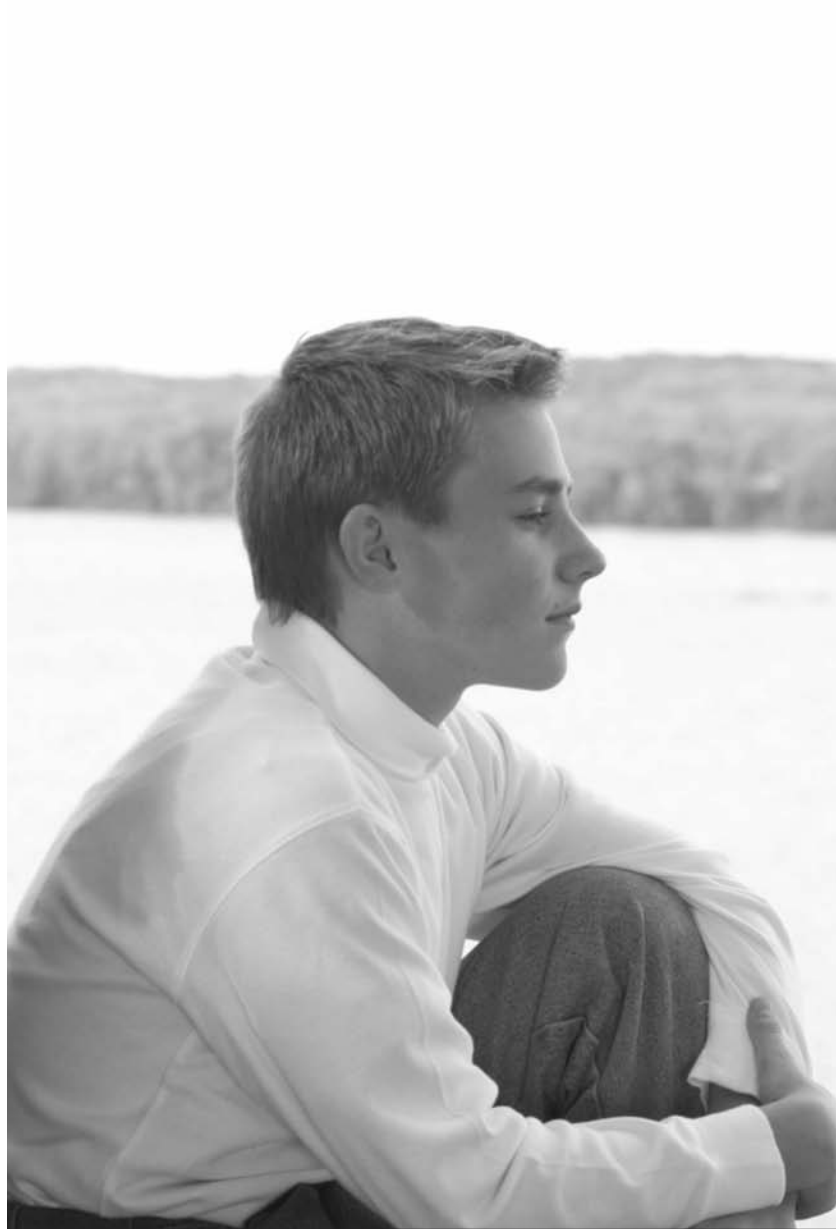


DEAD END

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Dead End

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**“If by my life or death
I can protect you, I will.”**

Aragorn

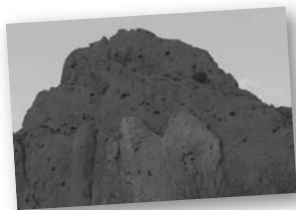
**“To finish is a sadness to a writer—
a little death. He puts the LAST word down
and it is done. But it isn't really done.
The story goes on and leaves the writer
behind, for no story is ever done.”**

John Steinbeck

**“So don't worry about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will bring its own worries.
Today's trouble is enough for today.”**

Jesus, Matthew 6:34

BEFORE



RED RIVER, TEXAS

The man had dark bronze skin, as if he had spent a year at the beach. His eyebrows were thick, and his black hair was cut close. He wore a black jacket and jeans and walked like a lion, strutting into the underground compound.

People stood when he entered. They had waited for this moment, worked toward it.

“Sit,” Dark Man said.

All obeyed, as they would a king.

He walked to a table filled with fruit, picked up an apple, and began eating. His gaze ran around the room methodically, analyzing each person. “Have the preparations been made?”

A short, bald man leaned forward, nervously twirling a pencil. “Sir, we’ve notified the cells that you are here, and Operation Hamar is ready—”

“How many schools?” Dark Man interrupted.

