

Living Waters

Ed Waldrop

Dedicated to all who have served and to those who love them.

Chapter 1

“I need to talk to you,” the apoplectic owner of Bachman Office Solutions demanded as he passed the cubicle where AJ McClellan sat surfing through heavy metal videos on YouTube and drinking his second Red Bull of the morning. McClellan’s desk, which should have been covered with invoices and call sheets, was bare except for a phone, a computer, and an empty Mountain Dew bottle used as a makeshift spittoon. It was nine thirty. Well after he should have been out making calls. AJ ignored him.

“McClellan, my office, now!” Bachman bellowed. To AJ, Bachman was a loathsome piece of shit who did nothing more than hustle a bunch of lost-cause underachievers into peddling inferior copiers to unsuspecting business owners. He was lazy and deceitful. Worst of all, he was a philanderer. Bachman was screwing one of AJ’s coworkers in return for all the best leads that came into the office. Never even tried to hide it. Pathetic. AJ had zero tolerance for that kind of living. To betray the team’s trust to further your own interests was unconscionable. *Asshat*, he thought.

AJ shot up out of his seat, sending it crashing into the modular wall behind him. As he stepped out of the workspace and turned the corner toward Bachman’s voice, AJ mumbled, “God, I hate this place.” Head down, barely holding it together, he followed the wide trail of Rorschach stains on the carpet created by two decades of dirty shoes and spilled drinks.

“Yeah?” AJ snipped as he sat down just inside the cramped and cluttered office in front of Bachman’s desk.

“Yeah?” Bachman challenged. He sat with his back to AJ, peering through narrow floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the parking lot. To Bachman, AJ was a hotheaded smart ass that spent too much time in the office and not enough time on the streets. The greater truth, however, was that Bachman couldn’t manipulate AJ like he could everyone else. That, for Bachman, was intolerable.

“Yeah, what do you want?” AJ said defiantly as he stared at the bald patch on his boss’s head.

Bachman turned around, leaned forward, and cut loose. “What do I want? I want you to be on the freaking job, McClellan!” Bachman leaned in toward the young salesman as the rant continued. “I want you to be on time to work. I want you to be out there hustling up business. I want you to do what I tell you to do and shut up while you’re doing it!”

AJ acknowledged none of it, which inflamed Bachman even further. Eyes forward, head bobbing ever so slightly, AJ went to that place in his head he always went before engaging the enemy—Drowning Pool’s “Bodies.”

Bachman yapped for several more minutes about tardiness, customer relations, sales quotas, and motivation. All AJ heard was “Let the bodies hit the floor! Let the bodies hit the floor! Let the bodies hit the floor!” By then, Bachman was about as done with AJ as AJ was with him.

“You know what, McClellan? Screw this. If you don’t care, I don’t care. Pack your shit! You’re fired!”

AJ's head stopped bobbing, his body tense and trembling. He lunged over the desk toward Bachman, landing a direct hit on the old man's chin. Bachman slumped in his chair as AJ walked out on yet another failed job. "I quit," he said.

For AJ, trying to control his temper was like trying to rope a bull with dental floss. The meteoric shower of stress and adrenaline in war had changed him. Memories etched in moments of intense action haunted him daily. Before combat, AJ was the easygoing jokester everyone loved to have around. That guy was missing in action. The cops had been called on him so many times they were on a first-name basis. Usually, he just trashed a few things at his workplace and would walk out. That day, he took it one step too far. Bachman was such a puny man, in every sense of the word, which made it worse.

AJ perseverated over the whole ordeal. *I fucking lost guys worth a hundred of your sorry ass. I've killed better men than you.* Harnessing thoughts was impossible—a cage match between his rational mind and wounded soul. In such times, his rational mind always tapped out.

AJ jumped into his old gray F-150 that had seen its own share of hard days. *How the hell am I gonna cover rent?* he thought. As usual, good sense never kicked in until the damage was done. Unsure of what to do next, he drove off toward the one place he knew he could escape. A little north of Waco there was a watering hole just off the interstate called The Oil Rig. Mostly a handful of drunks and truckers frequented the place. They just called it The Rig. AJ spent more time there than he cared to admit. After about twenty minutes, he took his exit onto the service road.

