

THE
BREATH OF DAWN

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To Everleigh Grace,
my joy and delight

*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;
and all these things shall be added unto you.*

Matthew 6:33 KJV

Prologue

Seeing Morgan standing still as stone beside the freshly opened earth, Noelle St. Claire Spencer believed a man could shatter. One touch, and he might crumble and blow away. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Heat emanated from his tiny infant, who slept unaware that her daddy looked as close to the grave as the wife he buried. *Jill*. Noelle tightened her hold on the motherless babe, feeling her own little boy press tighter against her legs, as he sensed a magnitude of loss he hadn't before encountered. With one long arm, Rick held his family and one tiny part of Morgan's in mute protection.

Tall, silent as a sentry, his eyes mirrored the pain in hers. How did this happen? No, not how—why?

Her throat swelled with tears, her mouth sour with the bitter taste of grief, as she looked into the baby's face. Would she carry even a vague memory of the mother who'd held her inside, nestled and crooned and stroked her, anticipating moments of wonder and delight? Who would tell her?

She could see the silence growing in Morgan—he who'd wielded words with the skill of an empire builder, who'd lived potently and

vibrantly. Once before she'd watched him fade. Now he seemed colorless. He raised his face, needing more, another moment to hold on as the priest concluded the prayers over the casket. "We entrust this soul to God in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Those closest to the grave crossed themselves—except for Morgan, motionless. She touched his arm.

"Don't." His lips barely parted around the word.

Curled like a flannel-cocooned inchworm, his baby emitted a high-pitched mew. Morgan didn't turn. He stared at the curtain-draped hole and rasped, "Take her with you, okay?"

"To your house?"

"To the ranch." He cast a look at Rick, his taller, younger brother. "I'm no good to her."

Of course he'd think that. After everything.

"You come too," Rick said, solid, stoic. "Come back with us."

Morgan said nothing. The pain coming off him staggered her.

Rick told him, "We'll help, Morgan, but you have to come too. Your daughter needs you." He might not realize the impact of those words, words Morgan had responded to for a different daughter, one he'd tried to save and couldn't. After losing Kelsey, Jill's death seemed cruel and excessive.

A shudder moved through him, sun glinting off new silver threads in his black hair. His indigo eyes looked almost black. His face was gray. He had one foot over the line with the dead. Only Livie held him. If he convinced himself that she and Rick were enough for his baby girl, he might quit altogether. Who wouldn't?

Her in-laws, Hank and Celia, stood ready to support the cause, but it was Consuela, his housekeeper, who moved toward him, her face revealing a heart breaking for all he'd lost. "You go with them, Morgan," she said, her nearly black eyes awash yet fervent, her jaw set. "You go, and you come back."

His breath seeped out. "Fine." He took a step and once in motion kept on until he reached not the limousine that had brought him to the cemetery but his wine-red Maserati GranTurismo, pulsing power and prestige as it sat on the graveyard road that barely contained it.

Noelle trembled at the thought of him behind the wheel. How many times had she and Rick expected the call that he had died driving drunk? When he actually did crash his Corvette, he'd been stone sober. And he lived. He healed.

Now it had been Jill and two friends on a moms' night out—their minivan concealed by the whirling, wind-driven smoke of a sudden wildfire—who'd been hit by a rushing fire truck. There had to be order in that somewhere, but she couldn't find it. She could only hurt.

Thin, soundless rain fell unobtrusively as she and Rick joined Morgan at his car. No baby seat, since he never drove Livie in the sports car. Had he parked it there anticipating an unencumbered exit?

“Morgan . . .” Rick started to speak.

The older Spencer bent and kissed his baby's head, then looked up. “I'll see you out there.”

She expected Rick to argue, to make him fly back with them, but he only said, “Don't drive crazy.”

A dark and humorless smile touched Morgan's lips as he climbed in. The license plate read MYGRLS—a reminder to come home to the ones he loved? Or a way to have them with him wherever he went. Now he had only Livie. Noelle clutched her protectively.

Tears streamed down her face as the engine roared and he peeled away. No lingering over food and sympathy with his family, business associates, and hundreds of friends and members of his community all waiting at the reception. Morgan wanted the road. In pain, Morgan always wanted the road.

She looked up at Rick, whose gaze had landed on tiny Olivia. “He won't leave her, Noelle. It's not in him.”

Grief wasn't a feeling. It was a force, an entity, demanding entrance with the delicacy of a battering ram, and once that wall was breached, once the gates shattered, all hell would break loose. Morgan accelerated, as though speed formed a defense, as if flight could take him far enough, fast enough to keep the grinding pain from crushing him to dust.

Jill. He couldn't remember a time he hadn't loved her. Even the years apart, she'd been there, inside him, invading his memories, haunting his heart. Even in the anger, the betrayal, there'd been want. There'd been knowing she was in the world.

