RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Where the River Ends

Charles Martin

Contents

About the Book

Chris Michaels and Abbie Colman should never have met, let alone fallen in love. As the beautiful only child of South Carolina's most senior senator, Abbie's father had wanted better for her than Chris, who grew up in a trailer park next to the St. Mary's river. Abbie and Chris had married quickly and secretly, returning to face her parents' objections that haven't faded even after over fourteen years of marriage.

But now Abbie and Chris are coming to the end of the road. Diagnosed with breast cancer four years earlier, Abbie's case is now terminal and they've run out of options. Rather than letting Abbie spend her final days in a cold, sterile hospital room, Chris packs their bags and steals away with her in the middle of the night.

They carry with them Abbie's 'wish list' – ten things she wants to do before she dies. The wishes are simple, normal; because after four years of non-stop invasive medical treatments, 'normal' is a fleeting memory. Along with taking a final trip with Chris on the river that holds so many memories for them both, Abbie wants to dance with her husband, drink wine on a beach, and laugh until it hurts… But as they head for river's end, Abbie's father – along with most every major news network and law enforcement agency in the South – are determined to find them and bring Abbie home…

About the Author

The author of several previous books, including *When Crickets Cry*, Charles Martin holds a B.A. in English from Florida State University as well as an M.A. in Journalism and a Ph.D. in Communication from Regent University. In 1999, he left a career in business to pursue fiction writing. He and his wife live near the St. John's River in Jacksonville, Florida, with their three sons.

Also by Charles Martin:

The Dead Don't Dance
Maggie
When Crickets Cry
Wrapped in Rain
Chasing Fireflies

Where the River Ends

CHARLES
MARTIN

For my grandparents, Ellen and Tillman Cavert
… who have loved well for sixty-seven years

Prologue

I don’t have good memories of growing up. Seems like I knew a lot of ugly stuff when I shouldn’t. The only two things I remember as beautiful were my mom and this riverbank. And until I knew better I thought they’d named the river after my mom.

The man who lived in our trailer was always angry. Always smoking. Don’t know why. He lit one cigarette with the glow-plug end of the other. Touched them like sparklers. They matched his eyes. He never hit me, least not very hard, but his mouth hurt my ears. Mom said it was the devil in the bottle, but I don’t think you drink meanness. You can try and drown it, but, in my experience, it’s a pretty good swimmer. That’s why it’s in the bottle. To escape it, she and I, we came here. She told me it’d help my asthma. I knew better. Dying was about the only thing that’d help my asthma.

With a brick sitting on my chest, I pulled every breath through the length of a garden hose. That made it sort of difficult to get what I thought or felt out my mouth. Mom was always wanting me to talk about my feelings, trying to pull me out of me. I told her, “Forget feelings. I can feel later. Throw me some air.” Between bottle-man, the albuterol and the spastic cough I couldn’t shake, there was a disconnect between my mouth and my heart. Something in me had been severed.

I lived in pieces.

Maybe *islands* is a better word. Whenever I crept inside myself and took a look around, I didn't see one whole. Or one main. I saw a continent cut and quartered with each section floating aimlessly on some far corner of the globe. I've seen pictures of ice sheets near the pole that do the same thing.

From the ages of five to eight, I wore a helmet even when I wasn't on my bike and grew up with the nickname "Smurf" – adopted from my occasional lip color. To occupy me during my forced sedentary and mostly sucky childhood, my mother bought me some paints, and in them I found escape – painting the world I wished I lived in.

We had this bench down by the river where we used to sit nights. Mostly when the cigarette haze and verbal dribble drove us out of the trailer. Our butts had worn it smooth. One night, when I was about ten, I'd picked up on the trailer park chatter and I said, "Momma, what's an 'easy' woman?"

She'd heard it, too. "Who you been listening to?"

I pointed. "That big fat woman over there."

She nodded. "Honey, we all lose our way."

"You lost yours?"

She touched the tip of my nose with her finger. "Not when I'm with you." She put her arm around me. "But that's not what really matters. What matters is what you do when you find yourself lost."

