

Chapter 1

August 12, 2009

The mahogany colored thoroughbred stepped carefully through the soft earth adjacent to the cypress head as first light swelled on the horizon beneath a shallow mist surrounding the water. The wet soil gave way to his mass, emitting a sucking sound as it fought the release of each hoof. He stopped, dipped his head, took a careful sniff and then drew in a drink of cool dark water. Tea-stained, but refreshing, the water fired up his metabolism.

Extracting himself from the pond edge more carefully than he had approached, the stallion reached solid ground again. He turned an eye toward his herd stirring listlessly twenty yards upwind and then started a slow measured gait to the far side of the cypress trees in search of tender green fescue shoots.

The familiar ground, ground he had covered almost from his first days of life, had changed nearly imperceptibly. He tossed his head back and snorted at the sunrise as if to tell it that nothing could change while he was leader of the herd, least of all his own pastureland. He stopped to assess the ground ahead. The other horses stopped several yards behind.

The thoroughbred continued. He needed to satisfy the ache in his stomach. Pinkish beams from the rising sun crested the distant hillside highlighting the object of his desire only another thirty feet ahead, but the closer he got to the deep green area, the more the ground pitched downward. He stopped again, swung his head high, announcing

to the four horses a close distance behind that he would eat alone. They stopped, milled around each other and nipped at the thin ground cover.

As carefully as he had approached the pond, he approached the sweet, mist covered green fescue breathing in the wet, earthy fragrance. Finally upon it, he lowered his head, teeth bared to grasp the prize.

His lips had barely closed on the grass when the earth shifted slightly under his left front hoof. He adjusted his footing and again the ground shifted forward. He reared his head back and chewed the sweet green mixture of grass, fescue and weed, pushing it across his tongue and swallowing.

As he leaned down to take another bite, the earth under his front hooves slid forward. He responded with an immediate thrust that should have lifted his half ton body easily into the air, but served only to accelerate his slide forward.

The thoroughbred pounded at the shifting ground beneath but continued slipping forward and down. He raised his head and whinnied. The other thoroughbreds behind him nervously backed away.

In the dim red glow of the morning light, the depression ahead of him suddenly transformed into a deep hole that appeared to suck everything in proximity, including the thoroughbred into a maw of darkness. His belly slapped the ground, ground that was moving rapidly down and forward. No longer able to fight the force with either set of legs, he rolled on his side and kicked wildly, unaware that this reaction merely served to quicken the inevitable.

A flaming red sun cresting the horizon filled his large, panicked eyes as the ground beneath him accelerated. His legs flailed through the earth filled air as he fell, his

manicured hooves striking the sides of the newly opened shaft, spinning him head over tail ending with a sickening *smack* of his body striking the water that barely registered against the noise of the debris falling around and on top of him.

Driven deeply underwater by the force of his own weight, he kicked instinctively for the surface. Buoyed by the fearful lung-fulls of air sucked in flight down, he finally righted himself, desperately snorting out his held breath and sucking for fresh air. His lungs filled with a mixture of dirt, sand, dust and water. He tried to exchange the foul mixture for fresh air only to have it refilled with the same.

The mixture clogged his throat, keeping the air out and damping his whinnies. His vision began to tunnel and fade. Finally, he slowed the frantic struggle to keep himself afloat. Only his nostrils remained above water and a ringing in the back of his head, close to his ears drowned out all other sounds. His last attempt at a breath was fouled again and the proud stallion slipped into darkness—stillness—as the earth above continued rain down into the hole.

Monday August 30, 2009

The main building, white where it wasn't losing its battle against the Florida blue-green mold, stood in a field of massive live oaks whose branches strained under heavy loads of moss. Chas pulled his red 99'Ford pickup through the pockmarked gravel parking lot stopping next to the entrance. He regarded several other decrepit buildings dispersed around to the church and wondered whether to bother getting out.

A large faded sign in the shape of a thermometer stood at the front entrance. He looked at the faded red line, reaching only halfway up the markings; strips of the aging paint gathered around its base. He shook his head as he thought about how badly the month had gone so far.

