

## PRAISE FOR CHARLES MARTIN

“Very few contemporary novelists have found acclaim within mainstream and evangelical markets, but Charles Martin is among them. [*The Letter Keeper*] hinges on the Scriptural message of forsaking the found in order to seek the lost, a theme Martin brings to poetic and brilliant life . . . Martin’s story shines with the light of eternal hope.”

—DAVIS BUNN, WRITING FOR *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*

“Martin follows up *The Water Keeper* with this heartrending, action-packed chapter in the saga of Murphy Shepherd . . . those familiar with the series will appreciate the emotional punch this rip-roaring adventure packs.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* FOR *THE LETTER KEEPER*

“Martin excels at writing characters who exist in the margins of life. Readers who enjoy flawed yet likable characters created by authors such as John Grisham and Nicholas Sparks will want to start reading Martin’s fiction.”

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *THE WATER KEEPER*

“*The Water Keeper* is a wonderfully satisfying book with a plot driven by both action and love, and characters who will stay in readers’ heads long after the last page.”

—*SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW*

“*The Water Keeper* is a multilayered story woven together with grace and redemption, and packed tight with tension and achingly real characters. This one will keep you turning pages to see what else—and who else—Murph will encounter as he travels down the coastline of Florida.”

—LAUREN K. DENTON, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE HIDEAWAY*

“In *The Water Keeper* Charles Martin crafts a compelling story with skill and sensitivity. Current fans won’t be disappointed; new readers will understand why Charles Martin is on the short list of contemporary authors I recommend above all others.”

—ROBERT WHITLOW, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Martin explores themes of grace, mercy, and forgiveness in this sweeping love story . . .”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *SEND DOWN THE RAIN*

“Charles Martin never fails to ask and answer the questions that linger deep within all of us. In this beautifully told story of a prodigal coming home, readers will find the broken and mended pieces of their own hearts.”

—LISA WINGATE, NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*, FOR *LONG WAY GONE*

“Martin weaves all the pieces of this story together with a beautiful musical thread, and as the final pieces fall into place, we close this story feeling as if we have witnessed something surreal, a multisensory narrative for anyone who enjoys a redemptive story.”

—JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PERENNIALS*, FOR *LONG WAY GONE*

“A beautiful story of redemption and love once lost but found again, *Long Way Gone* proves two things: music washes us from the inside out and Charles Martin’s words do the same.”

—BILLY COFFEY, AUTHOR OF *STEAL AWAY HOME*

“Martin’s story charges headlong into the sentimental territory and bestseller terrain of *The Notebook*, which doubtless will mean major studio screen treatment.”

—KIRKUS, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *UNWRITTEN*

“Charles Martin understands the power of story, and he uses it to alter the souls and lives of both his characters and his readers.”

—PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Martin is the new king of the romantic novel . . . *A Life Intercepted* is a book that will swallow you up and keep you spellbound.”

—JACKIE K. COOPER, BOOK CRITIC, *HUFFINGTON POST*

“Martin’s strength is in his memorable characters . . .”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* FOR *CHASING FIREFLIES*

“Charles Martin is changing the face of inspirational fiction one book at a time. *Wrapped in Rain* is a sentimental tale that is not to be missed.”

—MICHAEL MORRIS, AUTHOR OF *LIVE LIKE YOU WERE DYING* AND *A PLACE CALLED WIREGRASS*

“Martin spins an engaging story about healing and the triumph of love . . . Filled with delightful local color.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* FOR *WRAPPED IN RAIN*

