

# Thomas Clayton

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A Novel

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## Chapter 1: The Bastard Boats

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I stood watching the coach and players on the football practice field and pushed up my Stetson with one finger in an effort to let the fading breeze blow some sweat off my forehead. It had been over a hundred for the last ten days, and the humidity level was nearly the same.

The players drew me back to when I had arrived here as a boy. I remembered the color rising in Boats's face—probably because I'd just told him to go fuck himself—as he sternly informed me that I'd be going out for all sports. "I was all-conference my junior year and all-state my senior year," he told me. "Doubt if you can do that well—or even half that, considerin' who your worthless pa was—but you had damn sure better be good enough to letter." Ma talked constantly about Boats while I was growing up. From what she said, I knew that he had hurt her in some way, though she didn't say how. She never got a chance to explain it, though, because Pa ran off the road in Florida, killing himself, Ma, and Sis.

Boats was Pa's half brother, and from the first minute I walked into Boats's house, I instantly hated the bastard. I learned later that Pa had felt the same way. Before Pa married Ma, Boats had been dating her, and they broke up. Boats told the town that Ma had married Pa to get his money but that the joke was on her because his half brother didn't have any. Pa was working for Nichols Casing, the largest oil casing company in the Southwest. It once belonged to Boats's dad, my stepgrandfather. The day after Ma and Pa married, Pa went back to work and there was a big argument and blowup. Boats fired my pa. Ma and Pa packed and left the next day.

This was all on top of the fact that Pa was only a truck driver with grease under his fingernails. He was a simple roughneck in the oil fields, working for his stepdad's company, as if

he weren't related at all. Pa's working-class status added fuel to Boats's highbrow hatred for him. Boats never spoke to my parents again, some fourteen years. He was a complete stranger to me the day we met. I knew him only by the pictures my ma and pa had of him.

Ma and Pa hadn't made it back by ten o'clock, so I had gone to bed. I woke to the smell of stale cigarettes and musty bourbon. Boats stood backlit in my bedroom door, his white suit and Stetson throwing a red-yellow aura hiding his face, 'cept for the glowing ash of his unfiltered Marlboro cigarette. He was short, turning his head to the side and blowing smoke into the hallway. "Git up, boy. We gotta talk." As I was sitting in my underwear and T-shirt on the flowered love seat my Ma had just covered, Boats told me that my folks and Sis were dead. His voice was emotionless and his speech slurred. He was drunk. He was restraining any emotion. Then he commented, "Your fucking pa killed 'em all when he drove off the road."

Boats sent a snarly cur of a man into my bedroom to collect my things. In the limo, they sat silently on the drive to the airport, and I tried to suppress my sobs.

A day later Boats and I were back in Tishomingo. My family's bodies were shipped back and buried in the local cemetery. My first fight with the bastard Boats was at their funeral and only the beginning of a hate/hate relationship.

I realized that Boats must be a very important man, judging from the number of people at the funeral. A lady named Shirley, who was introduced as Boats's private secretary, took me in tow. When people came by, she stopped and introduced them to me: senators, congressmen, the governor, and over five hundred other people I couldn't recall.

After the services were held at the Baptist church, the bodies of Ma and Sis were put into two different hearses. I didn't see Pa's coffin at the church. Shirley led me to the third black car, behind the ones hauling Ma and Sis, where I would ride to the cemetery. I asked her where my pa was, and she pointed to a hearse in the lot, just ahead of the two for Ma and Sis. When we arrived at the cemetery, the hearse carrying Pa went straight ahead and turned into a gate about a block from the entrance we went through. By the time Shirley got me up to the gravesite, my ma's and sister's coffins had been carried into the white-iron-fenced courtyard and lay suspended on rails beneath the gaze of a marble statue of Gabriel. She led me over and sat me down beside the bastard Boats.

I sat looking around, wondering where Pa's coffin was. It took more than fifteen minutes for all the people to get gathered around. It finally dawned on me that only two graves had been dug. Turning to Boats, I said, "Where's my pa?"