The call he'd received yesterday from the church's pastor had seemed strange. Now, as he looked at the church, he wondered if they had the money to pay his fee, whether this job would improve his bottom line. *But then*, he thought, *waiting around in my apartment for another call held no future*. He turned the key off, grabbed a flashlight from behind the seat and stepped out.

Chas studied the grounds as he walked toward the door and didn't notice the pastor standing in the doorway until he nearly ran into him.

"It's not much, but we have great plans," the man said as he stepped out with a welcoming hand and smile. "Pastor James Anderson." He wore a light yellow polo shirt and faded jeans over black shoes, his gray hair and warm demeanor being the only thing Chas recognized in his image of a man of the cloth.

"Oh, hi," holding out his hand. "Chas Gordon." The grip of the man surprised him. He'd expected a soft skinned and limp handshake from a person of his profession and age but instead found himself struggling to meet him with equal force.

"That short for something?" The pastor asked as he released his hand and held the door.

"Nah, that's the whole thing."

"Welcome . . . welcome," his enthusiasm kept Chas off guard as he led him through the door and into the sanctuary.

Chas stopped just inside the entrance, blinked his eyes several times to adjust to the dimly lit room and then looked around. The condition inside the church matched the outside: threadbare carpet, ten rows of dark pine pews in front of hastily placed rows of folding chairs. A simple elevated altar stood in the front of the church, a lectern to the side and a dozen folding chairs in a half circle behind. It wasn't like the churches he'd seen as a child. Then he noticed an area to the right surrounded with a short white fence.

"Well, ah—"

"Pastor, or James if you like," the man said as he led Chas toward the front of the church. "We're pretty informal here."

"Pastor, then. So Pastor, you said you had a problem with a well?" He said, wondering where they were headed.

"Yes, I'm glad you agreed to come. This is quite a problem we have here."

"What's behind that?" he pointed to the fenced area.

"The well," the Pastor answered.

"Well? You've got an open well in the middle of your church?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Did you happen to notice the name of the church when you arrived, Chas?"

He couldn't remember it exactly, though he'd written it down on the sheet of paper, a sheet of paper that was sitting on the dashboard of his pickup. Chas gave him a *'Deer in the Headlights'* look and waited.

“Church of the Living Water,” the pastor said, waving a hand in the direction of a small stained glass scene in the window behind the altar. Chas studied the depiction of Jesus being dipped in a stream by another man. He identified Jesus by the halo over his head.

“Of course,” Chas said.

As they continued toward the well, the smell hit him. At first he thought that the Pastor might be in need of some oral hygiene but the intensity of the smell increased drastically the closer they got to the fenced area. He decided that the smell of death was not something lodged between the man's teeth; but something behind the white fence.

"Smell that?" James asked.

Chas just nodded.

By the time they got to the rail, the stench was nearly unbearable. The Pastor placed a handkerchief to his face and peered at Chas, perhaps to see what he would do. He decided to tough it out.

Shallow breaths through his mouth helped. He said, “Smells like something died in your living water.”

Pastor James laughed.

"Sorry," Chas flushed wishing he'd thought before speaking.

"No, no. It does create a bit of a paradox.”

“Not to mention the fact that nobody’d want to stick around for a service with that . . . that smell here.” Chas pinched and wrinkled his nose to no avail. His eyes began to water.

“And we have ‘Fill-a-Pew Day’ next Sunday.” The Pastor said and shook his head in disgust.

Chas wasn’t quite sure he had heard that right. “Excuse me, is that some kind of religious holiday?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry Pastor . . . not much on religion. Is he a saint or something?”

“Who?”

“Philip Hugh.”

Pastor James considered the question and then smiled warmly. “No, no, not Philip Hugh. Fill-a-Pew . . . you know,” He jerked a thumb at the pews behind them. “Fill the pews with people. All the parishioners invite their friends and neighbors to the service.”

Chas laughed. “Ok, I get it. ‘Fill-a-Pew’ . . . Catchy.” He looked over the rail. “So, how long’s the smell been here?” It became easier to stomach the longer he stood over the well.

“Fortunately it didn’t start until late in the afternoon on Sunday . . . after all the services.” He turned and leaned with his back to the well. “Any idea what it could be?” He said through his handkerchief.

“Hard to say, could be a dog or something, maybe one of your people lost one over the rail.”