She walked me through the woods, sat me on the bench and panned her hand across the view in front of me. "Chris, God is in this river."

It was one of those copper-colored evenings when thunderclouds blocked out the sun. The edges were red and the underside dark blue and bleeding into black. In the distance, we could see the wave of rain coming. I scanned the riverbank, the ripples on the water, remembering all the times I'd felt my tongue thicken and turn numb, right before I blacked out due to oxygen deprivation.

I frowned. “That explains a lot.”

She pushed the hair out of my eyes while I stole two quick puffs on the inhaler. “What do you mean?”

I held my breath and thumbed over my shoulder. “Well, He ain’t in that trailer.”

She nodded once. “He was when I made you.”

I had just learned to cuss, so I was testing my boundaries. “Maybe.” I hacked and spat. “But He sure as hell ain’t now.”

She squeezed my cheeks between her fingers and jerked my head toward the water. “Chris Michaels.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Look at the surface of that river.”

I nodded.

“What do you see?”

My voice sounded thick and garbled. “Black water.”

She squeezed tighter. “Don’t get smart with me. Look again.”

“A few minnows.”

“Closer – at the surface.”

I waited while my eyes focused. My teeth were cutting into my cheeks. “The treeline, some clouds … the sky.”

“What’s that called?”

“A reflection.”

She let go of my mouth. “I don’t care what trash the world throws at you, don’t let it muddy your reflection. You hear me?”

I pointed at the trailer. “Well, he does and you don’t say nothing.”

“True. But I can’t fix him. And you’re not broken.”

“Why do you let him stay?”

She nodded, then said quietly, “’Cause I can only work so many hours in a day, and” – she held up my inhaler – “he’s got benefits.” She lifted my chin again. “Band-Aid, are you hearing me?”

“Why you call me that?”

She pressed her forehead to mine. “’Cause you stick to me and you heal my hurts.”

I didn’t know squat about life, but I knew one thing for certain: my momma was a good woman. I nodded back up the street. “Can I go tell that big fat woman that she can just suck on a lemon?”

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t do any good.”

“Why?”

Lightning spiderwebbed the sky. “’Cause all that fat just represents pain.” She brushed the hair out of my eyes. “Last time … you hearing me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A few minutes passed. The air grew damp, charged with electricity and smelling of pungent rain. “What you got – what you can do with a pencil or a brush – that’s something special.” She pulled me close. “Any dummy with half a brain can see that. I didn’t teach you to do what you do. Couldn’t have, ’cause I don’t know the first thing about it – can’t draw myself out of a wet paper bag. What you got comes from some place none of the rest of us know nothing about. That makes you special.”

“I don’t feel special. Most the time, I feel like I’m dying.”

She hiked her skirt up over her knees to dry the sweat off her legs. A rusty razor had cut the rough skin above her heel. She waved her hand across the world. “Life ain’t easy. Most the time, it’s hard. It seldom makes sense and it ain’t never wrapped up in a neat little bow. Seems like the older you get the more it trips you up, breaks you down and bloodies you …” She tried to laugh and then fell quiet a minute. “People come to this river for lots of reasons. Some of us are hiding, some of us are escaping, some of us are looking for a little peace and quiet, maybe trying to forget, anything to ease the pain we carry, but … we all come thirsty.” She pushed the hair out of my eyes. “You’re a lot like this river. In your fingertips, you got what people need. So don’t hold it back. Don’t dam it up. And don’t muddy it.”

She flipped my hand over and spread her palm against mine. “Let it flow out, and one day you’ll find that people from all over will dive in and drink deeply.”

She laid a sketchbook across my lap, handed me a pencil, then aimed my eyes downriver. “You see that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now close your eyes.” I did. “Take as deep a breath as you can.” I coughed, sucked it in and held it. “See that picture on the back of your eyelids?” I nodded. “Now …” She placed the pencil in my fingers just as the first raindrop fell. “Find the one thing that makes you want to look again … and let it out.”

So I did.

