



Coastal Empire

By John Leonard

Excerpt courtesy www.southernprose.com

Chapter 1

DeVaughn Harris paced furiously in the small break room just outside his office while his mind worked though every intricate detail of his anticipated night with Sadie. Everything must be perfect. When his plans were accelerated by unforeseen circumstances earlier that morning, DeVaughn allowed himself to become irritated for a bit, then he again focused his attention on the job at hand.

But his mind kept wandering back to Sadie. He had trouble thinking of anything else.

Some might call her DeVaughn's most recent obsession. He probably knew the woman's routine better than she knew it herself.

Business boomed during the holiday season at the Savannah Automotive Repair Shop. The heavy traffic created by an endless stream of impatient shoppers out buying last minute Christmas gifts caused a swell in the number of fender-benders. But his business thrived no matter what the time of year. The shop's reputation for quality repairs done right the first time generated loyal customers whose word-of-mouth testimony kept new customers coming.

The shop reflected the personality of its owner. It was meticulously clean and orderly. Every aspect of the repair process followed a precise order laid out by DeVaughn, right down to the color coded of key fobs on the pegboard hooks behind the counter. There was a controlled, methodic flow to the daily routine.

Quietly soothing classical music greeted customers in the lobby. DeVaughn never raised his voice with his customers, insisting his employees embrace the maxim "the customer is always right." His crew only knew he was upset or frustrated when he began to sigh a lot more frequently.

Though he wasn't a tall man, DeVaughn was powerfully built. He looked something like a fire hydrant – sturdy and solid. His rough and hard physical appearance was contrasted by a calm and soft spoken voice.

The expression “wouldn't hurt a fly” just doesn't work in Savannah....anyone who's ever experienced the mosquitoes and horseflies will attest to the fact those bloodthirsty insects can cure anyone of an aversion to killing. But the handful of people who could claim to know DeVaughn fairly well would say he put the “gentle” in “Southern gentleman.”

DeVaughn was not bringing Sadie a Christmas present tonight, but that would be okay. He knew she would not be disappointed. His visit was unexpected. He planned to surprise her.

He had meticulously planned her murder for weeks. He thoroughly scouted the area, particularly the houses closest to hers. He knew her routines, habits and idiosyncrasies. He didn't have anything against her. He didn't even know her personally. He never met or heard of the woman before his client offered the contract. In truth, after weeks of watching her, he didn't understand why anyone wanted her dead.

And now he'd been ordered to move up the schedule. The disruption caused him heartburn, first because he was methodical and the change represented a disruption of his timing, but also because he suspected there was no reason for the change in plans other than to reinforce how vulnerable he was in regard to his client.

But DeVaughn simply did the work. Just business, nothing personal. Under his current set of circumstances, he had little choice.

A large glass window in the wall separating DeVaughn's office and the reception area from the rest of the body shop was well insulated, muffling all but the loudest noises. Basically, he could be seen by the crew but not his customers, heard by neither. Unless he yelled at the top of his lungs, which he would never do, the ambient noise of auto repairs smothered any voices coming from the break room.

Inside the repair bays, Frank Miller noticed his boss's agitated pacing through the window. He stopped to watch DeVaughn for a few seconds. When the boss let himself get worked up like this, Frank worried about him. The man seemed to bottle up all his stress inside and something was obviously eating at him today.

DeVaughn was a good employer. He paid excellent hourly wages and offered solid insurance benefits for jobs that were not without risks. He stressed safety on the job and demonstrated genuine concern for the welfare of his employees. The only man DeVaughn fired in the last few years proved to have a drug problem and nearly got killed on the job. Tim came to work impaired and made a careless mistake with a hydraulic jack.

Frank saved the man's life, but couldn't help him save his job. When Tim told the hospital staff that he wanted to file a worker's compensation claim, routine blood tests were drawn. Drugs were detected. Not only was his claim denied, also DeVaughn got a stern letter from the insurance company suggesting

that he conduct more stringent drug screening of his employees or risk having to find another carrier with whom to do business.