“I doubt that Chas. We don’t allow them, well, other than service dogs, and we don’t have anybody in our parish with one of those.”

“I guess the only way to find out is to take a look.” Chas said as he leaned over the rail, turned on his dive light and pointed it down the well trying to see through the steel mesh platform suspended above the depths.

While he leaned over the rail, the pastor reached down and lifted a panel on one of the rails revealing a set of colored buttons. He pushed the white one illuminating the platform with light from a number of powerful floods in the ceiling. Chas reeled from the sudden explosion of light and looked up, studying the setup that suspended the platform while trying to shade his eyes from the glare of the spotlights.

A short pentagonal cutout in the ceiling above hid five steel cable receptacles, one on each corner of the pentagon. Each cable disappeared into a hole in the ceiling slightly larger than the cable itself. He thought the rig looked substantial. He looked back down trying to get an idea of how far down the water was but couldn't see the surface. He leaned over and aimed his dive light through the mesh but still couldn't see anything.

“You know how far down it is to the water?” Chas asked.

“It varies with the season, but right now about forty feet.”

“Forty feet,” he repeated vacantly.

“That's what the technician said; the one who adjusts the platform,” the Pastor said.

“How deep is the well?”

“Don't know. Never tried to find out, but it's never gone dry on us as so many of the wells in the area have in past droughts.” He answered, speaking through the handkerchief.

“The technician? You have someone that adjusts the . . . the what, the depth? I mean how far down the platform goes down?”

“Yes . . . insurance requirement. There are hard stops on all the cables to keep the platform from going any deeper than four feet below the water level.”

“Baptisms, right?”

Pastor James nodded, “Living Water.”

“Right,” Chas said.

Pastor James reached out, pulled at a hidden gate nudging Chas away and then opened the matching metal rail attached to the platform. Chas looked at it a moment, not quite sure if the Pastor wanted him to enter.

“The well opens up quite a bit as it gets closer to the water. You can open the gate fully once it reaches the water.” He said as he motioned him onto the platform.

“Great,” Chas grabbed the metal rail and stepped on.

“Want to go down now?”

“Nah, just wanted to see how stable it was.” He shifted from side to side and the platform banged against the inner wooden frame. Pastor James's eyes widened. Chas stopped swinging and smiled weakly.

“So, I guess you’ve got something dead in there. That means we’ll have to find it, haul it out and dispose of it.” He said as he dropped to his knees again and peered through the mesh at the water below. “I don’t see anything floating on the surface. Have you been down to see if it’s—“

“Our maintenance man went down yesterday. He didn’t find anything.”

“Then you called the right person. We’ll have to gear up so we can go down to see what’s cookin’, as it were.” He wanted to chuckle but contained himself.

“So, how much is this going to cost?” Pastor Anderson asked as he waved Chas off the platform, closed the gates behind him and headed quickly for the entrance.

Chas followed while trying to quickly calculate what it would cost him in time and gear against what he felt the job was worth and what Pastor Anderson could afford to pay. He needed an infusion of funds into his six-month old dive business before he was forced to admit defeat and to go back to his old job crawling around in attics installing air conditioning units. His bank account read nearly zero and his rent, truck payment and various bills would go unpaid if he didn’t get some kind of diving job soon. As they walked back to the entrance, he looked around again at the setting. Pastor James couldn’t afford it, but he hated to walk away and leave him like this.

Pastor James pushed the door open and they stepped into the bright morning sun, he took the handkerchief from his face and they both sucked in a welcome breath of fresh air. After being inside the dark chamber the sun hurt Chas’s eyes. He squinted and stopped at the threshold to regain his bearings.

With his eyes adjusted sufficiently to make it down the steps he turned to Pastor James and said, “Tell you what Pastor. Let me get back to my truck, make a couple calls, and I’ll run some figures.”

“I hope it’s not going to be too expensive.”

“Let me do some figuring and I’ll do the best I can for you.”

“Fine, I’ll be in my office.” He pointed to the single story white brick building poorly attached to the side of the church.

Chas gave him a nod. "Ok, I'll just be a couple minutes." The pastor disappeared into the church.

