

THE OCOOSA
COUNTY BURDEN

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THE OCOOSA
COUNTY BURDEN

BY ARTHUR H. HEATH

DEDICATION

To Cullen and Mary- Your encouragement and enthusiasm for this work were all I needed to pursue it to publication. Thanks for your confidence and all your help.

To Michael, Boo and Kirsten (the “Dolly”) - If you hadn’t been there, this wouldn’t exist!

To Brittany- Thanks for all your technical help in getting this on paper in a readable form!

The land remembers what evil has been done upon it.

*Impartial, it does not judge; unblinking,
it is the perfect witness of history and time.*

*Learn to listen, and it will whisper tales
of great shame and sorrow.*

- Randolph Martin, 1935

PROLOGUE

June 6, 1905

10:14 PM

Pebble Stretch Road

As her husband struggled in futility to raise himself up from the floor on his remaining good arm, Agatha Ring turned to him once more to point the bloodied hunting knife she held down at his face, brandishing it in a final, silent warning. Mason Ring's hand slipped on the wood floor, now slick from the blood lazily spurting from his left shoulder and arm, dully realizing if he failed to lift himself up to his feet now, his wife would escape the house and he would certainly bleed to death where he lay. His focus fading with his consciousness, he looked up into Agatha's face, into the unblinking eyes that had been the color of robin's eggs, now almost black in dilation and hate. He weakly extended his right arm in a last effort to stop her as she turned away from him to stride from the candled parlor with purpose, through the front door and out into the moonlit yard, the knife clenched tightly in her right hand, her four-day-old son Jacob dangling from the

other; the baby instinctively crying with all its strength, helpless and quivering.

She made her way through the clinging wetness of the grass toward the crumbling remains of what had once been an enormous stone chimney, looming up from the ground where the semblance of the undefined yard met the encroachment of the deep woods, casting an ominous shadow toward her in the bright moonlight. Falling to her knees in the square of darkness, she dropped the panicked infant to the ground and stared down at it, a menace growing with her breathing.

Mason lay sprawled on his side only feet inside the open door, unable to speak, motionless in a darkening pool of crimson, blankly staring at his last earthly visions of a room so familiar, so warm and safe to him. His eyesight failed at the words Agatha had hastily drawn with his blood on the floor beside him in her determined exit. He took his last shallow breaths while somewhere outside in the dark his newborn son's pulsing squall suddenly stopped, followed seconds later by a single choking cry from a young mother overtaken with an anguish she never understood.

As the crickets and frogs gradually resumed their songs of lust from the moist recesses of the land, the trees and fields of Ocoosa County observed the scene in the same perpetual silence they had in the past; as they would again in times to come.

CHAPTER 1

Monday, September 4, 1995

Habits, patterns, idiosyncrasies, things like that,” Loretta Carmichael said to the receptionist who was showing some confusion with the conversation they were having. “Myself, I think they’re fascinating. Life is full of them if you just look, and to me, really boring without them.”

Vanessa’s face showed she was still puzzled. “Such as? Give me an example.”

“Okay,” Loretta said, “I’ve been here, what, three months? And I’ve already picked up on a bunch of patterns and habits of the patients here, especially in the waiting room. That’s an easy example. Come here, I’ll show you.”

Vanessa looked through the open waiting room door at the expectant women and mothers with children seated in the large, brightly lit room. The waiting room of the Watsonville OB/Pediatric Clinic was designed big and roomy, industrial-but-soft carpet wall to wall, and contained twenty-two available seats for patients waiting to see the two doctors who staffed it.

“Here’s what I mean,” Loretta said, pointing to the

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assortment of chairs and small colonial-style benches. “Any time there are eight or more people out here, patients and husbands, moms and kids, whatever, the seat selection is about even; they spread themselves out to keep their personal space. Make sense?”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Vanessa agreed, “but that’s easy to figure. So what?”

“Okay, but here’s where it gets interesting,” Loretta said, smiling, her enthusiasm for her subject showing in her voice. “At any time there are seven or less *females*, and this hasn’t failed yet, they’ll all sit on the left side of the room, facing the bay window. Every time.”

“Why?” asked Vanessa. “Why do you think that happens?”

