

CHILD OF SORROW

Tennessee Delta Series, Book 3



by
Melinda Clayton

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For judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy.

James 2:13

Part 1: The Arrest

Chapter 1: Brian Stone

HAD MY CLIENT not tried to kill me that damp April morning, I may have never met Johnathan Thomas Woods. As it was, court had been recessed early, my client quickly subdued by deputies who whisked him back to his cell while I adjusted my tie and pretended to not be shaken by the incident. And because I'm not used to bicycles parked on my walkway—and was a bit distracted after having been jumped by a pen-wielding maniac—I nearly died for the second time in as many hours when I tripped over a pedal jutting into my path. Thankfully, the force of my face slamming into pavement was enough to stop my fall.

I have a tendency toward sarcasm when I'm angry.

Such was my mood when I stomped into the lobby of my downtown law office, blood dripping down my cheek and a torn flap of wool—*expensive* wool—flapping about my knee.

“Who the hell left—”

“Shush!”

The hissed order coming from my office manager was enough to stop me mid-sentence. Lena Reynolds is by no means a soft-spoken woman; nevertheless, her tone surprised me. Given my appearance, I’d expected a bit of sympathy.

“What—”

“Hush,” she said again, more softly this time, tilting her head toward the seating area opposite her desk. “Watch your language; you’ll scare him off. He’s a bit skittish, almost left a couple of times, but then sat back down.”

I grabbed a handful of Kleenex from the box on her desk, pressing them to my cheek as I followed her gaze. “Skittish? Lena, from what I can see he’s a kid, not a horse, although the way he’s slumped in that chair makes it hard to tell. What’s he doing here? I don’t have an appointment, and even if I did, he’d need a parent or guardian here. Is this whose goddamned bike—”

“Brian!” This time her voice was loud enough to penetrate through whatever noise the kid had been listening to through his earbuds. He looked up, a scowl on his face, his

eyes hidden in the shadow of a dark blue ball cap with the words *Going Fishing* centered in white over the bill. Shaggy hair curled out from under the cap. Brown, maybe. Maybe blond. It was hard to tell, wet as it was.

“What does he want?” I whispered, leaning close to Lena.

“Says he needs an attorney, is all I know.” She reached up and gave me a little push in the small of my back. “You’re an attorney. Go see what he wants.”

“We really need to work on your people skills,” I said, tossing the Kleenex into the garbage can beside her desk and tentatively touching my cheekbone. It didn’t seem to be broken, and the bleeding had stopped.

“Me?” she asked, brows raised. “I’m not the one storming in here cursing out a child. I’ll go pick up another suit for you while you take care of the kid.”

“You’re going to leave me alone with him?”

“You’re a big boy. I’m sure you can handle it.” She retrieved her purse from a drawer before pushing past me and shoving the door open with a hip, hiking boots splashing in puddles as she strode into the drizzly morning.

I looked back at the kid. If I’d had to guess, I’d have said he was around thirteen, maybe fourteen. I’m terrible with kids’ ages, but he was old enough to have lost the softness younger kids have, yet young enough to still

look vulnerable despite the scowl. Maybe even *because* of the scowl. He wore ripped jeans and a dark gray hoodie, damp about the shoulders, the wires to his earbuds snaking out of his zipped-up collar. On his feet he wore scuffed brown duck boots, not unlike a pair I'd had when I was about his age. They'd been a hot item back then; I didn't know if the same was true now, or if he'd found an old pair in a thrift store somewhere. Judging by the look of them, I'd have guessed the latter. They were also wet, I could see, and an old memory rose out of nowhere: another cold, wet Memphis morning much like this one, and me huddled alone in a doorway.

Refusing to speculate on the memory, I instead walked over to the boy, hand extended. "Brian Stone. Lena says you need an attorney."

He stood to greet me, offering me his own cold, wet hand to shake. "Yeah, I do," he said, his eyes darting to my face, then back down. "I'm John. Johnathan Thomas Woods, but I go by John." Another quick look at me. "But you don't look like I thought you would. You know, like the billboard you have beside the interstate."

I'd paid a fortune for that ridiculous billboard, a decision I'd instantly regretted when I first saw the finished eyesore casting a shadow over the I-240 loop around Memphis. "Yeah," I said. "Well, it's been a rough

morning. Which reminds me. Is that your bike outside?"

He nodded, stuffing his fingertips into the front pockets of jeans sitting dangerously low on skinny hips.

"You'd better bring it inside," I said. "Otherwise, it'll likely not be there when you go back for it."

He took a tentative step toward the door before turning to me. "Where should I put it?"

I hesitated, the thought of a dirty, wet bike—particularly *that* dirty, wet bike—leaning against a wall in my office enough to make me grimace. "Better bring it to my office," I said. "Go ahead. I'll wait for you." This day just kept getting worse. "Can I get you something to drink? Water? A Coke? Lena keeps us pretty well stocked in the lounge."

"Do you have coffee?" he asked, pausing at the door.

"Aren't you a little young for coffee?"

He made a sound, something between a laugh and a snort. "I'm a little young for a lot of things," he said, "but that doesn't keep them from happening."

He hurried to get his bike, and I walked to the lounge to make us some coffee.