And mixed into every moment with Jill, there'd been Kelsey, the daughter he'd thought she aborted. The daughter he'd tried to save from leukemia. He failed then. What made them think he wouldn't now, with Livie?

He pressed his eyes shut, even though the Maserati topped a hundred and ten. Then he remembered the road wasn't his alone and opened his eyes. If he were to fly, he'd do it where no one else paid the price with him. Plenty of places between California and Rick's ranch in the Colorado mountains.

He'd experienced that soaring after Kelsey died, a crash that broke his body in so many places he rivaled the Bionic Man, but it hadn't quit. In her collision, Jill died instantly. Gone so fast there'd been no pain, no prolonged suffering. Just gone. What he wouldn't give to know that trick.

Except for Livie.

In spite of the crushing pain, his heart swelled. Nothing he did, nothing that happened to him, it seemed, could stop that love. He might be no good to her, might fail her as he'd failed Kelsey, and now Jill, but nothing in this world could make him stop trying. Not this pain. Not the rest to come.

Jill smiled from the photo on his visor, caught unawares and unposed. Beside her, newborn Olivia, and then one of his only pictures of Kelsey before the angels carried her away. Bald and brave and otherworldly, she anointed him with courage, drops of mercy from a pain-perfected soul. His must be utterly grace-resistant to require, once more, this particular scourge.

CHAPTER

1

Quinn liked the way mountains made her feel small—not unusual at five three, a hundred and five, but beneath the towering peaks, she felt minuscule, practically invisible, almost invisible enough.

She stepped onto her narrow balcony that had no room for furniture but enough to stand and look out and become a human thermometer—valuable in a changeable weather place such as Juniper Falls, Colorado. And climbing over the railing and dangling would make the drop from the bedroom doable—should that ever be necessary.

Nestled in her tiny cabin’s A-frame peak, her bedroom held a full-sized bed, a closet with built-in drawers, the door to the balcony, and her. Also in the loft was the pint-sized bathroom, shower—no tub—in pale yellow tiles. She climbed down the ladderlike stairs to the living, dining, cooking room. In her cabin, she sometimes felt like Alice biting the wrong side of the mushroom. But it was hers. What could be sweeter?

Bundling into her boiled-wool coat, she stuffed her dark, curling hair into the hood, went out to her F-150 pickup, and pulled

out onto the dirt road. A foggy cloud sat hard on the valleys, revealing bits of grayed scenery—here the dark evergreen arms of trees, there a stone canyon wall with spring water frozen into phantasmal shapes.

She couldn't wait until it cleared. The chance to look through what sounded like a sizable estate before anyone else was an opportunity she wouldn't miss. It was her livelihood. Sometimes she drove hours just to have a look. It usually paid off with at least a few things—sometimes a big fat zero, and every now and then a treasure trove. The spark of discovery quickened in her now.

She'd lucked out that the estate was in the vicinity, only a few miles away. She didn't know the deceased. Having lived only six months in Juniper Falls, that applied to most of the live population as well. It also meant she'd barely plumbed the possibilities in the area.

Families with estates to settle could always list and sell the stuff themselves, wait for the right buyer or collector, package, ship, and insure, and deal with gripes while grieving their loved ones, but she'd found most were perfectly happy to let her make an offer and take all that on herself. For those who got greedy or sentimental, she left her card in case they changed their minds. Many of them did, and not too begrudgingly. She was making a living, not a killing.

She pulled up to the property, surprised to see a truck in front of the small ranch house. Two cars were in the garage, a blue-and-tan Subaru she guessed was the deceased's and a white compact marked as a rental. The truck might mean someone else was interested in the estate. Being new to the area, she didn't yet recognize all her competition. But she'd been promised first look.

She moved toward the house, her breath mingling with the fog. The doorbell gave a sort of short-circuit buzz that brought no one. Frowning, she stepped away and walked around the side of the house.

With the mist tightening her spiraled strands, she moved toward barely audible voices. Two women stood at a green metal fence jeweled with condensation. They turned as she approached.

“Hi there,” said the one whose every blond hair must have been

glued in place to hold in the mist. Her slicker barely accommodated her ample hips. “You must be Riley.”

“Quinn. I’m Quinn Reilly.”

“Oh, I had it backwards.”

“It happens.” Way more than it should.

“I’m RaeAnne.” Her twang made the name sing. “And this is Noelle, from the ranch next to my mom’s here.”

The other woman had classic Michelle Pfeiffer–style beauty with silky golden-brown hair and natural grace. Caught up in her appraisal, Quinn startled at the snort that preceded a bony black face appearing through the fog. Casting a wary look at the whiskered muzzle frosted with age, she took a step back.

