staircase, making his way to the lower-level living space. He tossed the four bedrooms and found more than he had hoped to find, a handsome, highly expensive piece of jewelry covered over with t-shirts at the base of a bedroom drawer. He placed the jewelry in the duffel bag, a bonus keepsake for the time spent here today.

He went back upstairs and took a compact disc out of the duffel bag. Earlier in the morning, he had copied a song to it made especially for this visit. He walked across the living room to a stereo system that was located within a built-in bookshelf on the west wall, placed the CD into the player and pushed the “PLAY” button. Soon the electric guitar chords and the beautiful voice of Sarah McLachlan were coming through the speakers of the upper living area. The song was one of her best known, *Building A Mystery*. As he listened to the song he felt a surge of rage and retribution pumping through his veins. He looked out the wall of windows that faced the sea for a moment and cackled out loud briefly as his head swayed slowly back and forth to the rhythm of the song. The irony of the title amused him. He took a seat on a bar stool in front of the kitchen island, and placed his duffel bag on the counter-top next to him. He looked at his watch.

The single song that he had burned on the CD came to its conclusion, and in just another moment he could hear car tires crunching on the gravel driveway below, followed by a clunk of a car door closing, and the chirp of a car alarm system.

“Honey! I’m home!” He mockingly spoke into the still empty space.

The door downstairs opened and closed and Lisa Utley ascended the spiral staircase. He could hear the jingling of her keys. He was standing by the kitchen island that was bleached in sunlight as she

reached the top of the landing. She was wearing the nurse's uniform of her employer and she dropped her handbag at the sight of him.

"Hi Lisa! Boy, this place looks great!"

Her eyebrows scrunched in puzzlement as she tilted her head slightly and studied the intruder.

"You sure found a nice place here. You can't get ocean views back in Ohio," he said, as he made a sweeping gesture towards the front of the cottage with his right arm.

She noticed the blue latex gloves that he was wearing. Her eyes went straight from his face to the company logo and nameplate on his shirt, and for a moment her fright and puzzlement seemed to dissipate.

"Well, no. I mean...what are you *doing* here? I don't remember placing a call for you guys..." Her voice trailed off as she waited for an answer.

"No. You didn't *call*," he said sarcastically while he shook his head. "Just think of this as a big '*Fuck You*' visit," he said as he reached over and into the duffel bag with his right hand, took out the 9mm and pointed it directly at her face.

Both of her hands instinctively jerked up to cover the screams that were about to leave her mouth. His hand was as steady as a rock as he cocked the hammer back on the semiautomatic and pointed it between her wide open eyes. The expression on his face had contorted into an angry mask.

"You *owe* me, bitch," he snarled. "You *all* owe me!" He lunged at her quickly.

"Oh, Jesus! Oh my God," she wailed.

Her mouth remained opened and she shrieked hard in disbelief as she turned to run back down the spiral staircase. In a second he pounced and hit her once between her shoulder blades, violently, with the butt end of the weapon. Her arms flailed as she tried to catch the railing and she went silent as her body plummeted down the steep stairway. He thought for a second that he could actually hear her neck crack and break as she fell.

In a moment it was over. He carefully released the hammer on the 9mm back to its safety position, and put the gun back inside the duffel

bag. He walked down the stairs and carefully kneeling beside her, he felt for a pulse that he had guessed wasn't there. He had guessed correctly. Her head and upper neck were twisted in a way that only death could allow.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," were the sounds that left his mouth as he shook his head. "Criminal... Just *criminal*," he said mockingly, as he surveyed his victim's corpse. He could feel the burning in his cheeks and his own heartbeat pounding in his chest.

He sprinted back upstairs, picked up her keys and handbag and placed them on the kitchen island counter. Next, he rifled through the handbag and retrieved Lisa Utley's laminated photo I.D. card that she wore at work and placed it on the counter. He then located a local Yellow Pages telephone book that had been stored atop the refrigerator. After he found the listing for The Outer Banks Hospital, he took a pen from beside the phone and circled it. He left the phone book open to that page and placed the deceased's photo I.D. on top of it, next to her handbag and keys.

He returned to the stair landing and looked down at his victim's lifeless body. He felt absolutely no remorse, only scorn.

*Payback time has just begun...* he thought to himself, as he looked around the cottage space that was now a crime scene. He heard a muffled thunk come from the ice maker in the freezer, and the ticking of a clock that hung on the kitchen wall. He took a deep breath, picked up his duffel bag, and turned and left the cottage through the same door that he had used to enter.

He was back in the light of day. Back in the wind. Back in the land of the living.

## Chapter 1

On the following Monday morning, Dare County Sheriff Martin Tate stood on a boardwalk outside the Brown Pelican restaurant in the small town of Duck, North Carolina.

Duck is pleasantly situated on a ribbon-of-sand stretch of barrier islands known as the Outer Banks, with the waters of the Currituck Sound to its west and the vast Atlantic Ocean to its east. It was 7 o'clock, about an hour after sunrise. The weather forecast out of Norfolk, Virginia called for wall-to-wall sunshine and a high temperature of 85 degrees. The weather service out of Norfolk was the only one that Tate trusted because the televised, 24/7 Weather Channel rarely predicted the weather of these Banks accurately on a regular basis.

