

WATER FROM
MY HEART



A Novel

Charles Martin



CENTER
STREET

New York Boston Nashville

For Moises and Pauline Rick

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Summary: "New York Times bestselling author Charles Martin's breathtaking novel of love and redemption. Charlie Finn had to grow up fast, living alone by age sixteen. Highly intelligent, he earned a life-changing scholarship to Harvard, where he learned how to survive and thrive on the outskirts of privileged society. That skill served him well in the cutthroat business world, as it does in more lucrative but dangerous ventures he now operates off the coast of Miami. Charlie tries to separate relationships from work. But when his choices produce devastating consequences, he sets out to right wrongs, traveling to Central America where he will meet those who have paid for his actions, including a woman and her young daughter. Will their fated encounter present Charlie with a way to seek the redemption he thought was impossible—and free his heart to love one woman as he never knew he could?" — Provided by publisher.

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CHAPTER ONE

I throttled down through Stiltsville, the reflection of the moon shimmering off Biscayne Bay. I loved this time of night. Behind me, a dark unlit boat slipped into my wake. I'd been watching her on radar. Been expecting them.

The key to having four supercharged Mercury Verado 350 engines—providing 1,400 horsepower and speeds reaching almost one hundred miles per hour—is knowing when and when not to use them. She hit her lights. Four spotlights up top lit up the center of my forty-four-foot Center Console Intrepid like noonday. The spinning blue lights above showered us. Agent Russ Spangler was ex-Special Forces and lived on full moon adrenaline nights like this. He was currently employing his shock-and-awe tactic of blinding me with a million-power handheld spotlight. We'd played this game before. His partner, Special Agent Melanie Beckwith, had a Napoleon complex and made up for what she lacked with anabolic steroids and muscles a good bit bigger than mine.

While I could outrun them, I could not outrun the Coast Guard, also on my radar, or the planes they could summon. I might make it back to the island, but it'd be the last run I ever made and I had no real intention of retiring just yet. If ever a person had a prime, I was in it. The engines behind me were a last ditch. To use them meant it would be the last time I'd ever run this boat, and at almost \$500,000, I'd like to use it more than once. But that's the thing about owning a boat like this: If you're going to own it and stay in this business, you can't get too attached. That's pretty much true for anything. And anyone. No attachments. You've got to be willing to shove what you love off a cliff at the first sign of agents like Spangler and Beckwith.

In almost a decade of this business, I've learned much but one lesson guides me: I hold everything loosely. And that includes people. My life and those I value dangle on a knife's edge, a precipice where—if circumstances arise that are contrary to my freedom—one gentle nudge will send them cascading down. Gone. Over the falls at Niagara. This mind-set also governs what I enjoy and what I hope to enjoy. Even what I dream. As a safeguard, I live with limited expectation. I tread cautiously. One foot on the bank. Cards close to my chest. I constantly calculate risk and reward because at any second, I may have to run, fold, or dive beneath the surface.

I own nothing and let nothing own me.

I checked my watch. A Marathon dive watch given to me by Shelly. She claimed I'd be late to my own funeral, so she'd set it five minutes fast. The hands were lit by tritium, which glowed brightly in the night air. I had time. I cut the engines and turned into the lights. Agents Spangler and Beckwith slid up alongside me, made all the easier in the glass-like conditions. Spangler's voice echoed across the water. "Hello, Charlie Finn. Imagine my shock at finding you out here this time of night."

I shoved my hands in my pockets and smiled at Agent Beck-

with. Giving her my best Humphrey Bogart. “Of all the gin joints...”

She jumped onto my boat, tying off my bow to her stern. She smiled and said nothing. I nodded. “Looks like that weight lifting program is really paying off.”

She pointed. “Stand there and be quiet.”

The Drug Enforcement Agency and Coast Guard and Game and Fish Commissions possess expanded search authorities so they’re a little more liberal in their violation of my constitutional rights. They also knew I wasn’t about to take them to court or call my attorney. So they—and their German shepherd, Molly—spent the next thirty minutes tearing my boat apart. Sniffing for anything resembling residue. I folded my arms and watched with curiosity. I was really impressed when Agent Spangler slid into his diving gear and inspected my hull. About forty minutes in, the two agents disassembled my center console, leaving Molly sitting faithfully at my feet. I scratched her head and let her lick my hand. She put one paw on my thigh and leaned into me. When they weren’t looking, I fed her dog bone-shaped treats. After almost two hours of grunting and sweating and finding nothing, they reported to someone in some office on the other end of their cell phones and then cast off my bowline and departed without a word.

