





RED ROCK MYSTERIES

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**JERRY B. JENKINS · CHRIS FABRY**

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*Wind Chill*

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**“Commit a crime and the earth is made of glass. Commit a crime, and it seems as if a coat of snow fell on the ground, such as reveals in the woods the track of every partridge, and fox, and squirrel.”**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

**“Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch the woods fill up with snow.”**

Robert Frost

**“To appreciate the beauty of a snowflake, it is necessary to stand out in the cold.”**

Anonymous



**PART 1**



## CHAPTER 1

✧ Ashley ✧

Hayley Henderson and Marion Quidley huddled with me in the Penrose Middle School auditorium as we awaited the final results of our forensics tournament. *Forensics* is just a fancy word for “speech.”

My twin, Bryce, competes in Oral Interpretation of Humor. His routine, “Good Morning, Baghdad,” is hysterical, and he’s the best at the tournament. He told me that he’d nailed his last performance.

I compete in Solo Acting. Bryce and I tried Duet Humor last year, and that was a disaster. It was easy to practice with each other, but we learned there are some things we shouldn’t try. Most of the year I

thought he was competing in the Irritate Ashley competition, winning first place each time.

The eight finalists in Bryce's category were onstage, accepting awards. It was down to Bryce and a kid with a goofy smile. Sometimes the way you look can mean all the difference in the humor category.

Marion has a thing for Bryce, and she couldn't stop jumping. "He's going to do it, Ashley! He's really going to do it!"

The announcer, a blonde woman with a lot of energy, took her time. "And first place . . . in Oral Interpretation of Humor . . . goes to . . . Red Rock's Bryce Timberline!"

All the Red Rock kids squealed, even me. Bryce held up the trophy and waved. Marion swooned like he was some rock star.

Next up was Impromptu, Marion's event. In that competition you're given a topic, and you have to make up a speech to support your views. Marion is really smart, and she blows away the competition when she gets a good topic. It's like watching a six-foot-five-inch high school kid play middle school basketball. No *uhs* or *ums* from this girl. She frames her argument logically, supports it with facts, and usually ends with a killer summary. I think she'll make a good lawyer.

Bryce joined us, holding on to his trophy like it was real gold.

When Marion's name was called for first place, we all went wild. It was kind of sad because Marion's mom and dad hadn't been to one competition, but the rest of us yelled even louder.

Hayley got sixth place in her event, and her shoulders slumped. I hugged her, and she tried to act like she didn't care, but I could read her face.

They called my category, and I walked onstage. One of the other contestants had performed a scene based on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and just about everybody in the room cried. I hoped I didn't get eighth place.



## CHAPTER 2

☺ Bryce ☺

*Life is a series of wins and losses.* At least that's what our coach, Mr. Gminski, says. He tells us to do our best, forget our mistakes, and see what happens. That's exactly what Ashley had done the whole year. She's the most competitive girl I know—evidenced by the way she gritted her teeth and held her breath as each name was called. Our group screamed and pumped our fists; then things got deathly quiet. It's a lot easier being onstage than being a spectator.

In the end, Ashley got second place, and Hayley and Marion would have put her on their shoulders if they could have caught her. She hopped around the auditorium like a kangaroo after a Starbucks binge.



The other team members who did well were Kael Barnes and Lynette Jarvis. They won first in Duet Humor. It was easy to congratulate Kael, because he's my friend, but Lynette is a different story. Ever since she moved here at the beginning of the school year, she's been a pain. She used to live in Wyoming, and let's just say I've been a burr under her saddle. To make matters worse, she's the prettiest cowgirl this side of the Mississippi, if you know what I mean.

The awards ceremony ended, and Mr. Gminski lined our team up onstage. It just happened that I stood beside Lynette. "Good job," I said.

She looked at me like I was a horse dropping and moved to the end of the line.

Marion took her place, smiling at me like I was her favorite horse. "Good job," she said.

It's funny how life will do that. Someone you like snubs you; then someone you don't care for looks at you starry-eyed and you want to leave. "Thanks. You too," I said.

"Your routine is really funny," she continued. "Everybody was talking about how perfect the material is. . . ."

