# Exclusive by John Knight

## from Tennessee, USA

**THROUGH huge, electronically locked steel prison doors, and at last I am face to face with James Earl Ray, America's most notorious and controversial killer.**

Although he has all the time in the world (like a 99-year sentence), he has none to spare.

There are greetings, and then he is straight into action.

"I appeal to you to help me get out of prison. Everyone around these parts is afraid of the truth. You, as an English newspaperman, can tell it the way it is."

*Which way is it then?*

"I was framed by the FBI for the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King. *They* wanted him out of the way. I was set up. I am still being denied a proper trial."

So began my strange involvement with Ray, 51, and his wife Anna, 31, in their fight to get Ray out of Brushy Mountain Penitentiary, the top security jail in the Southern state of Tennessee.

He had written to me in London saying he had sensational fresh evidence.

He is a fascinating actor on the stage of contemporary history.

The ghost who won't go away. And the authorities fear a fresh trial because a cover-up of Watergate proportions could be revealed.

As long as he is locked away they have little to fear. But I can reveal that legal moves are well advanced, and Ray may go on trial again later this year with new evidence.

He intends, he told me, to subpoena FBI agents who, he says, took part in the Martin Luther King murder. It is only recently that his research has obtained the names, he claims.

He also claimed to me that he is waiting for the American Freedom of Information Act to produce records which name the man who pulled the trigger. He doesn't expect it will be his own name.

Well, we will see. But a full trial, dominated by Ray's celebrated lawyer, Mark Lane, an explosive Perry Masonesque figure, will rattle America's conscience.

Anna, who married Ray in prison eighteen months ago, is a charming blonde with dazzling blue eyes. She met me at Knoxville, the nearest airport, and we started our drive out to Brushy Mountain.

This is Tobacco Road territory: the land of moonshine and country music; at the heart of the Bible Belt.

We drove through Hillbilly villages, some half-empty since the coal mines got worked out; in places a desolate straggle of crumbling shacks. The hideous fluted wings of big tinny American cars rusted in the damp air as they lay abandoned.

The American Dream moved quickly on in this part of Tennessee.

"Some live in dirt-floor poverty," says Anna, a successful painter who has a high reputation. "And I'm telling you, some of the people you're gonna deal with right now are sure gut-ugly."

**ANNA RAY: 'Ugly people.'**

She pulled the car round a bend, and there the prison was; and somewhere inside the formidable buildings was her James with whom she has never lived as man and wife. Brushy Mountains is the next range to the Smokey Mountains. Over both lies a dank halo of mist.

Set right at the bottom of one of the mountains is the Penitentiary, and it looks like a cardboard castle.

Ray was sent there for slaying on a Memphis hotel balcony twelve years ago last month Dr. Martin Luther King, the black Civil Rights leader and Nobel Prize winner.

That killing brought America to the verge of civil war. Ironically, the death of the prophet of non-violence started America's worst outbreak of racial violence.

Parts of Washington were set ablaze, and 168 cities rioted under the black pall of arson. The crack of the sniper's rifle brought the death roll to twenty with 21,000 injured. Looting thugs demanded an all-out war to avenge the death of King, whom they called "De Lawd."

All triggered off by the soft slug Ray was supposed to have fired from the Remington 30-06 pump gun which severed King's spinal cord. Death was in minutes.