DeVaughn let Tim go, but seemed apologetic and actually paid him a little severance to help until he found another job, which cemented the loyalty of his remaining employees.

Frank grunted audibly. The mechanics nearest him recognized his signal and looked at Frank, who perceptibly nodded toward the window. Word passed quickly down the line and through the shop. Keep busy, or look busy. The crew knew from experience that avoiding the boss when he was in one of these spells was the best way to have it blow over quickly. After a couple of minutes of more pacing, DeVaughn realized he was calling attention to himself.

His plans were accelerated by a day or two, nothing more. Frustration grew from his sense of being a marionette at the mercy of unseen hands, helpless but to do his master's bidding. He stepped inside his office and gently closed the door behind him.

Safely inside the privacy of his office, he checked his "travel bag" for tonight's job, just an old overnight traveling case. He carefully handled the duct tape, moving aside a brown paper bag containing of a couple of sandwiches, energy drink, bottle of water and a banana. Underneath it was the bag from Home Depot containing his brand new stubby hammer and scratch awl he purchased especially for the occasion. Beneath that were a hunting knife, alarm clock, ten foot length of rope, small box of matches, change of clothing, ski mask, flashlight, a small package of surgical gloves, and a clean nine millimeter automatic with untraceable serial numbers, complete with an extra clip — nope, he hadn't forgotten a thing.

His job was simply to kill the old lady, not to torture her. Some things he'd packed merely as contingency planning. He carried the pistol in case an unexpected visitor or innocent bystander caught him in the act and he had no choice. DeVaughn believed in planning ahead.

It was imperative to his client that his intended victim's death either looked like an accident or the result of natural causes. First and foremost, she needed to die, but if DeVaughn staged it to look like an accident, he maintained a satisfied customer who compensated him well for his efforts. His view of this sideline business had evolved from simply thinking the money was nice to the point he was seriously considering this talent of his could become his retirement plan.

The body shop laundered his sideline earnings for him and his nice-guy business persona provided a good cover. He had a million plus in hard assets, not counting his cash on hand. Next to nothing in liabilities. He maintained a couple of loans just to keep the interest deduction and so he stood less chance of drawing attention to himself. DeVaughn could sell out tomorrow and walk away to sunny Costa Rica with close to two million bucks after taxes.

The adrenaline rush he got from taking the life of another human being, the exhilaration and delicious anticipation of the planning kept him going. Still, the fear of being caught increased with each contract

kill. The more he made, the more he stood to lose. Truthfully, it made the adrenaline rush even more intense.

He was really, really good at what he did. The meticulous concentration he'd learned to apply as an automotive mechanic by day served him well as he worked as a "murder mechanic" by night. For his thirty pieces of silver, he brought death to the unsuspecting.

When the busy shop finally cleared out for the evening, Frank buzzed him using the direct connect button on his Nextel phone to tell him the shop was secured for closing. DeVaughn acknowledged him by saying, "Good night."

Frank punched out and headed home.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, DeVaughn emerged from his office dressed completely in black except for a leather bomber jacket. He quickly swapped a cold license plate he borrowed from one customer's car onto one of his loaner vehicles. He made sure the tag was valid and chose a customer's car of similar make and model to the loaner.

If the cops ran the plates, they'd see the same make of vehicle associated with the customer's tag number and figure it was a dead-end lead. The colors didn't match the customer's car sitting in his secured compound, making it easy for the customer to prove he was not involved.

Focused and ready, he cranked the engine and headed east out of Savannah toward the beach. The fading light of the sunset hindered his ability to periodically check his rear view mirror for a tail. He was fairly sure he didn't have one, but it was now part of his routine. One video had forever altered the degree of caution he now exercised religiously.

He passed only one or two cars on the lonely highway connecting the mainland to Tybee Island. The long, narrow road lined with palm trees and oleander bushes cut through the pristine marshes and crossed a series of rivers snaking inland from the coast. The sign for Fort Pulaski let him know he was almost there.

