

THE KEEPER

ALSO BY CHARLES MARTIN

THE MURPHY SHEPHERD NOVELS

The Water Keeper

The Letter Keeper

The Record Keeper

The Keeper

STAND-ALONE NOVELS

The Last Exchange

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

Son of Man

It Is Finished

THE KEEPER

A Murphy Shepherd Novel

CHARLES

MARTIN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Keeper

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For Charlie, John T., and Rives

Because the needs of the one outweigh those of the ninety-nine



PROLOGUE

Somewhere on the dark web in an encrypted chat room:

MAN 1: "Money received. Target address?"

MAN 2: "See attachment."

MAN 1: "Security protocols?"

MAN 2: "Same package."

MAN 1: "House schematics?"

MAN 2: "Same."

MAN 1: "Target?"

MAN 2: "Three. And I want them all."

MAN 1: "Collaterals?"

MAN 2: "The mother. Hands off. Not to be harmed."

MAN 1: "Dogs?"

MAN 2: "Yes."

MAN 1: "Trained?"

MAN 2: "Very."

MAN 1: "Father?"

MAN 2: "Away."

MAN 1: "Secret Service?"

MAN 2: "Make a statement."

MAN 1: "Define 'statement.'"

MAN 2: "Leave bodies."

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MAN 1: "Orders following extraction?"

MAN 2: "Photographed. Then taken and held at this address until further notice."

MAN 1: "And once there?"

MAN 2: "Keep them alive."

MAN 1: "Any restrictions? I need to be specific with my men."

A pause.

MAN 2: "The spoils of war. Enjoy the fruits of your labor."

MAN 1: "Much obliged."

MAN 2: "Pleasure doing business with you."

At 2:00 a.m., the blacked-out Suburban exited the asphalt onto a dirt road, at which time the lights were killed. A mile and a half later, six men exited the SUV and walked single file through a half mile of twenty-year-old pines. Aided by Trijicon night vision devices and thermal viewers, they stepped over or around infrared motion detectors and laser alarms, "speaking" through hand signals. A drone hovered a thousand feet above, allowing the man connected to the voice in their ear to monitor the heat signatures of the special agents guarding the compound and its occupants. The eye in the sky told them when to wait, when to walk, what code to punch, and where to step to avoid the cameras.

Reaching the edge of the field, two of the six lay prone behind Christensen Arms Modern Precision Rifles chambered in .300 Win Mag. While one member of the team ranged the target at 875 yards, the shooters dialed 7.03 MILs of elevation into Schmidt & Bender PMII optics, acquired a sight picture and superimposed the crosshairs on the target, pushed the safety to the fire position, then awaited the order. Following a seven-second countdown, both shooters pressed the trigger at zero, sending 210-grain solid copper projectiles out the muzzles at 2,804 feet per second, which reached the targets downrange 1.3 seconds later carrying 998 foot-pounds of impact energy.

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Of the twelve remaining agents assigned to this protection detail, seven died in the next ninety seconds.

Once inside the home, the operatives donned gas masks and slipped felt outer soles over their boots, climbing the stairs in relative silence. Landing on the second floor, they stopped at the master bedroom, snaked a hose between the door and the floor, and opened a tank valve. They would not kill her on purpose—although when she woke, she would wish they had. Ninety seconds later, having neutralized occupant number one, they approached bedrooms two, three, and four, where each team snaked a small thermal viewer into the room to verify the condition of the occupants.

And the location of the three Belgian Malinois.

The existence of the dogs had never been leaked to the press and no pictures existed. Their presence was highly protected information.

The first camera proved dog number one was asleep. The dogs in rooms three and four were not. The first dog received a suppressed subsonic round from a Glock 47. The second dog heard the rustle of the camera, jumped off the bed to investigate, and sniffed the strange tube, which released a gas, rendering dog two just as incapable as dog one.

Two teams entered the rooms, placing masks over the noses and mouths of occupants two and three, which startled them, forcing gas into their lungs. Two seconds later, a hypodermic needle was inserted into each neck. Sleep followed quickly.