Boats continued jabbering with a tall, lanky man covered by a Stetson a size too big. The hat pressed on his ears, making him look like a six-foot elf. He looked annoyed.

Reaching out, I took hold of Boats's arm and jerked it. Boats turned and barked, "Can't you see I'm talkin' to someone? Use some manners, boy."

"Where's my pa?"

"I will talk to you later, back at the house," he replied.

"I want to know where my pa is right now."

"Not now, boy," he said. "We'll talk this evenin'."

The Baptist preacher's voice interrupted. "Let us bow our heads in prayer." He dropped both of his chins to his barrel chest, supported by a bloated gut. His belly lopped over his silver belt buckle and hid the silver tips of his cowboy boots from his downward gaze. The preacher's voice was deep and gravelly as he asked Jesus to join us.

I stood up and shouted, "Hold on, preacher!" Turning to Boats, I insisted, "Before this goes any further, are you going to tell me what's goin' on here?"

Boats reached up and grabbed me by the back of the neck. "Shut up and sit down."

The anger had been building in me for the previous two days and erupted in a furious torrent. I threw my right arm up, striking Boats's forearm and ripping his hand off my neck. I spun on him and screamed, "Take your goddamn hand off me, you mealymouthed son of a bitch! I'm not sittin' here listenin' to some hypocrite preacher pray over Ma and Sis while my pa ain't here!"

Boats straight-armed me, knocking me back into the folding chair, which rocked back and would have tumbled over had I not grabbed at Shirley's dress to steady myself, tearing it in the process.

Boats shouted at me through clenched teeth, "Now sit there and shut up, or I swear I'll break your goddamned little neck!"

I tried to free myself from the chair, but Boats had pinned me in place with his left arm, his elbow stuck in my sternum and his hand holding the curled edge of the steel folding chair. He looked at the preacher and said, "Please continue."

A few minutes later, Boats relaxed his grip and I bolted, surprising both him and Shirley. I cut around the end of the coffins and, leaning over them, shouted at Boats, "Go ahead! Put on your show, but I'm not stayin'!"

As Boats rose from his seat, I ran like a tailback through would-be tacklers, parting the surprised crowd and angling in the direction of the first hearse, the one carrying Pa.

I caught sight of the hearse and a mound of dirt, where two men in sweat-soaked clothes methodically dropped spades of dirt into the hole. The men stopped their work and stood silent as I slid to a stop in front of them. The hole was partially filled.

"Is my pa in that hole?"

"Pends on who you is, boy," the older man said as he wiped sweat from his brow on a dirty sleeve. "Is you Tommy Gurley?"

"Yes."

"Then this is yer pa."

"Have they already finished the service?"

"We's just doin' what we's told, boy."

"You mean what Boats told you."

"No, we'uns work for the undertaker. He told us to bury your pa."

"Well, you stop right now, ya hear?" I said. "Till I can go get a preacher to say words over my pa."

"We cain't do that, son. We's just followin' orders."

"Orders or not, you see that shovel over there?" I pointed to a spade lying on the ground.

"We sees it."

I walked over and lifted the shovel above my head. "If you don't stop right now, I'm goin' to knock the hell out of you with this shovel."

The men looked at me with tears running down my face and then at each other. Then they dropped their shovels, walked back to their truck, rolled up the windows, locked the doors, and drove off.

I stood there watching the dust rise behind the truck as it disappeared through the cemetery gate. As I turned, I realized that the driver still sat in the hearse that had brought my daddy to this spot. I walked over and opened the passenger door, focusing my fury on the man holding a cigarette between his thumb and first finger, and I smelled the alcohol from the open

bottle of Jack Daniel's tucked between his legs. "Who told them to throw dirt on my pa without a preacher?" I demanded.

"Those was our instructions."

"Whose instructions? Boats's?"

"Nope. The undertaker's."

"Nothin' else is to be done until I get a preacher. You understand?"

"Understood. I'll tell the undertaker."

"You do that."

Turning around, I could see that the people were leaving Ma's and Sis's gravesites. I hurried back, looking for the preacher.