RaeAnne patted the horse. “Noelle’s offered to pasture Matilda, for what time she has left. Poor old girl.”

“We have a lot of pasture.” Noelle stroked the skimpy mane. “And Vera loved this horse.”

“She did.” RaeAnne’s voice tightened. “Even though she came with the house and Mom never sat a horse in her life.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Quinn said.

“Thanks.” RaeAnne blinked. “But Vera lived independently and passed in her sleep. What more can we ask?”

Lacking an easy answer, Quinn nodded.

“Well, come inside.”

RaeAnne’s hips swung back and forth with her stride. Noelle barely touched the ground, and Quinn just walked. Saying she’d be back for the mare, Noelle left in the Chevy truck—not what she’d picture the woman driving, more like a silver Jaguar.

“Pretty, isn’t she.” RaeAnne pushed open the back door.

“You think?”

They giggled.

The house had the old-person smell she recognized from similar circumstances—stale and slightly astringent—but RaeAnne must have alerted authorities almost immediately, because there was very little death scent.

“Well?” RaeAnne cast her gaze around. “Kind of leaves you speechless, doesn’t it?”

While she hadn’t been buried alive, Vera’d had a lot of things.

Quinn took in the packed tables, shelves, cabinets, hutches, and stacks. She could tell at a look that a lot of it didn't interest her. That left a lot of it that might. "What do you want to happen here, RaeAnne?"

"Well, there are a few personal things I'll hang on to. Some of it's just got to go, and for the things you want . . . whatever's reasonable, I guess."

"It can work two ways," Quinn told her. "I can purchase only what I might sell, which leaves you dealing with everything else. Or a flat rate buys whatever you don't choose to keep, and I'll resell or donate accordingly."

"That second way sounds great." RaeAnne seemed eager to separate from her mother's things. "I don't think the furniture will get you much. It's all secondhand."

And not antique, except in the kitchen. They haggled gently, the woman's genial nature and Quinn's own professional reserve keeping it civil. It wasn't about ripping people off. Though she imagined there were sharks in the water who preyed on the bereaved, it raised her hackles when people assumed she operated that way.

"Keep your stuff," she wanted to say when people questioned her offer, but she explained the process and the losses she took on things that never sold, not to mention her time. She did them a favor handling the whole lot and sometimes found hidden treasures—the hook for her.

In Vera's house, she recognized some popular and hard-to-find pieces. Her collector's guides and handbooks would help her know where to start the bidding or set the price. She'd learned a lot but still barely touched the surface of everything out there.

When they agreed, she gave RaeAnne her card with contact information and said, "I'll start with the knickknacks, if that's okay. You can reserve anything you want."

"Take them all. Just leave any jewelry for now."

"Okay." Jewelry was often excluded for value or sentimental reasons. She went back into the mist and brought in the lidded containers she kept stacked in the truck bed and cargo area to pack up and carry away the bits and pieces of a life.

After driving away with a full truckload, Quinn stood in her gray steel edifice lit by hooded bulbs suspended from the ceiling and warmed by space heaters in each corner. The prefab barn was the reason she lived in a dollhouse—that and the selling price. The structure was perfect for collecting, storing, and packing the wares she fostered as each awaited a new home.

While she hadn't grown up thinking she'd be an eBay trader, over the last four years she'd developed a knack for finding deals as well as an eye for quality. It didn't tie her to any physical location and was virtually anonymous, except when she acquired merchandise. Not a bad fit.

Even so, hours of handling, photographing, and listing other people's stuff sometimes made her glaze over. She slid the door open to a dry dusting of snow—the tiny pellet kind that struck the mountains anytime from September on and frequently now, as October waned. She'd heard the wind but hadn't realized it brought a companion.

Fog, mist, a few moments of sun, and now this, all in one day. Weather in the Rockies. She stepped out and slid the door shut, wind tossing hair across her face as the phone rang in her pocket. “Hello?”

“Hi, Quinn, it's RaeAnne Thigley. I'm sorry, but I wonder if I could look through the things you hauled out. There's a locket I can't locate that means a lot to me.”

“Oh.” Quinn turned back toward the building. “You want me to bring—”

“Heavens no. I'll come to you.”

“Um. Okay.” She gave RaeAnne her address with a tiny twinge.

“That's it? No argument? No, ‘I bought it and it's mine?’”

“Of course not. You said there were personal things you wanted.”

When RaeAnne arrived, Quinn let her in and pointed to the storage containers. “Help yourself, though I'm pretty sure I didn't pack a locket. Unless it's inside something else.”

RaeAnne's deep-set eyes pooled, tears beading on mascara-crusted lashes as dense as caterpillar fur. “You restore my faith—

you and Rick and Noelle. People who know how to treat one another.”