“I say it’s because the window has those cartoon duckies and squirrels on it. If there are kids waiting to be seen in peds, the characters probably keep them calmer and the moms know it. If it’s just an expectant mother by herself, waiting for OB, and she’s got the space, she’ll sit there too because it’s more pleasant for her to look out a window than to stare at a wall. Women like that, you know,” she said to Vanessa, nudging her.

Loretta held up her index finger to emphasize her next point. “But – if husbands or boyfriends are with them, they’ll sit against that wall, facing the door,” she said, pointing to the other side of the room. “It’s the guys. Guys do that; it’s the ‘saloon’ mentality. Men have it. Goes way back, maybe even to caves.”

Vanessa nodded her head in apprehensive approval. “You put a lot of thinking into this?” she asked.

Loretta shook her head. “No, not really. It’s all mostly

subconscious. I see it but I don't, you know what I mean? It's like, I don't know, like riding a bike or driving a car, maybe. You're doing it, but you're not really aware you're doing it. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah... yeah. That's pretty cool anyway, girl," Vanessa said as she began to walk back to her reception desk.

"I picked up on a little something about you, too," Loretta said with a mischievous inflection in her voice, intentionally staring down at her patient list and smiling.

Vanessa stopped abruptly and spun on her heel. "Me? What? Is it bad?"

Loretta grinned. She knew she had the receptionist where she wanted her, on the spot. "No, it's nothing bad. You like to tell stories; you have a lot of stories about you, your family and friends and everybody loves to listen to them. And you know it too, don't you?" Loretta said laughing, goading Vanessa and poking her.

"Things just happen to me that turn out funny, I guess. And I like to hear people laugh; I always have. So what do I do that you see?"

"Just this: You never tell your stories standing up. You can't. You always sit, mostly at your desk, and let people gather around you like an audience, I guess. And there's something else that goes with it," Loretta said

"What else?" Vanessa asked, showing almost a mild panic. She was embarrassed already, but felt she needed to hear it all.

"I've never seen you tell a story without a pencil in your hand. You can't seem to do that, either. The whole time you're talking, do you know what you're doing? You're thumping a

pencil on your desk, eraser down. You're not even aware of any of this, are you?" Loretta asked.

Vanessa looked mildly stunned and furtively glanced around the room. "Damn, girl, I'm afraid to think how well you got me figured out, seeing little stuff like that. Don't tell anybody about this, okay? You got me paranoid now!"

"Don't be, Vanessa," Loretta said, laughing and patting her on her back. "It's all in fun, it doesn't mean anything! I won't say a thing to anybody if it's going to make you feel self-conscious."

She smiled and looked back down at her patient appointment chart, taking the added job this Monday of calling the patients in to be screened and "roomed" for the two doctors. Leanne, another of the four nurses at the clinic, was out with a summer cold, but Loretta was actually happy to do the job. It gave her the opportunity to meet many of the OB patients she wouldn't ordinarily come in contact with, except to pass in the hall.

Though they were located in the same clinic, the Obstetric and Pediatric departments were run as two separate areas, Dr. Anthony LaStazzi in charge of peds, with whom Loretta worked, and the very talented Dr. Leonard Harkness heading up the OB duties. Tall, with an abnormally full head of straight black hair and hawkish face, Dr. Harkness had a lean, assertive look to him that suggested a capability. A graduate of Duke and Johns Hopkins, Len Harkness was considered one of the best in the Southeast when it came to bringing babies into the world. Before coming to Watsonville to "slow down a little," as his wife told those who asked, his practice at Athens General was booming. Everybody seemed to want Lenny Harkness to

deliver their baby. “Leonard Harkness, Obstetric Superstar.” And some mothers-to-be really needed his skills. He was the doctor of choice for suspected problem births. He had a knack for knowing soon in a pregnancy who would most likely be having what difficulty and at what stage, and therefore, how to successfully manage the coming months. His deliveries, like any work by an expert, were fine-tuned.

Without thinking much about it, Loretta played her “placement” game in her head before she opened the waiting room door. *Let’s see, she thought. Four patients on the list to be seen in the next hour, that means if Danielle is out there by herself, she’s looking out the window. If she’s with her husband...she swung the door open and scanned the room for the face she only knew casually by sight. Danielle Hyder and her husband, Bo, were right where she had expected them; sitting against the wall, facing the door. Never fails.*

“Danielle, come on in, girl! My goodness, you’re big!”