That evening, she studied my sketch. Her nose was running. Eyes too. “Promise me one more thing.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

She stared out my bedroom window, where the river floated beneath a cloud of steam. She tapped my temple and laid her hand across my chest. “What you got inside you is … is a well that bubbles up from way down deep. It’s sweet water, too. But” – a tear dripped off her face – “sometimes wells run empty. If you ever get to hurting and all you feel is ache – you reach down and find your well empty, nothing but dust – then you come back here … dive in and drink deeply.”

And I did.

Chapter 1

MAY 30

I CLIMBED THE final step into my studio, sniffed the dank fireplace and wondered how long it would take an errant flame to consume everything in here. Minutes I should think. Arms folded, I leaned against the wall and stared at all the eyes staring back at me. Abbie had tried so hard to make me believe. Even taken me halfway around the world. Introduced me to Rembrandt, poked me in the shoulder and said, “You can do that.” So I had painted. Faces mostly. My mother had planted the seed that, years later, Abbie watered, nurtured and pruned. In truth, given a good flame and a tardy fire department, I stood to make more money on an insurance payout. Stacked around me in layered rows against the four walls lay more than three hundred dusty works – a decade’s worth – all oil on canvas. Faces captured in moments speaking emotions known by hearts but spoken by few mouths. At one time, it had come so easily. So fluidly. I remember moments when I couldn’t wait to get in here, when I couldn’t hold it back, when I would paint on four canvases at once. Those all-nighters when I discovered Vesuvius in me.

The last decade of my life was staring back at me. Once hung with promise in studios across Charleston, paintings had slowly, one at a time, returned. Self-proclaimed art critics pontificating in local papers complained that my

work “lacked originality,” “was absent of heart” and my favorite, “was boring and devoid of artistic skill or understanding.”

There’s a reason the critics are called critics.

On the easel before me stretched a white canvas. Dusty, sun-faded and cracked. It was empty.

Like me.

I stepped through the window, along the side of the roof, and climbed the iron stairs to the crow’s nest. I smelled the salt and looked out over the water. Somewhere a seagull squawked at me. The air was thick, dense and blanketed the city in quiet. The sky was clear, but it smelled like rain. The moon hung high and full, casting shadows on the water that lapped the concrete bulkhead a hundred feet away. The lights of Fort Sumter sat glistening in the distance to the southeast. Before me, the Ashley and Cooper rivers ran into one. Most Charlestonians will tell you it is there that the two form the Atlantic Ocean. Sullivan’s Island sat just north, along with the beach where we used to swim. I closed my eyes and listened for the echo of our laughter.

That’d been a while.

The “Holy City,” with its competing steeples piercing the night sky, lay still behind me. Below me stretched my shadow. Cast upon the roof, it tugged at my pants leg, begging me backward and pulling me down. The ironwork that held me had been fashioned some fifty years ago by local legend Philip Simmons. Now in his nineties, his work had become the Charleston rave and was very much in demand. The crow’s nest, having ridden out the storm, had come with the house. In the thirteen years we’d lived here, this nine square feet of perch had become the midnight platform from which I viewed the world. My singular and solitary escape.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I checked the screen and saw the Texas area code. “Hello?”

“Chris Michaels?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Anita Becker, assistant to Dr. Paul Virth.”

“Yes?” My breathing was short. So much hung on her next few words.

She paused. “We wanted to call and …” – I knew it before she said it – “… say that the oversight committee has met and decided on the parameters of the study. At this time, we’re only accepting primary cases. Not secondary.” The wind shifted and swiveled the squeaking vane. The rooster now pointed south. “Next year, if this study proceeds as we hope, we’re planning on adding a study on secondary …” Either she faded off, or maybe I did. “We’re sending a letter recommending Abbie for a study with Doctors Plist and Mackles out of Sloan-Kettering …”

“Thank you … very much.” I closed the phone.

The problem with a Hail Mary pass is that it hangs in the air so long, and most are dropped in the end zone. That’s why they invoke God.

Because it’s impossible to begin with.

The phone rang a second time, but I let it ring. A minute passed and it rang again. I checked the faceplate. It read, “Dr. Ruddy.”