Just over 6 foot tall and generally just under 220 pounds, Tate looked younger than his forty-some years. Thick, brown hair he kept trimmed every other week topped green eyes, bushy eyebrows and a thick mustache. He was wearing his black service uniform without his hat as he leaned over a wooden railing looking down at some ducks quacking as they scuttled about in the shallow, brackish water.

A former lieutenant with the North Carolina State Police, Tate had moved his family to Roanoke Island five years previously. Three years later, he ran for and was elected Sheriff for a four-year term. Sheriff Tate was well-liked by the citizens in part because he learned to deal with the politics of the office without becoming a politician. He was also a highly skilled investigator, and he didn't suffer fools – or criminals – lightly.

He turned around to study the lunch menu of his favorite restaurant on these Outer Banks. The Brown Pelican was now owned and operated by Paul and Megan Treadwell. The Treadwells were new money northerners who had the good fortune two years back to win millions of dollars in an Ohio Lottery drawing in Lake County, Ohio, where they lived and worked. Paul was a detective in the Robbery Homicide Division of the Lake County Sheriff's Office, and Megan was a nurse. The Treadwells left Ohio that year to come to the Outer Banks where they had often vacationed, and bought the restaurant. Part of what Marty liked about them both was that they didn't have big egos, and they kept

the entire restaurant staff and didn't change a thing about it. Since there was nothing broken with the restaurant's brand, image or quality, that made perfect sense and pleased Tate to no end. He and his wife Elizabeth and Paul and Megan were now fast friends.

When he finished his query of the menu, he opened the front screened door and walked in. Paul, tall and slender with wavy brown hair, was standing behind the bar drinking a cup of coffee. This morning Tate found him attired in “beach business casual,” wearing a very fashionable cream-colored Tommy Bahama short-sleeved silk shirt, with olive colored Tommy Bahama silk pants. He looked over at Tate and smiled.

“Morning, Marty,” he called out from behind the bar.

“Mornin’ Treadwell,” Tate said as he replied to his friend with his last name only. He had a habit of doing this when he had something of some weight on his mind. “Coffee smells good.”

“Would you care for a cup? It's on the house.”

“Of course it's on the house. Haven’t I told you that providing your local constable with a cup of Joe is a long-held custom of local southern hospitality? Furthermore, I view it as part of my unofficial compensation since me and my deputies come through here in order to ‘protect and serve’ your transplanted, northern, Yankee ass.”

Paul smiled and nodded as he placed Tate’s steaming cup of coffee on the bar. Tate walked over and took a seat on one of the red leather and chrome stools.

“Before I tell you why I am here so early in the morning, would you please tell me, *what* in God’s name is a pummus fright?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It says out there on the lunch menu that you all are servin’ pummus frights along with a Kobe steak sirloin burger,” Tate said.

“*Oh*. You mean the pommes frites? That’s a French term for French Fries.”

Tate shook his head slowly back and forth and looked up at him. “Treadwell, may I kindly remind you that we all are here on the banks of the Currituck Sound in North Carolina, and NOT on the banks of the River Seine?”

“You have reminded me, but, the French version of the term carries ambiance and a little added curiosity for a guest-- ”

Tate interrupted him by holding out his left arm like a traffic cop signaling for a stop.

“How often do your servers have to explain what a pummus fright is to a local?”

“Often.”

“See my point? You'll draw more locals if you don't confuse them at the door with your menu. Take the highfalutin French off the menu and you'll be doing yourself, your guests, and your servers a big favor.”

Paul smiled and nodded. “I'll speak to Chef Books about it.”

“Good. Got any donuts to go with the coffee?” Tate looked around the bar hopefully.

“Sorry,” Paul said. “You know that we're only open for lunch and dinner. But, I do have some Virginia ham and cheese scones that Megan and I picked up from Sammy's Market yesterday and they're still fresh. Would you care for a scone?”

“Scones a French term for doughnut?” Tate asked with a smirk on his face as if he knew what the answer was going to be.

“No.”

“Alright, I'll try a scone,” he said, looking disappointed as he reached and put two sugar cubes and a small amount of cream in his coffee.

Paul retrieved the scones and presented a small plate of them to him at the bar. Tate chewed on one and drank a few sips of his coffee.

“Hmm..,” he sounded as he chewed his pastry. “Not bad. The coffee's good.”

They were both quiet. Tate clasped his coffee cup with both of his large hands – hands that looked strong and weathered like the hands of the commercial fishermen who ply the waters everyday in good weather as well as foul throughout the year.

“I've got a disturbing crime scene five miles north of here in the Sanderling subdivision,” he finally said with an even voice.

“Okay,” Paul said as he pursed his lips. Sanderling was a tree-lined and upscale development community, and it would be hard to imagine

any crime taking place there. It was also just a mile or so north from where the Treadwells lived in the Sea Ridge subdivision.

Tate looked around the restaurant from his vantage point at the bar to ensure that they were still alone before he spoke.