Somebody had tipped them off that I was running tonight, and they were right—I was, but that same someone had also tipped me off that they’d tipped them off. It pays to pay more and Colin—my business partner—pays more. Spangler and Beckwith had been dogging me for the better part of five years. As had the team of Miller and Marks before them. And while I’d run enough to fill up this boat twenty to thirty or even fifty times, I’d never been caught. And I wasn’t about to get caught tonight.

Casually, I cranked the engines and watched in muted amazement as Spangler and Beckwith disappeared north. Humming quietly to myself, “Na-na-na-na, na-na-na-na, hey, hey, hey...” I

slid silently into the maze of canals that fed into the bay. I slithered through the darkness past the hundred-foot yachts and \$20 million mansions where the who's who of Miami parked their lives on display. I'd made drops at many of these homes, but one of the things that made me successful and still at it was the fact that what started with me stayed with me. I knew how to keep a secret, and I knew what to risk and how.

I serpentine through the maze, knowing that Beckwith had planted more than one hidden GPS receiver on this boat. They'd installed the first months ago, and we'd been playing this game of cat and mouse ever since. The show tonight was to plant a second as the first must have been giving conflicting signals due to salt corrosion. Of course, that muriatic acid I poured on it might also have had something to do with it. Never could really tell.

Miller and Marks had started this. That time I found it a few days later, so I sold the boat to a guy making a pass through the Panama Canal and up the other side. They thought I was making a pickup in Mexico. They sent boats and helicopters and planes, and that failed sting operation cost them a pretty penny. They were not happy. The guy who bought the boat said they were more than a little surprised to find him marlin fishing off the coast of Mexico and that Agents Miller and Marks had started throwing blows when they discovered it wasn't me. They were even more surprised a few hours later when, upon their return, they found me on my porch in Bimini, swaying in my hammock, staring out across the horizon with a cup of coffee in my hand and a devilish smile pasted on my face. "Coffee?"

Now I stared out across the water, the rumble of the engines beneath me. While I didn't own this boat, I did possess a rather strong affinity for her so Colin had allowed me to name her. I called her the *Storied Career*. Tomorrow I'd turn forty, and if anything has been true about my life, it's been storied.

I tied off, checked the radar, and knew Spangler and Beckwith

hadn't gone very far. They weren't the only ones with a GPS transponder. Two could play that game. We ran a tight ship, but our model was a little different. We ran a boutique firm, operated on the honor system—as much as there was honor among thieves—and worked to reduce the variables. We sold only to clients we vetted. We accepted payment only via wire transfer to offshore accounts. And we determined the drop point. And we never, ever, absolutely ever dropped it when they wanted it or where they wanted it, and we didn't tell them where it was until after we'd dropped it. If they had to have it right then and right there, we were not their supplier. This model had kept us in the business, and it had kept Beckwith and Spangler sniffing at our heels and always three steps behind.

I shut the engines and turned on the coffeepot. I knew they'd work up quite an appetite tearing up my boat, so I pulled a box of doughnuts from my bag and left it in a false floor in one of the forward hatches beneath a pile of greasy life jackets. Wouldn't take them long to find it. I sketched a smiley face on a yellow sticky note and wrote, "Help yourself." On the rear deck near the engine, located in another false floor beneath one of the live wells, I left a bowl of food for Molly. Her favorite—venison and lamb.

I pulled up the float indicating the crab trap and unrolled my wet suit. The water wasn't too cold, but the flat black color didn't show up as well under water as my pale skin. I slid into it, pulled the regulator over my mouth, slipped into the water, pulled on my fins, and began the half-mile swim. I took my time. My tanks had been retrofitted with dual Pegasus Thrusters. These were underwater propulsion devices that pushed me along at 170 feet per minute. Up top that equates to about two knots. I also held on to an H-160 thruster, which was similar to holding on to a torpedo. The combination of these sped me along underwater silently and unseen and kept my legs fresh in the event that I needed them.

I snaked my way through the canals, spotted the flashing bea-

con above me, dropped my gear, and squirreled out of my wet suit—letting it fall forty feet to the ocean floor beneath me—and surfaced next to the Pathfinder, which I'd packed and docked three days prior. I untied the bowline, shoved off. Thirty minutes later, I was staring at the dock where the basketball team, the rapper with his entourage, the pop artist with her management team, the hedge fund owner with all the girls he could buy, and one-quarter of Miami's elite were partying. If they wanted to suck their money up their noses, that was their right, their privilege, and their problem. I simply provided an overnight delivery service. If I didn't, someone else would. Supply and demand.

I slid up next to the dock beneath the rocking *boom-boom* of a party in the house. In the dark, I unloaded and stacked several packages inside a hidden floor cavity beneath a rolling locker on the dock. I'd been here before. A good customer. Having returned all the furniture to neat and tidy and just as I'd found it, I texted delivery confirmation, jumped back in my boat, and disappeared.