I like attention, but Marion talked as Mr. Gminski snapped the photo. Later I grabbed the digital camera and saw that everyone was looking at the camera but Marion and me. We were staring at each other. It took everything in me not to erase the picture.

A judge found Mr. Gminski and took him to a room filled with coaches.

"I'll bet somebody got disqualified," Marion said. "They never do that after the awards are handed out unless there's a protest."

People whispered, and wild rumors flew around the auditorium. Since I'm Mr. Gminski's aide, I had a clue about what was up.

The blonde lady with the big voice hurried to the microphone

and told everyone to sit. “We have some exciting news. As some of you know, RMIFT”—she pronounced it R-miffed—“has established a competition this year for . . .” She must have seen the looks on everybody’s faces because she said, “It’s the Rocky Mountain Invitational Forensics Tournament. Those who qualify will compete with other top finishers in Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico.”

“Have you heard about this?” Ashley whispered. When I didn’t say anything right away, she snarled at me.

“Mr. Gminski said there might be another tournament, but—”

“The good news is,” the blonde lady said, “after tabulating the year-end scores, several of you have made the cut for RMIFT. Here’s the list.”

Each time she read a name, a group celebrated. When they called my name, I held up my trophy and pumped my fist. Ashley, Marion, Kael, and Lynette were also called. The other team members were happy for us, but I could tell they felt left out.



## CHAPTER 3

❧ Ashley ❧

“What does it mean?” one kid yelled after all the names were called. It was the question we were all asking.

The woman held up her hands to quiet us. “RMIFT is being held at CSD and—”

“What’s CSD?” someone asked.

I love it when grown-ups use acronyms. Makes me feel better because I use so many.

“Colorado School of Drama,” she said. “It’s in Tres Peaks, near Rocky Mountain National Park.”

I looked at Bryce. Tres Peaks (Three Peaks) was one of our favorite

places in any season. In winter it has great skiing, tubing, and snowboarding, and it's not as crowded as Breckenridge or some of the other ski areas. In the summer, Tres Peaks is cooler than where we live because it sits at more than 11,000 feet. Sometimes Sam takes us camping in the national park, and it feels like we're a million miles from everyone. The stars are bright at night, elk and deer run free, and the small town has lots of gift shops.

"If you're invited," the woman said, "you'll stay Thursday to Sunday competing. There will probably be some time for skiing and other winter sports, depending on the weather."

Bryce looked at Kael, and they gave each other a high five.

"The school will be on break that week," the lady continued, "so you'll stay in the dorms, eat lunch in their cafeteria—"

"Two days off school, plus skiing?" Bryce whispered. "I'm there!"

"—and the winners of that competition will go to the western finals in Hollywood."

My heart did a backflip, then a double somersault with a twist, and stuck its landing. I'd wanted to be an actress for so long, and I'd heard about CSD. It was my first choice for a college, even though that was four years away. But a trip to Hollywood seemed too good to be true.

"How much will it cost?" Marion shouted.

"There's a fee for entrance to the competition and meals," the lady said. "I think it's \$175."

Marion's face fell. Marion was long on talent but short on money. Her dad had been hurt in an accident, and her mom was barely keeping the family going.

I put an arm around her. "We'll figure out some way to get you there," I said.

She nodded, but I don't think she believed me.

When we got on the bus to go home, Hayley sat with someone else instead of with me. If you want to know the definition of a bitersweet victory, it's what I experienced that day.



## CHAPTER 4

☺ Bryce ☺

*When the forensics team travels,* we usually stop at Wendy's and pay for our own food, but once a year Mr. Gminski and some teachers pitch in and pay for our dinner at The Silver Plate. It's one of those all-you-can-eat places where you can get filet mignon or corn dogs, baked salmon or fish sticks.

I felt bad for those who hadn't made RMIFT but excited for the rest of us. The money didn't bother me because I knew Mom and Sam would pay. (We call him Sam because he's our stepdad, not our real dad.) Ashley and I would probably babysit Dylan, our little brother, and do extra chores, so I didn't expect a problem.