It seemed that since they’d parted, something more than grief had dampened RaeAnne’s spirits.

“But . . .” RaeAnne waved a hand. “You don’t want to hear my woes.”

“I have two ears that work.” Quinn pulled the lid off one of the containers she hadn’t begun to inventory. She’d immediately unpacked the Hummel figurines in near-mint condition in spite of overcrowding in one of Vera’s glass hutches. She had them set out on her long tables for photographing and knew for a fact none harbored jewelry. The little faces were as innocent as they appeared.

“I took off four days to handle Mom’s affairs, and I just found out I’ve been put on notice at work. What kind of world is that?”

“What do you do—national security?”

That got a laugh. “I work for an advertising company.”

“Ah, very time sensitive.” Quinn pulled the next container down and sat on the cold floor since all the table space was taken with the porcelain peasants. “No one covering you?”

“That’s the problem.” RaeAnne hunkered down a little less easily. “My overeager assistant. I’ve had some health issues this year, and he’s filled in more than I wanted.”

“But if you’re back tomorrow . . .”

“How can I be? I haven’t found the locket.”

Quinn cocked her head. “It means that much?”

“It means everything. My dad’s picture’s in it.” She looked up. “A picture I’ve never seen . . . as I’ve never seen him.”

“Seriously?”

RaeAnne nodded. “Mom said when she died I could see him, and not a day before. Now she’s gone and he’s nowhere to be found.” Tears welled up again. “She might have directed me to it in her last moments if I’d been there, but obviously . . .” She spread her hands.

“Maybe it’s in a safe deposit box or with a lawyer.”

“She banked online and never made a will, except what she wrote out by hand. It said, ‘Everything to RaeAnne—obviously.’” She laughed softly. “That was Vera in a nutshell.”

“There might be a letter in the paper stacks, telling you where to find it.”

“Maybe. But that could take months to sort through.”

Quinn reached into her container. “Well, let’s start with what we have.”

After searching the remaining bins, RaeAnne rocked up to her feet with a groan. “I’ll have to ask for an extension. If it ends up being permanent, we’ll just have to make do.”

“You can’t lose a job over this. I’ll find the locket, now that I know what I’m looking for. I’m already sorting the rest.”

“Quinn, it could be anywhere. I mean *anywhere*. I found a ring tied up in a sock.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t planned on scrutinizing every item of clothing and sheet of paper.

“I know it’s too much to ask.” RaeAnne pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her nose. “But I could give some money back for the extra time.”

“I might find it first thing tomorrow.”

“And it could take weeks. If I didn’t have to come back and clean the place for sale, I’d give back all you paid and call it even.”

If there were things squirreled away, the sorting alone would be monumental, but considering she had more time than money, Quinn said, “That’s fair.”

“It is? Would you do it? Just having it off my hands . . .” Again the tears pooled. “Between Vera’s arrangements and the house and my job, I’m a wreck.”

“You don’t look a wreck.” Every hair was still in place.

“I’ve lost six pounds worrying. And yes, I can afford to, but I’m more likely to have a stroke than a heart attack from all this.”

Quinn touched her arm. “Be kind to yourself. This isn’t easy.”

RaeAnne dug into her purse and retrieved the bills they’d exchanged earlier. “You sure?”

“Are you?”

They laughed.

“If I fly back tomorrow, will you keep me posted?”

“The minute I find it, you’ll know. And if it’s right away, we’ll renegotiate.”

“Oh!” RaeAnne grabbed her into a hug. “You are the sweetest thing.”

Enveloped by the warmth and sincerity, Quinn returned the hug, touched and intrigued by the woman and her tale. Such gestures were beyond the scope of her job, but somehow it felt right.

The next morning, dressed in black jeans, ankle boots, and an embroidered kimono-shaped sweater from a different estate, she paused in front of the Alpine Patisserie, with blue shake-shingle roof and white letters etched on the glass. At the window table, she saw Noelle, elegant in designer jacket and jeans—no mistaking that quality.

The man sharing the parlor-style table fit her perfectly, polished, urbane, and way too handsome, with nearly black hair and fine, angular features. He wore his well-fashioned clothes with as much ease as Noelle. A matched set.

Reaching behind the table, he brought up the last thing she'd expected—a fairy child, maybe two years old, with dark wispy hair and such precious features Quinn stopped, hand pressed to her heart. They were a family. Nothing amazing in that, so why did she feel such pathos?

When the little girl leaned in to kiss her daddy's mouth, something almost piercing—

“Going in?” a rugged guy in a Stetson asked while the young boy with him hung back by his arms to open the door.

She hadn't decided yet, but the little guy held the door so earnestly, she said, “Thanks.”

Red-faced with exertion, the kid beamed, then ducked in when the man took over the door. Heading for the counter, Quinn scanned the menu board, catching with the corner of her eye the newcomers joining Noelle and her husband.