An hour later, I swam beneath the mangroves en route to the *Storied Career*. Four other DEA boats had surrounded her. She was lit up like a runway. As if the second search would turn up what the first did not. Staring from a distance, Agents Beckwith and Spangler marched about in a spitting frenzy, flinging four-letter words and whatever wasn't tied down in my boat. Molly stood on the stern, muzzle deep in a box of doughnuts. She must have gotten to the powdered first because her normally black nose and mouth were pastry white. A half mile down the street beyond the boat, the marquee of an all-night pizza joint flashed. I routed around the boats, bought a large pizza, and returned to the boat, holding the box on my shoulder. "Hi, guys. Pizza?" They didn't like that much, either. But since they had neither drugs nor cash nor evidence that I had or had had any of the above, there wasn't much they could do other than cuss a little more and tell me to get lost.

Which I did.

I snaked my way through the canals, docked at a marina, and then made my way on foot to my Beach Cruiser. A few miles later, I let myself in Colin's back door. When they built their house, Marguerite had custom cabinets installed in the back hall. Lockers of sorts for the kids, where they threw all their school and sports stuff, including smelly shoes or jackets, when they walked in the back door. Once I became family, Colin had one added for me. And like most everything Colin Specter did, there was more than one reason for this.

I slipped my hand inside the top shelf of my cubicle, in the back corner, where—invisible from the front—a small sleeve, or pocket, had been built. Just large enough for a cell phone—or a SIM card. It was one of many such places. My fingertips found the new postage-stamp-sized card; I quickly replaced it in my phone, dropped the old card in the trash can leading into the back of the house, and slid the phone back in my pocket.

Something I'd done a hundred times before.

Maria sat on the couch. Pigtails. Ribbons. Evidence of her mother's makeup. Pink leotard fresh from ballet. Knees tucked into her chest, popcorn resting on her knees, watching our favorite movie. I sat next to her as the nuns on the screen began to sing about their problem—Maria in the convent. The real Maria—the one on the couch next to me—sat, foot tapping, and did not need an invitation to join the singing now filling the airwaves of the living room and kitchen. Knowing full well she had our attention and that the curtain on the stage of her life had now parted, she stood on the couch and belted out the beginnings of a beautiful singing voice. Eyebrow lifted, a sly smile spreading across her face, her mischievous voice asked the nearly half-century-old question of the self-titled song regarding how one might solve a problem like Maria.

Maria and I first watched *The Sound of Music* when she was

four. In a pinch, Colin and Marguerite had asked me to babysit, and knowing next to nothing about children, especially young ones, I plugged in what I thought would help pass the time. It worked and we've watched it a hundred times since. Now, at twelve, Maria knew her lines as well as the original cast members.

Jumping from the couch to the pool table, Maria spun, pirouetted, and plied herself across the tabletop, leaving petite, powdered footprints on the felt, quite oblivious to the effect her animated hands might have on the hanging light fixture. Her problem in gaining much reaction from "the crowd" rested in the fact that we adults had joined in so many times prior that we'd grown bored of the same and, in a desire for levity amid the monotony, begun to devolve into a confederacy of rhythm-challenged idiots. Doing so, we morphed into our own version of the now-hallowed song. From the kitchen, Colin and Marguerite sang out some sort of cheesy, offbeat rap duet while I feigned total beat ignorance, tapping and snapping badly out of time while singing with as much melodic acumen as a howling coyote.

Monkeys with pots and pans had more rhythm.

After little more than a single verse, Maria, hands on her hips and sensing that the room had descended into total musical chaos, raised an eyebrow, pursed her lips into a frown, and returned to her popcorn and the couch with a deflated exhale and a practiced look of measured disdain. Throwing a handful of popcorn into her mouth, she blew a strand of hair out of her face while texting a friend on her iPhone. Her fingers spoke one message, her mouth another. "You people are so old."

I laughed. "Yes, we are."

Cradling the popcorn bowl, she sat cross-legged on the couch, stuffed her mouth, and then rubbed her greasy hands on my shirt-sleeve.

I scooted closer to offer some of my signature comedic attempts, which once elicited bladder-busting belly laughter and

tears, but now at the knowing age of almost-a-teenager, she would have none of it. She raised her maturing, stop sign hand and spoke without ever taking her eyes off her phone. “Talk to the hand.”

I laughed, kissed her forehead, and turned toward the kitchen, but not before dumping the remains of the half-eaten bucket of popcorn on her head.

“Uncle Charlie!” She jumped up, stamping a foot. A vision in pink. “I cannot believe you just did that!” Eyes wide, she protested with a rather exasperated level of drama. “I just had my hair colored...”