Danielle *was* big; huge, in fact. Dr. Harkness had told her the week before that if she hadn’t gone into labor by September 6, he would induce her. Things were getting down to the wire and this was going to be her last office visit one way or the other. Her husband always came to the clinic with her since her sixth month of pregnancy, not so much because he was worried, but because his whole interest in the “parent thing,” as he called it, was growing along with Danielle’s tummy. And, as she neared her due date, she welcomed his company if for no other reason than to help her up. She struggled to stand when she heard her name called but the look on her face told Bo that she wasn’t going anywhere without a good tug from him.

“How y’all been? I’m Loretta,” she said, extending her

hand to them, finally getting the opportunity to formally introduce herself to two people she had seen in passing on a regular basis for the last three months.

“Hi, I’m Danielle and this is my husband, Bo. I’m so glad to be meeting you; I’ve seen you here so much! I guess when this baby is finally born we’ll be seeing you a lot more often,” Danielle said, all smiles. “Doctor LaStazzi is going to be our baby’s doctor.”

She was a pretty girl, Loretta had always thought; big blue eyes, fair skin with freckles on her cheeks and nose, and long, curly dark hair, full and down to her waist. *She’ll probably cut that hair real soon after the baby comes*, Loretta thought. *Too bad*. “I’m happy to meet both y’all too. We’ve been seeing each other here for so long, now,” Loretta said, her eyes falling to Danielle’s oversized stomach. “Girl, you are HUGE! It’s gettin’ to be about time to have that baby, isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah, and I’m ready for this young un’ to be out, too!” Danielle said, gripping her huge belly as well as she could. “It’s time to stop carrying this thing around and be a momma!” she said, laughing.

“Uh huh, I’ll go along with that,” said Bo, chiming in to confirm her desire to finally have this baby. “All she does anymore is bitch about how big she is and how uncomfortable she is...”

Danielle punched his arm. “That’s okay buddy-boy, next time it’s *your* turn to carry a big ol’ thing like this around. We’ll see who’s bitchin’ then!” Danielle and Loretta both laughed, looked at each other and chimed in unison, “Men!”

“Had Doctor Harkness said anything about twins at all, at any time?” asked Loretta. “This sure looks like twins to me.”

“For a while, but he figured from four months on, it was going to be just one big baby!” Danielle replied. “All he’s heard for months is one heartbeat and the sonogram showed only one.”

“You planning on having more after this?” asked Loretta.

“I don’t know; we’ll see how this goes. It’s our first, and we both love kids, but I told Bo I’m not making any promises till we see how this goes. Maybe.”

“Do you know yet what it’s going to be?” Loretta asked.

“We had the chance to find out, but we decided no, we wanted to wait and find out when it’s born!” she said, excited by the thought.

They came to the exam room and Loretta helped her up to sit on the table and did some minor preps to the room while Bo sat in the corner chair and reached for a Popular Mechanics magazine from the rack on the wall. Loretta glanced at his arms and noticed perhaps a dozen small, localized burns scattered around from approximately his elbow on up to where his shirt sleeve would be, burns perhaps the size a cigarette would make. The tank top he was wearing showed a dramatic line between the white skin of his shoulder and the dark, reddish tan that stopped at his bicep. The red sunburn was also underneath his arm. She examined his arms for a few seconds from where she was standing. *He’s a welder, I’ll bet*, she thought. “Bo, what do you do for a living?” she asked.

“I work at J&B Fabrication in Ludlow,” he said. “Been there for a while, now. It’s alright. The money’s okay; it pays the bills, I guess, but I don’t want to weld forever, you know? I’d like to own my own business someday, maybe tower erecting. That’s getting big.”

Loretta looked over her chart, making sure she had all the information up-to-date. “Any changes we need to know about?” she asked.

“Just our address, we moved three weeks ago. Got a good deal come up. We’re in a doublewide on Black Nate Road now; number thirteen thirty. It’s down in a hollow, it’s so cute! The landowner cleared out a lot of brush that had grewed up over the years and left the small scrubs. He thought he wanted to live there hisself but decided to rent it out instead. And since we decided to chance it and stay in Ocoosa to have this baby, we went ahead...”

Bo’s eyes flashed up from his magazine and caught Danielle’s with a fixed and reprimanding stare. Seeing his intensity, she stopped mid-sentence.

