

# **The Murder of Ernest Luttrell**

**by Michael Troy McDaniel, ...**

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# Part 1

## Who Murdered Ernest?

*“I knew from day one, the truth would prevail, but I was so scared I didn't know what to do.”*

—Susan Smith after drowning her two children

Caddo Parish is in the northwest corner of Louisiana and borders Arkansas and Texas. The city of Shreveport, population 200,000, is the parish seat. Shreveport was a cotton town in the 19th Century and an oil town in the 20th Century, but in 2006, it became known as a venue for the film industry. Thirty movies were shot in or around Shreveport between 2006 and 2011. In addition to entertainment, the natural gas industry discovered that north Louisiana was sitting on one of the largest natural gas deposits in the world. The deposit, known as the Haynesville Shale, was a timely economic boon for the parish.

Aside from movies and natural gas, Shreveport is known for its crime rate. In 2010, it was listed as the 12th most dangerous metropolitan area in the U.S. However, outside the city limits of Shreveport, things are a little quieter. The deputies who work for Sheriff Steve Prator in Caddo Parish like to think there is a good reason for that.

Keithville is a suburb of Shreveport located south and west of the city. Though it has existed for many years, it has been content to survive without politics. Keithville has no mayor or governing body. Fire protection and ambulance service are provided by Fire Districts that had their beginnings with volunteers. Other than safety, the main reason the Fire Districts exist is to keep insurance rates down. Police services are provided by the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office. The main attraction for living in Keithville is having close proximity to city conveniences without paying outrageous city taxes.

On July 25, 2010, the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office received a phone call from a woman in Keithville. It was 70 year old Loretta Luttrell. Loretta, known as Bobbie to family and friends, lived on State Highway 169 with her husband, Ernest. They had several acres of land and a beautiful log cabin with a horseshoe driveway in front of it.

When Bobbie Luttrell got home after Sunday School that morning, she thought her car was acting strange, so she pulled up to the mobile home behind her house where Ernest's farm hand and his girlfriend lived. The girlfriend also worked for the Luttrells, cleaning house and driving Bobbie to Shreveport to run errands. Bobbie knocked on the trailer door and told the hand she thought her tires were low. He followed her to the shop and checked the tires. Each one had only 17 pounds of pressure in it. Usually a problem occurs when one tire is low or sometimes two on the same side, but it was strange for all four tires to have half

the air they needed. He shook his head but didn't question her. He cranked up the compressor and aired Miss Bobbie's tires up. It was 11 am.

As was her weekly habit, Bobbie drove six miles to Grawood Baptist Church that morning. Ernest was not a church going man, so she made the drive alone. She was ordinarily less than punctual, but this Sunday she arrived an hour early and sat conspicuously in the auditorium while the musicians practiced for big church. It was the only time the music leader ever saw her in the auditorium before church started. At 9:30, she went to Sunday School, but when it was over she was tired and hungry. She skipped preaching and went home.

Now she was there, eager to get inside and have dinner. When the hand finished airing up her tires, she pulled the car into the garage beside the house. The thought of dinner and a nap were heavy on her mind when she walked in, but those thoughts disappeared instantly when she saw Ernest on the living room floor lying in a pool of blood from a gunshot wound to his head.

She got out of the house and called 911. The Sheriff's Office dispatched the call as a man, "unconscious and not breathing". Since the Fire Station was half a mile away, the firemen were the first to arrive. They stepped inside, took one look at Ernest, and came back out.

Sometimes old men get depressed because they are sick or old. Sometimes depression leads to despair and despair suicide. That's what happened to Ernest Hemmingway. Maybe Ernest Luttrell did the same thing.

But the fire fighters didn't think he committed suicide because his body was riddled with bullets, and his hands were tied together. They knew by looking at him that he couldn't possibly be alive. The killer could still be inside, so they waited outside. They knew better than to destroy a crime scene.

Deputy Robert Chapman was the first cop to arrive. He was a member of the Sheriff's SWAT team. The firemen told him Mr. Luttrell was laying just inside the south door of the cabin with multiple gunshot wounds.

Moments later, Deputy Mike King arrived. King was a giant man who played professional football before becoming a deputy. Chapman and King knew there was a possibility that the person who killed Ernest was still in the house, so they followed their training and systematically searched every room, corner, and closet. Chapman wrote in his report, "While clearing the residence I did see a w/m laying—on his back in what appeared to be a pool of blood. He appeared to have a gunshot wound to his left eye and possibly his stomach and hip. He appeared to be deceased."

Chapman confirmed that Mr. Luttrell did not commit suicide; he was murdered. He also noticed there was no forced entry into the house. The deputies set up crime scene tape and started a log, recording the names of all persons who entered the house. Bobbie Luttrell sat in an ambulance in front of her house, overwhelmed by the murder of her husband. She was elderly and frail. Robert Chapman spoke to her while she was in the ambulance. He took his time. He knew she needed medical attention, but he also knew she could have critical information about the murder of her husband. The firemen would have to wait.

According to Miss Bobbie, she left for church that morning at 8:30 am and nothing seemed unusual. She came home ready for dinner, but her tires were low, so she had Ernest's man Craig (not his real name) air the tires up in the shop.

When he finished, she walked into her house and saw Ernest on the floor. She said she knew he was dead the moment she saw him. She told Chapman it was a robbery.

Seeing the bullet ridden corpse of anyone is stressful, but when it is someone you love, it is overwhelming. The healthy are vulnerable, and the unhealthy are in danger, yet despite Bobbie's health problems, she was handling the tragedy well. Chapman wrote, "Bobbie seemed very calm and recalled the incident clearly."

Craig the farmhand noticed Ernest's dual-wheel pickup truck was missing. He told the deputies, and they called headquarters to get the registration for the truck, and then they put it in the national computer (NCIC). If any law enforcement officer came across the truck, they would find out it was stolen in a robbery that left a man dead.

Keith Fox was a detective with the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office, and he lived near the crime scene. He started his career as a Shreveport Police Officer in 1984 and became a Deputy Sheriff in 2005. Fox was called out to assist with the homicide. When he arrived on scene, Chief D. E. Stevens, Captain Bobby Abraham, and Detective Andy Scoggins were already there. Andy was lead detective.

Captain Abraham pointed to a car parked in the gravel driveway south of the house. The gravel road led to the trailer where the Luttrell's hired hands lived. There were two men standing outside the car and two women inside the car. Captain told Fox one of the women was the victim's wife. Fox approached a small man standing by the car whose face was tanned by the sun. It was Craig. Inside the car were Bobbie Luttrell and Craig's girlfriend Tina. Tina was Bobbie's maid, cook, and chauffeur. Tina's son, Dave (not his real name) was standing outside the car with Craig.

Craig was a jack of all trades. He could drive heavy equipment, weld metal, or pull weeds. He had known Ernest for a dozen years and lived on his property for six of those years. Ernest had been good to him, and he paid him back with hard work and loyalty, at least that was what everyone thought. Craig gave Fox a photograph of Ernest's truck. Fox asked him directly who killed Ernest. Craig said he had no idea. Despite his sincerity, he was a viable suspect.

Fox talked to Bobbie Luttrell. She reluctantly told her story again: church, low tires, and her husband murdered on the floor. According to his report, "Mrs. Luttrell was eager to leave the scene and get out of the heat..." It was mid-July in Louisiana, but Ernest had been brutally murdered. The first hours of a homicide investigation are crucial, and the detectives needed to get all information possible. It appeared Ernest was targeted while Bobbie was at church, and the detectives needed to find out why. Her cooperation was paramount, and the Sheriff's Office had air conditioning in all their offices.

