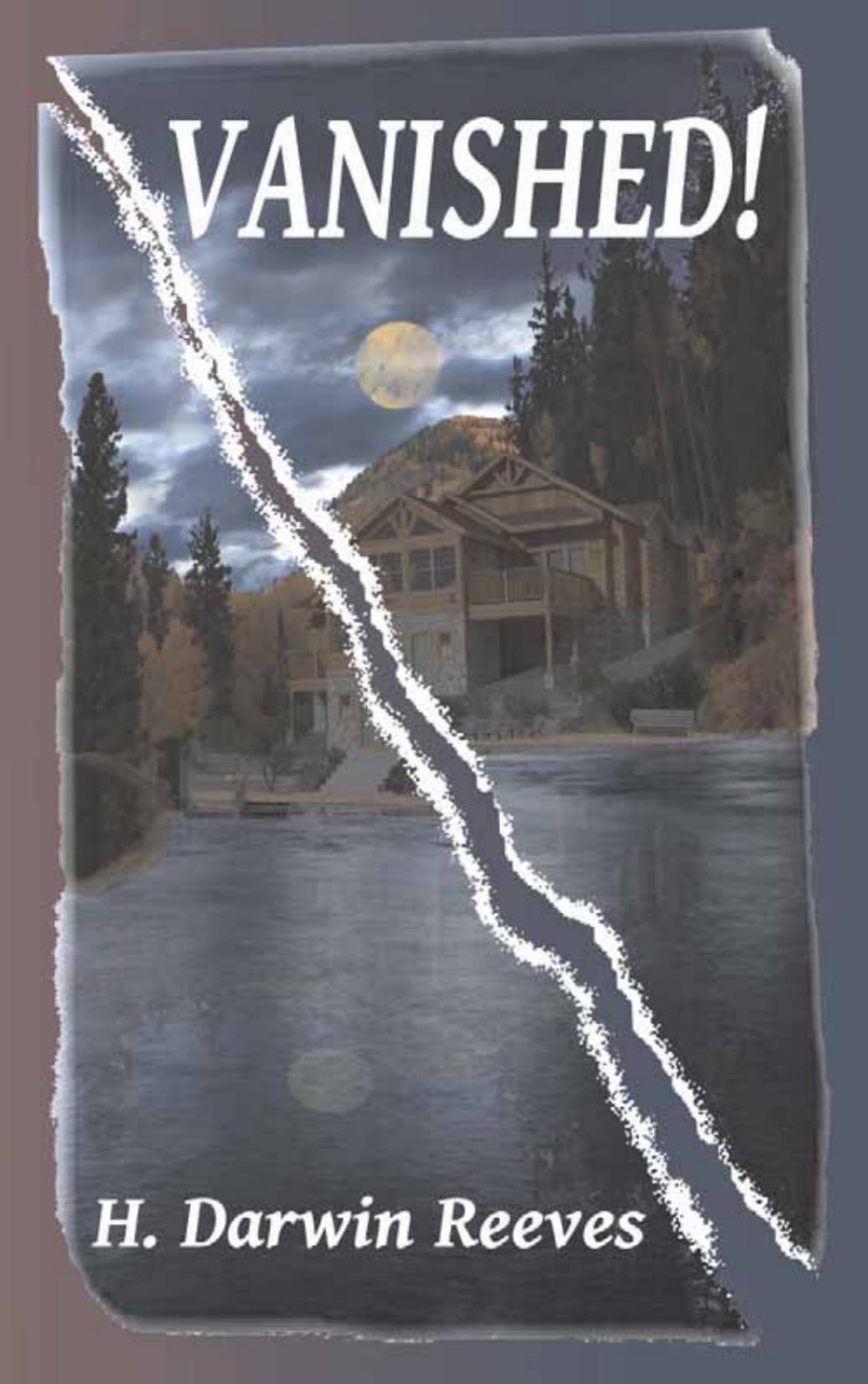


VANISHED!



H. Darwin Reeves

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DEDICATION

To my family:

My wife Jan who has stayed by me through all the ups and downs for 43 wonderful years.

To my children Darwin, Dawn and Amanda who continued to encourage me in my attempts at writing.

Thank you for your support and encouragement through this process.

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Chapter 1

Vanessa Morgan stood on the huge wooden deck absorbing the breathtaking vista before her. She and her husband, Ryan, had worked on their dream home for two years and with its completion, a sense of pride filled her.

The setting sun and the deep blue of the teardrop-shaped lake nestled at the foot of Barnett Mountain enhanced the idyllic picture.

A warm breeze stirred the deep auburn hair framing Vanessa's face, and inhaling the fresh air she said aloud, "This is heaven on earth; I'm never going to leave this place. I'll grow old and die here."