“Hey, Ruddy.”

“Chris.” His voice was quiet. Subdued. I could see him, leaning over his desk, head resting in his hands. His chair squeaked. “The scan results are in. If you two could get around the speakerphone, thought maybe we’d talk through them.”

His tone of voice told me enough. “Ruddy, she’s sleeping. Finally. Did that most of yesterday. Maybe you could just give them to me.” He read between the lines.

“I’m with you.” A pause. “Umm … they’re uhh …” He choked. Ruddy had been our lead doctor since the beginning. “Chris, I’m sorry.”

We listened to each other listening to each other. “How long?”

“A week. Maybe two. Longer if you can keep her horizontal … and still.”

I forced a laugh. “You know better than that.”

A deep breath. “Yep.”

I slid the phone back in my pocket and scratched my two-day stubble. My eyes stared out over the water, but my mind was a couple hundred miles away.

Empty-handed and lungs half full, I climbed down and back through the window. Running my fingers along the trim tacked to the wall, I crept down another flight. The staircase was narrow, made of twelve-inch-wide pine planks, which at nearly two hundred years old, creaked loudly – tapping out a story of age and the drunken pirates who once stumbled down them.

The sound lifted her eyelids, but I doubted she’d been asleep. Fighters don’t sleep between rounds. A cross breeze slipped through the open windows and filtered across our room, raising goose bumps across her calves.

Footsteps sounded downstairs, so I crossed the room, closed the bedroom door and returned. I sat next to her, slid the fleece blanket over her legs and leaned back against the headboard. She whispered, “How long have I been asleep?”

I shrugged.

“Yesterday?”

“Almost.” While we could manage the pain with medication, we couldn’t deter its debilitating effects. She would lie still, motionless for hours, fighting an inner battle in which I played helpless spectator. Then for reasons neither of us could explain, she’d experience moments – sometimes even days – of total lucidity, when the pain would relent and she was as normal as ever. Then with little warning, it would return and she’d begin her own private battle once again. It is there that you learn the difference between tired and fatigued. Sleep cures tired, but it has no effect on fatigued.

She smelled the air, catching the last remnants of aftershave that still hung in the air. I lifted the window. She raised an eyebrow. “He was here?”

I stared out over the water. “Yup.”

“How’d that go?”

“About like normal.”

“That good, huh? What is it this time?”

“He’s” – I lifted both hands in the air making quotation marks with my fingers – “‘moving you.’”

She sat up. “Where?”

More quotation marks. “‘Home.’”

She shook her head and let out a deep breath that puffed up her cheeks like a blowfish. “For him, it’s my mother all over again.”

I shrugged.

“How’d you leave it?”

“I didn’t. He did.”

“And?”

“He’s sending over a team of people in the morning to … ‘collect you.’”

“He sounds like he’s taking out the trash.” She pointed at the phone. “Give it to me. I don’t care if he is four heartbeats from the President.”

“Honey, I’m not letting him take you anywhere.” I flicked a piece of paint off the windowsill.

She listened to the sound of footsteps downstairs. “Shift change?”

I nodded, watching a barge slowly putter up the Ashley.

“Don’t tell me he talked to them, too.”

“Oh, yeah. Really put everybody at ease. Basically read them the riot act disguised as an ‘attaboy.’ I just love the way he gives you what he wants you to have under the pretense of your best interest.” I shook my head. “Sleight-of-hand manipulation.”

She wrapped her leg around mine, using it as leverage to push her head up, allowing her eyes to meet mine. The

once fit thighs now gave way to bony knees, thin veins and sticklike shins. Her left hipbone, the once voluptuous peak of the hourglass, pointed up through her gown, which hung loosely over the skin. After four years, her skin was nearly translucent – a faded sun-drenched canvas. Now it hung across her collarbone like a clothesline.

The shuffling downstairs faded into the kitchen. She stared at the floor. “They’re good people. They do this every day. We’ve only got to do it once.”

“Yeah … and once is enough.”