Many of the year-round residents of the island were at the malls, scurrying around doing last minute shopping. It felt like he had Tybee to himself. He set the cruise control for the decreased speed limit of thirty five miles per hour and rolled onto the island. A colorful lighted Santa wearing beach trunks and drinking a tropical cocktail complete with a decorative umbrella sat next to the "Welcome to Tybee Island" sign greeting visitors to the beach.

Once across the Lazaretto Creek Bridge, he observed old-fashioned Christmas decorations hanging from street lamps and spanning the highway at regular intervals. It made him wonder briefly how they plugged the lights in for power and how they hung them all the way across the road, but quickly he snapped his attention back to his driving. He couldn't afford a mental lapse; those get you caught, or killed.

Tybee Island protects the coast of Savannah from the Atlantic Ocean, the outermost barrier island and home to Savannah Beach. It's a small island, only about three miles long, with a redneck Key West feel to it. More residential than commercial, it is a quaint and quirky throw back to a simpler time. Bright little cottages dot the island, interspersed with the larger new multi-story beach homes built on the better lots after the original houses were razed.

Beach rats, serious fishermen, bohemian artists, a few hard-core drunks and other colorful characters dominated ownership of the houses in the interior corridor of the island. The precious waterfront property on the ocean or along a brief stretch of the back river either belonged to lifelong residents or were snapped up by the Savannah elite or the nouveau rich from Atlanta. In truth, the most expensive properties were not used as primary homes, but vacation escapes only visited several times a year by their well-to-do owners. To be a local and live in one of these exclusive properties meant your family had lived there for a very long time and the property taxes had been grandfathered by the Stephens-Daye bill.

Taken by DeVaughn to the island, Highway 80 is just called the beach road by most of the locals. After crossing the Lazaretto Creek Bridge the road runs to the north point, changes names to Butler Avenue, takes a hairpin right turn in front of the breakers, then runs parallel to the beach and stops again at the southern tip of the island where it runs out of real estate. A block west from Butler running parallel to it is Jones Avenue, the other central thoroughfare running north-south. In places, the island was only a few city blocks wide, making the beach accessible even on bare feet now the crosswalks had been redone with brick pavers rather than asphalt.

Tonight Tybee looked deserted. DeVaughn drove cautiously as he headed down Butler. Even a traffic ticket provided evidence he'd been on the island. It created a trail he didn't want to leave. DeVaughn thought of himself as a ghost, coming and going without a trace.

It was dark as he slowly cruised toward his destination. No one noticed as he carefully made his way to his carefully chosen hideout.

There was a bit more than the typical risk involved performing tonight's work. The island only had the one escape route by land. If the alarm went out and cops blocked off the Lazaretto Creek Bridge to outbound traffic, DeVaughn would be trapped. It would only be a matter of time before a manhunt tracked him down. There was no other way off the island except by boat and since he didn't swim, that wasn't an option.

The biggest risk was now, while he was exposed and out in the open. Once inside the garage, he would be relatively safe. He pulled up quietly and used the garage door opener he had stolen on his previous scouting mission. He drove inside the garage and shut the door behind him to minimize his exposure to any traffic on the street, unlikely though it was.

He had done his homework thoroughly. Sadie Elkins lived close enough to his base of operations that he could watch from an upstairs bedroom window and wait for her lights to go off. She lived at the beach year round. The rich doctor from Atlanta who owned the hideout DeVaughn selected for the evening

only visited his property a few times a year. Most of the time the house sat vacant like it had been tonight, until the hitman pulled inside the garage. What the doctor didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

He was a hunter watching and waiting for his prey, perched in an expensive, high tech deer stand.

Before heading down to the beach, DeVaughn used a disposable cell phone to call the doctor's home number. He knew the beach house was mostly an investment, a future retirement home for the cancer specialist researching the disease at Emory University. DeVaughn gambled the owner would not be visiting this weekend. A man answered the phone.

DeVaughn pretended to lose the connection then quickly thumbed the button to disconnect the call. He could now relax a little and bide his time. The good doctor wasn't coming to Tybee for the weekend.