**THE  
RECORD  
KEEPER**

## ALSO BY CHARLES MARTIN

### THE MURPHY SHEPHERD NOVELS

*The Water Keeper*

*The Letter Keeper*

*The Record Keeper*

### STAND-ALONE NOVELS

*Send Down the Rain*

*Long Way Gone*

*Water from My Heart*

*A Life Intercepted*

*Unwritten*

*Thunder and Rain*

*The Mountain Between Us*

*Where the River Ends*

*Chasing Fireflies*

*Maggie*

*When Crickets Cry*

*Wrapped in Rain*

*The Dead Don't Dance*

### NONFICTION

*What If It's True?*

*They Turned the World Upside Down*

THE  
RECORD  
KEEPER

A Murphy Shepherd Novel

CHARLES  

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MARTIN



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Record Keeper*

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*For Bones*  
*Because the needs of the one*  
*outweigh those of the ninety-nine*



# PART 1

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# CHAPTER 1

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## COASTAL GEORGIA

The plane touched down on an off-the-grid military runway in southeast Georgia. I hesitate to say airport because there was no tower and ours was the sole airplane. We landed, climbed into a rented Suburban, and in less than three minutes were accelerating south down the I-95 on-ramp. A few miles later, we turned east off I-95 at exit 58 and wound through two-lane highways to a map-dot fishing hamlet called Spellman Bluff.

Just past the Dollar General, two run-down bars sat opposite each other on the only road leading in. The marquis at the first read, “My favorite form of exercise is a beer run.” The second played off it by responding, “Yeah, I have a feeling my check liver light might come on this weekend.”

We pulled off the hardtop onto a dirt road that led toward the water. Bones wound through abandoned double-wides and dilapidated shacks where bamboo shoots spiraled out of rusty cars with no wheels and no engines and long-forgotten sailboats lay on their hulls, choked by vines, home now to cats and rats. This is ancient earth populated by old trees, some six feet in diameter, whose moss-draped limbs swoop down to kiss the ground only to rise again.

We cruised down a private drive and parked at what looked like an old fish camp. Well kept, unlit, and apparently empty.

“How’d you know about this place?” I asked.

He smiled. “I don’t tell you all my secrets.”

We stowed our gear, and Bones took me to a covered dock where he punched a button, raising the door, and then pulled the cover off a Zodiac Pro RIB—an extremely durable half-rubber, half-fiberglass boat about twenty-four feet long and just over nine feet wide. Powered by twin 350-horsepower Mercury Verados, it could carry a dozen people and do so quickly. It also would allow us to do this relatively unseen, as matte black rubber tends to blend into the night.

“Nice boat,” I quipped.

“Thought you’d like it.” He tossed me a line. “Get in. Let’s go for a ride.”

It was after midnight. Dead low tide and the half-moon shone on the oyster beds rising up like pitcher’s mounds around us. If there were that many around us, then what lay beneath us was a bed of razor blades. Bones navigated through the shadows seemingly without thinking, turning the wheel via muscle memory. We ran dark. No running lights.

I asked but the question was rhetorical: “You been here before?”

He pointed to a bluff, the remains of a dock and what had been a home. “Grew up there.”

I had no idea. “Really?” Our wake spilled gently over the few remaining dock pilings freckled with barnacles.

Bones smiled like a man who’d just returned home to the smell of fried chicken and hugged his mother.

We idled out of the tributary and into the larger waters that bled into the Intracoastal. The Southeast Georgia coastline is protected by hundreds of barrier islands, most of which were inhabited at one time. North of us sat St. Catherines Island, once home to several thousand Guale Indians. South of St. Catherines sat Blackbeard Island, named after the famous Savannah smuggler and pirate. Some think the island still holds his treasure. South of the Sapelo Sound, gateway to the Atlantic and entrance to the Intracoastal, sat Sapelo Island. A wildlife refuge.

I could tell by the look on his face that Bones was calculating distance and time. He pointed at the sound. “If she enters here”—I followed his

finger south down the IC Waterway—“either she’ll turn hard south and follow the coastline, or if she needs fuel or is picking up passengers, she’ll head inland.”

“How will we know?”

Another smile. “Local knowledge.”

