

The Necessary Murder of Nonie Blake

ALSO BY TERRY SHAMES

A Killing at Cotton Hill

The Last Death of Jack Harbin

Dead Broke in Jarrett Creek

A Deadly Affair at Bobtail Ridge

A Samuel Craddock Mystery

The Necessary Murder of Nonie Blake

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*To Sam and Ada Gaines and their descendants,
who filled my head with stories*

CHAPTER 1

Although none of the Blake family has caused the police in Jarrett Creek any trouble for a long time, I'm not surprised that people are in an uproar when they hear that Winona Blake is back in town. Most people don't even know her real name—she's always been called Nonie.

"She was a dangerous girl and she'll be a dangerous woman." Loretta Singletary, my good friend and neighbor down the street, has stopped in to bring me a hefty slab of coffee cake along with her opinions. She gets up early and bakes every morning and dispenses her goodies like she's trying to fatten up all her friends. Along with her coffee cakes and sweet rolls, she usually brings me the latest news-about-town.

I can't help groaning. "Loretta, I don't want to hear this. They wouldn't have let her out of the mental institution if they thought she was a danger to anyone. And besides, if her family isn't worried, why should anybody else be?"

"You know as well as I do that they're always letting people out of mental hospitals, and then they go crazy and kill somebody." I'm trying not to stare at Loretta's new permanent that has her white hair in tight curls all over her head. I don't know whether to mention the hairdo or not. I've had the experience of complimenting her on her hair only to find that she's unhappy with the way it looks, mad at her hairdresser, and by extension mad at anyone who notices it.

"No, I don't know that. And if you didn't watch all that TV you wouldn't believe it either."

"It's not just me." Her feathers are ruffled. She doesn't like to be called out for watching what I think of as alarmist TV. "Patty Larson is putting together a petition to have Nonie escorted out of town."

THE NECESSARY MURDER OF NONIE BLAKE

Now I laugh out loud. “Loretta, I hope you don’t sign it.”

“And why not?” She’s like a banty rooster when she gets mad.

“Because anybody with any sense will look at the list of signers and know that they’re looking at the silliest people in town.”

“Says you,” she grumbles. “For your information I had no intention of signing it anyway. I know you can’t run somebody out of town. But I think as chief of police you ought to at least go over there and find out what she’s up to.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I say. “If a bunch of you are so all-fired interested, why don’t you get a welcome wagon together for her?”

My suggestion wasn’t serious, but the gleam in her eye tells me that she is considering the idea. Everybody will be itching to get a look at Nonie. Twenty years ago, when she was fourteen years old, she tried to kill her younger sister. At the recommendation of a psychiatrist, the family sent her off to an institution near Dallas, and she had been there ever since. At least that’s the way I heard the story. I wasn’t chief of police at the time it happened. I was working as a land man for an oil and gas company, and I traveled all over the state and so sometimes missed getting the whole story of events that happened in town.

Now I’m chief of police again more or less by default. Jarrett Creek went bankrupt and couldn’t afford to pay anybody. I didn’t need the salary, so they asked me to step in. Even though it had been many years since I was in the job, people still called me chief, and it seemed natural enough for me to say yes.

Loretta says she’s got to go, and by the excitement in her voice I’m afraid that by suggesting a welcome committee I’ve started an idea that will take on a life of its own. From what little I know about the Blakes, though, they’ll find a way to deflect the curiosity seekers. A few families, no matter how long they’ve lived in Jarrett Creek, are never really part of it. The Blakes are like that. Nonie’s actions set the family apart, and since then they’ve never made much of an attempt to fit in.

For the next few days, Loretta doesn’t mention Nonie Blake—

in fact, she's obviously making an effort to keep me out of the loop on what the ladies are up to. That's fine with me. It's mid-August and hot as blazes, which seems to bring out the orneriness in people, and I have a few dustups to settle. Plus the kids are back in school, and the high school boys like to protest by spending the evenings drinking and racing cars along the dam road. I have to shut them down every couple of nights.