The housekeeper, Tina, was even more allusive than Bobbie. Fox asked to speak to her, but she told him she was busy fielding telephone calls. Her interview would come later. Next in line was her son, Dave. Dave said he did not know anything, but he was quick to admit he had been at the Luttrell's house a few days earlier. He said he walked to the house, sat down on a bench on the back porch for awhile, and then went back home. He showed Fox the bottom of his shoes and

told him he might find his prints on the outside of the house. If Dave was trying to be transparent, it wasn't working. It just made him suspicious and weird.

Detectives spent the rest of the day searching the murder scene. There were several guns missing from Ernest's gun cabinet. It looked like he was murdered with his own gun, and the killer escaped in his pickup truck. The murderer either lived close by or was brought to the scene by someone else.

The detectives and deputies went door to door asking neighbors if they saw anything. They didn't. Next, they stopped cars driving past the house hoping someone might have noticed something that morning. One of the cars was driven by Lieutenant Gayle McFarland of the Shreveport Police Department who lived a few miles down the road. Gayle told the detectives he drove past the Luttrell's about 9 am and noticed Ernest's two Kubota tractors in their usual spots, but his one-ton, pick-up truck was nowhere to be seen. That meant the truck was gone 30 to 45 minutes after Bobbie left for church. Maybe the killer was waiting for Bobbie to leave before he went inside.

## **Part 2**

### **An Unexpected Catch.**

*"...be sure your sin will find you out."*  
—1 Kings 21:5

On Monday, Detectives Andy Scoggins and Keith Fox did formal interviews at the detective's office. They spoke with Ernest's sister Mildred Jackson first. Mildred was close to her brother and broken hearted over his cruel murder. She knew Bobbie wasn't capable of shooting Ernest, but she said their relationship had been strained for some time. She believed she was taking advantage of her brother, and she said Bobbie and Ernest were not married. Bobbie Luttrell was actually Loretta "Bobbie" Moore. Ernest and Bobbie had been living together for fifty years. Each one had a child from a previous marriage, but they did not have any children together.

Mildred said Bobbie despised Ernest and wanted him gone so she could get everything he owned, and he owned a lot. She believed Bobbie would go to extremes to get what she wanted. Earlier that year, Bobbie had Ernest picked up on an emergency commitment order, also known as an Order of Protective Custody. Ernest had a dispute with a neighbor about a property line, and the neighbor accused him of threatening to kill him. Mildred said Bobbie took the opportunity to get him out of the picture by having him committed, but it didn't work because the hospital only held him for a day.

An Order of Protective Custody in Caddo Parish is issued through the Coroner's Office. If someone believes a person is a danger to himself or others due to mental or addiction problems, they can go to the Caddo Parish Coroner's Office and fill out a Request for an Order of Protective Custody. If the person fits the criteria,

they are picked up by law enforcement and taken to the state hospital for evaluation. Ninety nine percent of the time the system works well, but a person with wrong motives can manipulate the system, at least for a little while. That was exactly what Mildred accused Bobbie of. Fox noted in his report that she, "...told us there is no doubt in her mind that Mrs. Luttrell had some involvement with Ernest's death."

It was a bold accusation. Bobbie Moore was in the early stages of dementia and didn't have the wherewithal to organize a plot. She was 70 years old but seemed older. She probably could have knitted a fine scarf or crocheted an afghan, but she couldn't fire a .44 caliber revolver or drive Ernest's farm truck. If she had anything to do with it at all, she was not alone. It sounded like Mildred was just being vengeful.

Scoggins and Fox didn't consider Bobbie a suspect, but something happened when they interviewed her the second time that concerned them. After the murder, they considered her lack of emotion as the result of shock from finding Ernest in a pool of blood in their home, but nothing changed on day two. Her cold demeanor, appearance, and story were all the same. It seemed rehearsed. It is normal to recall details of traumatic events the next day, but her story did not deviate from the original. Detective Terry Richardson watched the interview on the monitor from another room and thought she looked emotionally detached.

After her interview, a family member pulled Fox aside. He told him he was concerned about Tina VanMoerkerque, the Luttrell's cook/maid. Right after the murder, she told him Ernest's guns were stolen from the house. He wondered how she knew since no one had been inside since the murder occurred. He also thought Bobbie was acting strange. She always called him on Sunday afternoons, but that Sunday, she called before 8 am and had little to say.

Those who knew Ernest Luttrell were on edge. Little things that seemed trivial the day before the murder suddenly seemed important. Those things could be a piece of the puzzle, but it was too early to tell. Ernest's family was scared, and rightfully so. They couldn't afford to overlook anything regardless of how outlandish it sounded. The detectives were frustrated that the person who killed Ernest was walking free and a danger to the good people of Caddo Parish.

Fingers pointed at Ernest's widow, his farm hand, his maid, and the maid's peculiar son, all of whom seemed to be unlikely suspects. Bobbie was old and in poor health, and the farm hand, his girlfriend, and her son had limited intelligence and ability. The suspect list needed to be based on something more than suspicion, innuendo, and family prejudice. The case had to be based on something solid, and it finally happened later that night, but in a way no one anticipated.

That night, the news broadcast a story on the murder. They showed a photo of Ernest while a neighbor talked about what a good guy he was. A reporter interviewed Bobbie's preacher who said his congregation was in shock over the tragedy. The reporter showed a picture of Ernest's flat bed, pickup truck and asked anyone who saw the truck to call the hotline.

Before the news ended, Andy Scoggins got a phone call. A woman told him she saw Ernest's truck in her friend's driveway earlier that day. She gave Scoggins his name and address.

Andy and Fox went to there, but the truck was gone. They knocked on the door and took the man the caller described in for questioning. He admitted Mr. Luttrell's truck was at his house because his friend Erick Crain came over in the truck, but he left shortly after dark.

Andy knew suspects often divert attention away from themselves, so he had detectives keep an eye on him while he went looking for Erick Crain. Crain was a 26 year old man with no ambition who could not hold down a job. He lived in a fifth wheel travel trailer in a trailer park behind Shreveport Regional Airport.

As Monday became Tuesday morning, Andy located Crain's travel trailer, but Ernest's truck was nowhere to be found. He knocked on the trailer door, and Erick stuck his head out for a moment, saw a badge, and slammed the door. Andy continued knocking and warning him to come out, but he would not. Andy called the SWAT team.

They watched the house all night, and then fired a canister of tear gas in Crain's trailer at 7 am. A confused, sleepy-eyed Eric Crain burst out the door, gasping for air and demanding to know what all the commotion was about. He refused to follow the simple directions given to him by men with big guns, so SWAT took him down and tied him up like a pretzel. When the effects of the gas subsided, Andy took him to the office and put him in the interview room.

Crain made sweeping denials and contradicted established facts. His life was a pattern of irresponsibility, and he thought it made him immune from accountability. It did not.

A detective's goal in an interview is to get an alibi. Andy knew his time with Erick was short, so he went straight to his alibi: where was he at the time of the murder? Erick said he was working at a body shop in Desoto Parish. Andy continued to push and found out he had a friend in Keithville named Dave. Dave lived behind Ernest Luttrell's house with his mom, Ernest's maid. On the day of the murder, Dave was the one who told Keith Fox he left his foot prints in the middle of the crime scene. Erick and Dave's friendship was suspicious.

Scoggins left the interview room and called the owner of the body shop in Stonewall. The body shop was closed on Sundays, and besides that, the owner said he fired Erick a week earlier.

In less than five minutes, Erick Crain's alibi was yanked out from under him. When the detectives broke the bad news to him, he came up with a second story. This time he said he was at a friend's house in Shreveport when the murder took place. Andy called his bluff and called the friend who said Erick came by his house on Sunday after 11 am and he was driving Ernest Luttrell's dual wheel pickup truck. Erick's day started with tear gas and things were getting worse, but he denied killing or knowing Ernest Luttrell. Despite his denial, his friendship with Dave and his possession of Ernest's truck were no coincidence, and he couldn't explain them away.