Inland waterways are charted by multiple engineers and experts before they are printed. The intersection of land and sea is literally measured with satellites, and thousands of hours are spent providing the best and most up-to-date information available. But inland waterways are not static and have a way of moving. Whether a result of hurricanes or time, the banks and depths change constantly, which can wreak havoc on captains. Given this uncertainty, every chart is printed with words like “Strangers should seek local knowledge before navigating this area.” Or “Numerous submerged pilings. Local knowledge is advised.”

Local knowledge refers to what the locals know by use. By being on the water. And few, if any, have ever read a chart.

Bones said, “There’ll be a dozen. Nine to twelve years of age. Two pairs of brothers taken from Sweden to Switzerland. Blond hair. Fair skin. The traffickers wrote programs that sifted their parents’ social media.”

Disgust crossed his face. “Auction closed yesterday. Ten days and 130 time slots.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

Bones nodded. “The *Sonsbine* is eighty meters, and they’ll board her east of Savannah. Four decks above the waterline. Three below. Her amenities include everything you can imagine. Saunas. Massage parlors. Hot tubs. Bars. Couple of pools. Several dining rooms. Dance floors. Fitness centers. Suites. Quarters for up to forty crew.” Bones shook his head. “It’s a floating hell. And citadel.”

“It’s a floating hundred million dollars.”

Bones continued, “She’ll sail south along the coast, then turn inland just north of Cumberland and take on the first clients in the ditch. Either by helicopter or a thirty-six-foot Intrepid. And before you ask . . . four 400-horsepower Mercury Verados.”

We studied the water for an hour. Talking through possibilities. What if she turned this way? What if she turned that way? Finally, at close to 2:00 a.m., we returned to the fish camp where Bones scrambled some eggs and I wandered around his two-bedroom home where I found no decorations. Only one small picture. Black and white. Two boys in the water. One holding a cast net. The other with his hand on the tiller.

“You come here much?”

He shook his head but didn’t take his eyes off the pan. “Not much.”

I had known Bones for twenty-five-plus years, and yet I’d never once heard about a home on the coast. Nor the fact that he grew up here. “You owned it long?”

A shrug. “Since before I found you.”

Bones’s silence struck me as strange, but I didn’t push him. It was late and he’d talk if and when he wanted. We finished our eggs, I washed dishes, and Bones headed to the door. As he closed it behind him, he said, “Gotta check on a few things.” He pointed at my room. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow we . . .” A chuckle. “Blend in.”

“Blend in” was code for reconnaissance, but I asked anyway. “What for?”

He smiled. “Local knowledge.”

## CHAPTER 2

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### COLORADO, 72 HOURS EARLIER

The morning air was chilly and thin, and I was breathing heavily before we set foot on the trail. Gunner jumped ahead, bouncing from rock to rock. I labored to put one foot in front of the other. Gunner had awakened me early at Summer's command. Neither was going to let me get fat and lazy, and any excuse about having been shot in the back had no effect on either of them.

We had ascended a thousand feet with another three to go when I finally gave up the fight, turned to my right, dropped to my knees, and hurled from my toes. Gunner sat, tail wagging. Amused yet waiting. Seemingly unfazed by the sounds coming out of me, Gunner circled and eyed my mess. He looked like he was about to lick my face, then thought better of it, spun, and trotted ahead.

I stood to my feet, willed one foot in front of the other, and tried to remember.

My recovery had been slow in the making. Six months had passed since Bones's brother sent his people to blow up Freetown and then paid someone else to shoot me in the back with my own crossbow. During that time, my body had spent itself fighting the infection that had occurred after I closed the wound in the cave. While I resembled my former self on the surface,

save a limp and some abdominal scar tissue that made me look a little bit like the hunchback of Notre Dame, I knew inside I was not the same. My energy was low and strength even lower. Fatigue had become my unwanted companion. During my convalescence, Summer worked tirelessly to feed me, rehab me, stretch me, and get me moving when I didn't want to. She started with a walk down the hall. Then Main Street. Then down and back twice. Then a mile. You get the point. In the last few days she'd been eyeing the Eagle's Nest. Four thousand feet above us. The trail beckoned. I knew it was going to hurt.