The problem came at door number four. Neither the occupant nor the dog was asleep. Another tube was placed beneath the door. Another valve opened. A minute later, both the occupant and the dog slumped over, followed immediately by an injection into the occupant's neck. Using facial recognition software embedded in their phones, each team scanned the occupant's face and awaited confirmation. Once received, they exited in unison, finishing dogs two and three with suppressed rounds.

While the eye in the sky monitored their retreat along with the heat signatures of the five remaining agents, one member of each team shouldered an occupant and the other covered their retreat as they returned down a hallway, down two flights of stairs, out a side door, and back across

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the field. That's when the eye alerted them to an agent exiting the bunkhouse just prior to shift change. He was met with nine rounds from a suppressed Daniel Defense 300 Blackout. Returning through the pines, the team retrieved both precision rifles, placed the occupants in the back of the SUV, then drove nine minutes to a private airport where each occupant was stripped, scanned, blindfolded, gagged, zip-tied, photographed, and placed in one of three different planes.

Four hours later, the video was sent.

PART I

“ . . . He who enters by the door is the shepherd of
the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens.”

—*John 10:2–3*



CHAPTER 1

16 HOURS EARLIER

The snow blew sideways, carried on a brittle, cutting wind. Dusted dark coats, glasses, gloves, and umbrellas stood in stark contrast to the perfect rows of white headstones rolling off into the fog. In my life, I'd found myself in many places where I never wanted to be again. This was one of them. Arlington National. Not because the dead aren't worth our greatest respect. They are. These are the best of us. Chances are good I'm writing this and you're reading this because of those lying there.

But today was different. Today we'd add one more.

Today, we'd officially bury Bones.

It'd been a month since I watched Bones's limp body, riddled with bullet holes and arms wrapped around his brother, disappear down the well shaft, splashing a hundred feet below. I'd replayed those events ten thousand times, and no matter how often I reached out my hand, I could not catch him. Since that moment, I'd dealt with guilt, shame, anger, and a soul-piercing sadness I'd known only once before—when I lost Marie. One half of me could not shake knowing I was responsible for his death, while the other half knew I was not. I lived somewhere on that narrow ledge between what my head understood by reason and what my heart would never accept.

Bones knew the cost. He'd always known. His life for one chance to turn his brother. A gamble. Had he? Had he turned Frank? I don't know the answer to that. If I had it to do over again, I'd shoot his brother in the face and be done with it. But not Bones. Bones would not dismiss Frank. Never had. So, for the last time, he left the ninety-nine to attempt one more impossible rescue. In truth, it was a prisoner swap. His life for Frank's. In Bones's mind, it was the only way to bring Frank home. But that's the crazy thing about all this: Not every prisoner wants to be rescued. Some prefer chains to freedom, darkness to light. Bones knew this. He also knew there are no second chances in this business. Bones himself told me that. It's why he did what he did. Frank's attempted rescue was a one-way trip. Always had been. Despite the cost, Bones stuck with his brother. Let Frank pull him down that well shaft. Bones knew what darkness lay at the bottom, and my guess is that he didn't want his brother to face it alone.

When I close my eyes and relive those last few seconds, the image that returns is the look in Bones's eyes. It wasn't anger. Not sadness. Not fear. It was peace. Resolve. Bones had done what he came to do, and he'd calculated and committed to the cost long before he met me.

When I first met Bones, I'd discovered quickly he was something of a genius. Given his life's work, he'd been given broad latitude to hand-pick recruits and develop a program with a singular purpose: Find people. Specifically, lost people. One at a time.

When Bones first explained this to me, I had said, "So you work for the CIA."

He shook his head. "No, but they often work for me."

In my time at the academy, he'd routinely disappear for days at a time. No explanation. No goodbye. And then without notice, he'd return. When I started paying attention, I noticed that on several occasions, he was protecting some part of his body. Nursing an injury. One time he returned from a week's absence with an obvious problem in his shoulder.

"Cut yourself shaving?"

He didn't respond.

“You want to talk about it?”

I’ll never forget his answer. He reached into his pocket and simply handed me a bullet. Not the cartridge that contained the shell casing plus the bullet. Just the bullet. The spent projectile. The copper thing had gone down the barrel at high speed and entered his body. When he dropped it in the palm of my hand, I picked up on the fact that Bones was playing for keeps, and this whole clandestine training thing ended somewhere other than a grammar school playground.