Frustrated with having his alibis pulled out from under him, Erick stopped talking, but before Andy left the interview room, he took a good look at him. Erick was wearing boots with a distinct tread design that looked similar to the boot prints left in blood on the Luttrell's floor Sunday morning. Andy had enough to arrest Erick, but he wanted more.

After Erick was taken into custody, the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office Patrol Division went to work looking for Ernest's truck. At 9:45 am, Greg Ardoin found it parked at an oil well site within walking distance of Erick Crain's trailer.

Scoggins arrested Crain for first degree murder. The charge made him eligible for the death penalty. At booking, Andy seized his boots for evidence. Later, forensic investigators confirmed they were the boots that left the bloody footprints at the Luttrell home on July 25.

A few hours later, a reporter from KSLA Channel 12 went to the body shop in Stonewall to talk to Erick's old boss. During the interview, the boss received a phone call from Caddo Correction Center. It was Erick making a collect call. His boss accepted the call and turned on the speaker phone. Erick talked for a moment before his boss asked him directly if he killed the man in Keithville. He replied, "Yeah, I killed him." Erick said he broke into the Luttrell's house and Mr. Luttrell surprised him, so he had to kill him. Crain's confession was broadcast on the news that evening.

The next person he called was Tina VanMoerkerque, his buddy, Dave's mother. It seemed odd that he was calling her. They say everyone has a skeleton in their closet, and Tina was no exception. Months earlier, she was investigated for stealing and using the Luttrell's credit cards. She had access to their bank accounts, vehicles, guns, and even their wills, and she took advantage of her position by using their credit cards for personal expenses. She made \$2000 worth of charges before the Luttrells knew what happened. The case was investigated by Bobby Herring of the Sheriff's Financial Crime Task Force. He had everything he needed to arrest her for felony theft, except one thing. When it came down to having her arrested, Ernest couldn't do it. Instead, he let Tina continue to work for him, and he set up a payment plan for her to pay off the theft. Few people would have done what he did.

Erick Crain robbed and murdered Ernest Luttrell, and Tina VanMoerkerque stole money from him, but why did he call her from a recorded telephone at Caddo Correction Center? It was a mystery for detectives to explore another day. They were exhausted after their all night apprehension of Crain, so five o'clock was a welcome sight. What they needed most was a good night sleep, but Lieutenant Bill Rehak had other plans. At 7 pm, he sent them out to look for Dave, Tina, and Craig.

Some people thought Craig was the missing link. He was close to Ernest, lived on the property, and his girlfriend was close to Bobbie and had access to her finances. Others felt Tina's son, Dave was the connection. He acted strange when the detectives spoke to him on Sunday. And there was Tina. Erick called her as soon as he was in jail. Maybe she just a mother-figure to him, but there was some things to clear up. The detectives needed to talk to all three of them.

They went to the trailer behind the Luttrell's house, but no one was home, so they checked area motels looking for them. They stopped at a motel in Shreveport, and the clerk told them they weren't registered, but he told them Tina spent the night there on Saturday night. They checked the motel's surveillance system and saw Tina going in her room with Erick Crain.

The stakes just went up. Tina was more than just a person of interest; she was with the murderer right before he killed Ernest.

That night, Tina was staying at a motel next to a truck stop in Greenwood, Louisiana, just off I-20 before getting into Texas. Her car was in the parking lot around back, but instead of disturbing her, Lieutenant Rehak left Sergeant Bubba Lewis and Detective Jay Morgan to watch her room while he, Scoggins, and Fox went to the jail to execute the DNA warrant on Crain.

After Scoggins got Crain's sample, they went back to the motel and knocked on Tina's door. Inside were Craig, Dave, and Tina. They took them to the detective's office to be interviewed. It was 4 am on Wednesday morning.

## **Part 3**

### **Where Did He Come From?**

*“Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool...”*

—Proverbs 10:23

At 7:30 am, an ambulance pulled in to the detective's office. Bubba Lewis was standing outside the building with Craig. They were looking at a man on the ground in front of them. Bill Rehak and Keith Fox were nearby.

Sergeant Mickey McDaniel of the Youth Services Division arrived to work early that morning. Youth Services consisted of school resource officers, DARE officers, and three detectives who worked juvenile sex crimes. Youth Services was housed in the same building as the criminal detectives. As he walked past the man on the ground he asked Bubba, “What's up?”

Lewis told him the young man's mother was inside the office being interviewed, and it looked like he had a seizure. Dave was the man on the ground, and his mother, Tina, was inside in an interview room. McDaniel didn't know anything about the case. He went inside carrying a box of folders. When he walked into his office, he looked through his window and saw Dave jump up and start hitting Craig in the face. It was the first time he ever saw a seizure victim do something like that. He ran to the front door, Taser in hand, to find Dave reeling backwards with his arms flailing while Lewis held him by the collar of his t-shirt. Lewis told him, “Get on the ground, now!”

Dave jerked away, and Lewis let go of his shirt. He turned suddenly and did not see the oak tree behind him. He ran into the tree head first with a thud, and then dropped to the ground even harder. Before he could gain his senses, McDaniel and Lewis were on top of him.

Bubba Lewis and Mickey McDaniel were born in the same month and year and were just shy of 50 years old. They cut their teeth in law enforcement twenty years earlier in the Sheriff's jail where fights and attacks were a daily occurrence. Violent people were nothing new to them.

Before the wild man could regroup, Bubba had his legs pinned to the ground, and McDaniel had both his knees across his back. Seconds later, Fox joined them and put Dave's left arm behind his back. Dave was immobilized.

Despite his restraints, Dave fought back. The blow to his head from the tree, and the fall to the pavement did not affect his abilities. He squirmed, twisted, and tried to bite McDaniel. The detectives knew he must not be allowed to get up, but it didn't stop him from trying. He fought intensely while speaking in an unknown tongue.

McDaniel lifted his Taser and told Lewis, "First time I ever had a chance to use this." Lewis stopped him. He put the Taser away, and he and Fox put Dave's arms behind his back and handcuffed him. Though Dave could not get away, he kept fighting and sliding down the slope which led to a creek. Like a fish out of water, he was determined to reach the creek. On cue, the three men lifted him up and lay him on the sidewalk where Lewis put Dave's legs in a figure four leg lock, and the others pinned his shoulders to the ground.

McDaniel tried to talk to Dave, but he babbled unintelligibly except when he reverted to English to swear. He turned his head to spit on the sergeant, but Mick dropped his hand across his face and covered his mouth. The slap angered Dave, so he tried to slide his hands out of the cuffs which were not double-locked. He was dangerously close to freeing himself when McDaniel reached down and squeezed them tight. Dave tried to twist the handcuff chain around the sergeant's fingers, but he pulled his hand away and put Dave in a rear wrist lock. He screamed and cursed him out.

Dave was under control, and now it was just a matter of loading him up and sending him to LSU Medical Center, but one of the firemen approached the detectives and said, "Sorry guys... under the circumstances we won't be able to transport."

McDaniel was clearly irritated and told him to leave. Fox called dispatch and asked for a patrol car. While they waited, Dave never stopped fighting, cursing, or babbling. After ten minutes, a patrol car with lights and siren pulled in. It was John Baccarie. He ran over and helped load Legion in the back of his patrol car.

Baccarie pulled out his pad and started writing down information. After five minutes, McDaniel remembered Dave in the back seat of the patrol car. When they left him, he was handcuffed behind his back and laying on his stomach. He went to the car and opened the driver's door to find Dave sitting up and in his right mind. Surprised at the transformation, he asked him a question.

"Hey... who killed the man that lived in front of you?"

"My Mom."

He knew Eric Crain was in jail for the murder because he saw it on TV the night before, and it didn't make sense to him that a woman was involved. He asked the same question again.