In truth the physical pain wasn't the deterrent. I'd been hurt before. Probably would be again. Pain came with the job. But as the weeks rolled by, I sensed there was something in me that was hesitant to climb back in the saddle. My problem wasn't so much my body as my heart, and I'm not talking about the muscle in the center of my chest. I'm talking about the place in me that holds my love—and just as important, my hope. I like to think it's down there behind my belly button. The place where you feel butterflies. Maybe when the crossbow bolt passed through me, it nicked it. Allowing it to leak. My problem was further compounded by the fact that I'd had ample time to navel-gaze and consider my own problems. A luxury I'd never enjoyed before.

All of Freetown—and I do mean everyone—had rolled out the red carpet to get me healthy. I became their singular focus. “What do you need?” “How can I help?” “Is there anything I can do?” “How are you feeling?” Those were the first questions out of everyone's mouth, and each was well-meaning. Their intentions were beautiful. I'm not knocking the questions. And yet they produced consequences I never expected. This constant focus on me had an effect on me; it gave me time to think about me and what I needed, and did I really want to go through all of this again? That was a question I'm not sure I'd ever asked myself.

For the last fifteen years, I'd swallowed the pain of Marie's absence in my life and then dealt with it through David Bishop's fiction. But now, for the first time in my life, Murphy Shepherd was looking in the mirror and telling David Bishop to shut up. Don't write another word. Don't do that

to your heart. It's too painful. When I could muster the courage to pick up a pen, I found my hope bucket empty and the page wordless. I, as much as anyone, knew that hope is what feeds us. It's the currency of mankind. The fuel of the soul. Without it, we wither and die.

My problem was twofold. One, even at my best, I could not protect those I loved. The events of six months ago proved that. And two, there was always one more. Despite over two decades of spending myself to rescue the lost, I'd made no dent in the cancer. Evil was no less evil. Some might find my longing to make a real difference idealistic. I don't. I don't do what I do for kicks and giggles. It's not a game. It's trench warfare. But somewhere, somehow, I needed to know that the sum of everything I'd done was having some effect on the guys in the other trenches. The war's effect on me was apparent. I was limping. What about them?

Bones had been patient. Me? Not so much. Summer would take me either way.

Gunner stared at me with an *Old man, what's your problem?* look on his face.

In short, I wasn't back to being me. I was glad to be in the land of the living but a long way from fully alive. That might take some time. I'd spent what will and energy I had staying alive in that cave. When they found me, I was on my way out. The forces pulling me down were stronger than me. Then I felt something pulling me up. Voices. Tears. Then the darkness returned. Then singing pulled me back to the surface. The tug-of-war lasted weeks. I shouldn't be here. Love won. That's all I know to tell you.

Which made it all the more difficult to get myself ready to do it all over again.

Truth was, I was stalling. Choosing excuses over sweat. Which included sleeping in and not training when I should or doing so halfway. Sunrise would find me sitting and staring at the mountain rather than climbing it. I'd pick at my plate rather than clear it when I desperately needed calories to rebuild lost muscle. Where a hundred push-ups was once routine, thirty was now the new norm.

For the first time ever, I wasn't doing what I knew I needed to—and

the difference was not lost on Summer. My lax approach was dangerous, because those guys in the other trenches were doing what they needed to do.

Either unconsciously or not, I wanted out. When I asked myself why, the reason was simple. To make the bad man stop. Regardless of the success of Freetown and all those beautiful faces walking by us on the street or flashing across Bones's Planetarium slideshow, or the freedom known by all the names tattooed across my back, what I remembered most was the pain; the images I saw when I closed my eyes were those of terror and horror and heartbreak and pain.