Loretta paused her notations long enough to ask, “Stay? Where else would you go? Why wouldn’t you have it here?” Quickly noting the silence, she glanced up at the two of them and scanned both faces, sensing an immediate and palpable tension that had not been present between them moments before. She felt it fill the room and penetrate her. Bo’s glaring had made its point and his eyes drifted back down to pages of his magazine. Danielle quickly shifted the conversation back to their recent move.

“Bo and a friend of his had to do all the moving, I’m about useless. And besides, Doctor Harkness told me not to lift anything over *five* pounds about two months ago! I think that’s a little too dang strict, don’t you?” she asked.

“Well, that’s a new one for me,” Loretta said, still going over the chart. “The address, I mean. Then again,” she said, looking up again, putting the peculiar shift in conversation on

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the back burner of her mind, “most addresses I hear *are* new to me. I’ve been here all of three months and I still don’t know my way around much. That’s the hardest thing about picking up and moving somewhere completely different; you’re lost for so long, it seems. As big as Atlanta is, I knew my way around; knew where everything was, I’d been there so long.”

“How long did you live in Atlanta?” Danielle asked. “I’ve been there a few times, but I don’t like it at all. Way too hustle-bustle for me.”

“All of my life till I moved here. Yeah, it’s fast alright,” replied Loretta. “I think that’s what I liked about it for so long. I came through here once a while back and I just felt good here, really fell in love with the place right off. Figured it’d be a good town for me to slow down a little when I was ready to, kind of settle in where people are friendlier, more predictable, you know?”

“That’s us, Watsonville: slow and predictable!” Bo replied in a resigned tone of voice. The room was all laughter and it felt good to the three of them.

“Is he going to ‘induct’ me?” asked Danielle, changing the subject, a slight pleading in her voice that told Loretta she was getting predictably worried as her time approached. Loretta laughed slightly, but not enough to make this simple Georgia girl feel awkward about her choice of terms.

“You mean ‘induce?’ Well, Doctor Harkness said he would if you hadn’t started labor by... tomorrow, so...yeah, unless you go in between now and Wednesday, I believe he has you scheduled for Thursday morning to induce or take it Caesarian if he has to,” she said, looking intently at the latest orders written in the chart. “That decision he’ll make at the last

minute. It'll be up to him what he thinks is best for you and the baby at the time of delivery."

"He does? He's got me down for Thursday?" she replied, her pleading tone replaced with surprise. She glanced over at Bo who looked up at the mention of a Thursday delivery.

"I know, I know," Loretta reassured her, realizing full well the apprehension all mothers seem to slip into as the delivery date finally comes into sight. They all want it out, but they've become so accustomed to this growing lump in front of them that the idea of a change scares them. "It's come to a head now, excuse the pun, and you're going to finally have this baby, and it will be beautiful boy or girl and you're going to love it and spoil..."

"And be up all damn night with it," injected Bo, trying to be funny and do what he could to ease the anxiety his wife was feeling.

"Doctor Harkness will be here in just a few minutes, so just sit back and take it easy. He'll most likely want to talk over Thursday with you and you just listen to him, listen to what he tells you, he's really good, y'all know that. You couldn't ask for a better doctor. Don't be afraid to ask him any questions you've got, he's got the answers," Loretta assured them. "This whole procedure about birthing babies doesn't get too far off the main track very often and chances are whatever questions you have, he's answered hundreds and hundreds of times. You seem to be progressing fine right up to now, I doubt you're going to have much trouble at all, okay?"

"Thanks, thanks for your help," Danielle said as Loretta turned to leave the room. "You've been just super and we'll be seeing you again soon, I guess. Wish us luck!" she said as she

bit her fist in mock panic.

“Y’all gonna be just fine, really! I’ll see you next week, maybe the week after when you’re in to see Doctor LaStazzi for your first visit with your brand-new baby,” Loretta said, sounding as upbeat as she could for the concerned young woman. “I’ll give your address change to Vanessa at the desk so she can make note of it, so don’t worry about it. Bye!” She closed the door and knew that even though it seemed so crucial and important to the soon-to-be parents in the room, the scene had been and would be repeated day in and day out at the clinic. Delivering babies was a business and the OB department went about that business in a controlled, conscientious manner. After all, that was the best way to ensure a consistent, quality product: a healthy new baby, ready to take its place in the world with the help of nurturing, informed parents. At least that was the theory.