As he headed for his truck, Chas tried to remember the last time he'd attended church, even an Episcopal church where his Catholic father and Protestant mother had raised him and his two sisters. Except for a few Christmas services recently with Danni, he couldn't remember any since leaving home at the age of seventeen.

As he walked to his pickup, he tried to imagine what Danni would think of this place. Whenever they discussed marriage, which hadn't been often or recent, she told Chas that she wanted to raise their kids in the Catholic Church. He wouldn't have any objection, as long as she didn't expect him to go to church *every* Sunday, he'd told her. They were both too busy trying to get their careers started anyway. The last thing they needed right now was marriage and kids.

Chas pulled the back door of his topper open, dropped the tailgate and shinnied up on it. He couldn't quote Pastor James a price without knowing who he could get to accompany him on the dive. Some of his buddies would dive for free at the drop of a hat, just looking for an excuse to hit the water, but most would want to be paid for their time, travel, tanks and a little extra beer money. He wanted to call Boomer, but he was out of town for the next three days. He flipped his phone open, pulled out his list of dive buddies and started with the 'A's.

Twenty minutes passed and Pastor James could stand it no longer. He peeked out the door to see if Chas had left in disgust. He needed to get this problem cleared up. He

feared having to explaining to his council of deacons that he couldn't fill the pews because the church was already filled with its own pew. He chuckled, and then remembered that this particular moment of levity was inspired by a truly serious problem. Not the most serious problem he'd had in his years as pastor but perhaps the one that could lead to the loss of his battle to keep the council of deacons from making what he felt was a disastrous decision. *To keep Jack O'Connor from convincing them to make that decision*, he thought.

Of all the times for something like this to happen, he mulled as he peered out the window, heartened to see Chas still there sitting on the tailgate of his red pickup talking on the phone. He fought the temptation to walk out and explain that he needed to have this fixed at any cost. *Chas hasn't left yet so he probably isn't going to*, he thought. He would come up with a price and whatever it was James would gladly pay it. He wasn't quite sure how yet, but he would pay it.

Never had he been more concerned about the future of his church than right now. He had prayed hard and often over the past several days that a solution to this problem would be forthcoming, his biggest fear being that the smell came not from something dead, but a sour well. He'd heard of such things before. He didn't want to think about that right now.

Chas closed his address book and stared at the fundraiser thermometer. He could make the dive alone if he had too, but not knowing what was down there, having someone along would make it a lot more comfortable. He knew he needed to make the call. He had his finger on the speed-dial for Danni when the phone rang and her name popped up.

"Hey love, I was just about to call you," he said cheerfully.

“I know, I felt you,” Danni said.

She was way too metaphysical for Chas some times, but things like this did happen more often than he could explain.

“So, what’s up?”

“Remember that call I got about the church?”

“Yeah, you check it out?”

“I’m here right now.”

“And?”

“Want to take a dive?” He held his breath. They’d met four years earlier while diving the Orange Grove Sink caves at Peacock Springs. He’d never expected to meet a girl who was smart, pretty, and loved cave diving too.

“In a well?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Can you break away early?”

“What’s in it?”

"What?

"The well. What's in the well?"

“Not sure yet. It smells pretty bad, maybe a dead dog or something. So we go down, bag it, bring it up, collect our money—”

“A dog? Chas, it’s a dead . . . something. How do you know it’s a dog? What if it’s a person, a body? What then? I don’t think I could deal with that. ”

“Danni, it’s not a body—”

“You don’t know that Chas. Maybe someone fell in there and—”

“It's not a body.”

“Ewww, the thought of hauling something dead out of a well, or swimming around with it. Ewww.” Chas felt the shiver in her voice.

“Hey, not a problem, we just leave all our gear on until we get it out. Then we wash down real good,” he explained. “Come on Danni, getting into this business was your idea, remember?” Chas held his breath. He knew that saying any more might kill the deal.

Danni finally let out a big sigh. “I’ll talk to the Senator.”

The knock on the office door came as Pastor James worked at a particularly difficult line in his “fill-a-pew” sermon. He'd put the problem of the well aside, trusting that the solution would be *provided*. He walked out of his office, across the cupped and cracked gray linoleum floor and opened the door to Chas’s smiling face.