Our bed was one of those old, four-poster, Southern things that Southern women go gaga over. Dark mahogany, it stood about four feet off the ground, was bookended by steps on either side and Lord help you if you rolled off it at night. There were two advantages: Abbie slept there, and when I laid on my side, my line of sight was above the windowsill, giving me a view of Charleston Harbor.

She stared out the window where all the world rolled out as a map, the green and red channel lights blinking back. Red right return. She slid her fingers into mine. “How’s she look up there?”

I loosened the scarf and let it fall down across her shoulders. “Beautiful.”

She rolled toward me, placed her head on my chest and ran her fingers inside my button-down where both my chest hairs grew. She shook her head. “You need to get your head examined.”

“Funny. Your father just told me the same thing.” I stared back out across the water, blindly running my finger along the outline of her ear and neck. A shrimp boat was working her way out to sea. “Actually, he’s been telling you that for almost fourteen years.”

“You’d think by now, I’d listen.” The boom lights of the shrimp boat rolled slowly east to west, seeming to skim the ocean’s surface as she reached the larger swells.

Her eyes lay sunken, the lids dark and dim, as if eye shadow had been tatooed in. “Promise me one thing,” she said.

“I already did that.”

“I’m being serious.”

“Okay, but not if it involves your dad.” She pressed thumb to index finger, snatched down and plucked out one of my chest hairs. “Hey” – I rubbed my chest – “it’s not like I’ve got a surplus of those things.”

Her fingers, like her legs, were long. Now that they were skinnier, they seemed even longer. She pointed in my face. “You finished?” She fingered a circle around the opening in my shirt. “’Cause I see one more.”

That’s my Abbie. Thirty pounds lighter and still making jokes. And that right there is what I held to. That thing. That finger in the face – the one that threatened strength, promised humor and said “I love you more than me.”

She scratched my chest and nodded at the picture of her father. “You think you two will ever talk?” I studied the picture. We had taken it last Easter as he christened his new darling, *Reel Estate*. He stood, broken bottle held by the neck, champagne dripping off the bow, white hair ruffled by the sea breeze. Under other circumstances, I would have liked him, and sometimes I think he would have liked me.

I glanced at his picture on her dresser. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll talk.”

“You two are more alike than you think.”

“Please …”

“I’m serious.”

She was right. “He still rubs me the wrong way.”

“Well, me too, but he’s still Daddy.”

We laid in the darkness listening to the footsteps of well-intentioned and unwelcome strangers shuffling below us. “You’d think,” I said, staring at the sound coming up

through the floor, “they’d come up with a better name than ‘hospice.’”

She rolled her eyes. “How’s that?”

“It just sounds so …” I trailed off.

We sat awhile longer. “Did Ruddy call?”

I nodded.

“All three?”

I nodded again.

“No better?”

I shook my head.

“What about the guy at Harvard?”

“We talked yesterday. They’re still a few months out from starting that trial.”

“Sloan-Kettering?”

I shook my head.

“What about the website?” Two years ago, we’d created a website for people with Abbie’s condition. It had become a clearinghouse of information. We gleaned a lot from it. Got to know a lot of people who led us to a lot of really knowledgeable people. A great resource.

“No.”

“Well, that just sucks.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

Silence again, while she studied a fingernail absent of polish. Finally she looked at me. “Oregon?”

The Oregon Health & Science University, or OHSU, was on the cutting edge of developing some new systemic therapy that targeted cancer at the cellular level. Real front-lines stuff. We’d been in contact with them for several months, hoping for some sort of clinical trial in which we could participate. Yesterday, they had established the parameters for the trial. Because her disease had moved out of her organ of origination, Abbie didn’t qualify. I shook my head.

“Can they make an exception?”

I shook my head a second time.

“Did you ask?”

It had taken so much. And yet, all I could do was sit back and watch. While I held her hand, fed her soup, bathed her or combed her hair, *it* had not quit. No matter what you threw at it.