The boy, who looked about four, ground the metal feet of a parlor chair over the tile floor like a file on a washboard and slid into place at the table. The man removed his hat, bent, and kissed Noelle, a hand wrapping the back of her neck in a brief, telling gesture. What?

Quinn stopped pretending to read the board and ordered hot green tea. Captivated by the three adults and two children, she carried the mug to a seat with a view. She'd always been an excellent people reader. Not, as it turned out, that it mattered.

She squeezed the tea bag by its string around the spoon, then set both on the table. The little girl spoke earnestly to the man who held her. Quinn could have sworn she was his child, their features and coloring so similar.

When Noelle asked the boy his choice, he cried, "Chocolate crepes!" The kid could have a career in broadcasting.

"Choc-late crepes," the fairy child mimicked with far less volume and precious pronunciation.

Noelle went to the counter and placed their order. When she turned with the tray, their glances met. "Quinn? Hello."

Sipping her tea, Quinn raised her fingers in a wave, then lowered the cup when Noelle stepped toward her. "Your kids are cute."

"Oh." Noelle glanced over her shoulder. "The little girl's my niece, but that rascal Liam is mine."

So the little girl was the first man's, and Noelle really was with the rancher. Thus the truck, not the Jaguar. "Liam looks like his dad, his expressions especially."

"And every bit as determined." She laughed softly. "Want to join us?"

Quinn looked at the overcrowded table. "I'll just finish my tea and run. I'm cleaning out Vera's house."

"That's a project."

To say the least. "How's Matilda?"

"Not much faded, I think. Our properties adjoin and the grass tastes the same on our side. But if she does prefer the other, it won't be a problem. My husband, Rick"—she tipped her head his way—"made RaeAnne an offer on the land."

"What about the house?"

"She'll sell that separately."

"Mommy!" Liam hollered.

Noelle cast another glance over her shoulder. "Better feed my starving child."

Quinn watched her and then, more openly, the little ones. If the

girl was her niece, then the first man was her brother, or married to her sister. She couldn't get a clear view of his ring hand. But when the husband, Rick, said something, the other man's expression shifted. Brothers. They were brothers. Quinn sat back and sipped, an unfamiliar sensation in her chest.

Morgan frowned. Rick's attempt to interest him in the slight, dark-haired woman irritated him almost as much as Noelle's ever-present concern. "For future reference, Rick, my own eyes work just fine." Though small, the woman would never be inconspicuous.

"They don't see three inches past Livie."

"What else is there to see?" He spoke over his daughter's head as she dipped a fingertip in the chocolate.

"Me, Uncle Morgan!" Liam declared.

He frowned at the kid. "Who are you again?"

"Liam!"

Noelle shushed him. "Don't encourage it, Morgan. This shouting is not cute."

Morgan grinned. "Oh yeah. Little Will."

"Wil-li-am. Liam!" He pressed the side of his hand into the middle of the crepe, oozing chocolate out both ends. "I'm not little Will. I'm Liam."

"Don't play with your food." Rick nudged his hand off the crepe.

"Livie does."

"Livie's two."

Producing a tiny fork-spoon from his pocket, Morgan gave it to his daughter. "Tools are what separate us from the animals."

"That and opposable thumbs," Rick said.

"And the ability to reason," Noelle rounded it out.

"Hands work better." Liam gave the crepe another karate chop.

Morgan had to smile at Rick getting a kid more headstrong than he. Olivia on the other hand was perfect—sweet-natured and affectionate, with an impish streak like a vein of silver and a gold dusting of feistiness. Why would he ever look past that?

"I'm just saying," Rick said, lowering his voice, "at some point that little girl's going to want a mother."

Not to put too fine a point on it. For almost two years now, Livie had shared Noelle with Liam as a sibling would, though no sibling had yet . . . Or had one . . . He narrowed his eyes. “Something you guys haven’t told me?”

“How did you do that?” Rick leaned back in his chair.

Morgan rubbed Livie’s back as she switched her little fork from one hand to the other, testing proficiency. “You say go get a life; you mean yours is moving on.”

“I didn’t say go get a life.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But that’s the point, isn’t it?”

Noelle touched his hand. “It’s not because I’m pregnant—”

“But you are.” Had they gone four years between children because of him and Livie?

“What’s pregnant?” Liam stuffed a drippy end of chocolate crepe into his mouth.

Living on a brood ranch, he presumed the kid had an inkling, but neither parent offered insight.

Noelle leaned in. “We want you to be happy.”

Her version of happy. He didn’t contradict. His second book, *Ten Spectacular Ways to Fail—and Why CEOs Choose To*, had flown up the bestseller list faster than *Money Magic by the Success Guru*. There was no reason to believe his nearly completed work-in-progress would do any less.