Mr. Gminski raised a plastic cup of Diet Coke and saluted the whole team. (It makes me laugh when grown-ups with round bellies fill their plates and then drink Diet Coke.) He gave out awards like Comeback Player, Encourager of the Year, and dumb certificates too. I got the Best Run for the Bathroom award for an incident I'd rather not see in print. Trust me, we were all laughing when he finished.

I grabbed one more blueberry muffin and some baked fish at the buffet, then spotted Lynette on the way back to my seat. Her plate just had some fruit and vegetables on it. I thought about walking past her and not saying anything, but I couldn't. "You think there will be anyone from your old school at RMIFT?"

She glanced up, crunching a stalk of celery like it was my neck. "I doubt it."

"Be kind of neat if there was, don't you think?"

*Crunch. Crunch.* "Sure." She looked at her plate, which was almost empty. I can see studying a plate with country-fried steak or sweet-and-sour shrimp and egg rolls, but you don't study bits of carrots and broccoli unless you don't want to talk to the person in front of you.

"You and Kael really did great this year," I said. "Some kids work all three years of middle school, and you guys just started before Christmas, right?"

*Crunch. Crunch.* She nodded.

I looked at my muffin, which suddenly didn't seem half as appetizing as it had under the warm buffet lights. The baked fish turned soggy, and my tartar sauce ran on the hot plate. Wow. Now she had *me* studying food. "Do you like to ski?" I said.

She dropped a piece of broccoli and stared at me. "Look, Timberline, you don't have to try to be nice. I know how you feel. You know how I feel. My mom told you not to badger me."

“Badger?” I said. “I was just—”

“Drop it!” she said so loud that everybody in the restaurant looked at us. Then she lowered her voice. “Leave me alone. I don’t like you; you don’t like me. That’s how it is. Okay?”

I nodded and walked away, bumping into Kael. “What was that all about?” he said.

I shook my head and retreated to my table, where Marion was waiting. She handed me a full glass of Mountain Dew mixed with Dr Pepper. “I brought a refill,” she said. “It’s what you like, right?”

I wanted to ask her to leave me alone, but I set the drink by my cold fish and tepid muffin. It had just the right amount of ice, and Marion had put the Dr Pepper on the bottom, the way I like it.

“Thanks,” I said.





## CHAPTER 5

❧ Ashley ❧

When Mr. Gminski finished his meal, I asked how I'd made it to the tournament.

"You had enough first and second finishes to qualify," he said. "But the competition gets a lot tougher at RMIFT."

"What about Hayley?"

He winced. "She was really close. If she'd have finished third or better, she'd be going."

I tried to talk with Hayley, but she was in a corner booth with a cell phone to her ear, looking out at Pikes Peak, all purple and red in the twilight. I don't know about you, but I've been in that booth before.

I ate an ice-cream sundae until my stomach was so full I didn't think I could squeeze onto the bus.

When we filed into the parking lot, a car zoomed up. It was Mrs. Henderson. Hayley jumped inside. The whole thing put a damper on our celebration.

I got on the bus and sat behind Lynette. I'd heard her tiff with Bryce and wondered if she'd even look at me. "Congratulations," I said. "You and Kael should do well at the tournament."

"Yeah, you too. I think your performance has gotten better every week."

Hmm. She sure wasn't treating me like she treated Bryce. I leaned forward. "You were fighting with my brother in there. He can be a pain."

She shook her head. "He gets on my nerves. Tell him I didn't mean to yell."

Marion was the last person to get on the bus, and she sat by me. Her head was down, and she wiped her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"I called my mom and told her. She said there's no way we can afford this."



## CHAPTER 6

☺ Bryce ☺

*Mom and Sam beamed* and Dylan squealed when we told them about the trip. Dylan had no idea what we were talking about, but that didn't stop him from hopping around the house. Leigh, our older stepsister, was so thrilled that she said, "Huh" and went to the kitchen.

"Mr. Gminski sent an e-mail to parents, but I never expected both of you!" Mom said. "Do they need chaperones?"

I stared at Ashley. The last thing we wanted was for our mother to spoil the best trip of eighth grade. "He didn't say anything about . . ."

"No," Ashley said quickly. "I'm sure they have that covered."