"Listen... who killed the man who lived in the house in front of you?"

The answer was the same, "My Mom."

Maybe Dave was still out of his mind, so he tried it again. He didn't say Ernest Luttrell's name because he didn't know it.

"Dave... I want to be sure you understand what I'm asking you. There was a man who lived in front of you that was murdered last Sunday. Do you know who did it?"

Dave, frustrated at being asked the same question repeatedly, did his best to make him understand, "My Mother."

McDaniel believed him.

## **Part 4**

### **Empathy.**

*“Patience is the art of hoping.”*

—Marquis de Vauvenargues

While Dave was keeping the detectives busy in the parking lot, his mother, Tina VanMoerkerque, was inside in an interview room. Andy Scoggins, Keith Fox, and Jay Morgan were in the sergeant’s office watching her on the monitor. They talked to her for two hours, but she did not admit anything. Andy knew she was involved and thought she might cooperate if they could charge her with something. He was on the phone with an Assistant District Attorney when Mickey McDaniel walked in. McDaniel told Fox and Morgan what Dave told him in the back of the car moments earlier. Morgan pointed at Tina on the monitor and said, “Hey Mick, you ought to talk to her.”

The detectives had been at it since Sunday at noon, and they were exhausted. McDaniel had a reputation for talking to suspects, but he was in Youth Services not Persons Crimes. He didn’t work for Lt. Rehak, and he understood the chain of command. The detectives told him they needed a break. They knew Tina was involved, but the evidence against her was underwhelming. She was still talking when they left the interview room, but she only admitted to what they already knew. Andy was going to write a warrant on her for conspiracy to rob and murder Ernest. Until he finished the warrant, there was time.

Warrants are a great tool, but sometimes they can alert a defense attorney to weaknesses in the case. When the police have a suspect in custody for a serious crime and they have evidence against him, they arrest him on probable cause without a warrant. That was what happened the day before with Erick Crane. After interviewing him, they arrested him for murder. They didn’t get an arrest warrant; they simply booked him in jail and turned in an affidavit of probable cause. On the other hand, if probable cause is limited and the detective decides to get a warrant instead of making a probable cause arrest, the defense attorney might pick up on it and charges could be thrown out or reduced.

In her interview, Tina told them she stayed in a motel the night before the murder because Craig was drinking and using drugs, and she was afraid of him. They knew her excuse for staying at the motel was a lie. Craig’s bad habits never bothered her before, but she needed an excuse for being with the killer before the murder. When pressed, she denied taking Erick to the scene. She said she left the motel with him on Sunday morning, but she dropped him off before she got to the Luttrell’s house.

Her alibi was convenient. It would have been pertinent information if she told them about it three days ago. If she would have, Erick would have been arrested

on Sunday and the case all summed up. There was a reason she didn't tell anyone about it on Sunday. Knowing and spending time with a killer did not make her a killer, and the detectives knew it. They also knew there was more to the story, but so far, they couldn't prove it.

Scoggins told McDaniel about the case while they watched Tina on the monitor. She was short, heavy, and didn't have her teeth in. A month earlier she turned 44, but she looked older. When Andy and Fox left her, she was still talking, and she would continue to talk if someone would listen. McDaniel was that someone. The question was: would she talk nonsense or the truth?

McDaniel walked into the interview room just after 8 am to find Tina VanMoerkerque standing up and pacing the room. He told her about Dave going to the hospital. She said he was ADHD as a child, but she never knew him to have seizures. He was recently released from the mental ward at LSU Medical Center for depression. If she was concerned about him, she hid it well. Apparently, there were other things on her mind. She was tired, and the murder had everyone on edge. Now she was being accused as a conspirator in Ernest's death. If she had nothing to do with it, she too was a victim. Ernest gave her a job, a home, and forgiveness for betraying his trust. Without him she would not have a home or food on the table. Her future was in jeopardy.

For all his impulsiveness, McDaniel was patient that day. He took his time and developed rapport with the maid. He looked in her eyes and asked her if she was alright. She said she wasn't but wouldn't say why. She told him she was a Christian and like her boss, a Baptist. People who try to hide things will say anything, and religious talk is usually their first defense. He didn't confront her about her hypocrisy. It wasn't time for that yet. Genuine suspects don't care much about truth or justice; they only care about things that affect them directly. The detective's role in the interview room is to be nonjudgmental and show genuine concern. If he can do that, suspects will eventually respect him, and it is hard to lie to someone you respect.

Innocent until proven guilty was the detective's creed, but there was a problem. After four hours in custody, Tina Marie only admitted to what they already knew. Unless there was additional information, the case against her was weak. Though she still held out a facade of cooperation, she was entrenched, and she felt safe in her foxhole where only a direct hit could harm her. McDaniel climbed into her foxhole, felt her pain, listened to her, and immersed himself in her world. He imagined she was the woman she portrayed herself to be, and he wanted her to be that woman. When he asked what was going on in her life, she replied, "Oh, Lord, here we go again. Can we step outside and let me smoke a cigarette, and I'll tell you all you want." He held her off because he needed her alibi first.

She retold the story of seeing Erick Crain at McDonald's on Saturday. He was her daughter's ex-boyfriend, and they used to live in the same mobile home park. They caught up on old times and before leaving, exchanged phone numbers. When she got back home, she got in an argument with Craig about his drug use. She got upset, left home, and called Erick. She picked him up and took him to a motel for beer, pizza, and sex. The next morning, she went home. It was 11 am, 10 am, or maybe 9 am. On the way, Craig threatened her on the phone. She was afraid, so Erick agreed to go with her and protect her. She dropped Erick off at the road in

front of the Luttrell's house while she checked to see if Craig was acting right. She promised to signal him from the trailer if there were any problems.

She checked on Craig, and he was asleep. Before she could signal Erick, Mrs. Luttrell called and said her tires were low. She woke Craig and told him to go out to the shop and help Loretta. While Craig was outside, Tina realized she needed cigarettes. She woke Dave and told him to go to the store with her. She said, "I did hear one gunshot go off before I left."

At the end of her sentence, the door to the interview room opened. It was Lt. Bill Rehak. He was not happy about McDaniel interviewing his suspect. Without any introduction, he asked her, "Are you ready?"

Tina was surprised. "What am I supposed to be ready for?"

He offered to let her go outside and smoke a cigarette. She couldn't pass up the offer.

They left McDaniel alone in the interview room. He sat there a few minutes, licking his wounds, and then got up, went to his office, and shut the door.

Before she walked out of the room, Tina said she had heard a gunshot. That was new information and a subtle admission that she knew something was going on that morning, but the opportunity to explore the news was gone, traded for a cigarette.

Lieutenant Sam Hall, McDaniel's supervisor, went in his office and sat for a few minutes. He knew what happened and recognized that an opportunity had been missed.

An hour later, McDaniel was walking down the hall when Rehak stopped him.

"Sorry about that. I needed to get something out of her car."

"No problem. I know it's not my case."

"We've already talked to her for hours, but you can go back in there if you want to."

"Well, if you don't care, I'm going back in. I doubt if she will tell me anything, but if she does, it will take awhile."

Rehak had a sudden change of heart. McDaniel didn't know that Sam Hall spoke to Captain Abraham on his behalf.

It was 9:49 am. Tina had been sitting alone for an hour and a half.

He picked up where they left off. He asked her about the gunshot she heard Sunday morning. She said she didn't associate it with Erick or Ernest. Instead, she thought it came from the shooting range down the road. When she left for the store, she noticed Ernest's truck was gone, but that wasn't unusual. On her way, she didn't see Erick anywhere, so she assumed he found another way home.