Like Beethoven, the subject of TSO’s metal rock opera, Morgan Spencer brought forth brilliance from agony, birthing as great a fame and wealth as the “vaporous wizard,” who refused signings and tours, as he had being the turnaround specialist who took corporations from ashes to blazing suns.

Everything he touched thrived—except the people he loved, and he’d be damned, literally, before he lost Livie. “*Jesus loves you,*” Kelsey had told him in the letter he read after she died, in the crash when he almost joined her, in his heart even now. But that love had an edge so sharp, blood spilled before he ever felt the blade.

The past two years, with help from Rick and Noelle, he’d been everything Livie needed, present and more than accounted for. But he’d disrupted their lives long enough. He tuned back in to

their conversation as Rick said he had fencing to tear out from the new pasture.

Noelle lowered her cup. “RaeAnne took your offer?”

“Yep. Now she just needs to dump the house.”

The house. Morgan tipped back in his chair as a thought occurred. Out of sight of Rick’s log complex, but close enough if Livie needed Noelle. His real home waited in Santa Barbara, but for now . . .

CHAPTER

2

Morgan parked the Range Rover that replaced his Maserati during inclement months in front of the house he'd come to see. Unlike Rick's western log house and cabins, this single-level ranch was nothing special, a rectangle with a peaked center, probably a low cathedral ceiling in the living room. Not looking for permanence or even investment, he only cared that it was livable in this step toward independence for his daughter and himself.

If not for Livie, he'd have thrown himself into the all-consuming milieu where he turned coal into diamonds—to hear the pundits tell it. Instead he'd put to paper the tenets of his success and welcomed their use by any and all.

Maybe he would return to the corporate world, but it could not be traumatic for Livie. And so he got out and surveyed the house. No sign indicated a listing yet, and he'd just as soon make an offer without real estate agents. His lawyer could handle the details. The bell made an asthmatic wheeze he wasn't sure carried anywhere.

Trying the door when no one came, he found it open and called, "Hello?" He'd like a quick look to make sure nothing ruled the place out.

The woman who exited the bedroom caught him by surprise. It was the one from the bakery. “You’re RaeAnne?”

She looked equally taken aback. “Quinn.”

He took in the elfin features, the dark tumble of hair moments from jailbreak from its clip. “Does that come with a first name?”

“Quinn Reilly. Quinn for my grandpa’s favorite hound.”

“You’re named after a dog?” And admitting it.

“Not just any dog. A bluetick hound with a nose like none before or since.”

“Huh.” In spite of himself he ran his eyes down her slight figure in jeans and threadbare sweatshirt that reminded him of one he wore on his balcony when he didn’t care if the salt air drifted in.

“Did you want something?” She placed her hands on her hips.

“To see RaeAnne about the house.”

“Oh. She flew home. I have a number though.”

“That would be good.” He looked around. “Can I walk through?”

“Not easily. I’m going through Vera’s stuff.”

“I just need a sense of the place, to see if it works.”

“For you?” Surprise found her eyes, though he didn’t know what difference it made to her.

He cocked his head. “Is that a problem?”

“Not for me. I’m just doing a job.”

He nodded. “I’ll take a quick peek and get out of your way.”

She shrugged and went back to the bedroom; at least he thought there was a bed under the heaping clothes. Quinn pulled a pair of pants from a drawer and checked it methodically—pockets, lining, seams—then added it to the pile on the bed.

“Looking for something?”

“I’m . . . sorting.”

“Thoroughly.”

She cast him a look. “Yep.”

He found her laconic approach to conversation interesting. He hadn’t experienced many women who said less than necessary. Taking a quick cruise through the single level that would keep life with Livie simple, he returned to Quinn, still sorting clothes. “Is there a basement?”

“A cellar.” She sat back on her heels. “I understand it’s not habitable.”

“Oh?”

“This house was built on the foundation of an asylum.”

“No way.”

She shrugged. “That’s what RaeAnne said. They sent people up the mountain to ‘rest their minds.’”

Not at all sure he wanted to live over an asylum, but diabolically intrigued, he said, “Have you seen it?”

“No.”

“Want to?”

“No.”

He leaned on the doorframe. “Aren’t you curious?”

“I see plenty of cellars.”

“Not haunted.”

She rested her palms on her thighs. “Do you see all this? RaeAnne’s mother kept every piece of clothing she ever owned.”

Rick had not noticed her for nothing. She had a sort of spark. “Come explore and I’ll help you haul those clothes out.”

She cocked her head. “You’re scared to go alone?”

“I could use a shield.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Do you have a name?”

“Morgan.”

“Does that come with a first name?”

A smile tugged the corners of his lips. “Morgan Spencer. Now come on, let’s see that cellar.”