I wanted to take it back. Wanted to kill it. Slice it into a thousand painful pieces, then stamp it into the earth, grind it into nothing and eradicate its scent from the planet. But it didn’t get here because it was stupid. It never shows its face and it’s hard to kill something you can’t see.

“Yes.”

“And M. D. Anderson in Houston?” I didn’t answer. She asked again.

I managed a whisper. “They called and … they’re still two, maybe three, weeks from a decision. The uhh” – I snapped my fingers – “oversight committee couldn’t meet for some reason. Some of the doctors were on vacation …” Looking away, I shook my head.

She rolled her eyes. “Another holding pattern.”

I nodded. A single piece of yellow legal paper lay folded in thirds on the bedside table. Abbie’s handwriting shone through, covering the entire page. Beneath it sat a blank envelope. A silver Parker ballpoint pen rested at ten o’clock and served as a paperweight.

Eyes lost out over the harbor, she was quiet a long time. She said, “When was the last time you slept?” I shrugged. She pulled on me and I leaned back where she placed her head on my chest. When I opened my eyes again, it was 3 a.m.

Her whisper broke the silence. “Chris?” Her gown had fallen off one shoulder. Another reminder of what had been stolen. “I’ve been thinking.” A horse-drawn carriage rolled down the cobblestone beneath the window.

I’m not a vengeful person. I don’t anger easily and most will tell you I’ve got a rather long fuse. Patience is something I have a good bit of. If you have asthma, you

understand. Maybe that's why so many people ask me to take them fishing.

She stared at the framed newspaper article, hanging on the wall, yellowed from the sun.

It was six months ago. The Charleston paper was writing some feel-good stories about local celebrities and their New Year's resolutions. Thought it might jump start the rest of us. They called and asked Abbie if they could interview her.

The reporter came to the house and we sat out on the porch watching the tide roll out. Pen in hand, he expected her to rattle off the fantastic. Her responses surprised him. He sat back, studied his writing and turned up his list. "But …?"

She sat up and leaned toward him, backing him off. "Did you ever see the beginning of the *Jetsons* cartoon?"

He looked surprised. "Yeah, sure."

"Remember when George and Astro hop on the treadmill?" He nodded. "That's been us for four years." She tapped his legal pad. "This list is my best shot at cutting the leash."

He shrugged. "But there's nothing …"

"Extraordinary?" She finished his sentence. "I know. In fact, it's entirely normal. Which is the point. 'Normal' is a memory." She looked at me. "The last few years have purged us of extraordinary." She slid on her sunglasses. "You spend enough time flailing just to keep your head above water and you'll discover what you truly care about. This list is my way of fighting back. That's all. It doesn't include climbing Mount Everest, running with the bulls in Pamplona or circling the world in a balloon."

She sat back and palmed the tears running off her face. "I need" – she grabbed my hand – "to sit on a breeze-swept

beach, sip from little drinks decorated with umbrellas and worry about color combinations for somebody's kitchen."

She thought for a second. "Although, I would like to do a loopty-loop in an old plane."

He looked confused. "What's that?"

She waved a large circle in the air with her hand. "You know … a loopty-loop."

"Can I add that to the list?"

I spoke up. "Yes."

Rather than calling it Resolutions, she called it her Top Ten Wishes for the year. Something about it struck a chord with readers. Maybe it was the simplicity, the gut-level honesty. I'm not really sure. For the last five months, she'd been getting letters and a lot of traffic on the website. Wanting to remind her that she had once hoped and wished, I'd framed the article and hung it next to the bed. Only problem was that with all that we'd been through the first part of this year, we hadn't really checked off any. She pointed at it. "Hand me that."

She dusted off the glass with her gown, her reflection staring back at her, then loosened the tabs on the back, pulled off the cardboard and slid the article from beneath the glass. Half laughing and mostly smiling, she reread the article then shook her head. "Still wishing."

"Me, too."

She lay back. "I want to give you your anniversary present."

"Five months early?"

"I'm surprised you remembered the date."

"I don't want anything."

"You'll want this."

"I don't need anything."

"That's what you think."

"Honey …"

"Chris Michaels." She pulled me to her. "I'm not doing this here. Not like this." She fingered my hair off my brow.