He asked her if she knew Erick was going to kill Ernest, and she said, "No sir, I did not. No sir, no clue. I had no idea. I would, you know, never even took—him out there..." In thirteen words she denied knowing Erick was going to kill Mr. Luttrell five times.

Tina said Ernest let them live in his mobile home on his property because they worked for him. It was the best deal an ambitionless person like her could possibly have, but she down played his generosity. She said she gave up her freedom to take care of Loretta. She hinted that she deserved more.

He asked her why she wouldn't kill Ernest, and she said, "Because I love the Lutrells. They give us a place to stay for free. I worked for them; I made good

money, and I wouldn't want nothing to happen to them 'cause we might have to leave, you know, now."

There are two types of criminal intent: specific and general. For a murder conviction in Louisiana, at least one of the two types of intent is necessary. For specific intent, she had to have an active desire to kill him, but for general intent, her actions would have had to directly result in his murder. McDaniel didn't think she had specific intent to kill Ernest, but he knew she was a thief. By her own admission she used the Luttrell's credit card for her benefit. Perhaps her greed was a contributing factor to the murder. Maybe she ran her mouth about Ernest's assets, and Erick called her bluff. Maybe she dropped him off at the log cabin to commit a burglary and things got out of hand.

Tina was talking, but her answers were guarded. She was scared. He left her alone while he prepared for her interrogation. All told, her interview lasted 35 minutes.

McDaniel went to his office, shut the door, got down on his knees, and said a prayer. Tina was comfortable in her trench, and it would take divine intervention to get her out of it. If she was a passive participant in a crime that ended up in murder, she needed to tell the truth about it.

## Part 5

### The Common Denominator.

*"I ain't no murderer. I had no part of it. Now, I'm telling you that's the gospel truth, man."*

—Tina VanMoerkerque

It was time to rouse Tina from her foxhole; time to impress on her the absurdity of her story. McDaniel kicked things off like this, "...here's the deal Tina. I'm gonna be upfront with you. It's clear that you were involved in this. Now, what I want to do is sit down with you and see if we can get to the bottom of it because I personally don't think that you are a murderer."

At first, she sat quietly but then said, "I'm being honest; I'm not."

She meant to say, "I'm being honest, I'm not a murder," but the way it came out she changed her mind about being honest in the middle of her sentence as if she was saying, "I'm being honest, but not really."

He had her attention. She paused before saying, "No, I'm not involved in no murder." Once again, her subliminal thoughts were slipping through. She used a double negative in her denial. In grammar and mathematics, a double negative cancels out two negatives and makes them positive. The proper interpretation of what she said was, "No, I'm involved in murder."

Seconds later, the DVD was full after recording for hours and stopped recording. It took several minutes to put a new disc in the machine, but the conversation in the interview room continued. During the break in recording, something

significant happened between the maid and the detective. The conversation sounded like this:

“Tina, you must have known Erick Crain a little better than you made out, since you spent the night with him.”

“No, not really, it was just a one night stand.”

“Oh really? Tina... how many one night stands have you had?”

Her face turned red and her mouth, void of teeth, turned down into a deep frown. She treated his comment like a punch in the face, and for a second, she had trouble catching her breath. She inhaled deeply, like a vacuum cleaner, and tears came to her eyes. She was mad and confronted him, “Are you calling me a whore?”

Though the fact was already established, it was a shocking revelation to her. He never called her a whore, those were her words, but she blamed him for it and refused to listen to reason. She growled and lashed out angrily. In a matter of seconds she went from reasonable to hateful, but Mick thought her tantrum was contrived. To him, she was trying to relieve her stress and find a reason to despise him.

By the time the recording picked back up, she was in tears and cussing him. When he didn't give her the response she expected, she admitted he did not call her a whore. He said, “No, I asked you a question. There's something there that bothers you for you to respond like that. And what I'm hoping is, is that all this is coming down to this moment and you're recognizing just how serious this is.”

“What are you talking about now? How serious what is?” Her lack of understanding was disingenuous. From the start they had been talking about Ernest's murder, but she could only focus on herself. It all hinged on what might happen to her, not on a man who was brutally murdered and his ailing widow.

He told her he knew she was involved in the murder. “I was not, man.” Her denials were getting weaker. Tina was wearing down.

“You were a part—listen, don't be mad at me because I'm simply being truthful, okay.”

“How can you figure I was at fault...I wasn't. Tell me.”

She wanted to find out what he knew, but he knew nothing. She said she didn't know what Erick was going to do when she dropped him off Sunday morning. There was a piece of the puzzle hidden inside a woman who had been gambling her entire life on how to get ahead. He was calling her bluff, hoping she would cut her losses. He had to make her believe the gig was up, and the truth was the only way she could survive.

He left the murder alone and concentrated on his theory that she brought Erick there to do a robbery or burglary. He drew her out of her foxhole by asking closed ended questions, but he was dangerously frank, “Tina, you are the connection between the robbery, the theft of the truck, and the murder. You are the connection. You know that. You brought him to the scene. The knowledge that he had of the Luttrells or anything there, it's because of you.”

She retreated to the only place she knew which was a victim, and she told McDaniel he was rude and mean. He knew she was trumping things up as a

means of self protection. If she could find a reason not to like him, she had an emotional excuse to lie to him. In her world, hurt feelings justified deception.

But instead of getting angry and giving her reasons to hate him, he listened and showed concern. When she paused from accusing him of harassment, he asked her, "Can you honestly say that I've harassed you, really? Can you honestly say that, Tina?"

Her face was red from tears. She stuck her bottom lip out like a pouting child and said, "Worser than any drill sergeant."

He laughed. It wasn't a mocking, self-serving laugh; just a genuine response to her exaggerated accusation. Perhaps she was trying to make him angry, but it didn't work. He looked her in the eye, shook his head and smiled. That was when something unexpected happened.

Instead of continuing her charade, a smile broke through her tears and a laugh sprang up from the deep that made her belly shake. The two of them laughed together, and in that moment, Tina VanMoerkerque and her interrogator became friends.

Things were different after that. For the next twenty minutes, he told stories about the past and related them to her situation. She nodded and smiled and ended his sentences for him. They looked like two friends reminiscing on old times. When the time was right, he leaned forward and said, "You're leaving some things out. You need to fill in some blanks. You know what I'm talking about, Tina?"

She knew.

"Can me and you grab a pop and go out here and smoke a cigarette?"

Just like that, he lost her. It was the beginning of the end.

## **Part 6**

### **Ass u me.**

*"Sometimes nothin' is a pretty cool hand."*

—Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke

He normally wouldn't let a suspect leave in the middle of an interview unless it was an emergency, but Tina had been there for hours. He once got a confession on a double homicide after giving the suspect a cigarette, so he took the gamble and grabbed a bottle of water and took her outside. It was after 11, and she had a three pack a day habit.

As soon as they walked outside he realized he made a mistake. Craig was there, standing by the front door. McDaniel stepped between him and Tina to distract her. She didn't seem to notice him, and he didn't speak to her. He took her to the north side of the building in the shade where they were alone.

It would reach 100 degrees before the day was over, but the morning was partly cloudy with a breeze. Tina reached in a leather case and found a king size

cigarette. She lit it and took a deep draw. McDaniel thought she was playing him, but he wasn't going to give up without a fight.

The cigarette cleared her mind and filled her with optimism. She smoked while he talked; occasionally shaking her head to let her new friend know she was listening while at the same time she prepared to fold her hand and ask for a new one. After five minutes, she exhaled a cloud of smoke and interrupted him, "I'll tell you everything if you promise not to take me to jail!"

He spent the last two hours with her, chasing false leads and mending hurt feelings, and she denied being involved despite compelling circumstantial evidence against her. Before they came outside she told him, "As God is my witness, I did not 'cause that was a good man!" But now everything changed. She admitted for the first time that she knew what happened to Ernest.