Maybe this I-want-out place was what Bones encountered after a decade of doing the same and that's why he found me when he did. Maybe Bones chose to recruit, train, and then oversee me because he couldn't continue in this life any more than I wanted to now. Unless you've lived it, the life we endure is surreal. Unnatural. We walk about the planet waiting for the next text or phone call. We sleep with clothes laid out. Our phones never off. Always five minutes from boarding a plane. Not knowing when or if we'll return. We are tethered twenty-four-seven to "What if?"

Whatever my problem, I could not fix me. Summer knew this more than I. As I was about to discover.

During my convalescence, Freetown had rallied. Strengthened even. Our board is made up of many of the parents whose children we've rescued. From CEOs to scientists, from NYC to LA, these people are good at thinking outside the box and have the means to do so. They're also motivated because they've known the helplessness of waiting for the phone to ring.

When I woke up, Freetown was in the midst of a massive repair and renovation. The sounds of construction, from hammers to excavators, echoed into my room. The black scar caused by the explosion had been removed and new construction had taken its place. In years past we'd kept a low profile by being known as a private rehab and addiction facility. It was partly true. We also never told anyone about those for whom we cared. We never shared a story. This created a cone of silence, which we valued. In fact, it was essential to who we are. We talk about no one.

That changed with Casey. When her book hit every bestseller list and movie rights were optioned, we did our best to protect not only her but everyone else. Admittedly, it grew more difficult with every copy sold because people wanted to know. Naturally, they were curious. As time passed, the cone of silence became more difficult to maintain, causing me to wonder if we shouldn't replicate the model elsewhere—and tell no one.

When the bomb went off, Freetown was home to sixty-three rescued girls and women. Include parents or siblings who made the trek with them, and that number quickly swells to over a hundred people housed in more than forty cabins tucked into the mountain. To care for those individuals, we employ north of two hundred people, from counselors to security to landscapers to ice cream shop and pet store workers. Our board secures donations from around the world, and as a result, our hospital has become sought after for neonatal care, not to mention addiction and trauma recovery. Most of our girls stay with us for at least two years, during which—once healthy enough—they plug in and help where needed. Many work in the hospital. Some teach in the school. Some scoop ice cream. Others groom pets. We attempt to provide them with skills training in any area they desire. From art classes to nursing school to cosmetology to fashion design to completion of their college degree.

One of Angel's footprints at Freetown was the creation and development of several stores along Main Street that design and sell women's clothing, jewelry, and footwear. If they can think it and we can help them produce it, we sell it. Online sales are booming and at last count Angel employed more than a dozen girls, many of whom were either enrolled or applying to become enrolled in an online degree program out of New York.

One of the horrors experienced by trafficked boys and girls is that the world they live in becomes their box. The despair of their circumstances snuffs out any hope of ever stepping outside the confines of the cell in which they live, both physically and emotionally. They won't let themselves think outside that box because it's too painful. Hurts too much. When they come to us, we try to tear down the walls of the box and give them a reason not just to think outside it but to conceptualize the world in which that box is

held. In our experience many trafficked women begin to believe they are not beautiful. They're taught by how they're treated—inhumanely, as less than an animal—that they are not only not beautiful but never will be. So why would they entertain the idea of fashion? They're convinced they're disposable and heinous, so why try to dress that up? The emotional warfare runs deep.

Angel suggested fashion design and the concept took off. Girls began wearing color. Bright colors. They created scarves, dresses, even designed shoes. If they could wear it, they could make it beautiful. Nothing was out of bounds. And their creations filled the stores along Main Street. They could shop every day of the week, the price was free, and they could return any item at any time, no questions asked. A wave of beauty washed through Freetown, much of which Bones captured with his Nikon.

As is the case with trafficked women, many had been tattooed. Most unwillingly. Several had been marked with a barcode like you'd see in a grocery store, the mark denoting ownership, a constant reminder that they were disposable property. Most tried to cover up those tattoos, so we brought in a removal specialist. Before long, girls were baring shoulders and necklines and smiles. Some of the girls even began studying to work as an assistant to the specialist.