Settled into a chair in the bedroom with the best view of Sadie's house, DeVaughn ate his sandwiches. An uncomfortable thought crossed his mind. *What if the doctor had lent his place out to friends for the weekend?*

It hadn't occurred to him until now that someone other than the homeowner could suddenly show up. A serious bump up in the body count wouldn't reflect well on his professionalism.

Sadie Elkins sacked out by ten every night like clockwork. The old woman was a creature of habit for sure. Once he identified his first choice for a hideout, the rest of the job sort of fell into place. He just needed to watch and wait until the right moment came.

He had a clear, unobstructed view from his vantage point. The beach was behind the house, but even in the off season he had to be concerned about stray lovers or beachcombers walking the shoreline at night. He was careful to minimize any movement of the blinds that might reveal his presence there.

The residence on the Elkins property sat several hundred yards away from Butler Avenue. Thick foliage obscured sight of the house from the street. The house was really a nice beach shack that practically rubbed up against the sand dunes. It was so far away from the street with heavy brush and trees blocking the view that most passing by on Butler didn't even notice the house. It appeared to be an oversized vacant lot.

DeVaughn smiled his approval when Elkins's lights went out, but he waited.

It was still too early to move. He waited for Sadie to reach a deep sleep. Hours passed. The adrenaline rush had worn down and he began to feel fatigue. He feared a concentration lapse or worse yet, dozing off. Someone could sneak up on him if he slept on the job.

He popped open a small energy drink bottle, draining it in a single gulp. After a few sets of sit-ups and push-ups, DeVaughn's heart resumed the accelerated beat rate he needed to stay jacked until time to go to work.

He resumed watching her house for any false signs, waiting and listening for any sound of warning. His natural intuition for trouble was powerful and he trusted it. In this line of work, any mistake was potentially fatal. A quick time check: almost 3 a.m. Show time.

When he stood again, he discovered his legs had gone to sleep. Painful pinpricks traversed up and down his legs as sensation returned. He did a couple of deep knee bends to assist the blood circulation to his lower extremities.

He stood on his right foot, lifted his left leg and shook his foot like a dog trying to shake off bathwater. When he finally put it back down, his left foot felt normal. He reversed his position and repeated the process. When he was done, DeVaughn felt able to sprint if necessary. *It soon might be; you never know.*

He checked the other houses in eyesight of the front windows. The street was dark and quiet as a church mouse. Any neighbors actually home for the evening were in bed and asleep.

He slipped out the back door and slowly made his way toward the Elkins' house, staying in the shadows cast by a giant oak tree that partially obscured the view of her house from Butler Avenue. A crescent moon provided dim light, but with the help of the oak tree's shadow, DeVaughn became invisible. He felt his way along with his feet, unwilling to use a flashlight that could betray his location, assuming someone was watching. He moved slowly, worried a neighbor's dog might start barking if he was detected.

DeVaughn memorized the layout of her house during the two week period when he stalked his intended victim. One day he followed her and watched as she left the island. He turned around at Fort Pulaski and quickly drove back to her house as fast as he could get there. It only took a couple of minutes to pick her lock. That was in daylight, not when he was there to kill her. Tonight he would use the key that he'd made for the occasion.

On his previous visit to the house, DeVaughn found out what he needed to know inside of twenty minutes. The place was a fire hazard just waiting to go up in flames. A large outdoor propane tank supplied gas to the clothes dryer, her stove and water heater. The old lady smoked, so periodic open flames and burning cigarette butts were easily explained.

Sadie tried painting landscapes, which weren't bad, though she didn't paint people very well. She had churned out any number of serene beach scenes and simple natural settings. Her most realistic-looking birds and people were depicted far off in the distance. The closer she got to her subject, the more cartoonish the features she painted.

Her hobby meant she used plenty of solvents and flammable liquids like acetone and mineral spirits, both handy accelerants. On that trip DeVaughn got lucky and found a spare house key in a kitchen drawer. He used it to make a wax impression before leaving the way he came, careful not to leave any sign he'd been there.