Reluctantly, she rose.

He swung his arm. “Lead on.”

She raised what might have been ordinary eyes but were instead espresso brown with lighter starbursts around the pupils. “I’m not going first.”

“Scared?”

“The one in front gets all the spider webs.”

Something opened up in his chest, something like amusement.

“Okay. I’ll take the webs. Just show me the way.”

“I don’t know it.”

“What?”

“I’ve been going through the stuff, not exploring the house.”

“Might be stuff down there.”

She shuddered. “That’s creeping me out.”

Since he hadn’t seen a door elsewhere, access was probably in the kitchen. The room had very little floor or wall space with all the tables, hutches, cabinets, and a rolling dishwasher. The linoleum popped and crackled like little firecrackers under their feet.

She enclosed herself in her arms. “You know, I’m not—”

“Can’t back out now,” he said. “We need a nose like none before or since.”

“All right. I thought I saw something . . .” She leaned around a massive mahogany hutch. “Is that a door?”

He leaned too and saw it. “Now see, you’re living up to your name.”

Head tipped, she slid him a look. His mouth twitched.

Together they angled the hutch away from the wall, and with a yank, the door opened to stairs much older than the house. “Cool,” he said as a musty draft drifted up. He tried the old wall switch to no effect. “Hmm.”

“No doubt there’s something in here to use.” Quinn pulled open drawer after drawer until she found a flashlight, banged it a few times to get the lamp on, then flashed the dim beam.

“That should work.” Taking it, he stepped onto the stairs, pushing a stringy spider web aside. “They seem sturdy, but tread carefully.”

He could feel her close behind him, her creaks immediately following his. Thick dust without footprints coated the stairs. The iron railing wobbled but held. Nearing the bottom, he shot the light wide. “Whoa.”

She gripped the back of his shirt. “Are you kidding me?”

The space was filled with iron beds, carts, commodes, rubber tubing, and unidentifiable paraphernalia.

She tightened her grip. “Are those chains?”

He focused the beam on a bed rail. “I think you’d say shackles.”

“I’m beyond freaked.”

He took the final step down.

“Wait, wait, wait. We’re not going in.”

“Don’t chicken out now.” He trailed the light slowly across the darkness, pausing on a glass-faced cabinet near the wall. “Check that out.” He felt her straighten, interest kindling as the light ran over dusty bottles on the inner shelves. “Tinctures of newt and eye of bat?”

She shifted her grip to his arm, excitement trumping concern. “Can we get to it?”

“I thought we weren’t going in.” Swinging the lantern beam to illuminate her face, he eyed her, all pent-up energy and impatience.

“Do you think we’ll die?”

“No, but squeeze any harder and I might lose that arm.”

“Oh!” She looked down and let go.

He swept aside a dust-coated cobweb and moved between two beds stacked sideways on his right and three to his left.

“Who would build a house on top of all this?” Her voice sounded thin.

“Someone who didn’t want to dig and pour a new foundation.”

“With all these things inside?”

“Know what it’ll take to clean it out?”

“No. But I guess I’ll find out.”

He half turned.

“I bought the contents of the house, so it’s my problem.”

He pushed through several carts, the wheels of one wailing like a ghost. “You could contact a museum.”

“Like anyone would want this junk.” But when he illuminated the drug cabinet, she moved past him and wiped the glass with her sleeve. Didn’t make much difference as far as he could tell. The glass itself looked milky.

She pulled the metal knob. “It’s locked. Think we can carry it up to the light?”

She seemed serious. The cabinet was his height though narrow, hardwood and beveled glass. “You’d be risking the contents.”

“Not if we keep it tipped just right.”

He shrugged. “High or low on the stairs?”

She looked over her shoulder. “I guess realistically I better take top.”

“Good call.” It put her backward for the climb, but he’d bear

the weight. “Just a sec.” He stuck the flashlight into his waistband in back, sending an insipid light to the ceiling that prevented total darkness as they dislodged the cabinet. They pushed it through the path he’d made, then hoisted it up each riser, the bottles jangling against each other.

At the top, they brought the cabinet into the scant remaining floor space and slowly righted it. Even so the bottles tinkled and tumbled. “I guess a locksmith could get it open.”

She fingered the knob and keyhole. “I have a whole box of skeleton keys someone collected for about two hundred years.”

“Long-lived.”

“I mean the keys date back—” She caught the joke and said, “One of those might work.”

He dragged his thumb through the dust along a crease. “Or you could leave it sealed. Let it keep its secrets.”

She turned. “Why?”

“It’s been in the dark a long time.”

“Don’t you want to know what’s in the bottles?”

Turning pensive he asked, “What’ll you sell this for?”

“I have no idea. I don’t usually handle furniture.”

“I’ll give you a thousand dollars—as is.”