He stared at it. “Life is not a video game, and there is no do-over.”

No do-over echoed through my mind as I stared through the snow. Down at the box. And when I closed my eyes, I saw Bones staring back at me.

Two weeks ago, we’d met as a group on the beach near Bones’s childhood home and tried to say our goodbyes. I had lifted Shep onto my shoulders and waded out. Then, like now, we had nothing to bury. No ashes to scatter. So we buried his orange case at sea. Then, like now, I wanted to speak; I just couldn’t. So Clay broke the silence and spoke beautiful words over the water, his deep baritone a balm to my soul. Then Eddie. Followed by Casey and Angel. Final words spoken at random. Our tears mingling with the ocean. I stood shattered. One breath. Two. In. Out. Repeat.

Finally, Summer had patted me. “Your turn.”

I stared at the box. Scuffed. Scarred. One last voyage remaining. Solo. I tried to speak and could not. When I tried again, no words formed in my mouth. Then, on the wind, I heard his voice. There in that water, in that broken place of earth where the sand told the sea, “You will go no farther,” Bones spoke to me. And when he did, I could hear him smiling. *Tell me what you know about sheep.*

I shook my head and spoke out loud. “No. I will tell you about the one who keeps them.” Wanting to see him off, I had waded out past the breakers until the water rose above my chest and placed the orange box on the surface. There I let it go.

I let Bones go.

Staring through the snow at the flag-covered coffin, I knew I had not. I could not. As much as I knew I needed to, I was not able.

When we learned Bones would be buried with the highest of military honors, we scoured Freetown for mementos of Bones. Books, his Bible, a watch, a few nice bottles of wine, an old pair of boots, a pocketknife, his priestly vestments, a camera, a lens. I had deliberated adding the coin I carried in my pocket, but my hand wouldn't let go. As we scoured Freetown, returning with our offerings, Gunner appeared with an old wool sweater Bones wore when he sipped wine by the fire. Worn, tattered, a couple holes here and there, leather patches on the elbows, it smelled like Bones. When Gunner dropped it in the pile, I pretty much lost it.

A string of black SUVs and limos lined the road. Not a large crowd but a crowd nonetheless. As "family," Summer, Angel, Ellie, Casey, Shep, and I walked behind the horse-drawn caisson. Summer held one hand, Shep the other. Whether I held them or they held me, I could not say. We walked over two hills and down into a valley protected by giant sentinel trees. The caisson came to a stop and the casket team approached from the side, lifted the simple wooden box, and began stepping backward in perfect unison. In lockstep, they carried Bones's box to its final resting place, where one member spread a flag lengthwise.

I scanned the attendees and knew Bones would be uncomfortable with the attention. Platitudes were never the reason for the scars he carried. The directors of the CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security. The joint chiefs. Multiple members of the House and Senate. Speaker of the House. President pro tempore of the Senate. Secretaries of State, Treasury, and Defense. As well as the chief of staff to the president, who had been detained overseas. A bomb here could really mess up presidential succession. Most of these men and women had personal experience with Bones—he'd rescued someone they loved. Returned them to the dinner table.

Lastly, escorted by multiple Secret Service agents, the vice president exited a limo, refused an umbrella, and approached the coffin.

CHAPTER 2

Aaron Ashley was political royalty. The son of the former secretary of state and later vice president, Aaron was ruddy-faced, with tight-cropped red hair and a salt-and-pepper beard. He was also very physically fit. A stark contrast to his soft earlier life.

Having a father who held every significant political office save POTUS, Aaron spent his childhood in the lap of political protection and the privileged life of Riley. This childhood bosom led to an illusory superiority—not only did he think he was better than others, but he seldom thought of others. Having been raised under the watchful eye of the Secret Service, he never touched an elevator button. Never did his own laundry. Never cooked. Never did many things. In his youth, this made him a goldbrick who shirked any responsibility and stared down his nose with indifference at those who did shoulder it. Coddled as the vice president’s son and strapped with a last name that sounded more female than male, Aaron made an unlikely cadet at the Air Force Academy. The laughingstock of the freshman class. His initials, along with the fact that he was rather scrawny and not overly coordinated, earned him the nickname Double-A. After the battery. As in small, containing little juice, and disposable. But then one day a bully on the playground—a fellow cadet jealous of Aaron’s privileged existence—put two and two together, taking note of his reddish hair and ruddy complexion, and took it a step further. “Copper Top.” Laughter ensued and the name stuck.