It was the nicotine that changed her mind, but he had an obstacle to overcome: she did not want to go to jail. The only way that could happen was if she was a witness, but she wasn't. That possibility went away when she took Crain to the scene before the murder. She was involved, but he didn't know how deep. If he told her she wasn't going to jail, it would be a lie. "Tina, you could have asked any detective in this office to make that promise, and they would have, but I won't because I am not gonna lie to you."

She said her story was important, but he didn't budge. She lit a second cigarette from the first. Most suspects who promise to have important information rarely deliver. He never showed his hand, but she thought he had something on her. She fidgeted with her cigarette and paced back and forth in a small circle. She lit her third cigarette from the second and inhaled deeply.

"Promise not to take me to jail, and I'll tell you the truth... because, because someone else was involved."

Despite her effort to garner a deal for the information she was withholding, she revealed something new: someone else was involved in the homicide. It got his attention, and she knew it. With renewed resolve, she decided not to talk until she had his guarantee that she would not be held accountable for anything she said.

He knew she was involved, or she would have told her story to Keith Fox right after the murder occurred three days earlier. He also suspected the information she was holding, if true, would put her in jail for a long time. He asked her questions, but she would not answer. If they walked back inside with nothing more, it was all over, but words are not the only way to communicate. He drew her into a game she could not resist.

One-by-one, he gave her the names of the people she told him about earlier, and he asked her if they were involved. After each name, she shook her head. When he exhausted his list, he said, "Did we talk about the person earlier?"

She nodded.

Having gone through every man he could remember, he asked her if the person involved was a woman. She nodded yes.

"Tina... you didn't mention any women to me." She nodded her head and closed her eyes, frustrated that he was overlooking the obvious. He held up the palms of his hands and shrugged his shoulders. She broke her silence with one word.

"Loretta."

"Loretta? Who is Loretta?"

“His wife.”

He remembered the little old lady who was in the office on Monday. He knew her as Bobbie Moore. To McDaniel, accusing a woman who looked like his grandmother was like desecrating a grave or cutting down a fruit tree. It didn't seem possible, and Tina read his mind. When he looked up at her she was bobbing her head up and down to silently confirm what she told him.

Tina slipped. There was no deal in place, no promises made, or guarantee of leniency. Armed with this new information the detectives could track down the rest, but McDaniel was not content. He wanted everything.

“Tina, you know what this means?”

She sat on the steps in front of the back door and nodded.

“This means you have a lot of explaining to do. This doesn't make sense.”

She pulled on her cigarette until it was down to the filter, flicked it onto the sidewalk, and broke her silence once again.

“I know... I know.”

She had been holding it in all week, and now it flowed out unencumbered. She thought her forthrightness would clear her name, but instead, it sealed her fate. She downplayed her role, but ultimately she was the common denominator in the plot to kill Ernest Luttrell.

Tina did Loretta's cooking and cleaning and drove her wherever she wanted to go. She knew the Luttrell's habits and secrets. She knew Loretta and Ernest were not married. She knew Ernest had a son with his first wife that died a few years back, and Loretta had a daughter from a previous marriage and a granddaughter.

Ernest retired from Foremost Dairy a decade earlier. After retirement, he built a log cabin in the country on a small farm. He cut hay and did a little farm work. When natural gas was discovered in north Louisiana, many landowners in the area, like Ernest, leased their property to gas companies such as Petrohawk or Chesapeake. Ernest leased his property and put the money in the bank.

According to Tina, the thing that kicked everything off occurred in May when Loretta's granddaughter graduated from college. Ernest and Loretta went to Texas for her graduation. When Ernest congratulated her, she thanked him and asked if he was still going to pay for her graduate school. She told him it would cost \$50,000.

If there was ever an agreement, Ernest did not remember making it. He ignored the veiled demand. When they got back home, Loretta asked him when he was going to send her the money. He ignored her too, but she kept it up. When he had enough, he told her to mail the girl a check for \$1000.

Loretta was not happy. She accused him of reneging on his promise. She told Tina she hated him. Tina tried to reason with her, but she wouldn't listen. She said, “The only way out is to have him killed. Do you know anyone who would kill him for \$1000?”

One thousand dollars was the amount of Ernest's gift to her granddaughter, and the price of her old man's life, but she forgot the old saying: you get what you pay for.

With feigned bewilderment, Tina asked the detective, “Can you believe she did that?” Her indignation didn't keep her from volunteering to put a plan in motion to have her boss executed. She did not mention what she expected to get out of it,

but when Ernest was gone, she had an inroad to the log cabin, access to Loretta's bank accounts, and leverage on her for the rest of her life.

She saw her old friend Erick Crain at McDonald's on Saturday. Later that evening, she spent the night with him at a motel in Shreveport. She offered him \$1000 to murder Ernest, and he told her, "I'll do it. I need the money."

Loretta moved money to different savings accounts to hide it from Ernest. She changed his will to ensure her daughter and granddaughter got his assets when he died. Everything was in place to speed up the natural course of events; after all, he would die soon anyway, might as well speed things up.

Loretta called Tina at 8:30 am Sunday morning, the Lord's Day. She told her to make the murder look like a robbery. She said Erick could have Ernest's guns and his truck when he finished his dirty work. She left her boyfriend of 50 years asleep, turned the house alarm off, left the doors unlocked, and drove to church to worship God.

Tina dropped the killer off in front of the cabin, and he went to work. Inside, he found Ernest awake, so he shot him six times with his own .44 pistol. When the deed was done, he loaded up the guns and drove away in the dual wheel pick-up. In a matter of minutes, Erick Crane made one thousand dollars, or at least he thought he did. Before it was over, he got far more: free room and board for life.

Later, the detectives found out Tina gave Erick the murder weapon before he went inside the house. She probably gave him the truck keys as well. The pistol he used to kill Ernest was later found buried in his friend's backyard.

Tina did not feel responsible for the murder. She blamed everything on Loretta and Erick.

When her confession was complete, they went back inside. McDaniel left her alone in the interview room while he told the detectives what happened. The confession changed the atmosphere throughout the office; even those who had no part in the investigation knew something special occurred. There was no longer a need to get a warrant for Tina because she provided all the probable cause necessary for her own arrest. She talked herself into a first degree murder charge. She gambled and lost.

McDaniel re-interviewed her to get her confession recorded. She thought she was clearing her name and wouldn't go to jail, but he never made her any promises. His theory that she was involved in a burglary or robbery and not the murder was wrong, but his approach was right. Confessions are the result of control, time, patience, and respect. They don't come easy and always at a price because the detective must put himself in the shoes of a criminal and try to understand what he did and why he did it. The process ends up in a relationship that cannot be maintained because the accused goes to jail, sometimes for life. It is a heavy burden, and for that reason, few detectives do what it takes to get a confession. It's easier and less painful to go through the motions.

Tina could have reminded Loretta that murder was wrong, and it would ruin her life. She could have saved everyone a lot of pain, but she didn't. Instead, she thought it was a good idea to set a plan in motion to satisfy Loretta's desire for revenge. Her confidence in an old woman with dementia was naive, and her choice of a hit man was foolish. Now that it was all over, her cooperation broke the case wide open, and her confession filled all the gaps, but it did not reduce the tragedy.

She told McDaniel she and Loretta had been talking on the cell phone trying to make arrangements to get Erick his money, so he could bond out of jail. They didn't realize one thousand dollars wouldn't come close to paying his bond. Talking to Tina, keeping secrets, and getting money to keep Erick and Tina quiet was getting harder for Loretta to do. People were starting to notice her need for privacy, and they were getting suspicious.

Tina was expecting a call from Loretta. McDaniel asked her, "Let me ask you something. Can we call her and say, 'Hey we need you to—we need to go get that thousand dollars?'" He wanted something solid on Loretta. A recorded call just might be it. She was eager to make the call.