It's a shame that school starts up so early, before summer is over. When I was a youngster the best days of summer were late August when you could lie around with a fishing pole and while away the afternoon. At least that's my nostalgic recollection—it probably didn't happen very often.

So I've pushed Nonie Blake out of my mind when a call comes in to police headquarters a few days later. It's Charlotte Blake, her voice trembling.

"Chief Craddock, something has happened. My sister Nonie has drowned and I don't know what to do."

"Drowned where?" I ask.

"In our pond out behind the house." She starts to cry.

"I'll be right out there. Don't move anything or mess with the body."

"We already moved her. We had to get her out of the pond. We couldn't just leave her there."

"I understand. I mean, leave everything the way it is now."

I call an ambulance to come from Bobtail. Then I call Bill Odum, one of my two deputies, and tell him I need him to come out to the Blakes' ranch as soon as he can. He says he can leave right away, that he and his daddy have just now finished clearing a field. When he isn't working part-time as a cop, he works for his daddy on their farm.

The Blake place is on the north side of town, out past the cemetery and a few miles down a gravel road. I barrel down the road, kicking up a lot of dust. Not too many houses out this way. Every one of them is situated on a couple of acres of land. People got in the habit of calling these places "the ranches," but for me it doesn't fit. When I think of a

THE NECESSARY MURDER OF NONIE BLAKE

ranch, I think of acres and acres of land stretching farther than the eye can see, not some scrubby couple of acres.

I don't know why anybody would want to live out here. There's something desolate about it, even though there are plenty of trees. But there's also scrub brush and big patches of land with nothing growing on them, not even weeds. It's worse this time of year when we haven't had enough rain and the sun is at its hottest. If you walk around in this area, you run across a lot of fire-ant beds. Makes my ankles sting to think about it.

I head up the gravel driveway to the house and park in front of the garage. I pause before I get out, sizing up the place. It's massive, both tall and wide with a big wraparound porch, generous windows, and an oversized front door. But it's unadorned, no carved trim on windows or doors, no embellishments, and it's painted a gloomy gray. If the house ever goes to ruin, no doubt people will soon say it's haunted, not only because of what happened out here twenty years ago, but also because it looks unapproachable.

Charlotte said the pond was located out back of the house. The backyard is as scrubby as the front, with exhausted patches of grass barely holding their own in the red dirt. There's a big hulk of a barn set several yards back that has seen better days. The heat shimmers off the tin roof, the glare piercing even though I'm wearing sunglasses. As I get closer to the barn, I hear a child's voice, high and loud, and a woman crying, the sound coming from behind the structure. A trick of acoustics makes it seem like the air is full of voices.

The pond is set a short distance back from the barn. The family is gathered near the banks next to a heap on the ground. As I walk up, I see that the pond is half-obscured with brown algae and dead leaves. A putrid smell hangs in the air. I don't see how the family can stand the odor, although I suppose with Nonie lying there they aren't noticing much else.

I had forgotten that Loretta had told me that Charlotte has a five-year-old boy, and I'm surprised to see him crouched beside the body looking at it intently. Squatting next to him, his hand on the boy's shoulder, is a scrawny young man with his back to me.

Adelaide Blake; her daughter Charlotte; and a man of about fifty, with a thick body and curly gray hair, have their eyes on the two crouched there. Adelaide Blake is sobbing into a handkerchief. I'm curious why Adelaide's husband, John, isn't with them.

At the sound of my footsteps, they turn to me with an air of relief. Only the child doesn't look up, keeping his attention on the body. Children are fascinated by death and can seem heartless because they don't really understand the full import of it.

Charlotte walks toward me, and the scrawny young man who was keeping vigil with the five-year-old stands up. His thin, pale face is streaked with dirt and the trace of tears, and his black pants and T-shirt look damp. The Blakes have four children, one of them much younger than the other three. This must be him. He's around twenty. There's an older brother who doesn't live in Jarrett Creek. He has made a bit of a name for himself riding the rodeo circuit.