More than fifteen minutes passed after leaving his roost before DeVaughn used his new key to enter the old lady's house. Safely inside, he added his new key to the kitchen drawer alongside the original he'd duplicated. Now old Mrs. Elkins had two spare keys. In a few minutes she'd have no further use for either one.

A night light dimly illuminated the bathroom, so he could more or less see as he retraced the twenty three paces he'd counted between the front door and her bedroom.

Lifting the pillow from her late husband's bed, DeVaughn gently covered her face with it then pressed down firmly, smothering old Mrs. Elkins. She thrashed around for a bit in her bed. It seemed an eternity passed before she stopped struggling. He counted to twenty after her last moment, keeping the pillow firmly pressed over her face in the meantime. Finished, he took a deep breath and relaxed ever so slightly. He tossed the pillow back where he got it on the unused twin bed still in her bedroom several years after her late husband's passing. He checked for her pulse, found none. So far, so good.

DeVaughn found her purse and took the pack of Marlboro Lights out from a side pocket, tucking one behind his ear. He tossed the rest of the pack back in her purse.

He took his time in her studio, spreading the accelerants but carefully returning them where he got them. Empty accelerant cans on the floor would scream arson to the crime scene investigators; mostly empty accelerant containers and a little judicious spreading of those materials could be accomplished without raising undue suspicion. He left a couple of bottles partially open or with cap off, enabling the flammable vapors to meet his coming ignition source. DeVaughn didn't want to just start a fire; he intended to burn the place down completely before the fire department could even react.

He made his way to the laundry room, illuminating his path with his pen flashlight. Located on the other side of the kitchen, the room wasn't much bigger than a closet. He pulled the dryer away from the wall and used the stubby hammer and the scratch awl to punch a small hole into the gas supply line on the back side. As soon as he smelled gas, he pushed the machine back into place.

The smell of rotten eggs filled the laundry room, a sure sign of a gas leak. Utility companies intentionally add the stench to propane and natural gas supplies in order to minimize the danger from leaks. The warning was already useless to Mrs. Elkins.

DeVaughn left the laundry room and went in search of an ash tray. He finally found one in the television room, lying on the floor beside her easy chair. When he stepped back into the hallway, he smelled traces of gas filtering into the kitchen. A sense of urgency quickened his pace. He needed to wrap this up.

He lit the cigarette, puffing a few times to make sure it was burning okay. The cigarette would keep burning until hitting the filter or the gas reached the burning embers. He perched the cigarette in the ashtray and left it in her bedroom before leaving the house.

He locked the door behind him as he left just in case. DeVaughn crossed the yard quickly, sacrificing stealth for speed on the way out. At four in the morning, there were few people wandering around

Tybee and those were usually the serious drunks on vacation. He didn't want to be seen leaving the house but more importantly, he needed to be as far away as possible when the explosion occurred.

He backed the car outside the garage of the hideout, leaving the engine running and the car parked in the driveway. He ran back inside the house and put the garage door opener back in place. He knew he should get moving, but he stood by the car door to listen and watch for one extra moment. When the audible *whump* of the gas igniting roughly fifty yards away carried across the still night, he jumped in the car and slowly drove away from his crime scene. It required every bit of self discipline DeVaughn could muster to overcome his urge to flee in haste, but self discipline was paramount for his survival.

In his rearview mirror, DeVaughn saw a fireball burst above the tree line. As certain as he'd been the place would go up in flames, the visual confirmation was a nice bonus on the way home.

DeVaughn stripped off the surgical gloves from his hands and shoved them in a plastic trash bag he kept hanging from the cigarette lighter. He slipped into the parking lot of Chu's convenience store and tossed the bag into the trash container out by the gas pumps without even getting out of the car. He only slowed down long enough to make sure his trash made it into the receptacle.

Out of the parking lot DeVaughn turned west, heading off the island and back toward Savannah. From the corner of his eye, he saw the first set of flashing lights heading in the direction of the fire. Because the fire station was on Jones Avenue, DeVaughn didn't get to see the engines scrambling on their short race to the burning house. That was a little disappointing.

But all in all, it was a good night's work.