After a difficult freshman year, Aaron took a chance ride in a glider and, interestingly enough, found something he was good at. Really good at. Aaron took to flying like a fish to water and set his sights on pilot training. Something for which he had a knack. Turns out all that time spent playing video games had honed his eye-hand coordination, a talent that would one day make him one heck of a pilot. Graduating with honors, he was selected for United States Air Force Weapons School—the Air Force equivalent of the Navy’s Top Gun school—where he excelled and graduated first in his class. Quickly assigned to foreign theaters, call sign Copper Top made a name as one of the military’s best pilots. Shot down twice, he safely ejected and then found his way home. The first time, he hitchhiked back to base after spending a few days in a culvert pipe and an abandoned brothel. The second, he walked some forty miles across the mountains in freezing temperatures wearing what was left of his leather flight jacket. Upon his return, he climbed back into the cockpit and resumed duty. The same day.

Aaron didn’t suffer fools, and getting shot down was all a part of flying. Not to mention payback was a . . . well, a real bummer. Copper Top had found his juice.

Following decorated service, he returned to the States. A no-nonsense, straight-shooting war hero with ice water coursing through his veins. For vacation, he took a few weeks off and drove cross-country in an old truck. Avoiding highways. Sleeping in RV parks. Something he’d always wanted to do. Somewhere in there, he stopped at a roadside produce stand in central Georgia. Squash. Carrots. Tomatoes. Turnips. And a pretty girl wearing a straw cowboy hat and jean overalls.

“Morning.”

She nodded. A faint smile. The contrast between the two was striking. His shirt was tucked in. She’d been mucking the stalls. She noticed his flight jacket. “You a pilot?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He would soon learn she was spunkier than her attire suggested. “You any good?”

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He nodded and said nothing, which was good because he couldn't take his eyes off her and any word coming out of his mouth would not help the situation.

"Can I help you with something?" Her South Georgia accent was intoxicating.

He held up the nearest vegetable and tried to speak but couldn't.

She laughed. "You like butternut squash?"

Another nod. More silence.

"Really?" One hand rested on her hip. "And just how do you cook it?"

He shrugged. "Soup."

The nearest RV park sat a few miles away, so he stayed a week. Returning each day. Finally, after a few days of beating around the bush, he asked, "Would you like to go flying sometime?"

She shook her head. "No."

"What?" He had not prepared for this contingency. "Why?"

Another half-smile. "I don't even know you."

"You ever been?"

She shook her head.

"You've never been in a plane?"

Another shake.

"Well . . ." He pointed. "I'm more comfortable up there than down here."

She laughed out loud. "I believe it."

"I could take you. Be no trouble."

She shaded her eyes with one hand and put her other hand on her hip. "You're not from 'round here, are you?"

He shook his head. "What gave it away?"

She laughed and glanced at a farmhouse set on the hill. A man standing on the porch. "You'd better talk to him first."

Fortunately for her, Ashley was not afraid of imposing men. "Take me to him?"

Turned out Esther loved flying.

Ten years and three kids later, Aaron hung up his flight suit and traded the military's most advanced fighter cockpit for farm life and then, when

statewide conflict presented itself, the state legislature. Which led to the House. Then the Senate. Where he served several terms and worked tirelessly to protect Esther and the kids from the swamp in which he worked and the journalists who wanted access to his personal life. Remarkably, Esther made the transition from private farm to national platform and served with distinction both her husband and the country. And while she felt called to her role, her children were not. So she protected them like a hawk. Built a wall between them and the public. Three of the most beautiful children ever born on planet earth. Hair so blond it was almost white. Green eyes. Smiles that lit a room.

Following a distinguished Senate career, Aaron was tapped to serve as Secretary of Defense. Four years during which his popularity and name recognition grew and made him the first choice to be tapped to serve alongside the current president. America had fallen in love with Copper Top. Currently, Aaron was three years into his first term as vice president, and given that the current president had termed out, Aaron had thrown his hat in the ring, declared his candidacy, and received his party's nomination. Polls had him well ahead.