“What?”

“I want to keep it here in the kitchen.”

“It’s not your kitchen.”

“It will be. I’m making RaeAnne a cash offer.”

She crossed her arms in clear frustration. “We brought it up to see inside.”

“One thousand five hundred, intact with the bottles.”

“Are you insane?”

A smile twitched. “Think I belong down there? In the shackles, maybe?”

Her expression left no doubt. “I want to open it.”

“Then refuse my offer.”

She squirmed in the trap. With almost no context, he couldn’t guess which way she’d go. But he could nudge. He took out his checkbook, wrote one thousand five hundred dollars to Quinn Reilly, and tore it off. “That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

She snatched the check. “I’m not showing you anything else before I see it myself.”

“Fair enough,” he said. With the exercise ended, the ache inside returned like a guard who’d looked away for a second, then resumed scrutiny.

Watching him leave the kitchen, Quinn had the same sensation she’d experienced outside the patisserie—desolation. One moment those indigo eyes probed and teased, the next they caved in like bad ice, leaving fathomless black water.

She moved down the hall and jumped when he came out of the bedroom behind a heaping pile of clothes. “What are you doing?”

“I told you I’d haul these out.”

“I didn’t think you meant it.”

“I wouldn’t say it otherwise.” His lackluster tone had a razor-thin edge.

She watched him carry armful after armful of clothes to his Range Rover until at last he came back inside, rubbing his hands from the chill.

“That’s all I can fit. Where do you want them taken?”

“There’s a church in town that sends them to a mission.”

He nodded. “I’ll drop them with Pastor Tom.”

“You know him?”

Now the edge found his eyes, but in truth, Morgan didn’t seem like a man who’d know the pastor by name.

“Right.” She broke the stare. “Thanks for your help and . . . purchase.” She’d been too flabbergasted to haggle.

“You’re welcome. Hope you find what you’re looking for.”

She hadn’t admitted to searching, but he’d obviously analyzed and drawn conclusions. If she was smart she’d do the same. Maybe he didn’t have fifteen hundred dollars and his check would bounce. That suspicion seeped in with an acidic burn.

She still had possession of the cabinet, so it wouldn’t matter except in principle. Still, she couldn’t stand dishonesty, hated it almost as much as cruelty. Being the victim of lies as a little child

had first baffled, then demoralized her. Now it infuriated her to encounter even senseless, supposedly harmless deceit.

Bundling into her coat, she hurried to her truck and drove home, parking not at her little house but the big metal storehouse barn on the side of the property. Chafing her chilly hands, she fired up her laptop and searched Morgan Spencer.

Moments later, her jaw fell slack. “Oh. My.”

Videos, images, articles, and blogs. Awards, events, international corporate news. She read one business article about his second *New York Times* bestseller. *Elusive corporate specialist Morgan Spencer avoids the public eye as his fame and success crescendo. . . .*

Quinn gaped. She’d clung to a world-famous mogul. Huffing a laugh, she shook her head. She should have charged five thousand.

With his head to the steering wheel, Morgan sat alone in the night, clutching his baby’s monitor to his chest, the engine unturned in the Maserati that would fly if he let it. Outside in the car was as far as he could go, and that only because the lights of the monitor would show what he might not hear over the pure-pitched speakers throbbing words he knew by heart from countless repetitions.

A life leaving nothing behind. No dream to echo in time.

Hours ago, he’d typed the final word of his third book and sent the file without once looking back to revisit what he’d written. He’d laid out the core of his philosophy, everything that made his zenith shine. Whoever could reproduce it, let them. Let others save the world.

Visions and dreams dismembered. Nothing remembered. Everything lost in this night.

Once, he’d fed on the cool certainty, the razor-sharp focus and adrenaline of the contest, recognizing potential and turning disasters around, seeing problems and finding solutions no one else saw. Now it was all ashes in his mouth, shades laughing softly in the night wind.

A few strides might get him the sympathy of his brother and even Rick’s wife, but no matter how close they were, in the end,

it was his own effort to put one foot in front of the other, step by step by step.

All his successes, yet he hadn't seen it coming. Almost two years, and still the stealth and shock of death rocked him. The lyrics had ended, and in their place came the caring platitudes.

"What could you do? You weren't even there."

He'd been useless to his wife and worse than useless to Kelsey, his vigorous bone marrow damaging one organ after another when she had nothing to fight back with.

"You did all you could. It was out of your hands."

The hope had been a slim one, but he'd believed. He was golden. He'd save her, and then he and Jill could know her. Only he hadn't. Morgan Spencer wasn't God. If he were, Kelsey would be here, *Jill* would be here.

Instead . . .

The piercing-clear moon showed his face in the rearview mirror. The kings of the earth rise up and the one enthroned in heaven laughs.