A quarter mile up on the right AJ approached the gravel parking lot and a thirty-foot-high web of rusted iron that once resembled a working oil rig. The old bar was as

torn up on the outside as the men who were drinking on the inside. Peeling paint, broken lights, and busted furniture piled out back gave it a feeling of abandonment. AJ loved it. A few of the older guys were combat vets, too. They accepted him there. Nobody asked anything. Nobody wanted anything. Except to drink in peace.

A dust cloud consumed the truck as AJ sped in and braked hard to a spot near the back of the building. He sat there, dazed by what had just transpired. *I am so fucking done. I can't do this anymore. I'm done. I'm done. I'm done.* He reached over to the passenger seat for a half-empty can of Skoal. Outside the truck, something moved. He quickly scanned the area. About twenty yards away, at the edge of a dense wood, stood a little girl in a flowing white dress. No more than nine or ten years old with olive skin and dark brown hair. Two eyes blacker than midnight stared back at AJ. He turned off the ignition and jumped out of the truck, advancing around the bed in the direction he had seen her. Nothing. *Again? What the hell?* he thought. Only the faint sound of dogs barking in the distance and air brakes on semis at the truck stop across the road could be heard.

AJ hurried inside for that drink he so desperately wanted. None of the regulars were in the bar. For that, he was grateful.

Jackie, the bartender, looked up and shouted a welcome across two pool tables centered in the room. "AJ, how's it hangin' today, beautiful?" She always called him beautiful. She wasn't so bad herself. Jackie had ten years on him, but they had definitely been kind to her. Eyes the color of sapphires peeked out from under the brim of a black Stetson, teasing small talk and large tips out of the hard men lining the counter. Long blond hair braided down her back swung like a pendulum as she hustled drinks from one

end to the other. A pair of Levis stretched across her ass like leather on a saddle. She and AJ had hooked up several times, but it never went beyond that. He certainly wasn't interested that morning. Feelings of despair and the recurring vision of the little girl in a flowing white dress consumed him.

"Two and two, Jackie," he shouted, ordering his usual two beers and two shots of whatever she brought him. He went straight for the corner booth farthest from the door.

"Looks like a top-shelf tequila day. You all right?"

AJ sat silently, elbows on the table with his head in his hands. He kept running his fingers through the acorn-brown tufts reaching up out of a high and tight he never relinquished after leaving the Army. "Bad day," he answered. "Again."

Jackie hurt for him, but she knew well enough not to push. She grabbed two Budweisers and two shots of Patrón. By the time Jackie got to his table, AJ had completely buried his head in his arms. "Here you go, beautiful. Tequila's on me." With a light touch to his arm, Jackie tried offering quiet reassurance, then returned to the bar.

Four hours and a shitload of alcohol later, AJ was smoked. He tucked two twenty-dollar bills under his glass and slipped out of the bar without Jackie noticing.

When he got to his truck, AJ stopped and looked toward the woods. No sign of the girl. He fumbled for the keys in his pocket, finally got the door unlocked, and slid behind the wheel. It took a moment to orient himself. He fired up the truck and floored it out of the parking lot, leaving a small storm of rocks and debris in his wake. The drive home was perilous. Not only did the alcohol incapacitate him, but every overpass along the interstate became an invitation to a welcomed end.

An hour into what should have been a fifteen-minute drive, AJ finally pulled into his complex. He stumbled up the stairs and into the sparsely furnished one-bedroom apartment. *I'm . . . fr . . . ick . . . ing . . . tired . . . ofthisshiiiiit.* So drunk even his thoughts were slurred, AJ never made it to the bedroom. Instead, he toppled onto the brown corduroy sofa in the living room and passed out.

In the middle of the night, AJ startled awake. He blinked a couple of times, trying to adjust to the darkened room. “Fuck, what time is it?” he said. The effects of the alcohol had diminished. The sense of failure and hopelessness had not. Nothing about the day felt good. Nothing about life felt good. His body was broken. His mind was numb. His spirit had fractured into tiny shards of shame and disappointment. For the tormented young man, life had seized up like an engine without oil.