The last rays of light faded from pink to mauve, and disappeared into the darkening sky as she heard Ryan's car approaching.

She hurried to the door, opening it for him, and before he could say a word, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips tightly

upon his. Dropping the briefcase, Ryan enveloped her in his arms excited by her greeting.

He leaned back slightly and whispered in her ear, "What a nice surprise. May I ask what I've done to deserve this? Or maybe a better question is what have you done?" His voice resembled a purr.

"I was enjoying the view out back and became overwhelmed with feelings. I'm just so happy, Ryan, this life we have is perfect. It's okay to feel that, isn't it?"

"Okay? I should say so," he responded. "Any time you have an urge like that, you just let me know."

"Believe me, darling, you'll be the first."

They kissed again, this time more passionately.

"Dinner is almost ready," she said, walking into the kitchen. "We'll resume this later."

He grinned. "You can count on it."

Vanessa arranged for them to eat on the deck and enjoy one of the last warm days of the season. The evening air was still warm as they finished dinner; the night creatures began their serenade.

He took Vanessa's hand in his and sighed "These last five years have been so wonderful. I had no idea it was possible to love as totally as I love you. The only regret I have is that we didn't meet earlier."

"Let's not think about that," she said, stroking his face. "We don't know if it would have worked then. We're both different than we were twenty years ago and remember there's a reason for everything."

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With a shrug, he nodded. “You’re right. I’m glad we’re here now and the time is right for us.”

They remained outside, talking over the day’s events. Business was good for both and they enjoyed sharing that part of their world with each other.

“Have you talked with Bob yet?” Vanessa asked, changing the subject.

“No, but I plan to this week. I think he’s ready to move up. He showed definite interest in becoming a partner when I first approached him with the idea. He knows the business inside and out and is perfect for the position.”

Ryan James Morgan started RJM and Associates architectural firm six years before and the business was experiencing unprecedented growth. He had recently added two new associates and was negotiating with one of his senior members to become a partner. The time was right to bring someone else into the top level of the business, a place he’d occupied alone since establishing the firm.

“As long as we’re talking business, isn’t tomorrow when the New York buyers are coming in to see your new designs?”

“Yes and I’m very excited about it. New York buyers; can you *believe* it? I would never have imagined I’d be showing my clothing designs to such a prestigious firm as Macy’s. I’m still pinching myself. Tell me it’s not a dream.”

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He reached across the table and took her hand. "I'm not surprised in the least and it's not a dream. I knew you would do great things because of who and what you are, a talented, determined and very creative woman. You were destined to do great things. I might be a little prejudiced, but I think you're terrific. *Visions* can only be a success."

The ringing of the telephone interrupted their discussion.

"I'll get it." Ryan walked to the large breakfront, picked up the cordless phone and pressed it to his ear. "Hello?" He glanced at Vanessa, shrugged and repeated, "Hello?" He hesitated a moment, a perplexed expression on his face. "Hello? Is anybody there?"

He waited for a reply, and hearing only silence at the other end, hung up.

"Must have been a wrong number," Vanessa said, carrying the dinner dishes into the kitchen.

"That's got to be the third or fourth time this week I've answered a dead line."

"Really? Isn't that strange? I hadn't noticed."

"I don't like it. I have to admit it's making me a little nervous."

She chuckled, a light tinkling sound he found so attractive. "You've been watching too many of those scary movies again." Vanessa grinned, poking him in the side.

"No, really, I'm serious. Sometimes I get an uneasy feeling when you're here alone. I know we picked this piece of property so that we could have

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some solitude, but I have to admit I didn't think it would be a phone invading our privacy at the time."

"Oh, now don't you start getting weird on me." She glanced at him, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"And don't you go getting too independent on me," he replied and then softened his voice. "I would never try to change who you are, but there are times when even big girls need a little taking care of."

Voice low and seductive, she whispered, "Well, mister, I think this is one of those times." She slipped her arm through his and pulled him close. "How about taking care of me right now?"

Basking in the perfect afterglow of love and curled in his arms, Vanessa reflected on how in tune they had become, down to anticipating one another's wants and needs.

After a lingering kiss, her final thought as sleep settled over them was, *how is it possible that our life together can continue to get better? What could improve on this?*

The warmth of his body, pressed so close to hers made her feel safe and secure, untouchable by the outside world.

* * *

Shadows cloaked the man as he returned the cell phone, camera, and huge telephoto lens to the

backpack. The darkness made it difficult to see the path as he made his way back to the vehicle, but he was anxious to develop the film and get these latest photos added to his growing collection.

Vanessa Morgan was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and he was determined that she would belong to him. And that would happen soon, very soon.