

*How does someone disappear?* I had no answer, but taking the leap became necessary. I hastily rolled up two shirts and laid them on the bed next to the small but growing pile of clothing. My breath quickened and my hands shook so terribly it made it difficult to collect needed items for my escape. I pulled open the top bureau drawer, pausing for a moment to study the jewels that sparkled up at me, each one a reminder of his efforts to make peace. How dumb was I to fall for that tactic. I considered taking them, too, then shook my head. No. I'd managed to scrape up enough for a new start. I found the flashlight I needed and closed the drawer firmly.

*Breathe, Aspen. Breathe.* With quick steps I grabbed the backpack from the back of the walk-in closet and shoved the clothing, my laptop, and other items into the largest compartment. I stuffed the toiletries into the front pouch.

I hurried downstairs to the coat closet and chose my warmest coat along with a lightweight jacket. Mesa, Arizona at the end of November was too warm for two coats, but I knew the nights ahead wouldn't always be warm. I took both.

Next step: turn off the security alarms. In the office overlooking the front yard, I moved the mouse with shaking hands and clicked quickly through the windows on his laptop. It had taken weeks of careful observation to puzzle out his passwords. With that information and the money, I now felt ready . . . as ready as I'd ever be. Once the alarm switched off, I would have mere seconds to exit. Longer if he ignored the notification to his cellphone. For that, I hoped.

I clicked the last button and glanced up at the camera in the entryway outside the office door. The red light flicked off. My heart hammered and I hurried from the office to the garage. Under an unused blue tarp, I found the new red gas tank. Then I hurried from the side door out into the driveway.

No turning back.