Placing both hands on the coffin, Aaron whispered words I could not hear, kissed the snow-covered flag, and took his place alongside Esther. Either unable or unwilling to sit, I stood behind Summer and the girls. As did Gunner, who stood alongside me and Clay. The rest of the team huddled closely.

While my body was here, my mind was not. The memories flashed like a slideshow across my mind's eye. I remembered lying in that cave. Having been shot with my crossbow days earlier. Infection had long since set in. My ship had sailed. I had an hour, maybe two at the most. Then Bones walked in. He'd found me. Saved me. He'd done what I had not.

The next slide showed me tending bar in Key West. Bones had found me at my lowest, put a pen and pad in front of me, and said, "Tell me what you know about sheep." Out of that rescue, David Bishop wrote books that caught fire, which funded Freetown, which gave Murphy Shepherd a reason for living. I'd found my place in this world because of Bones. Why?

One simple reason. I'd mattered more to Bones than Bones mattered to Bones.

The needs of the one . . .

My tutor still taking me to school.

The slide flipped again and I found myself in Bones's wine cellar, his orange box resting on a shelf. We had come to our wits' end. We couldn't find him. Had no clue. Then Shep pointed at the bird. The pelican. And the Pelican case. I remember spinning the box, clicking open the latches, lifting the lid, and staring wide eyed. Bones had left us, left me, several things: a bottle of wine, an opener, loaded spare magazines for his Sig, his satellite tracker, a first aid kit, a Williams pocketknife, a lighter, a pair of reading glasses, three canisters of unused Kodak film, a compass, paracord, a pair of Costa sunglasses, a small package of fishhooks with fishing line, a ballpoint pen, and a worn Bible. Taped to the underside of the lid was a picture of two suntanned, towheaded identical boys fishing out of a small johnboat. One standing in the front throwing a cast net. The other sitting in the rear with his hand on the tiller of the outboard. They might have been eight years old. And the bottom of the boat was piled three high with mullet. It was the same picture Frank had laid down before he died. Somehow, it held meaning for both of them.

Then I'd seen the letter. Lying folded across the middle. And across the envelope, Bones had written, "Murph." I remember everyone leaning in, focused on that envelope, and each one of us wondering, *Is that real? Is that what I think it is?*

While the snow dusted my shoulders, with Gunner pressed against my leg and Summer holding my hand, I recited the letter to myself. I didn't need to read it. I'd done that enough. I knew it by heart.

CHAPTER 3

Dear Murph,

Well, if you're reading this I'd bet Frank took me and you're fumbling around without a clue as to how to find me. Don't blame yourself. He's like that. Nobody thinks like him. It's evidence of his genius and his demented and evil nature, both of which he is, so don't be too tough on yourself. It's a good thing you don't think like him.

Let me help you out. Chances are near 100 percent that I'm in Majorca. I'd bet the bottle in this case, which is a good one by the way, that Frank has taken me back to where it all started, and he's stuck me down in my dungeon home. Years ago, he converted it into a home of sorts. It's one of the only places on earth where he can sleep, even if just a few hours. It's also where he can lock me up in the dark with my painful memories and leave me to rot. He will do all this because he knows he can't make me talk, so he'll use me as leverage to get you to bring him what he wants—probably his birth certificate. Which I don't have. Haven't for a long time. His obsession with that small piece of paper proves that identity precedes purpose. Whose you are matters more to the soul than who you are or what you are. I have my reasons for keeping it from him.

There is hope. The attached map should help. Follow the instructions. Closely. Don't deviate. See you soon.

Bones

Classic Bones. A simple here's-where-to-find-me letter. X marks the spot. It'd been there all along. And he wrote it in advance, which meant he knew we'd find ourselves in this position, which meant he didn't prevent it. Which meant he planned his own abduction.

Bones's hand-sketched map had ended with specific detail: "Once you reach the headwaters of the spring, look up."

Gunner and I had traveled up the underground river through caverns and caves, finally coming to a dead end. The headwaters. So I had done what he said. I looked up and started climbing.