“It’s a B&E with a potential felony larceny, *and* the homeowner’s body was discovered at the scene.” He held Paul’s gaze for a few more seconds before he looked down at his coffee cup.

“I assume, that since you’re here so early, the deceased did not die of natural causes?”

“Glad to see that you’re keeping up with me.”

“Homicide?”

“Too early to tell for sure if it was intentional. It looks like it to me, though. For now, we’ll rule it manslaughter during the commission of a robbery. The Medical Examiner says the cause of death was a broken neck suffered as a result of a violent fall down the spiral staircase in the home. The vic was pushed, however. There’s no doubt about that.”

Paul said nothing as he shook his head.

“This isn’t something we see down here very often. In fact, it’s been decades since there’s been a wrongful death. You’ve got a good instinct, Paul, and you helped me solve that robbery case last year. I could use a second pair of eyes with this one.”

Paul glanced out the windows to the still waters of the Currituck Sound. He spotted an osprey in flight returning to its nest with a small fish in its talons. The scene outside was peaceful, serene, and in lock step with nature’s calm order. He looked down at the floor and placed his hands on his hips and began to pace back and forth behind the bar.

“Megan will have a shit-fit if I get too involved with this, Marty,” he said. “Robbery is one thing, a possible homicide’s another. How about if you just read me your notes, and I’ll give you my professional impressions... Will that do?”

“Paul, if that would do, I would’ve picked up the phone back in Manteo while I sat at my desk chewing on a genuine, jelly-filled doughnut. Instead, I’m here bright and early having some coffee and a scone, and asking you directly for some help here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look,” Tate said. “I will be happy to speak to Megan, if you’d like, but we both know that you’ve got a skill set and some experience that’s fairly atypical compared to a lot of police officers down here. I just want you to look at the crime scene with me.”

“Marty, I completed some special training with the FBI in Quantico years back. It’s the same training that you and Kenny Smith went through.” The eleven week National Academy Program focuses on behavioral and forensic science, leadership development, and fitness training for selected police officers who have outstanding records of merit within their agencies. Deputy Kenny Smith, Tate’s right hand man, was one of these officers.

Tate took a deep breath and let it out forcefully through his nostrils before he spoke.

“You’ve investigated and closed more homicide cases than I have, and your experience is a lot more recent. The last homicide to take place down here was in 1997, and it remains an open unsolved.”

“Yeah, well my last murder case in Ohio was over four years ago. The perp staged the scene to make it look like a home invasion gone wrong. Grant you, I smelled something funny from the onset and we finally got the guy. But, that whole episode sure feels like a long time ago.”

He clasped his hands together and stretched them over his head before he looked back at Tate. “Since then, mostly what I do around here is pour out free cups of coffee to traveling lawmen.”

“Look, wiseass, this is my case. I’m not asking you to get involved with the investigation. I just want your impressions of the crime scene. It seems staged to me. Just like your guy from four years ago. Like I said, you’ve got a good instinct. Just take a look around with me, *okay?*”

Paul pursed his lips again and took a pull from his coffee mug. “Okay,” he said. “Tell me what you got so far.”

Tate nodded and moved his right hand across his chest to the left-hand breast pocket of his uniform and withdrew a slim notebook. He flipped over the cover and began to read.

“The cottage is an oceanside residence on Skimmer Way Drive. The crime occurred last Thursday afternoon or early evening. The

victim's fiance discovered the body at 7:30 pm.. They were supposed to have dinner together later that night. The main living area was clearly tossed by our unknown subject. The victim's family is here now to claim the body and to take it home, and they are helping us verify the valuables that were taken from the premises. One piece is valued at over \$8000.00 dollars. There was no sign of forced entry, but you and I both know that these sliding glass doors that nobody seems to secure around here are a joke when it comes to home protection. Whoever it was looked like he entered and exited through one of them. You'd think that people would go to the hardware store and pick up a few inexpensive dowels and stick them in the door frames."

He paused and took another sip from his coffee cup before he spoke again.

"Deceased's name was Lisa Utley. She was 32 years old, and worked as a delivery room nurse in the Outer Banks Hospital in Nags Head."

"Small world," Paul said glumly. "You remember that Megan was a delivery room nurse back home?"

"Yeah, I remember. Well, the world gets even smaller, I'm afraid," Tate said soberly. "Lisa was from Northeast Ohio, too. It seems that she inherited a fair amount of money and moved down here a couple of years ago, around the same time that you and Megan did."

"No shit."

"No shit. Lisa used to work at a Hospital in Fairview Park, according to what we've got," Tate said as he flipped closed the cover of his notebook and placed it back in his pocket. "You want me to talk to Megan?" he offered again.

"No, thanks," Paul said as he shook his head. "Better she hates *one* of our guts than both of our guts. I'll call her right now. I'll keep the details to a minimum, but, she has a right to know what I'm helping you with."

Tate nodded. "Okay. Fair enough."

"When will you need me to go with you?"

Tate stood up, and wiped his mouth with a white linen napkin. "I'll be waiting by the car," he said, as he turned and walked towards the front door.