I caught hold of him as he was trying to get into his car. "Preacher, I want you to come over and say some words over my pa."

The minister's face reddened, and he fumbled for words. "I—I'm sorry, son, but I have another engagement I need to get on to."

"You mean you won't say a prayer over my pa?"

"I'm sure you can find a minister of God of your dad's faith to give him final rites."

"What you mean 'final rites'?"

"Well, after all, boy, I understand your pa was a Catholic."

"You pray to the same God, don't you?" I asked.

"Son, you don't understand."

"I understand you won't say a prayer over my pa. What the hell kind of goddamn heathen are you, anyway?"

My voice and hand started to raise as I started to really let him have it, when Boats's hand fell on my shoulder.

"There you are, boy. Over your mad yet?" Boats smiled at me as he cast a furtive look at the preacher. "What's the problem, minister?" Boats said to the preacher, his smile widening.

"The boy here wanted me to say a prayer over his dad's gravesite."

"Well, you can do that for him, can't you, Walt?"

"If you wish, Mr. Nichols, but you know he was a papist."

"I know it isn't as if he was a Christian or anythin', but even the papists need a send-off."

I swung around, with Boats still keeping a tight grip on my shoulder. "You keep away from my pa. Neither one of you bastards go anywhere near him."

"Don't get your spurs up, son," Boats said. "Just tryin' to help. I wouldn't go down there anyway." Turning, he called Shirley over and handed me off. "Take this boy and keep 'im out of trouble."

I stood straight with my fists clenched, feet spread, eyes locked on Boats—oblivious to Shirley's arm draped across my shoulder.

"It's a damn good thing I ain't a man right now or I'd kill you where you stand and that bastard preacher too."

Boats laughed and turned to talk to a gathered group vying for his attention. Shirley wrapped me up and led me away to the car. I heard Boats apologizing to the preacher and the gathered onlookers.

When we got back to the house, Boats's driver, Pike, met us. I recognized him as the cur dog that had gathered my belongings in Florida. He was grizzled. His face was marked with deep scars, obviously a brawler. His gray, close-cropped hair displayed his age, which was contradicted by the youth in his clear blue eyes. His eyes missed nothing. Shirley put a hand on

my back and pushed me toward Pike. I started to protest, but Pike's right hand caught my wrist. The instant pain from his calloused grip compelled me along. He led me to a small room in the bunkhouse out behind the big house. "Boats said you'd be better off down here."

"Damn straight," I said. "I couldn't stand to be in the same house with that bastard Boats."

Pike smirked at me and whispered, "Watch yer mouth, boy. Not many people call Boats a bastard and walk away. Yer bein' kinfolk will only buy you so much rope, and if'n he don't kick yer ass for it, I just might for sport."

It was 1965; I was three months short of being fifteen when they buried my family. I was five-nine, a hundred and forty-five pounds of barbed wire, browned by the Florida and Oklahoma sun, pissed off, and spoiling for a fight. Living in a corner of the bunkhouse like an angry cur, I took up my role as a gopher for Boats and any other adult around the place who took to barking orders at me. That first summer, I hauled, fetched, and carried whatever the crews needed. Getting wrenches and pipe chains; fixing flats; shoveling mud, dirt, and grease—I did any dirty job that needed to be done. For ten to fourteen hours a day, including Saturdays and Sundays, I worked in the shipyard, cleaning up the yard and using the steam cleaner to clean the tanks and other equipment. Slowly I got over the aches and pains. Often working without a shirt, I blackened like an olive in the hundred-degree heat. One evening in August, the foreman told me, "Boats wants you up to the house."

Walking toward the house, I spotted Boats sitting in a cane chair on the front porch. I placed my right foot on the steps and rested my elbow on my knee, and I stopped and looked up at Boats. "You want to see me. Here I am."

"Been wantin' to talk to you, but button your shirt first. Buck tells me you're a helluva good worker, which surprises me."

"What do you want, Boats?" I sneered from under furrowed brows as I finished buttoning my shirt.

"School starts in two weeks. Understand you're gonna be a sophomore. That right?"

"Yeah."