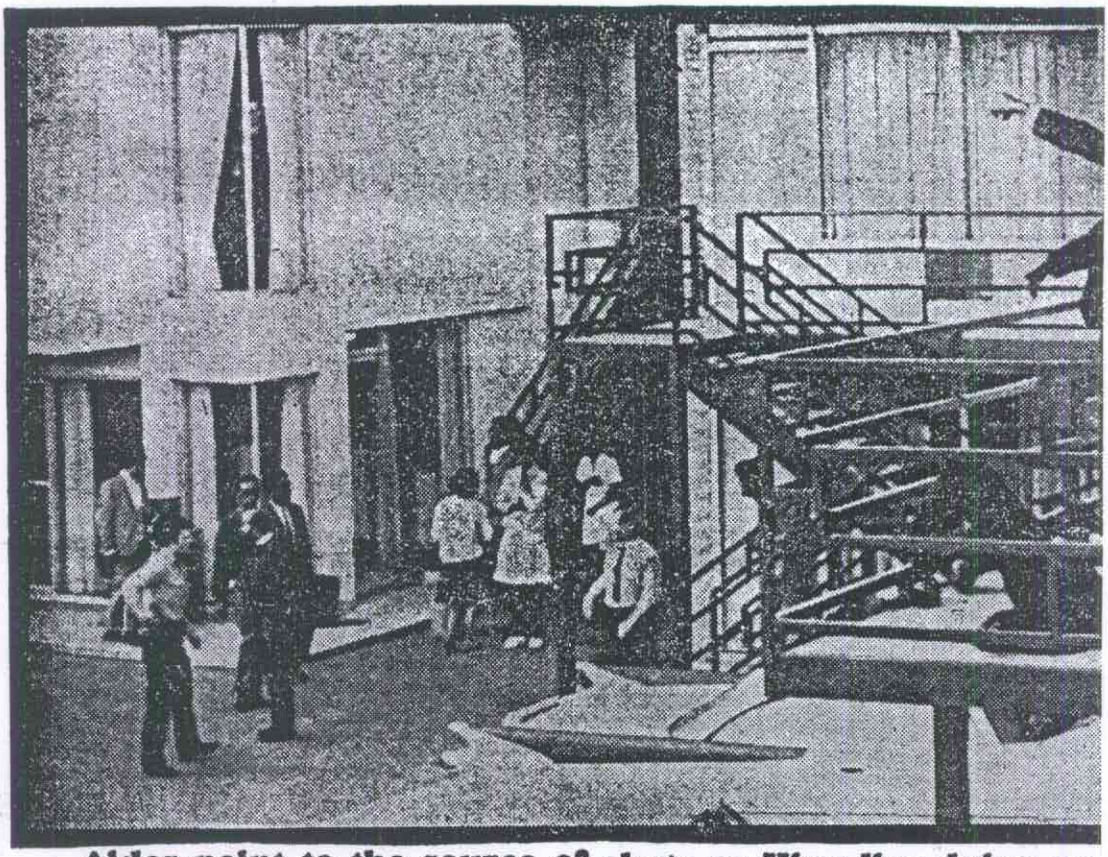
"Everything could be resolved this year," Ray told me in his Southern drawl. He is locked up in solitary confinement except for one hour each day which he uses to run round the prison yard.

**He is locked up in solitary confinement except for one hour each day**

This keeps him trim, and he knows that unless there is a remarkable reversal in his fortunes, he can't expect to get parole before he is 89.

Friends of his told me the twelve years in jail had improved his mind. Once he had been a petty crook acting out an Alan Ladd character with snap-brim fedora along the main

# Luther King's 'killer' points his finger at the FBI..



Aides point to the source of shots as King lies dying on

# I WAS FRAMED

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streets of a hundred faceless American towns with their blaze of neon advertising, loan shops and hamburger parlours.

A sad figure, post-war garbage. When we met he retained some of the dated Hollywood mannerisms, and he revealingly said: "I knew I had been set-up. The description of the man did not fit me. *I had a Dick Tracey type nose*, and he didn't."

He said: "I admit I was part of a conspiracy. Unwittingly. But I was there in Memphis, and what I was doing was not lawful. I had been contacted by a man called Raoul to carry dope across the Canadian border to America.

"I bought a white Mustang, and then he called me to Memphis. I had been buying guns for shipment to Mexico. Raoul told me to buy a certain type of gun.

"But I purchased the wrong one, and he sent me back to get the right one. This was the gun to be used in the killing. Astonishing if I was to do the killing that I should go to the shop twice, and leave my fingerprints all over the weapon."

According to Ray, he was told to book into a four-dollar-a-day flophouse where the landlady, Bessie Brewer, gave him room 5B — a filthy cell with a bug-ridden mattress. The dingy bathroom down the hall had a view of the Lorraine Hotel in Mulberry Street.

Especially of the balcony of Room 306—the room to be occupied by Dr. King and his party.

Dr. King had been booked to stay at the Holiday Inn. But this hotel was white-run and occupied, and he was pressured at the last minute to go to the Lorraine whose owners and clients were all black.

Ray claims at no stage was King's name mentioned to him, and he didn't even know King was going to be in Memphis. As for the change of hotels, how could he possibly know about that in advance and be able to book into the flophouse? Only King's own party and the FBI would know.

As the time for King's departure from this Earth neared, Ray says he was sent to another part of town in his Mustang.

