

real life jaw-dropper

My son is on DEATH ROW

Kent Whitaker, 63, tells Bella how his son's lies led to unimaginable horror...

Raising my glass, I swelled with pride. 'Congratulations, Bart,' I said. It was December 2003 and I was celebrating my 24-year-old son's graduation at a restaurant with my wife Tricia and our youngest boy, Kevin.

'This is great, Dad,' Bart replied, admiring the Rolex watch we'd bought him.

The waiter brought out our dessert with 'Congratulations' written on it in chocolate sauce.

I got my camera out to capture such a happy occasion.

'I'm proud of you son,' I told Bart. 'You've turned your life around.'

'Thanks, Dad,' he replied, hugging me.

When Bart was 17 years old he got in with the wrong crowd. They burgled schools, including the one where his mum taught.

The police arrested Bart and he was put on probation for a year.

That was all in the past now. On the drive home, I noticed Bart seemed quiet.

'We should go out on our bikes soon,' I said.

'Definitely,' he agreed.

Bart and I would often cycle together on the trails near our house in Sugar Land, Texas.

Kevin, 19, drove us home and he and Tricia, 51, raced to the front door, eager to get out of the cold.

'I left my mobile in the car,' Bart said, walking back.

Suddenly I heard a loud bang and Tricia screamed.

I raced to the house to see a man in a black ski mask in the doorway. 'What the...?' I started,

but then something slammed into my right shoulder, knocking me to the ground.

In my confusion I realised that I'd been shot.

And that's when I saw blood – it was all over me.

'Tricia,' I croaked. I could see her still body lying on the ground.

I remember the paramedics arriving and watching helplessly as Tricia was stretchered into an air ambulance.

In the chaos I didn't manage to speak to anyone until I was at the hospital.

'My family?' I asked a nurse.

'Bart's on his way. He's been shot in the arm,' she replied.

'Where's my wife and Kevin?' I asked. Her pained expression was my answer.

'They're dead, aren't they?' I said.

'I'm sorry. They were both shot in the chest,' she told me. 'Kevin died at the scene. Tricia died in hospital.'

Pain and shock tore through me, far worse than any physical injury, and I sobbed uncontrollably.

My beautiful wife and youngest son were dead. I felt so much hatred towards their murderer that I wanted to kill him.

'Who would want to do this to us?' I thought.

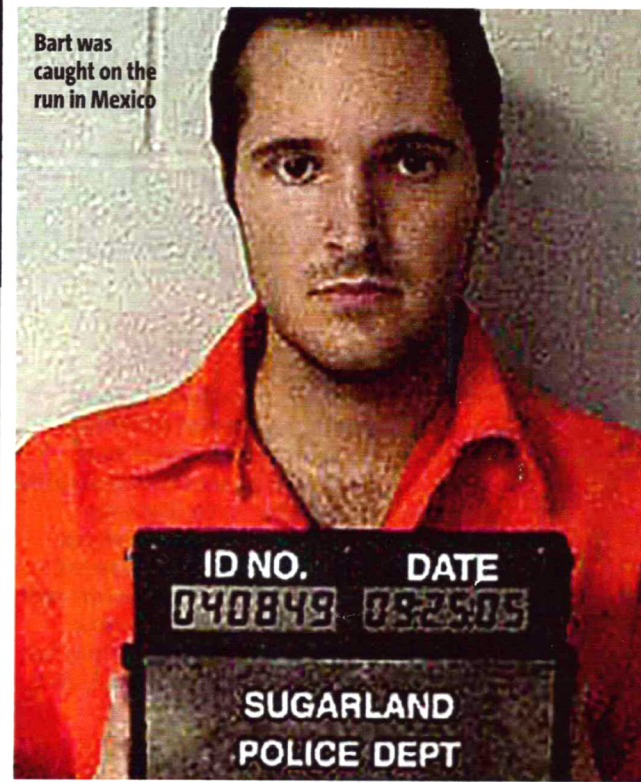
For a brief moment I saw Bart before I had surgery on my arm.

'I'm so glad you're okay,' I said. He stayed silent.

As I recovered a police officer took a statement from my hospital bedside. That's when I discovered our ordeal was far from over...

'Bart didn't graduate from college,' the officer told me. 'He

Bart was caught on the run in Mexico



hasn't attended for six months.'

'I don't understand...' I said.

'He's now our chief suspect,' the officer continued.

'My son's not a murderer,' I said. But the detective didn't reply.

'Take me to my son,' I asked a passing nurse.

She took me to Bart's room in a wheelchair. I was so angry.

'Because of your lies you're the police's chief suspect,' I exploded.

'I didn't kill anyone,' he wept. 'I lied about college because I didn't want to disappoint you and Mum.'

Bart explained that for the past six months he'd been pretending to study when really he was doing odd jobs and partying.

I was dumbfounded. He'd made a mockery of Tricia and me.

Four days after the shooting Bart and I were allowed home.

Numbly, I walked around the house in a daze, seeing Tricia and Kevin everywhere.

We muddled through the next few days before eventually sitting

down to talk about that ever

'What did you see?' I asked

'I was at the car grabbing phone when I saw you fall,' I said. 'I ran inside and struggle with the gunman, who shot me.'

Soon, we were both sobbing. We held Tricia and Kevin's funerals six days after they died.

One of Kevin's friends gave a eulogy and told Bart that his younger brother had idolised him.

Over the next few months police kept questioning Bart.

'Why are they doing this to Dad?' he asked.

'Don't worry, we'll clear your name,' I told him. But I couldn't ignore my suspicions.

A couple of days later Bart he was going to stay with a friend. But he never came home.

Detectives were now convinced that Bart was the murderer.