Of Loretta she said, "...she was gonna pass money from my hands is how I'm in trouble. I was gonna deliver the money, kind of a middle person, you see?" She blamed others but was blind to her own guilt.

After Erick murdered Ernest and stole his stuff, he went to Walmart. It was 9 am. Tina met him there. He told her what happened. The old man suffering from Alzheimer's was not exactly a threat to a man in his twenties with a big gun. It was a gruesome, cowardly act, but he reveled in it. He told Tina, "I never shot anybody in my life, but it felt good."

McDaniel led Tina to her car in the parking lot. She got an envelope containing Ernest's last will and testament and her cell phone. He checked the Caller ID on the phone and saw where she missed a call from Loretta five minutes earlier. He had the phone set it up so her calls could be recorded.

He brought Tina back to the interview room and saw her for the last time. Bill Rehak took the phone, wrote her a script, and had her call Loretta in Texarkana. The call was recorded.

Loretta: Hello.

Tina Marie: Loretta?

Loretta: Uh, uh.

Tina Marie: This is me.

Loretta: Yeah.

Tina Marie: I'm okay but the police down here have been talking to me. And I'm not sure if they're gonna put me in jail.

Loretta: Yeah.

Tina Marie: The man, you know, that shot Ernest for you, he managed to get out on...

Loretta: Yeah.

Tina Marie: \_\_bond about an hour ago. And he called me and \_\_looking for a thousand dollars so he can get out of town. When do you think...

Loretta: I don't...

Tina Marie: \_\_I can get some money?

Loretta: \_\_if I could get it to you. I don't have no way of getting it to you because everybody's done told me that that—they was arresting you for it. And you know, I don't know how to get it to you. I don't even have it now 'cause it could have got just, you know \_\_wasn't used to this—"

Loretta got more than she bargained for, and now there was hell to pay. All she wanted was for Ernest to give her all his money and go away, but she trusted her secrets to a woman who could not keep her mouth shut, and now the thing she instigated could not be taken back.

She offered Tina her credit card number to pay the wages of her sin, but it was not enough. At the end of the conversation, Tina asked her, "I feel sad about Ernest. How do you feel?"

Loretta replied, "Oh, I wish we'd never—I wish it'd never been done. Don't you?"

In mid-sentence, she changed her pronouns from 'we' to 'it' much like Pilate washing his hands after condemning Jesus. Justice was hot on Bobbie Moore's trail. Some people said she could not have done it because she had Alzheimer's, but the phone call proved she knew what she was doing.

McDaniel wanted to get Loretta to the office that day to be interviewed and arrested before the sun went down, but nobody listened.

Tina Marie VanMoerkerque's fate was sealed. She gave detectives everything they needed to arrest her and Loretta for first degree murder.

Keith Fox and McDaniel sat in his office and talked about Tina's unexpected cooperation. Fox asked him if he wanted to handcuff her; after all, he earned it, but he couldn't do it. He felt too attached after talking to her for so long. Fox went in the interview room and told Tina to stand up. "You are under arrest for first degree murder." She stared blankly and repeated the charge, "First degree murder?" He cuffed her and took her to Caddo Correction Center. McDaniel spent the rest of the afternoon writing a first degree murder warrant for Loretta.

The day started with detectives restraining a crazed man and closed with one woman under arrest for murder and a second woman on deck.

## **Part 7**

### **The Ides of March.**

*"Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more.' This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder,"*

*—The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky*

Ernest Luttrell's funeral was on Thursday. That morning, Andy Scoggins got Loretta's warrant signed by a judge. He waited to arrest her until the funeral was over that afternoon.

As a reward for his diligence, McDaniel was allowed to be part of the arrest team. They waited outside the gates of Forest Park West Cemetery until 2 pm when Loretta got into a car with her granddaughter and her granddaughter's boyfriend. When they drove out of the gate, McDaniel pulled the car over and told the driver to follow him to the detective's office. They arrived just before a throng of

TV reporters and family. The detectives arrested her and took her to the interview room, but within minutes, she asked for an attorney and the interview ended.

Loretta's daughter, Katey Passaniti, and her husband came to the office and demanded to see Loretta. Katey was from Austin, Texas. When they wouldn't tell her where Loretta was, she raised her voice and made threats. Her husband tried to calm her down, but it didn't work, so McDaniel made them leave the building. Katey approached a reporter in the parking lot, and he interviewed her. She told him, "My mother couldn't have done it. Her mind is gone. I want you to know the shape that my mother was in. There's no way. Tina manipulated her. She had been stealing money from her."

She didn't tell the reporter that Loretta had a driver's license and drove a car, or that she had a cell phone and used it every day. She didn't tell him about Loretta's conversation with Tina the day before.

Loretta Luttrell was unsteady on her feet, so Fox escorted her outside to a patrol car. Patrolman Ricky York helped her in the car and took her to Caddo Correction Center. When she had her booking photo taken, she stuck out her tongue. The next morning she told the deputy she wanted her coffee and a donut served to her in bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Friday, June 3, 2011, Erick Crain pled guilty to first degree murder. It was less than a year since he murdered Ernest. Things moved fast because he pled guilty to avoid the death penalty. What Erick didn't know was that the death penalty in Louisiana is almost totally ineffective. Death row inmates spend years waiting for punishment that never occurs. For example, Shreveport serial killer Nathaniel Code has been on death row since 1990 for murders he committed in 1985. Endless appeals have tied executions up for decades. According to a report by Alison Bath from the Shreveport Times, "...prosecutors are seeking death sentences less frequently. Faced with higher costs, the need for a unanimous jury verdict and a lengthy, expensive appeals process, they instead are opting for life sentences with no parole."

\* \* \* \* \*

On Thursday morning, January 12, 2012, Tina Marie VanMoerkerque pled guilty to second degree murder. She received a life sentence without benefit of parole. In an article entitled, "Woman pleads guilty to murder-for-hire," the Shreveport Times reported, "Investigators later determined that Erick Crain killed him for money. Crain, Moerkerque's \_\_boyfriend, received a portion of the money but was arrested before the debt was paid in full. Moerkerque \_\_has agreed to testify in the trial of Loretta Luttrell." Rather than gamble her life in a trial with the death penalty at stake, Tina cut her losses, but she didn't go quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shortly after being booked, Loretta fell down at the jail and broke her hip. In the 18 months she spent at Caddo Correction Center, her health and physical appearance deteriorated. Gone were shopping trips with Tina and visits to the beauty shop. Instead, she was confined to a medical ward, reduced to eating

sandwiches, and being manually fed by corrections personnel. The few recollections she had in 2010 dwindled away. A year and a half after the murder, she was found incompetent to stand trial, She was moved from Caddo Correction Center to a state mental health facility, and died on July 31, 2014.

\* \* \* \* \*

By February of 2012, the murder case of Ernest Luttrell appeared to be wrapped up. Two people were in jail for life and a third was confined to a mental hospital, but beware the ides of March.

On March 22, Loretta Luttrell's daughter was arrested by the San Antonio Police Department. According to the Shreveport Times, "...a Caddo Parish Grand Jury returned a secret indictment against Linda Kate Passaniti for second-degree murder, conspiracy to commit second degree-murder, and three counts of forgery. The indictment stems from a continuing investigation by the Caddo Parish District Attorney's Office and the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office into the contract killing of Ernest Luttrell on July 25, 2010."

The wills Tina VanMoerkerque turned over on the day of her confession were forged by Katey. KSLA Channel 12 reported, "...documents recovered in the initial investigation led investigators to evaluate Passaniti's participation and involvement in the manipulation of Ernest Luttrell's finances prior to and after his death." Investigators from the DAs office also found probable cause to arrest her for second degree murder. On the day Loretta was arrested, she blamed Tina for manipulating her mother, but now it seemed Katey herself was the manipulator. Before Tina was sentenced, she told the DAs Office that Passaniti was involved.