Removal of the stain of that identity, along with the contagious spread of beauty, caused something else unexpected to happen. Girls decided they no longer wanted to be hidden, kept behind locked doors. They wanted to be seen. By each other. Their scars were no longer symbols of shame but signs of survival. *I made it. I'm alive.* Chins once resting on chests were now lifted high. Eyes once scouring the ground at their feet now stared two blocks down. We're not entirely sure what precipitated the change, but one night Summer convinced the girls to dance. Three hours in, they were sweaty and laughing so hard their stomachs hurt. Nightly dance classes ensued. From the electric slide to the macarena to ballroom dancing to Broadway acts, they couldn't get enough. Everybody wanted to dance with Clay, who first appeared in his wheelchair with oxygen tank in tow. The interaction did wonders for his recovery and nursed him back to health.

Before long, he was standing tall on his own two feet and not only breathing on his own but wiping sweat off his brow, which only endeared him to them all the more.

Every night he'd show up wearing a new tux and penguin wing tips—given that the old ones burned up in the explosion—with a stash of handkerchiefs in his pocket. He'd give one to every dance partner, and he made a point of dancing with every girl. Wasn't long until every female in Freetown wanted only one thing: one of Clay's handkerchiefs.

I stood in the shadows and watched as an eighty-plus-year-old Black man reached deep into these girls' hearts without even knowing it. Clay was the gentleman they'd hoped for but never knew. He treated them like ladies of extraordinary value. He communicated to each one that she was worth the fairy tale. As a result, he became the singular reason many of these girls could learn to trust men again. The first night he returned dressed in a tux, Summer cued his entrance with the song "Staying Alive." True to form, Clay strutted in with all the charisma and charm of an inmate caged for sixty-plus years. A beautiful walk.

Given their dance experience, some of the girls asked Summer to help them put on a Broadway show. So Summer is now choreographing a couple nights a week.

And no, never in my wildest dreams did I think Freetown would become what it has become. Early in my training, Bones taught me that when a kernel of wheat falls to the ground, it dies alone. But if it is buried, watered, and fertilized, it puts down roots, spirals toward the sun, blossoms, and produces fruit. And what comes up is never the same as what was buried. It's exponentially more.

The residents of Freetown pay for nothing. It's free. They've earned it. A thousand times over. But getting here is not easy. The prerequisite to entry is slavery. Having been owned by another.

Until about six months ago, everyone here knew me as the guy who kicked down the door. That's all. Just one of the employees. To ensure that opinion, I kept a low profile. I still do. Or at least I try. After my recovery—or better yet, after Summer nursed me back from the

brink—they just saw me as the guy who wears a hoodie, hobbles down Main Street, sits on park benches, and sips oolong tea. Most afternoons I leave our home and limp to my bench, which gives me an unobstructed view of the pet store, clothing store, and salon. I feed the pigeons and the smiles feed me as the girls pass on skateboards, scooters, bicycles, or running shoes. In truth Gunner is far more the attraction than I. His ability to attract admirers and belly-scratchers is unmatched. And while I enjoy the smiles, I come here for something else. Something you can't touch. It's the universal sound of freedom. Laughter. On most days it echoes from one end of town to the other.

Possibly my favorite thing to do occurs most nights after dark. I'll shuffle to the Planetarium and park myself along one wall with a bag of popcorn and watch the girls enter and exit. It's one pajama party after another. Fluffy slippers, pillows, fuzzy blankets—they come to see Bones's latest pics. And because of Eddie's facial recognition software, their faces are "read" when they walk in so that the program shows an inordinate amount of pictures of them. Most of these girls didn't have any pictures of their growing-up years prior to arriving. Not their childhood. Not prom. Not graduation. Not anything. Few had any pictures of themselves whatsoever. Bones changed that. He documented life's beautiful moments, and he had an uncanny knack for snapping the shutter at just the right time. This ability led to requests for him to teach what he knew. So twice a week Bones taught photography to a dozen or so girls. He bought them each a camera and then taught them how to read and capture light. Now, every Friday night, when Bones releases his latest Freetown pics, most have been taken by his team.