Bones had added a PS to his map. "If you slip, don't worry—the water's deep beneath you. But it's also flowing with a force like you've never known, so hold your breath because it's about to take you on an underwater ride that not even Disney could imagine, and it will either drown you or save you." I remembered how Gunner whined as I climbed and how I could feel his heart pounding through both his and my vest in the same way I could feel it pounding against my leg now.

When the crowd was seated, the chaplain gestured to the vice president, who stood, removed prepared remarks from his coat pocket, and stepped to the end of the coffin. Above where Bones's head would have been. He opened the pages, stared at them, looked at all of us, then folded the sheets and placed them back inside his coat pocket.

Clearing his throat, he said, "They asked me to speak . . . I don't know why. We all know I'm a terrible speaker." A gentle laughter rippled through the crowd. A much-needed icebreaker. "I won't attempt to tell you what Bones meant. Or means. Your presence here is evidence of that." He shook his head.

"I met Ezekiel 'Bones' Walker when he rescued me. Literally. From a greasy fat man at a hotel in Idaho. Bones found me, little more than a kid, gagged and bound in the cab of a tractor trailer. I'd been taken eight days earlier. My father, who then held the office I now hold, had unleashed the entire intelligence community of the American government to find me—and they had not. No leads. Nothing. And then this random guy opens the cab door, smiles, lifts me out, and feeds me a burger while the blue

lights flash. A few hours later, I was hugging my dad. Glad to be back in the arms of my mom. That day changed the trajectory of my life. It's why I'm standing here. It's no secret I grew up a privileged politician's son. My private school critics called me Riley. In turn, I hated the life. Wanted nothing to do with it. But something changed that day in Idaho. Bones took my indifference and gave me a reason. Gave me my 'why.' It is also no secret that, truth be told, my dad pulled some strings. While I was not cadet material, he secured me an appointment into the academy where Bones kept an eye on me. As a cadet, I tried to fit in. Tried to be one of the guys. But I was not. At all. Which was made all the more difficult when everyone around you worked so hard to earn a spot while you were given yours thanks to your daddy. A spot that rightly should have been given to someone else—a fact that only served to heighten my shame. With that as my backdrop, I didn't have many friends. In fact, I had none. Further, I had grown up lazy, so physical exercise was not my forte. The only thing I chased was the ice cream truck." More quiet laughter. "Again, no secret, I was more mush than not. One of the ways the academy whittles cadets is through this sadistic thing called an obstacle course. It separates the men from the boys. Those who want to be there from those who like the idea of being there. To be honest, it's a medieval torture device lifted from the catacombs of hell. I hated it. Hated every minute of it. But every freshman was required to complete the thing in thirty minutes or less. The first time I tried it, I ran, crawled, climbed, scurried, did everything I could in the earth-scorching time of forty-nine minutes and fifty-seven seconds. It wasn't difficult to read the writing on the wall." He paused, suggesting the next admission was painful. "Few knew this, but given my soup of circumstances, I was not in a good place." He shook his head once. "I'd written my letter. Had a gun. One bullet. My plan laid out. I even read medical textbooks and knew where to place the muzzle"—he pointed at his heart—"so that my mother could cry over my dead body and not have to close the casket because I'd blown my face off.

"While I was alone much of the time, I'd also noticed another cadet with few friends. Unlike me, he was physically superior. One of those