The bald man handed a folder to him. “Fifteen in the Midwest. Twelve in the East. Ten in the West. All of the attacks will be coordinated, so the authorities will not have time—”

Dark Man raised a hand and closed the folder. “You have information on the man I seek?”

The bald man glanced at a woman across the table. An American. Short brown hair. She stood before she spoke as a sign of courtesy. “Sir, we’ve matched two children in Colorado with the identity of the previous target.”

“Timberline?”

“Yes. As you believed, the agent was never on the plane. When it was destroyed, he went into hiding, assuming a new identity.”

Dark Man opened another folder and studied a picture—a mustached American in cowboy boots and a denim jacket. “Samuel Timberline,” he hissed.

“He married the widow of a businessman on the plane. He has an older daughter by his first wife and is stepfather to three.”

“A family of six.” Dark Man laughed. “Convenient.”

“He is a charter pilot,” the woman continued. “He lives in that house; his wife is a writer. We know his schedule. We know everything.”

He tossed the apple core and slammed the folder on the table. “Where?”

She opened a map and pointed. “The town is called Red Rock.”

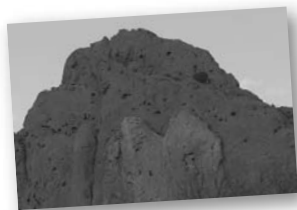
“You have made their school a target?”

The woman smiled and nodded.

Dark Man sat and leaned forward, elbows on the table. “We have waited to show America our power. Now we will strike where they are most vulnerable.” He pounded a finger on the picture of Sam Timberline. “I will coordinate the initial strike in Colorado. And I promise you, this man and his family will be the first to die.”



PART 1



CHAPTER 1

THREE WEEKS UNTIL THE END OF SCHOOL

✿ Ashley ✿

Eighth grade is supposed to be the highlight of middle school, but it's been a mixed bag for Bryce and me. He's my younger twin brother—I'm older by 57 seconds. We've had victories in speech tournaments, and Bryce had a good basketball season, but a lot of bad things have happened with our friends.

Bryce and his friend Kael aren't talking. My best friend, Hayley, got mad because I've spent time with Marion Quidley. Marion asked a lot of questions about God, but she hasn't become a Christian. I wonder if she ever will.

School is winding down—only three weeks until the eighth-grade

dance and summer, and the beginning of ninth grade is just around the corner. They called us “pixies” in sixth grade. I wonder if “freshmen” will be worse at Red Rock High.

The best thing about the past few weeks has been our writing contest. It promises great prizes and guarantees at least one winner per school, so a lot of kids have entered.

We were eating dinner early that Sunday because Pastor Andy was picking Bryce and me up for some volunteer work. Leigh, our older stepsister, came running in crying. It wasn't the kind of thing you see in the movies, where a girl makes a big scene and wails like a police siren. I could just tell by the way she didn't look at us as she passed.

Dylan, our little brother who's finishing kindergarten, bit into his meat loaf and spit it out. “Hot!” he said.

“Blow on it,” Mom said, putting her napkin down and following Leigh.

Bryce doused Dylan's meat loaf with ketchup.

“Can you mash my potato?” Dylan called after Mom.

“Here, I'll do it,” I said. His potato was cut in half, and a river of butter ran through it. I used a fork to mash it, but I got potato skin mixed in, which he doesn't like. “Try your corn,” I said.

“I don't like corn. It makes me toot.”

Bryce snickered.

Mom came back and settled Dylan down with a cup of lemonade. Then he cried because he didn't want to look at the meat loaf he'd spit out, and I couldn't blame him.

“When is Sam coming home?” I asked Mom. He and Mom are okay with us calling him that because he's our stepdad.

“He's still in DC. I'm not sure when he'll be back.”

“What's going on?” Bryce said.

She sighed, and I could tell that she knew more than she was saying. “It’s an alert. They asked him to look at some Internet messages—chatter, he calls it.”

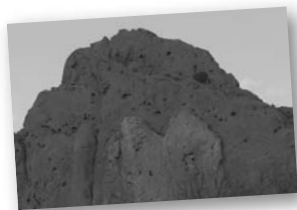
“What’s wrong upstairs?” I said, changing the subject.

She gave me a worried look. “I’m not sure.”

Dylan dropped a hunk of meat loaf into his corn, and he cried so hard it sounded like someone had chopped off his ears.

Pippin barked at the front door, and Bryce and I jumped.

“That’s Pastor Andy,” he said. “See you, Mom.”



