

Blessed Are the Wholly Broken
Tennessee Delta Series, Book 1

Melinda Clayton



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Dedication

As always, to my family with love and gratitude.

Title inspired by “[In Place of a Curse](#),” by John Ciardi.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my legal expert, David K. Bowles of Bowles Lutzer & Newman, LLP, as well as to my medical expert, Jennifer Bunn, RN and co-author of the textbook *Microbiology Fundamentals: A Clinical Approach*. To both of you, your time and expertise were invaluable; any mistakes are solely my own.

I'd also like to thank the staff from the Lauderdale County Jail in Ripley, Tennessee, who were always friendly and helpful during my numerous phone calls asking about procedures and processes. Again, any mistakes are mine.

Thanks, too, to my beta-readers and editors. David Bowles, Patty and Bill Franklin, and Malcolm R. Campbell, author of *The Seeker* and *The Sailor*, your careful attention to detail made all the difference.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Matthew 5:4

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Prologue: May 13, 2013—Sentencing

AROUND ME I HEAR the sounds of incarceration echoing against cold concrete: shouting, banging, an occasional sob. The air is putrid, a stale mixture of urine, sweat, bleach, and vomit. In the beginning I could scarcely fathom becoming used to such things, but after nearly a year in this cell, in some odd way the noise and the stench have come to represent home. I'm comforted by the consistency of the assault on my senses, much as one finds comfort in the numbing monotony of white noise.

The call came exactly four minutes ago, so I wait for the armed guards and the quick trip to the courthouse where I will meet my attorney. Together, we will face the jury—a jury of my peers, they said, and at one time that would have been accurate. But these people are no peers of mine; I've crossed a line that ensures this to be true.

There is no doubt of my guilt; that was already determined. What is in dispute is the depth of my guilt. For weeks I sat at the defense table, my mouth dry, my eyes drier, and listened to the horror of my crime. The carefully prepared defense of my actions crumbled away like so much dust in the wind, blown apart by my own behavior. By the end, even I knew I was a monster, not for the reasons they cited—not because I had killed my wife—but because I didn't save her sooner.

More recent words play themselves through my mind as I wait for the telltale jingle of keys. *Aggravating factors. Particularly cruel, stood to gain sole custody of a minor, planned and premeditated, preyed upon vulnerabilities.*

It is not enough to label me guilty; the question is: Am I guilty enough to put to death?

It is a necessary part of the process; this, I understand. The court needs closure, the jury needs to feel they've fulfilled their responsibilities, the family needs to feel vindicated. True and just punishment must be meted out within the appropriate parameters of the law.

I will go with my lawyer into the courtroom. I will sit again, as I have sat for weeks, and wait for others to determine my fate. Life imprisonment or death; that is the question. And while the outcome matters immensely to the other players in this drama of my life, it matters not at all to me. I am dead either way.

Chapter 1: February 14, 1989

WHEN I THINK ABOUT the day I met my wife, what I hear is rain. It coursed down the dorm room window in great rivulets that February of 1989, pouring from the sky in quantities sufficient to ensure the students splashing along the flooded campus on the way to class would be soaked to the bone in spite of their shiny raincoats and colorful umbrellas.

On that particular day, the fortuitous rainy Valentine's Day that would set the future course of my life, I stood on the tenth floor of Richardson Towers South, listening to the rain drum on the roof and staring gloomily out the window. I was a conscientious student; rarely did I miss a class. But that winter morning of my senior year at Memphis State University—later renamed University of Memphis—I couldn't bring myself to slog to the far corner of campus for a microbiology lab I disliked even on the sunniest of days.

"Damn rain," I muttered, and heard my slumbering roommate stirring on the other side of the desk that served to separate our room into halves.

"Again?" He sat up, scrubbing his face in an attempt to wake up. "Jesus, will it ever stop?"

Brian and I had been roommates since sophomore year, one of those rare pairings that worked effortlessly from the beginning. Ironically, given the differences in our personalities, it was odd we ever even met. Brian Stone was an athlete, a former football player, whereas I got winded merely anticipating the long trek downstairs during one of our many late night fire drills. He began his time at MSU housed in South Hall, the athletic dorm, where he stayed until his disdain for curfew, coupled with his love of girls and beer, resulted in his removal from the team. I returned from summer break to find Brian's smelly duffel bags tossed onto the bed I had come to think of as my own.

Despite our differences, our personalities and temperaments were such that even after semesters spent tripping over each other in our cramped and crowded dorm room, we remained friends. Brian's easygoing nature and innate optimism took the edge off my own anxiety-driven self-doubts, and I don't think it's too much of a stretch to believe I helped Brian find his footing at MSU. The Brian of our senior year was a much more focused young man than the Brian who had his filthy feet propped on my desk—*my* desk—that first day of our sophomore year.

"Yes, again," I answered him, leaning my forehead against the cold glass of the window, fogging it with my breath. "I'm skipping class."

"You?" Brian threw off the covers and padded over to peer out the narrow window with me, rubbing the stubble along his jaw. "Now *me* skipping class, that's pretty much a given, but *you*? Phillip Lewinsky doesn't skip class. And it's only Tuesday," he pointed out. "Not a great way to start out your week."