"Two things I want, boy. You will get a B-plus average or above. We never had a dummy Nichols in the family, and we ain't startin' now."

"I'm only half Nichols, and that's too damn much."

That's when Boats told me I would be going out for all sports, and I told him, "You can go fuck yourself, Boats."

"Probably won't be doing that anytime soon, son, but you'd better watch that mouth of yours, and your tone. You want anything, boy?"

"Yeah, I want some money. I need school clothes."

"Just like your pa, a damned leech. You get paid. Take it out of your own wages."

"I ain't gettin' paid," I said.

"Nobody works for me without being paid—even you. I told Shirley to put you on the payroll."

"I don't give a damn what you told Shirley. I ain't been paid a red cent."

Boats turned and hollered through the screen door, "Shirley, get your fat ass out here!"

The screen door creaked and slammed against the clapboard siding, and Shirley stood there barefoot, barelegged, and holding her bathrobe together with both hands. "You want me, honey?"

“Thought I told you to put the kid here on the payroll.”

“I did, the first day he got here.”

“Not according to him.”

“Well, the checks are all down at the office,” she answered. “He’s never been in to pick ’em up.”

“Ever think about getting off your dead ass and takin’ ’em out to him? Go get some clothes on and bring me a bourbon and branch.”

Turning to me, he said, “Pick ’em up at the office tomorrow. Also, football practice starts Monday. Be there.”

The only thing I recall from my sophomore year was being a tackling dummy with the rest of the scrubs for the varsity to pound on. The coach used us for defense, and day after day we took a beating from the varsity. One thing about being light, I learned how to throw a block and tackle without meeting them head on. The first couple of times I tried that, I almost got killed. Coach Blackman told me after a month that if I’d gain about thirty to forty pounds, I’d be one hell of a football player. He assigned me to do weight training and isometrics. By the time school let out, I had managed to get junior varsity letters in boxing, football, basketball, and baseball.

Three days after school was over, I was working off a catwalk when Boats came by. The closer he came, the more apparent it was that he’d been drinking. He brushed against the pipe that I was carrying, and it left a streak of grease across his white suit.

Boats looked at the black grease on his suit and barked, “Hey, dumb shit, watch what you’re doin’! This is a five-hundred-dollar suit.”

I ignored him and continued up the catwalk to drop the pipe into place.

Buck Hagan, the straw boss, told me to go get two made-up turnbuckles for the one-inch cable. I climbed the catwalk and grabbed two of the greasy steel turnbuckles I had made up earlier in the day. They were about three pounds each and had a hook at one end and an eyelet at the other to secure the cable. The hook could be dropped over the edge, and tension could be removed from the cable by turning the fly—a small metal frame with right-hand threads on one end and left-hand threads on the other. When it was turned, the tension was taken from the line. I held the hook ends in my hand and swung them in rhythm with my stride.

As I passed Boats, I heard him cussing in a drunken stupor under his breath. Buck yelled down to him, “The kid’s one hell of a worker, Mr. Nichols!”

Coming back with the turnbuckles, I heard Boats yell back to Buck, “He wouldn’t have to be much to be better than his deadbeat dad! A no more worthless, lazy, shiftless, wormy son of a bitch ever lived.”

I was two feet above Boats on the catwalk when he finished. I didn’t give it a thought—before I realized what I’d done, the two turnbuckles caught Boats behind the left ear and shoulder, launching him forward, off the boardwalk, and into the trench pond filled with water, sour mud, sludge grease, and piss. Most men didn’t go to the outhouse to relieve themselves when the trench was so handy. Boats bellowed like a stuck pig and scrambled up the wall of the trench pond, cussing and spitting in an effort to find traction. Buck ran to the edge of the catwalk and yelled for me to get my ass up to the platform.

The other men suppressed their laughter as Boats screamed, “I’m gonna beat the shit out of that little prick!”

Buck didn't tell me till a year later what happened after I ran for cover. That night, when the Crummy brought the crew back, Buck came into the bunkhouse and told me, "Pack your things, boy. You're comin' to live with me."