

C H R I S L Y N C H

SPECIAL FORCES

MINESWEEPER

BOOK 2



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CHAPTER ONE

A Graduation

My name is Fergus Frew Junior. Fergus Senior is dead. He was thirty-four years old in 1943 when he went to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean and stayed there. I was twelve. It was the war. The big war. And Dad was bold and brave and ready and willing and able and all that stuff that makes people go googly over what our good guys did to wipe out the bad guys. He was heroic.

My ma has a theory. I hate it when she has those. She believes that I'm attached to the sea because the sea took my father and I'm trying to take him back.

Truth is, if there's any connection between me and Dad and the sea—which there isn't—then it would be because I hope to give him a good smacking around for failing to keep his head above water when he should have.

The ocean has been generally better to me than it was to my old man. That's primarily because I stay on top of it when I need to and go underneath it when I

choose to. Mutual respect is what connects the water and me.

You have to maintain the respect. Otherwise, you are wasted.

And why my ma's theory is so stupid: It suggests that I or anybody else can win something back from the sea. No, sirree. A tug-o'-war over my father's earthly remains with the ocean itself? I miss ya plenty, Dad, but that's a loser's game, and you didn't raise no loser.

And that is my tribute to my father.

What I most like to do in the salty cold waves is to surf them.

I am a surfer.

I don't, however, care very much for other surfers. It may be unreasonable, but if I had my way, it would be me and the waves and nobody else. It doesn't work that way, unfortunately. If you've got something as awesome as the ocean waves bobbing around, you can't expect that you'll be the only one who appreciates them. Awesomeness attracts. Otherwise it wouldn't be awesomeness.

Understanding it doesn't mean I have to be happy about it, though.

I've come to accept that a fine beach with fine surf is going to be loved by lots of people.

You know who does not love it, though? Ma. Ma hates the ocean and the surfing and all that goes along with it, in the same way that seals must hate orcas. Even though surf life poses no threat to her happiness in the way that orcas do to seals.

“Where are you going, Fergus?” Ma said one day in June 1949. She said it wearily, as tired of this pointless exchange as I was.

I didn't even turn. I stood at the front door, having come so close to getting through it without this challenge. I sighed and talked to the door, to Ma. “You know where I'm going. The sun's out. It's hot and breezy. Conditions are perfect. My board is strapped onto the back of my truck for Pete's sake. Do you actually *like* having this talk? It gets us to the same exact non-place every time, and neither one of us ever seems to understand anything better by the end.”

I truly didn't intend to be nasty to her. Every time I did it, I felt sorry. I coulda, shoulda done better, especially this time.

And yet every time I *felt* sorry, I failed to *say* that I was sorry.

“You are so like your father,” she said.

This was a theme. A tireless, relentless theme.

“Good for him,” I said, not for the first time.

I loved her. I felt bad for her, and I felt pain for her. I was almost certain that she could have said those exact same things about me. So why couldn't we manage to do better?

I love to surf. I used to love to do other things, like baseball and basketball and homework. Until I found surfing and it found me. I also love diving and snorkeling, but they're just offshoots of surfing. In service to surfing. I'll go underwater only when the overwater isn't worth the time, because the waves are not happening. You can figure out a lot about how waves behave by studying what's going on underneath them. The geography and rock formations, the channels between them, sandbars and shelves, they all come into play when shaping a wave. It's like a moving sculpture, that thing that forms on the surface and then delivers the great, crazy ocean from out there to crash onto the shoreline. There is a whole culture of waves that goes on beneath them. To understand surf you have to understand the unseen bits below. Waves want to be understood. They want somebody like me to pay attention to them.

That's all I wanted to do that day I shut the door on my unhappy mother. I knew she was unhappy. Maybe she had every right to be. Didn't matter, or at least it didn't matter enough, as I strode to my truck, hopped in, and pulled out of our driveway.

I couldn't hear my mother crying. But I knew that's what she was doing.