When he returned to the area, he found commotion in the wake of the assassination. As he was an escaped convict on the run (he was serving a 20-year sentence for robbing a supermarket), he made himself scarce by driving out of town.

It was only on the car radio that he learnt King had been shot, he says.

There were strange happenings in the wake of his departure. Another white Mustang appeared on the pavement outside the flophouse where the most damning evidence of all was discovered, he claims.

Rolled up in a bedspread from 5B were the following items: murder weapon, binoculars, pair of pants, shaving kit, two cans of Schlitz beer, hair brush, radio, pliers, the local paper — and some cartridges.

All belonging to James Earl Ray, and covered with his fingerprints.

"It was the classical frameup. I had been spotted months before. That was why I was allowed to get out of jail and go on the lam. This guy Raoul was an FBI contact to draw me into the net."

Ray went on the run in Canada, and finally was arrested by Scotland Yard in London and extradited for trial in Memphis.

The trial drew whistles of incredulity. It lasted only two and a half hours, and Ray pleaded guilty.

He claimed to me that for months before the trial he had been psychologically weakened by being kept in a room with the light on day and night.

He claims he was tricked into pleading

**Ray was told: 'If you don't plead guilty, you'll be barbecued'**

guilty because he was told that a deal had been made with the District Attorney for a light sentence if he did so.

As Ray had a previous criminal and prison record, and was worn down by little sleep and no privacy, he finally pleaded guilty, he says, when he was threatened: "If you don't, you'll be barbecued."

That was slang for execution in the electric chair.

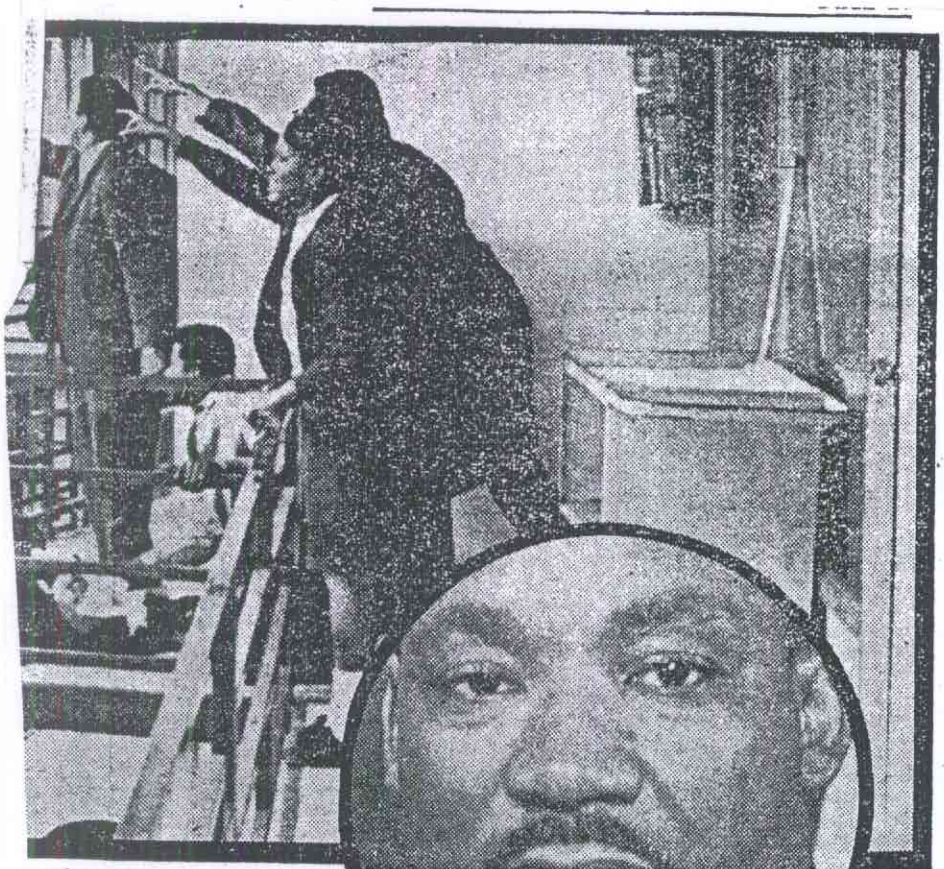
"My 'light sentence' was ninety-nine years in jail!" snorts Ray. "I had been taken for a patsy right down the line."