Adonis-like miscreants who levitated when he ran.” More laughter. “Made a mockery of most of the tests. Bones hovered in his orbit. I wasn’t sure if he liked him or tolerated him, but as with me, he kept an eye on him. Late in our freshman year, prior to the final running of the obstacle course, we were all given strict instructions that while one day we would fight as a unit, this course was an individual accomplishment. We were not allowed, under any circumstance, to help another cadet. In fact, we were ordered not to. If we helped anyone at all, in any physical way, we’d be disqualified. Standing on the starting line, I knew this was the end of my tenure and I’d soon be the subject of more ridicule and shame and embarrassment to my family. I consoled myself, knowing the embarrassment would end that afternoon. I’d started the countdown. I’m not asking for your pity—I’ve lived and do live a blessed life—but I’m describing to you my experience at that time. When the starting gun went off, I watched as the entire company put distance between themselves and me. Twelve minutes in, breathing so hard I thought my heart would explode, that mysterious loner broke the academy record. That’s right—twelve minutes. Basically, he lapped me and then some. Making him a shoo-in for pretty much any summer assignment he wanted. Military brass tend to applaud and reward physical prowess and mental toughness, both of which he had. Over the next several minutes, I clawed my way toward the finish line, which seemed no closer. As my fellow cadets crossed the line and rang the bell prior to the expiration of the time limit, shouting in joyful exultation, it became clear that—while I had improved a lot—I’d never make it. Then, about the time I lost all hope, I looked up and there’s this guy. Running alongside me. With me. Step for step. And somewhere in my oxygen-starved brain, it struck me that he’d finished first only to immediately turn around and come back. Who does that?

“No one, myself included, thought I could make it. To make matters worse, by missing the cutoff deadline, I would cost my entire company a weekend pass. Making me that much less popular. Climbing a rope ladder, I slipped, my foot caught, and I found myself hanging upside down. Next thing I knew Spider-Man righted me and freed my foot. When I told him

CHARLES MARTIN

I couldn't make it through the log maze, he told me I could and steadied me when I slipped. When I said I couldn't lift my arms for the final pull-ups, he grabbed the bar and said, 'Just do what I do.' And I did. As time dwindled and I snapped, telling him I couldn't make it, he leaned in, pressed his shoulder to mine, and told me I could. We could. And for the first time in my life, for reasons I will never understand, I believed him."

Ashley raised a finger and nodded. "Learned something else that day. Two can do what one cannot. I've never forgotten that. With more ground than clock, he told me he was staying with me. All the way. My time was his time. We'd do it together. Him and me." A pause. "Since that time I've flown over five hundred combat sorties, and in every single one of them, I have heard his voice. 'We can.'" A nod. A quick glance at me. "I hear it still. To this day I don't know how we did it, and to his great credit, I don't know why. I just know he did. And because he did, we did. I rang that bell with nine seconds to spare. Nine seconds. And when I did, I caught a glimpse of Bones. Smiling."

CHAPTER 4

Aaron's voice shook the memory loose. What had been a difficult day for Aaron had turned out to be a very hard day for me. Turning around and disobeying a direct order did not make me many friends. None actually. My isolation continued.

One afternoon, after a rather difficult workout of flying 200s, the man in the priestly garb found me. Another bag of chips in his hand. I was standing at my locker, putting on dry clothes. The room was empty save us. He stepped closer. Within two feet. Emptying the bag of chips into his mouth.

"Tell me something"—he spoke around the crunch—"Why'd you turn around? Go back?"

"He wasn't going to make it."

"The obstacle course is, by design, a singular achievement. Start as a group. Get judged as individuals."

"And yet we suffer as a group if one person fails to make time."

"Orders are orders."

I looked right at him. "It's a bad order."

"That attitude'll get you thrown out of here."

"Sir"—I glanced at his robes—"or Father, or whatever it is you do around here. Do I look like I care?"

He raised his eyebrows. "You know, you're only the second one on record to do that."

“What? Disobey an order?”

“No.” He laughed. “Go back. Help the stragglers.”

“Maybe I was the only one who could, sir.”

“Maybe.”

“Permission to speak freely, Father sir?”

He smirked. “Granted.”

I wasn’t sure if I was in trouble or not. Would they discipline me? How? If so, I wanted to get it over with. “What is it that you do here? Why are we having this conversation? Why are you here?”

He considered this. “They tolerate me.”

The dichotomy of “they” and “me” was not lost on me. Regardless, I’d had it with this man and his stupid riddles. “If you want to sift me, then do so. Be my guest.” I gestured outside in the direction of the obstacle course. “I went back. I’d do it again.”

He sat on a bench opposite me. “You don’t fit in too well around here, do you?”

I wanted to say, “Thanks for the revelation, Captain Obvious,” but did not. Instead, I said, “No, Father sir, not really.”

“Not really or no?”

I pulled on a sweatshirt. “No.”

“Why?”

“Well . . . we’re busy during the day and there’s not much time for social—”

“No, why’d you go back?”