That was my graduation day.

I wasn't a nice guy then. I wasn't a *bad* guy, but I had trouble caring. And I wanted to be left alone. So once I got in my truck—which I *loved*, proving that I wasn't without feelings altogether—I didn't look back, didn't look up to see my mother's sad face in the window. I got in gear, stared straight ahead, and gunned it for the beach.

Fifteen minutes later I was climbing out of the truck, inhaling the great Pacific breeze, and unstrapping my board. As I made the transition from biped to motorhead to aqua creature, I paused almost involuntarily to admire the vehicle that made it all possible. It had become a ritual, as significant to the whole exercise as waxing my board or paddling into the waves.

I bought the big clunky beast with the money I'd made from three summers of lifeguarding. It was a 1932 Plymouth pickup, which at one time must have been

some shade of brown but was now almost uniformly rust colored from nose to tail. It had been left to decay for most of its life, which was only a year shorter than mine, and pre-owned three times before I came along. All three owners had been farmers, which would account for the noble wear and tear on the truck. As far as farmers were concerned a patina of rust is not decay, it's just life.

And death. Funny, or not so funny, since one of the distinguishing characteristics of the truck was its “suicide doors,” which hinged in the back and were generally considered unsafe. The guy who sold it to me told me that the first owner actually *had* committed suicide, though not in the Plymouth itself. A pea farmer, he was beaten down by the Great Depression, then opted for the Great Alternative. The truck sat for a few years before his wife unloaded it. The second guy farmed lettuce—which is just a vast waste of agricultural space, if you ask me. He had a stroke. The truck sat again until Farmer Three came along and bought it. He farmed cucumbers, and the less said about them the better. He sold it to me after having it for a couple of years, because he just couldn't stand to drive around in a “skid mark of a vehicle” anymore.

I nicknamed the truck Lucky.

San Onofre is my home beach. It has it all, really: bluffs and cliffs, hiking trails, sandy calm beachfronts, and best of all, a variety of surf spots. And I have a home within my home beach. I love a spot called Trestles, for a number of reasons. First, it was named for the railroad bridge running right alongside it. Trains and beaches, can't be beat. Second, it has all kinds of geological arrangements under the water, including craggy rock reefs and placid, ever-shifting sand fields. They make the break inscrutable and alive and always new. Every time you surf Trestles, you have to figure it out all over again.

But possibly my favorite aspect of all is that, unlike the other San Onofre beaches, you have to park your vehicle and then haul your board nearly a mile down a nature trail just to reach Trestles, passing under said trestle and through a wetland full of nutty bird-watchers.

I love bird-watchers. I don't care much for their hobby, but they bother absolutely nobody while doing it.

About surfing and surfers, I feel precisely the opposite. Nothing gets in a surfer's way like other surfers.

Because of all these conditions, and it being graduation day across the county, I came to the clearing onto Trestles to find I had the place pretty much to myself. This, I have to say, was my paradise.

I was almost *too* excited as I started running toward the ocean, my board tucked under my arm. I'd forgotten how much of a strain walking from the car with my board always was. I stumbled, as awkwardly as a fit young man with a board can stumble, fighting the inevitable until I finally fell to the warm ground. Before making it twenty yards into the run, I'd hurtled shoulder-first, bouncing off my own board and leaving a mask of my stupid face in the sand.

I got up quickly, brushing myself down and looking around desperately for any witnesses. Seagulls came from all over to swoop and squawk and laugh their beaky heads off at me.

"Fine," I said, gathering up the board and resuming a more dignified pace toward the waves, "just don't tell anybody."

I slapped down on the water and took my time paddling out. This was a day. I could feel the chilly water on my hands and feet, lapping up over the sides of the board and licking my torso, while at the same time the midday sun warmed my bare back. I had on my long shorts, cut off just below the knees, and by the time I'd gotten out past the break they were sodden. It was a good feeling.