"Mrs. Blake, Charlotte." I take my hat off and nod to them. Adelaide turns away, weeping, and Charlotte puts her fist to her mouth.

I walk over next to Nonie Blake's body and say to the child, "Mind if I take a look?"

Charlotte says, "Trey, come over by me."

"No, Mamma, I'm watching Aunt Nonie," the child says.

The young man takes the child's hand. "Come on, Trey, let's go."

He whines in complaint, but he lets himself be led away.

It's obvious that Nonie is dead, but I lean down to put my fingers on her artery nevertheless. I wonder how long she was in the water. It must have been several hours. Her skin is wrinkled and white. She's wearing a brightly flowered dress and slippers that don't look like the kind of thing you would wear to come outdoors unless it was only to step outside for a moment.

Physically, Nonie doesn't look like her mother and sister. They are both tall and slim, and she's only about 5'5", and although she's not heavy, she has more weight and shape to her. Her head is canted to one side. I

THE NECESSARY MURDER OF NONIE BLAKE

reach over and center it, and then peer closer to be sure of what I'm seeing. I can say one thing. Nonie Blake didn't drown. The side of her head has been bashed in, crushing her cheek and jaw. Surely the family must have noticed this when she was pulled from the water, but Charlotte said she drowned.

Everybody is quiet while I am observing the body, as if they're hoping I can perform a miracle. I straighten back up and shake my head. "Ambulance will be here soon," I say, although I realize that now I'm going to have to put off having the ambulance take her away until the Texas Rangers or the highway patrol get here.

I walk over to Adelaide. She has stopped crying, but her expression is stunned. She's in her midfifties. Her hair is tucked into a large gray bun. "Mrs. Blake, I'm so sorry," I say. "Does anybody have any idea what happened?"

She sniffs. Her voice is strangled. "Can you ask Charlotte? I need to collect myself."

"Of course. Why don't we move away from the pond?"

She takes a few steps back but can't take her eyes off her daughter's body.

I turn to Charlotte. Her face is pale. She's not a pretty woman, her face long and thin with a sallow complexion, and her eyes bulging slightly. But she has sleek brown hair and a trim figure. She's wearing a short-sleeved yellow blouse and white slacks.

"I don't know that we've met officially," I say. "I'm Samuel Craddock."

"Thank you for coming so quickly," she says.

The man with her puts his hand out. "I'm Les Moffitt," he says. "I'm a friend of the family."

"And this is my brother, Matthew," Charlotte says, indicating the young man still holding the five-year-old's hand. "We call him Skeeter. And that's my son, Trey."

Trey slips his hand out of Skeeter's and runs back to the body. Charlotte has her eyes in his direction, but I don't think she really sees him.

Skeeter wipes his hand on his pants before he shakes mine. His hand is damp and surprisingly cool.

“Charlotte, can you tell me who found your sister’s body?”

“That was Skeeter.” She reaches over and puts her arm around her brother’s shoulders and pulls him to her.

He swipes dirt off his face with the back of his hand.

“Skeeter, why don’t you tell me how you happened to find your sister,” I say.

“Everybody was in an uproar about Daddy. I came out here to the pond to get out of the house for a few minutes. When I got to the pond . . .” He stops for a minute and swallows. “I saw this shape and I thought it was a fawn that might have fallen in the water and drowned, so I went around the side to pull it out. When I got close, I saw . . . I saw the dress and I knew it couldn’t be . . . you know what I mean.”

Adelaide moans. Charlotte is gnawing at her lip.

Charlotte’s little boy suddenly jumps to his feet, runs to his mother’s side, and grabs her hand. “Mamma, Mamma,” he says. “I saw Aunt Nonie move. You said she couldn’t move anymore, but I saw her.”

Charlotte draws a sharp breath. “Les, could you take Trey inside?”
“I saw her! I did!”