I shrugged. For the first time I answered his question with a question. “Does it matter, sir?”

He wiped the corners of his mouth with a napkin, then pointed to Aaron’s locker. “It did to him.”

I shrugged it off and said nothing.

He rested his head on the lockers. “You know him?”

“Sir?”

He tapped Aaron’s locker.

Given that my heart and mind were east with Marie, I had kept to myself and not embroiled myself in the who's who of my class. In truth, I didn't care. I shook my head. "Not really."

"So you really don't know who he is?"

Another shake of my head.

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

I pressed him. "What?"

"The fact that you don't know who he is, and more importantly whose he is, makes turning back that much more significant."

I was done with this strange man, this stupid conversation. And if I had my way, I would soon be done with the academy.

He was about to leave when he turned back. "You still haven't answered my question."

"Which one?"

His expression softened and his eyes focused on me. "Why'd you do it?"

"I don't think you'd understand."

"Try me."

It was no use. What would a priest know about that anyway? He was just a pansy, passivist has-been who couldn't hack it so he traded BDUs for white robes. I shook my head. "Just something somebody told me a long time ago."

He chuckled. "You mean after you climbed back onto Jack's boat a second time?"

That stopped me cold. How would he know about that? I didn't put that in my application, and I'd never told anyone else—save Marie. I stood there with my mouth open.

He leaned closer. "David, maybe we're not trying to get rid of you." He patted my shoulder. "Maybe I'm just trying to figure out why you're really here . . . and who you want to be when you grow up."

Aaron's voice brought me back to here. To now. To the snow, to Gunner whining and Bones's coffin stretched out before me.

Aaron continued, “I would later ask Bones, pointing to this mystery cadet who’d returned for me. ‘You ordered us not to do that.’ Bones had nodded. ‘Did you know he would?’ He nodded again. Knowingly. ‘He can’t not. It’s just in him.’ I remember studying that man. The quiet cadet who disobeyed a bad order to do what his heart told him he couldn’t *not* do. I turned to Bones and asked the question that changed the trajectory of my life. ‘You teach me how?’ That night I burned my letter and later returned my dad’s revolver to his safe.” He reached in his pocket and removed a worn coin made from copper. “But I kept the bullet. Tried to give it to Bones as a thank-you. A memento of sorts. In typical Bones fashion, he had it melted down and turned into this medallion, engraved with eleven words that matter to him and me. They became my *raison d’être*. I’ve carried it every day since.

“In the years following, Bones became my tutor. In every area of my life. I am who I am because of”—he gestured—“this simple, towering man.” Another pause. This one longer. “Because of my political connections, and because of the debt my dad felt to Bones, he helped create a way for Bones to do what he did with me on a broader level. To work with many of our agencies. Below the radar. Literally underground. With a singular mission: to rescue individuals. Lost. Taken. Stolen. Deceived. A decade in, and Bones had personally returned over five hundred sons and daughters to their parents.” He eyed the crowd. “Many of them yours.” He held up a small wooden box. “Because all of his work was classified, his medals were given, hung around his neck, and then taken back five minutes later. And stored in this cigar box in my dad’s office. He later passed it on to me.” He shook the box. “Colonel Ezekiel Bones was and is probably the most decorated government servant I’ve ever known, and yet he never said a word.” He opened the box. “There are more Purple Hearts in here than places on your body to hang them. And . . .” He teared up. “I was invited into my father’s office the day they hung the Congressional Medal around his neck.” I shook my head. I never knew Bones had been awarded the Medal of Honor. He’d never mentioned it. “And then in classic Bones fashion, he thanked my dad, lifted it off, laid it in this box, and boarded a plane for

THE KEEPER

some faraway country where some kid needed somebody to kick down the door.

“On the day I was elected vice president, some twenty years after my father held the post, I was sitting in his, now my, office, wondering just what in the world I’d gotten myself into. In walked Bones. He sat, put his feet up on my desk, lit a cigar, and said, ‘Tell me what you know about sheep.’

“I knew the answer. ‘They’re completely lost without their shepherd.’

“Bones listened, considered my words, and nodded. ‘Then be one,’ he said. ‘And be a good one.’”