Some years ago a Congressional Select Committee on Assassinations heard evidence on the Martin Luther King killing.

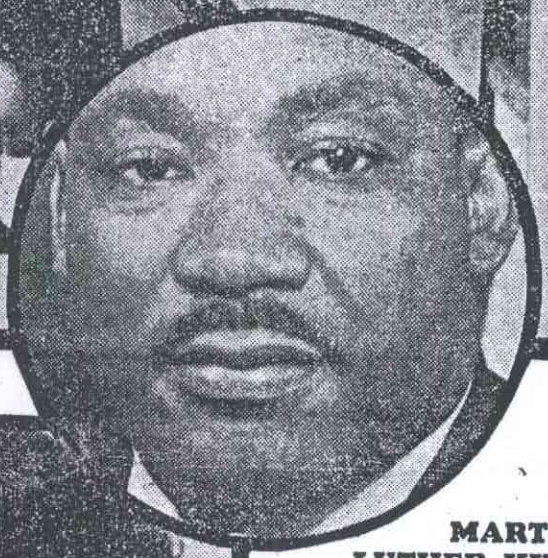
They concluded that Ray had been the trigger man, and his two brothers, John and Jerry, had been involved in the plot.

They were funded by two St. Louis businessmen. The Committee's findings were not greeted with universal approval. For one thing, Ray had not been able to cross-examine witnesses. No charges were, or have been, brought against John and Jerry.

The investigations for the Committee had been carried out by the FBI



the balcony



MARTIN LUTHER KING

JAMES EARL RAY: 'I'm innocent.'

on the phone as a form of harassment.

"For on the day he died he gave me instructions that he would not be with us much longer and that no one should be employed who was violent."

The Rev James Lawson, another close associate of King's, did one thing which shows he does not think that Ray murdered his leader.

Lawson married Ray and Anna in a ceremony at Brushy Mountain prison.

"I don't think Ray killed him. He was set up for it. He didn't know what was going on.

"King was killed because Hoover had called him the 'most dangerous man in America.'

"There is the infamous FBI Memo 27 which says that King is to be 'nullified', and if he

—the very agency which Ray has always claimed did the killing.

Most disturbing of all, the two businessmen from St. Louis were long since dead so they could tell no tales at the hearing.

But why on earth should the FBI want to rub out King, the Messiah of the Black People?

J. Edgar Hoover was boss of the FBI (he died in 1972), and had been for nearly fifty years. He was feared for his ruthless tactics, and generally regarded to be effectively more powerful than the President himself—certainly in domestic affairs.

Hoover hated King. This memo to FBI bureaux spelt it out:

*"Subject: Counter intelligence progamme. Goals: one, prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups; two, prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement. King could be a very real contender for this position."*

The Vietnam War was at its most bloody, with protests against US brutality, incompetence and lack of morality.

Now Martin Luther King was stomping the country demanding equal rights for the blacks. To the John Wayne gung-ho brigade it was too much.

And into it steps this minor character called James Earl Ray, who never got anything right. Did he pull the trigger on the promise of a few thousand bucks? Is he today trying to blame the FBI because that's the only possible way he'll get out from behind bars?

Possibly. But here in Tennessee I have been talking to important people who would not agree he was the killer.

**The Rev. Ralph Abernathy** took over the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement after King had died in his arms on the hotel balcony.

He said to me:

"Ray has been made a scapegoat. I think the FBI were involved on the orders of Hoover.

"All our phones were tapped. I think the FBI had communicated with Martin to say he would be killed. They were cruel enough to tell him can't be nullified he is to be destroyed."

**Mrs. Coretta King**, widow of the black leader, has been voted the Number One Most Effective Woman Leader. She said: "Whether Ray pulled the trigger is open to doubt. The FBI will not let us know what really happened.

"My husband's death is like the deaths of President Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy.

"When the real killers and those behind them get away, we must wonder: who runs the country?"

The FBI even had a sinister code-name for King. It was Zorro (he was a legendary masked figure in the Old Spanish West, popularised in a TV series twenty years ago).

Lawyer Mark Lane puts it simply: "James Earl Ray was the rabbit who had to run."

Has the real Jackal who stalked his prey through the Deep South to the Lorraine Hotel yet to be identified?

**NEXT SUNDAY: I witness the harassment of Anna Ray**

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