Don Ashley was an investigator for the Caddo DAs Office and a retired Shreveport Police detective. Don reviewed the case and interviewed Tina. It didn't take him long to find out that Katey forged Ernest Luttrell's will twice before his death, and a third time after he was murdered. Don followed the money trail, and it led straight to Katey. Though Tina was the common denominator between Loretta and Erick Crain, Katey initiated the entire plot.

An important factor in most every crime is intent. The state had the burden to prove that Katey had specific intent to kill Ernest Luttrell. Specific Intent means, "...that state of mind which exists when the circumstances indicate that the offender actively desired the prescribed criminal consequences to follow his act or failure to act."

In the conspiracy to kill Ernest Luttrell, Katey's motive was greed, and she was the only co-defendant of four that had the brains to put the plan in motion, but her intent alone was not enough. In order to be guilty of a crime, she had to combine her intent with criminal conduct, which means, "An act or failure to act that produces criminal consequences..."

Most people thought Katey was close to her mother, but Don Ashley found otherwise. Loretta was 15 years old when she had her, and she sent her to live with her mother. Katey called her grandmother 'Mom', and she called Loretta by name. Katey's husband said Loretta never fully accepted the fact that Katey was her daughter. Loretta had a second chance at motherhood when Katey was 15 and came to live with her and Ernest, but the reunion was not a happy one. Katey rebelled and even ran away, and the mother and daughter bond never happened.

When Katey turned 18, she went off to college. She was a brilliant student and thrived in the academic world, eventually receiving a doctorate degree and becoming a college professor. After she married and had a daughter, Katey determined to forgive her mother and build the relationship they never had. Loretta embraced the opportunity and started playing catch up. Within a couple years, Katey got the idea that an early inheritance would just about even things up.

Around age 70, Ernest was diagnosed with dementia, and it affected his memory and disposition. He was easily angered and got into a dispute with a neighbor about the property line. Katey took the opportunity to use her influence to have him committed. She showed up from Texas with paperwork saying she had power of attorney over Ernest. She wanted to put him in a home, but Ernest said he did not sign any paperwork, and Katey was not his power of attorney. Detectives found out later that her power was forged. Since he would not go down quietly, Katey made other plans.

Ernest's estate was estimated at over a million dollars, and Katey could not ignore that kind of money. She refused to wait for the inevitable; instead, she would do away with her father in law like an old, crippled dog. Her first plan to take over his estate was to have him put away after his commitment. Plan number two was to get rid of him by cutting the brake lines on his truck, but that plan also failed. Her third plan called for finding an idiot to kill him for \$1000, and it worked, but there were consequences.

Katey's trial began on April 22, 2013. The case was tried by long time Caddo Parish Assistant District Attorneys Laura Fulco and Dale Cox. Dale was the First Assistant DA and Laura was a Section Chief.

The DA laid out the case on day one. The Shreveport Times reported, "When Ernest Luttrell sold the mineral rights to his south Caddo property in 2008, his stepdaughter allegedly was outraged that he didn't consult her prior to finalizing the papers. That started the wheels to spinning as to how Linda Kate Passaniti could get her hands on Luttrell's \$400,000, according to Caddo Assistant District Attorney Dale Cox. After a forged power of attorney for his healthcare and a failed attempt to get the 73-year-old committed to a nursing home, he was killed."

The rest of the trial included testimony from Katey's daughter, a handwriting expert, local notaries who participated in Katey's forgeries, and convicted killers Erick Crain and Tina VanMoerkerque. Perhaps the most convincing testimony for the state was from Katey's former cellmate at Caddo Correction Center, Lawanda Daughtry.

Just after noon on Saturday, May 4, 2013, the state presented its closing rebuttal. First Assistant Dale Cox addressed the jury comprised of six men and six women: five black and seven white. Dale Cox promised to dispel every suspicion of doubt that the defense presented. He described Tina VanMoerkerque as a "wretched soul," Erick Crain as, "...the lowest vermin on earth," and Loretta Luttrell as an old woman whose mind had wasted away from the effects of dementia. He told the jury Katey was self-serving and greedy, and of the four co-defendants, she alone had the greatest motive.

While she was in jail, Katey told her cellmate, Lawanda Daughtry, about the plot to have Ernest murdered. Daughtry testified, "She wanted them to shoot him at least twice in the head [sic] make sure he was dead."

The defense told the jury that the case against Katey was merely an obsession of District Attorney's Investigator, Don Ashley. Don was a retired Shreveport Police detective. Dale Cox addressed the allegation by saying that the people of Caddo Parish owed Don, "...a debt of gratitude." Dale told them Don was in charge of reviewing the case, and he found out Katey put a plan in motion to have Ernest Luttrell killed. Without her, there would not have been a murder.

During the rebuttal, Katey took careful notes on a yellow pad as if she was taking names while the teacher was out of the classroom. After Dale Cox's rebuttal, the jury retired for deliberation. Mildred Jackson, Ernest Luttrell's sister, attended the entire two week trial. McDaniel and Fox sat on the back row. Katey was all alone: neither her husband nor daughter was there. When McDaniel got up to leave, six foot eight inch tall Don Ashley met him in the aisle and hugged him. It looked like a bear hugging a gorilla.

After an hour and a half, the jury returned with a verdict. Katey was found guilty of all charges. She did not shed a tear or show remorse.

On a stormy day in mid May, District Judge John Mosely handed down her sentence. It was a mere formality since second degree murder in Louisiana has only one sentence. Judge Mosely sentenced Linda Kate Passaniti, "...to life in prison at hard labor without benefit of parole, probation or suspension, plus 60 years."

A man and three women were arrested for murder and put in jail at public expense. In the twenty-first century, hard labor is neither hard nor laborious, but it is expensive. It costs the state about \$40 a day to house inmates. That adds up to \$14,600 a year per person or \$58,400 for all involved; however, Loretta's expenses were higher than average due to the medical attention she required.

Ernest Luttrell was a paratrooper and veteran of the Korean War. Like many men who live long, he was set in his ways, but he was kind and generous to many. His kindness included his housekeeper, Tina VanMoerkerque, whom he did not fire or evict after she ran up an unauthorized tab on his credit card, and Loretta Luttrell who said Ernest never raised a hand to her or treated her violently.

In the end, the case was built on the cooperation of people: some good, some bad, and the Sheriff's Office's ability to secure that cooperation. A concerned citizen got the ball rolling when she called and identified the trigger man. His quick arrest led to a suspicious maid. The maid's confession yielded a third suspect, the wife of the victim. Follow up from the District Attorney's investigator revealed a fourth suspect, the victim's step-daughter.

Four people went to jail. Three of them were women and at least two of them were professing Christians of Baptist persuasion. The murder took place while the wife of the victim was attending church. Christians are called to seek the Kingdom of God, but the killers sought a kingdom of their own: a kingdom they could pass down to their posterity.

Life is a gift. For human beings the gift is extended even more because God made us in His image which means that people are unique among all His creation because he made us to please him. Men and women have great value because of

this, and that is why murder is so serious. That is why the prerogative of taking life belongs only to God. Ultimately, God is the avenger when someone takes a life, whether it is an aging adult, a mentally challenged youth, or an unborn baby.

Death is our ultimate destiny, and no one is immune from it. Death exists because of sin, and sin is transgression of the law of God. Only those who humble themselves, repent, and trust in Jesus will survive.

*“God commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*

—Acts 17:30-32



Ernest Luttrell



Erick D. Crain



Tina VanMoerkerque



Loretta Luttrell (aka Bobbie Moore)



Dr. Linda Kate Passaniti

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