"I'm tired of being wet," I said, "and cold. It took forever last night for my feet to unshriveled."

Brian yawned loudly, scratching at his belly above the sagging sweatpants he wore as pajamas. “Looks like a good day to skip out on everything,” he said, as I leaned away from him, waving my hand against an invisible cloud of morning breath.

“You smell like something crawled inside and died,” I informed him, and he laughed.

“Not all of us are as hygienically scrupulous as you,” he retorted. Brian had a way with words, a deep appreciation for vocabulary; this was a fact that often seemed incongruous with the rest of his personality, though it served him well in the years to come.

“Hygienically scrupulous?” I repeated. “Who says that? No one says that, Brian. Seriously.”

He gave me a sideways look. “Well of course they don’t,” he said. “That’s what makes me special. Just as not everyone flosses three times a day, deep conditions once a week, and trims nails on Sunday.” He poked a finger at my chest. “That’s what makes *you* special.”

Against my will, I felt myself blush, a trait I hated about myself. “I’m not that bad,” I said, though in truth I probably was. Living in such a confined space didn’t leave much room for secrets. “It just seems a little overboard because you’re so nasty in comparison. How many showers did you take last week? Two? Three, at most?”

Brian snorted. “Not all of my showers are taken here, you know. I have...” He paused, face squinted in apparent concentration as he searched for the right term. “Friends. Yes, that’s it. Friends of the female persuasion who enjoy sharing shower time with me.” He grinned again. “How do you think I keep these golden locks so irresistible?”

It was true, both the boastful claim and the golden locks. Girls did tend to find Brian irresistible. Although he hadn’t played football since freshman year, he was obsessive about his workout routine. The end result was that aside from his love of advanced verbiage, he still presented as a football player. Brian’s looks may have helped reel the girls in, but it was his temperament that kept them there. My own mother was smitten with him. “Such a charming young man,” she always said, and make no mistake, Brian knew just how to capitalize on his natural gifts.

Men liked Brian, too. What wasn’t to like? He was a man’s man, as my father said. I knew exactly what my father meant, because I knew in my father’s opinion, I wasn’t. My father and I didn’t have a contentious relationship; we were cordial with one another. But my father and Brian were never at a loss for words on any number of topics, from sports to cars to rabbit hunting.

I used to watch them as they talked, the way my father’s eyes lit up. I wish I could have been the one to do that for my father, but I wasn’t, and after years of trying, and failing, to connect, I’d ultimately given up, content to bask in the residual glow of his enjoyment of Brian. I might not have been able to live up to my father’s expectations, but at least I’d given him Brian; I learned to enjoy my father’s pride vicariously.

In hindsight, I think they each filled a need for the other. Brian was the son my father had hoped to have, and my father filled the void left by the man who abandoned Brian a month before he was born. Brian rarely talked about his childhood, and I didn’t press the issue, but if talking

with my father about his desire for Memphis State to return to the Final Four helped him in some way, I was happy for him.

His family relationships may have been rocky, but Brian's success with the ladies of MSU was legendary. It was virtually guaranteed on nights I returned late from the lab I'd find a piece of tape placed over the keyhole, my sign to knock and then retreat to the study lounge down the hall while Brian roused himself enough to escort whichever coed he'd been entertaining down to the lobby for checkout. Brian was a scoundrel, no doubt, but he was a likable scoundrel, the only person I've ever met who somehow managed—and still does—to maintain friendships with women even after breakups.

I, on the other hand, was apparently quite easy to resist. It wasn't that girls didn't like me, *per se*; it was more that they didn't notice me. Slightly built with dark hair that was already receding in spite of the weekly deep conditioning so adroitly noted by Brian, I was overly serious and had a tendency towards moodiness, a tendency the incessant rain wasn't helping. The only consolation I had was that the rain might at least keep people indoors so I wouldn't have to witness happy couples parading around campus with flowers and candy while I spent Valentine's Day exactly the way I'd spent it the previous twenty-one years: alone.

"Come on, Lewinsky," Brian said, delivering a soft punch to my bicep. "Let's go get some breakfast. This room is depressing."

Brian threw on a t-shirt and flip-flops, and we headed downstairs to the cafeteria that connected Richardson Towers South with Richardson Towers North, the girls' side of the dormitories. During the years I called the university home, the Towers were the closest thing to coed dorms MSU had. They may still be; I haven't visited the campus since shortly after my graduation.

That dreary morning the cafeteria was nearly deserted, which is part of the reason Anna was impossible to miss. But only part. The real reason Anna couldn't be missed was that she entered the room on her backside, with a tremendous crash of table, chairs, books, and papers.

It was, she later told me, one of the most embarrassing moments of her life, slipping in a puddle of rainwater just as she strode through the door. "But only one; I've had several," she admitted. "I'm a little clumsy." I loved her clumsiness almost as much as I loved her candor.

But that was later. I had no way of knowing as Brian and I jumped to help her collect her belongings, trying our best not to laugh, that this was the woman I would one day swear to honor and cherish until parted by death. And I certainly hadn't known I would be the one to part us by death, or that Brian would be left alone fighting to allow me a life I no longer wanted.