The picture taking had unforeseen ripple effects. Having seen the moments of unadulterated happiness and laughter and wonder and beauty projected onto the ceiling of the Planetarium, more and more girls wanted their pictures taken. Having been hidden for so long, they now wanted to be seen. In color. And now that Bones's team was taking the photos, they felt free to capture images he never would have. In a natural and gradual transition, the Friday night slideshow began to include pictures of scars caused by

needle, fist, razor blade, and forced caesarean. A big hit, which was always accompanied by raucous applause, was the before-and-after pics—damaged teeth restored, crossed eyes made straight, tattoos removed. Then there were the total body makeovers, which brought about standing ovations. It's not that their original bodies weren't good enough. They were. But for residents of Freetown, something in the process of the makeover was like thumbing their nose at their past. A revolt against their history. The transformations were astounding. And just as amazing was the fact that Bones had replicated himself and, in so doing, resurrected and redeemed memories.

Every girl in our care had walked into Freetown wearing some form and expression of shame. Across the board. It was true of all of them. It had been put there by someone else and wrapped around them like a blanket. Not only had it clothed them, but it had become their identity. But by nature and by design, life at Freetown swapped out that blanket for something new. Something that fit. Something they wanted to wear. Something that said, "I am beautiful. I am one in a billion. And I am priceless."

While I sat on my park bench along Main Street listening to the laughter, I kept my eyes open to the unexpected moment when any one of our girls willingly shed her rags of shame in exchange for her garments of beauty. Of new identity. On multiple occasions I watched as girls walked into any of our clothing stores only to walk out and carry a pile of old clothes to the bonfire we kept lit twenty-four-seven—and then watch in arm-in-arm silence as the old them went up in flames and the new them walked away. I'm not suggesting that simply changing clothes erased the horror that had occurred on the inside. That takes time—longer for some than others. But this exchange was a part of the process. And it gave them hope.

When each of us arrived at Freetown, our hearts and souls were held together by twine and tape and glue. Little more than a patchwork of pieces. Like a sweater with one loose thread, a simple pull threatened to unravel the whole. Each of us walked in with a singular need: to be known. I used

CHARLES MARTIN

to think the need ended there. Repair the tear and fix the person. Wrong.  
What I saw happening across the streets of Freetown, from fashion to dance  
to photography, convinced me there is one need deeper.

To be accepted in the knowing.

Maybe that's rescue.

## CHAPTER 3

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Through a confluence of geographic oddities I cannot pretend to understand, a sandbar surfaced just off Spellman Bluff at the intersection of three small tributaries and one larger arm of Blackbeard Creek. The sandbar stretched almost half a mile, and come lunch on Saturday, it was hopping with people, dogs, and charcoal fires. More than a hundred boats had either beached themselves or anchored at the water's edge, and close to three hundred people, in various stages of inebriation, modeled bathing suits that used to fit and many that never did. Two boats, one a pontoon and one a flats skiff, had been outfitted with stereos large enough to power a small rock concert. They were anchored just a few boats apart, and the stereo war had commenced with each playing their music of choice. The skiff was a Buffet fan selling Margaritaville, and the owner was screaming something about it not being his fault. The owner of the pontoon stood over a blender, actually making margaritas, while dancing to Zac Brown who had just put his butt in the water and toes in the sand—or something like that. The ear-splitting mixture of the two made for one bad audible experience that I doubted either owner could hear.

Bones and I left the dock at his river shack in a small aluminum john-boat maybe fourteen feet in length and powered by a 20-horsepower motor. If we were trying not to attract attention, we were doing a jam-up job. Bones and I wore flip-flops and were dressed in faded cutoff jeans and