Her game face had returned. “I won’t do it.”

You see that? That right there? In the nearly fifteen years I’ve known her, Abbie has possessed and exhibited a trait that I’ve never been able to put my finger on. A prisoner on the tip of my tongue, no articulation gives it justice. Every utterance falls flat. But while the name escapes me, its power does not.

I protested, “But …”

“Not here.”

There was no use arguing with her when she got this way. Sick or not. And although she’d argue the point, she got that from her dad. The only response was “yes, ma’am.” Strange how two words can change you forever. I laid the article across the bedspread in front of her. “Pick one.”

She pointed without looking. “All the way from Moniac.”

Number ten. Of the list, it was the most impossible. I raised both eyebrows. “You realize that we’re two days from the first of June?” She nodded. “And that officially marks the beginning of hurricane season?” She nodded again. “And the Jurassic-sized mosquitoes are just now hatching?” She closed her eyes and nodded a final time with a sly smile.

I pointed to her parents’ house a few blocks down the street. “What about him?”

She tapped the single yellow legal page resting on the bedside table.

“And when he gets it, he’ll call out the National Guard.”

“Maybe not.” She sat up, more focused now. “You could talk to Gary. He can prescribe something. Something to—” She pressed her fingers to my lips. “Hey.” She wanted my eyes. The edges were blurring and I knew that added to the weight she already lived under. I turned. “Have you ever broken a promise to me?”

“Not that I know of.”

She folded the article and stuffed it in my shirt pocket. “Then don’t start now.”

Neither option was very good. “Abbie, the river is no place to—”

“It’s where we started.”

“I know that.”

“Then take me back.”

“Honey, there’s nothing but a bunch of hurt down there. It won’t be the same.”

“You let me be the judge of that.” She gazed south out the window.

I tried one last time. “You know what Gary said.”

She nodded. “Chris, I know what I’m asking.” She tapped me in the chest. “They say we have reached the end.” She shook her head and pressed her lips to my face. “So let’s start over.”

And so we did.

Chapter 2

JUNE 1, 2 A.M.

RAIN PELTED THE windshield in sheets. Every few seconds, golf ball-sized hail smacked the hood and rooftop, thundering like firecrackers. I leaned forward and rubbed the backside of the glass with my palm, but that did about as much good as the wipers. Ninety miles ago, a semitrailer dragging a broken hydraulic line passed us in the left lane and sprayed the front of the Jeep with brake fluid and sparks. The oil-and-water smear, mixed with headlights and early-morning darkness, gave the world a Coca-Cola tint. The region was suffering a drought. The aquifer was down and people from South Georgia to North Florida were subject to watering restrictions. Few areas felt the effects more than the river. She was eight to ten feet below normal, and while this deluge was needed, most of it would never reach the river.

In the 1950's, before the federal interstate highways cut the U.S. in six-lane precision, wonder, efficiency and freedom, their smaller and less efficient two-lane twin brothers politely meandered through and around small-town America – careful not to upset the balance of pecan trees, live oaks and fourth-generation chicken farms. Dotted with concrete-block, mom-and-pop motels, full-serve gas stations and all-u-can-eat buffets, U.S. 1 – something like an east coast Route 66 – was the lifeline of every

traveling salesman and vacationing family from Maine to Miami. Between the free orange juice stands, junk stores, alligator farms and state-line souvenir stores brimming with stale Claxton fruit cakes and Mountain Dew, the route represented Americana in its heyday.

Trying to stay awake, I clicked on the radio. A weatherman was in mid-report and hard rain smacked his microphone. He was yelling above the sound of the wind: “Four weeks ago, a tropical depression moved across the southern portion of West Africa. For the next seven days, the tropical storm system continued across the coast of Africa and the tropical Atlantic. After moving through the Caribbean Sea, satellite pictures on May twentieth showed an organizing cloud pattern over the south-central Caribbean Sea. And on May twenty-third, Tropical Storm Annie – so named as the first storm of the year – strengthened and moved northward. And at six a.m. this morning, Annie spun herself into a hurricane.” I turned it off and stared through the windshield. River guides, by default, become closet weathermen. We have to. It’s just the nature of the job. I wiped the backside of the windshield again. Towering pines now lined both sides of the road. I crossed her off. The rain we were experiencing had nothing to do with Annie, and given her location, she’d fizzle long before Florida.