'Why would an innocent man run?' they pointed out.

The media went into a frenzy. Reporters hounded me. 'Did I

kill your wife and son?' they asked.

'Leave me alone,' I said.

Then a man I'd never heard of, called Steven Champagne, confessed that Bart had persuaded him and another friend, Chris Brashear, to commit the murders.

Steven claimed that Bart had promised them a share of his 'huge' inheritance. They were wrong though – we were comfortable but we certainly weren't millionaires.

'Why aren't you here, Tricia?' I cried. I felt so alone.

For 15 months I did little more than function. Then, in September 2005, the police called.

'We've found Bart in Mexico,' they told me.

'Thank God he's alive,' I said, breaking down with relief.

The officer explained that they'd traced Bart's phone calls. But there was more. 'We've charged him with murdering your wife and son,' he said.

I couldn't ignore the truth – surely only a guilty person would go on the run.

Police extradited Bart to Texas and arranged for me to visit him in jail. He looked gaunt and his eyes were red-rimmed.

'I'm so sorry, Dad,' he said. 'I was involved.'

'Don't say anything else, Bart,' I told him. I didn't want him to incriminate himself.

I arranged a solicitor for Bart and that night I wrote him a letter. 'I'll be there for you no

matter what,' I wrote. 'I love you.'

I couldn't abandon him. My eldest son was all I had left. It wasn't easy though. There were times I felt intense rage at his betrayal.

Bart wrote back. He didn't go into detail – the police checked his letters. 'I felt like a failure,' he wrote. 'But I kept up an act in front of you and Mum.'

I racked my brains for signs I'd missed, but there were none.

I really believe Bart was mentally unstable.

The police told me I couldn't hear any of the prosecution's evidence against Bart because I would be called as a witness.

But I knew they'd be poring over every detail of our family life.

Then Bart's solicitor told me the prosecution would be seeking the death penalty.

The blood seemed to drain out of me. 'Help me Dad,' Bart begged.

'I won't let anything happen to you,' I promised.

In February 2007 Bart's case came to court. He didn't enter a plea in an attempt to avoid the death penalty.

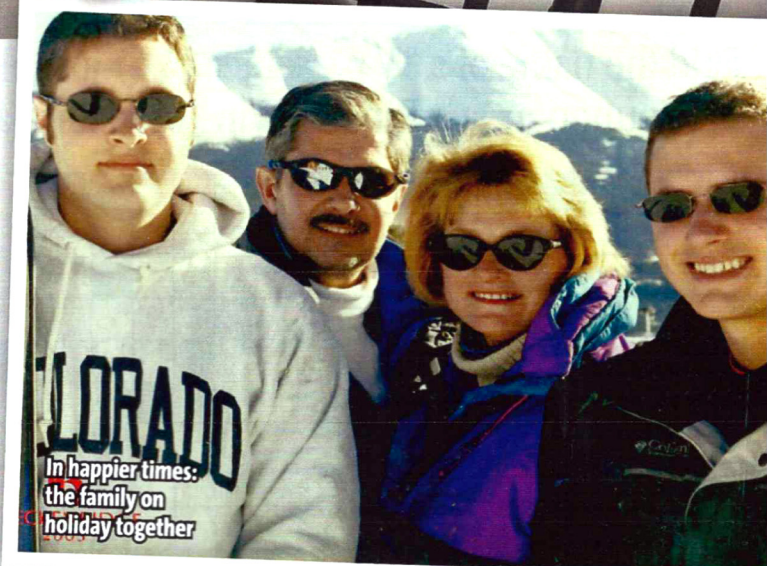
The prosecution argued that Bart had been motivated by greed.

My heart thudded as the jury announced their verdict. 'Guilty,' they said. 'Of capital murder.'

'No,' I cried because I knew what was coming next...

'You are sentenced to death by lethal injection,' the judge said.

'Please,' I begged the court. 'Let



me hug my son one more time.'

But as I ran towards Bart two officers pulled him away.

He looked terrified.

Bart was sent to a maximum security prison two hours away.

Now the trial was over I was allowed to know all the details from the legal teams.

Bart had discussed killing his family with his friends Chris Brashear and Steven Champagne.

What began as silly banter grew, with them mistakenly believing I had an estate and life insurance worth millions.

That fateful night, Bart left our back door unlocked and told Chris where Kevin kept his gun.

Then Chris lay in wait for us. Meanwhile, Steven waited nearby with the getaway car.

But there was one massive flaw in their plan – I'd survived.

Chris Brashear was sentenced to life imprisonment but escaped a death sentence.

The prosecution believed that without Bart's influence he wouldn't have committed murder.

Steven confessed and made a plea

bargain. He was jailed for 15 years.

Bart now spends his days in a tiny cell. His only human contact is with his prison guards and with me during my weekly visits.

Sometimes Bart looks at me in complete despair, and I do my best to reassure him.

'It's okay, son, I've forgiven you,' I said on one visit.

'I'm sorry,' he replied. 'I wish Mum and Kevin were still here.'

I'm spending every penny I have appealing against Bart's death penalty – I can't lose him.

'I'm scared, Dad. What if we don't win?' Bart asked me.

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,' I said. 'And if the worst happens, I'll be there at the end.'

Bart nodded.

Not a day goes by when I don't miss Tricia and Kevin.

I didn't think I'd ever love a woman again but incredibly, in 2008, I met Tanya through a friend. We married in May 2009.

People wonder how I can stand by Bart. But Tanya understands that as a father I can't let the only son I have left be executed.

Bart has been on death row for four years and I don't know if he'll get out of there.

But I love my son and I'll never stop fighting for him until the day he dies. ■