I love that girl.

“Then I guess that proves what we already know...,” I said, laughing and walking backward toward the kitchen.

She looked at me confused. “What?”

I offered a fist bump to Colin, who knew what was coming next. “That you do, in fact, have a problem.”

“Uncle Charlie!”

I escaped into the kitchen beneath a barrage of raining popcorn. I raided the fridge, ate some leftovers—which as godfather to both Maria and her older brother, Zaul, was my pseudo-parental right. Not one to stew long, Maria soon appeared, offering me a glance of—and the chance to admire—her bedazzled book bag, which I appropriately praised. From there, she held my hand and led me around the corner to the door of the laundry room where, on a hanger, she had displayed a new bathing suit her mom had bought her. Hand on her hip, eyelids blinking in rhythm with her foot. “Dad says I have to take it back.”

It was about the size of a napkin—more string than fabric. I turned to Colin and nodded. “Good call.”

She gently slapped me on the shoulder. “You are not helping me.”

I held it in my hand. “It doesn’t cover anything. Besides, it’s

white.” I stretched the fabric in front of my eyes. “Like almost see-through.”

More eyelid batting. “That’s the point. Have you seen my competition?”

I lifted her chin. “Honey, you have no competition. There’s not another twelve-year-old on the planet that can hold a candle to you. Besides, you don’t want the guys who only want you for how you look in this thing.”

“It worked with Mom and Dad.”

Marguerite laughed. “She’s got a point.”

Colin’s voice again. “That is so untrue. I deny that completely. You hooked me with the way you play piano. I never even saw you in that white-and-blue-striped bikini with the little strings on the side.”

Marguerite, over my shoulder. “Colin Specter, you wouldn’t know middle C if it hit you in the face.”

Maria did not look convinced and stood waiting for me to join her side. I tried a second time. “Look at it this way: Skin cancer is a big problem these days and your dad and I are helping you with that.”

She tugged on my hand, leading me toward her newest painting. “Yeah, you’re helping me all right. Helping me become the biggest”—she formed an “L” with her hand and pressed it flat against her forehead—“loser on the beach.”

Growing up in my family, life had been rather dysfunctional. In fact, I didn’t have much family life. Walking through Colin’s house, listening to the voices and the laughter, being accepted as one of the family, holding Maria’s hand, and being asked by her parents to raise and take responsibility for her and her brother in the event of their death—these were the richest moments

of my life. And every time I walked in here and ate the popcorn and kissed Maria's forehead and laughed with Marguerite at Colin and helped myself to any and everything in the fridge and propped my feet up on the coffee table and washed the dishes and took out the trash—I lingered and sucked the marrow out of it.

Colin and I seldom exited the same door, so when they left through the front, I slipped out the back hall, where I bumped into Zaul in the mudroom taking out the trash. "Hey, big guy."

I hugged him, or tried to. He was stiff. Distant. Thick with muscle and steroids and the stench of stale cigarette smoke. Just shy of eighteen, gone was the affable, curious kid. He was wearing a flat-billed ball cap cocked to one side. He raised his head in a half nod. "Charlie." Noticeably absent was the word "Uncle."

It'd been a while and I was genuinely glad to see him. "Your dad said you were hanging out with your sis tonight."

Zaul held the overfilled trash bag with one arm, and I realized just how muscled he'd become. A nod. "Thought maybe we'd go for a moonlight stroll or something in the Yellowfin."

The Yellowfin was Colin's twenty-four-foot flatboat powered by a three-hundred-horsepower Yamaha. Perfect for a glassy night like tonight. It also had state-of-the-art electronics so they'd have a difficult time getting lost. "Good choice. Love that ride. Especially this time of night."

He nodded and attempted a smile. He pointed above himself. "She likes to stand up in the casting tower and..." He shrugged. "Be Maria."

His shoulders were angling downward under the weight of something unseen. His eyes were dark circles and his voice raspy and tired. The trash was dripping on the floor. "I'd better get this cleaned up."

He disappeared into the garage while I exited out the back beneath the shadows. I stood long enough to let my ears and eyes

adjust to the night and then crept down to the dock with the picture of Zaul weighing heavy on me.



I made the forty-four-mile crossing in *Storied Career* in a little less than an hour, slept fitfully, and as the sun rose over the Atlantic, I found myself on the porch, hovering over my coffee and staring both my fortieth birthday and my wedding in the face. While those were cause for celebration, a wrinkle had formed between my eyes as I stared at my left wrist. My naked left wrist. The watch Shelly had given me was gone. I'd lost it somewhere in the last twenty-four hours and I had no idea where.

And that was bad.