Stretching southward from Waycross, Georgia, to the Florida border, sits a seven-hundred-square-mile peat-filled bog that hovers like a poached egg inside a saucer-shaped depression that was, more than likely, once part of the ocean floor. When plants die, they fall to the swamp floor where they decompose – a process which emits both methane and carbon dioxide – producing peat. And because decomposition is a slow process, it takes fifty years to add another inch of peat to the base of the swamp. The thick web traps the gas, building pressure and forcing the islands upward – like corks floating to the surface. As they

rise, the gas is released where it glows like Northern Lights in its rise to the surface. In the mid-1900's, visitors claimed the existence of UFOs, established tours and sought to sell tickets until scientists showed up and proved otherwise. Since their formation, the peat masses have been unstable and trembling – sort of like the earth's plates but a bit more fluid – causing the Choctaw Indians to so name the place "The Land of Trembling Earth."

In English, it sounds like "Okee-fen-o-kee."

On the surface, it's primeval and untouched. Uninhabitable to most men. For all practical purposes, it serves as the drain for the southeastern part of Georgia and northeastern section of Florida.

Drain is the key word here. Like all drains, there's a limit to what they can get rid of in a given period of time.

When the swamp fills up, the overflow spills out in two places. It's a lot like New Orleans but with only two holes in the dike and with a lot less murder, gambling and prostitution. The larger pipe, called the Suwannee River, winds its way about two hundred miles southwest across Florida and dumps into the Gulf of Mexico. Her 130-mile little sister, the St. Marys, first snakes south to Baldwin, hovers across the top of Macclenny, turns due north toward Folkston, then makes a hard right eastward, where she finally spills her crooked self into the Cumberland Sound and the Atlantic Ocean.

Given its tea coloring, the St. Marys is called a blackwater river. Two hundred years ago, sailors used to venture into the Cumberland Sound and run upriver some fifty miles to Trader's Hill, filling their casks to overflowing because the tannic acid kept the water potable for long periods – like transatlantic voyages.

In times of drought, the St. Marys River can be a few inches deep and a few feet across. At its headwaters in Moniac, it can be little more than a trickle. But prolonged rains – the lifeblood of the swamp – can swell the river's

banks, closer to the ocean, to more than a mile wide with “holes” thirty or forty feet deep. Normal flow rate might be a half a mile an hour, while flood flow might be as much as six or eight. Maybe even ten.

Flooding here is a sneaky thing. When it floods, it does so from the ground up. Because the rain comes in from other places, the water rises beneath your feet without warning. One minute you’re asleep, moon bright, not a cloud in the sky with the bank sitting thirty feet from your tent. Six hours later, you wake to find your sleeping bag soaked and your tent three inches under water. Floods here don’t fall down around you. They rise up beneath you. Out of nowhere.

Folks who live on the river usually ask two questions before building a home: where is the hundred-year flood plain and how do I build above it? Given that no insurance company in its right mind will write flood insurance for the St. Marys Basin, most homes are built on stilts.

Even the churches.

Despite this, the banks are dotted with homes, fish camps, swimming holes, marinas, rope swings, zip lines, whiskey stills, mud bogs and even one well-hidden nudist colony. Activity bustles along the banks like ants beneath the surface of their hill. From headwaters to sound, she is one of the last virgin landscapes in the South.

The rain had slowed me to a crawl so I pulled off beneath an overpass and pushed the stick into neutral. Abbie lay in the back, half asleep. Every few minutes she’d mumble something in her sleep that I couldn’t understand.

The treatments are the worst. They whittle away at your core, strip you of everything and leave you with fleeting memories. She’d tried so hard for so long to hold on, but like water, it had slipped through her fingers.