She kneels down next to the boy. “Honey, it was some water settling in her body.”

The child looks back at Nonie, frowning, not wanting to believe this information. Charlotte takes his shoulders and moves him around to face her. “Trey-Trey, would you like Uncle Les to take you inside and give you a cookie?”

The boy sticks a finger in his mouth. “Two cookies.”

“Okay, two cookies. And you can watch TV.”

That seals the deal, and Les Moffitt leads the child away.

I turn back to Skeeter. “When you say everybody was in an uproar over your daddy, what do you mean?”

Skeeter looks at Charlotte. She says, “Daddy has had Parkinson’s for several years and now he’s got some dementia with it. He gets agitated sometimes.”

THE NECESSARY MURDER OF NONIE BLAKE

“I see. Skeeter, you pulled Nonie out of the water by yourself?”

“Yes sir.”

“When you got her out, did you happen to notice the wound at the side of her head?”

“What wound?” Charlotte’s voice is high with tension.

Skeeter looks down at his feet, nodding slightly. “I thought maybe she had hit her head on a rock.” He looks up at me, his eyes as weary as an old man’s. “But there’s no rocks around the pond that I know of.”

All the air goes out of Charlotte. She closes her eyes and clenches her teeth.

I look to Adelaide to see how she has taken this news, but she’s looking out over the pond as if she either didn’t hear it or doesn’t want to process it.

“Why don’t you all go back to the house and I’ll be there in a minute to talk to you,” I say.

Charlotte and Skeeter start to walk toward the house, but Adelaide stands her ground. I lock eyes with her, wondering if she has something in particular to say to me, but she looks away quickly and stares at the body. She clears her throat. “I’m going to stay here for a minute,” she says. “If that’s all right.”

“That’s fine. I have to make a couple of calls.”

“She’s not going anywhere,” Adelaide says.

I walk a little distance away to put in a call to the Rangers and the highway patrol, telling them I’m going to need some help here and giving them directions.

When I walk back, Adelaide hasn’t moved. With a sigh, she says, “She didn’t have a chance to get back into life.”

“It’s a shame,” I say.

I stand there with her a few minutes longer. I’m thinking that although Skeeter brought Nonie out of the water here, she may have gone in anywhere along the shoreline of the pond.

I hear vehicles crunching up the gravel driveway, more than one. When I hear doors slam, I say, “Mrs. Blake, it would be best if you go inside. I’ll walk with you.”

“All right, then.” We head toward the house. She goes inside, and I walk over to talk to Bill Odum and the ambulance drivers, who arrived at the same time.

I tell the drivers that things aren’t as straightforward as they seemed when I called them, and it’ll be a while before they can take the body, so they may as well settle in.

Then I tell Bill Odum to come with me. “I want you to take a look,” I say.

At the pond, he crouches down to get a closer look. “Uh-oh,” he says, seeing the way the skull is damaged. “We’re going to have to notify the state.”

“I already put in the calls.” I tell him I’m going to go back to the house to talk to the family, and I want him to walk around the pond and see if he can figure out where Nonie’s body went in. “And keep a look out for a weapon. I don’t know whether somebody hit her here at the pond and shoved her in, or if they might have done it somewhere else and dragged her body here. You know what to look for.”

I’m wishing we could put a sheet or something over the body, but the last time I did that, I caught hell from the coroner for interfering with the body temperature and making it harder for them to determine the time of death.

Odum looks out over the pond and shudders. “Snaky kind of place. I’m going back to the car to get me a tire iron to poke around with.” He doesn’t move right away. “I went to school with Charlotte. I don’t remember her very well, but I do remember my mamma was pretty shook up by what happened. She wanted to keep me out of school, but luckily Daddy convinced her that didn’t make any sense. You don’t suppose Charlotte did this, do you?”

“It’s a little early for that kind of speculation.” I start toward the house, Odum walking beside me. “By the way, Doc Taggart’s going to be here soon. Would you ask him to come to the house when he arrives?”