Later Ashley told me what Lynette had said on the bus, and I just shook my head. “I’m staying out of her way from now until the end of time.”

“You’re going to avoid her?”

“She hates my guts and everything else about me.”

I closed the door to my room and put the trophy on the dresser. I kept looking at it, picturing the trophy from RMIFT. It would be as big as my dresser. I jumped in bed and couldn’t help smiling every time I opened my eyes and saw that trophy. First place.

It didn’t take long to drift off. When I did, I dreamed Ashley and I were on a ski lift, stuck high over a mountain. The wind whipped our faces and swung the chair so much that Ashley started to freak.

People below waved and told us to hang on, and a shadowy figure raced up the hill. Black hair swung beneath her hat. She pulled a lever and the lift jerked. Ashley screamed and I reached for her, thinking she was going to fall, but I slipped through the chair. The ground came closer, and I saw Lynette smiling.

That’s when I woke up. I heard once that you never die in your dreams, and if you do, it’s really bad. I looked at my trophy and tried to go back to sleep.



## CHAPTER 7

☘ Ashley ☘

*A week and a half later*, the finalists were in a meeting with Mr. Gminski, talking about the competition. Bryce and Lynette sat on opposite ends of the first row. Marion sat next to me, chewing on her fingernails.

Mr. Gminski told us what kind of clothes we'd need, that we should bring any special pillows or medicine (I have a seizure disorder), and what the rooms and food would be like. "This is not a plush hotel; it's a dormitory. You'll get a feel for college life."

"How will we get there?" Kael said.

“Mrs. Jarvis is the chaperone for the girls, and she’s letting us use her SUV. We’ll drive up Wednesday evening and return Sunday.”

“Competition Thursday, Friday, and Saturday?” Bryce said.

“Right—they’re staggering a few of the events so you’ll be able to watch some of the competition,” Mr. Gminski said.

He told us about the town and the shops, and I saw Marion cringe. When he finished with the practical stuff, he started the pep talk. “I don’t like to compare students, but this is my best team.” (One of his former students said he says this every year.) “The addition of Lynette has been wonderful, and all of you worked really hard. I don’t think there’s another school in the district sending five students.”

We all clapped. I wished Hayley were going.

“Practice at least once a day,” Mr. Gminski continued. “You’ll have to nail each performance perfectly if you want to move on, but I know you all have the ability to do that.”

We clapped again. It was the closest I’d ever come to a locker-room speech by a football coach. Forensics is a sport of the mind—remembering stuff, speaking—but it’s every bit as nerve-racking as football or basketball. At least that’s what I think.

“There’s just one more item,” Mr. Gminski said, looking at his clipboard. “Payment is due, so I’ll need a check no later than tomorrow. Some of you have already paid.”

Everyone left but Marion. We’d tried to raise money for her, but all our plans fell through. I stopped at the door and watched Mr. Gminski erase the blackboard. When he turned around, Marion said something.

“Excuse me? I didn’t hear that.”

“I said I can’t go.”

“That’s preposterous. Of course you can go. You’re the best in Im-promptu I’ve ever coached. You may feel a little nervous, but—”

“It’s not my nerves. It’s the money.”

He put the eraser down. “Marion, you’re going and that’s final.”

“I talked with Mom, and she said we can’t—”

“Marion,” he interrupted, “you’re not listening.”

“No, *you’re* not listening,” she said, not in a mean way but in a way that would make you cry if you heard the pain in her voice. “Mom’s having money trouble. We can’t afford it.”

Mr. Gminski smiled at her, and I wanted to kick him. It almost looked like he was making fun of her. He took off his reading glasses and leaned close, like a father checking out a skinned knee. “Marion, don’t worry about the money. Someone has agreed to pay your way.”

“What?” Marion’s mouth dropped. “Who would do that for me?”

“Someone who wanted to remain anonymous,” he said. “They believe in you and think you’re going to the finals. How you’ll pay for that is another matter, but as for RMIFT, you don’t have to worry.”

Marion covered her face. “Are you serious?”

Mr. Gminski put a hand on her shoulder. “Knock ’em dead up there, kiddo.”