CHAPTER 2

☺ Bryce ☺

Pastor Andy has been leading the youth group at church for almost five years, which is a lifetime for a youth pastor. He does a lot with the senior high kids, and his wife has called Leigh a couple of times, but that's pretty much like asking a snowman to go tanning.

He drove the church's van, and there were a couple of older kids inside who acted like Ashley and I were nuisances. Andy asked us how we were doing and about school. He mentioned Leigh, and I told him that she still didn't want anything to do with church.

"Too bad," he said. "I was hoping with what's going on . . . well, I had hoped she'd change her mind."

"What's going on?" Ashley said.

Andy blushed. “I . . . uh, can’t really talk about it.”

I looked at Ashley as Andy launched into a description of our jobs. The youth group mows yards for old people and picks up trash along the highway. At Christmas, Ashley and I babysat for a woman whose husband died. It was sad, but Ashley and I knew what those kids were going through. The first Christmas without Dad was the worst.

“The old place we’re working on used to be a school and I think a government building at one point,” Pastor Andy said.

“What are they doing to it?” I said.

“It’s going to be an orphanage. The Chapmans are renovating it. They’re the ones with all the foster kids. The place has nine bedrooms, but it’s trashed right now.”

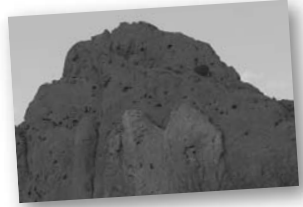
“What’s our job?” Ashley said.

“We’re cleaning so they can paint. The basement will be more of a challenge. I was hoping you two could handle that.”

We parked behind a brick building that looked like a fire station. It had a huge archway in front and some broken windows on the third floor. Hammers pounded inside, and a radio blasted a Christian group.

“What do you think Andy knows about Leigh?” I said as we walked to the basement.

Ashley shrugged.



CHAPTER 3

✿ Ashley ✿

Bryce and I put on gloves and little white masks so we wouldn't breathe too much dust. Our first task was to haul dusty boxes outside to a huge trash bin.

I'd seen the Chapmans in church. The mom and dad couldn't have children, so they tried adoption. When that fell through they took in a foster child. A second one came, and soon they had a lot of kids.

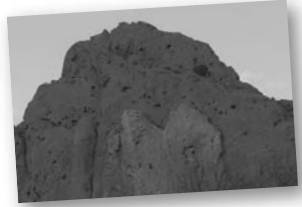
After an hour of hauling, the basement looked better. We found a huge fireplace, and I imagined a Ping-Pong table, couches, and a big TV down there.

Pastor Andy checked our progress and looked impressed. He held up his watch and said, “You probably won’t be able to finish, but up next is the ceiling. We need to tear it out.”

Bryce and I removed crumbling tiles that looked like chalk. Many were water damaged and fell apart. I stood on a stepladder, Bryce on a chair, and we threw the tiles in a corner. When we had a tall stack, we’d dump them in the bin and brush the dust from our hair.

We were halfway through with the main section when something tumbled out of the ceiling.

Bryce held it up. “Ash, it’s a wallet.”



CHAPTER 4

☺ Bryce ☺

The wallet looked a hundred years old and was crumbling. I opened it, my hands shaking. There was nothing green inside, just some faded pictures, a Social Security card, and an old key. I read the name to Ashley.

She shook her head. “Never heard of him.”

I stuffed the wallet in my pocket and worked on the next panel. Four more wallets fell out. A piece of paper stuck out of one. It was a pamphlet folded in half that talked about the best way to survive an atomic bomb.

“Ash, these have been here a long time.”

Pastor Andy came back, and we showed him the wallets. There was no money in any of them, but there were old letters, driver's licenses, snapshots, and one even had a ring. We found 12 wallets in all.

Andy looked them over. "You two are good at mysteries. How do you think they got up there?"

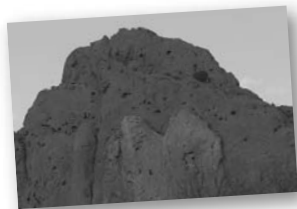
I looked at my sister. "You go first."

Ashley scratched her head. "The ceiling is low, so somebody tall could have stolen them and stashed them there."

"That would explain why there's no money in them," I said. "What should we do with them?"

"Take them and I'll talk with the Chapmans," Andy said.

We put the wallets in a garbage bag. I wondered if the memories in them were more than just trash.



CHAPTER 5

✿ Ashley ✿

Bryce and I rode our bikes to school the next day. I saw a friend by the bike rack and talked. We lost track of time, and I was late to first period. Not a good start to the day. Plus, Marion Quidley saw me and kept walking.

When I went to get my lunch, an envelope fell out of my locker. A bustling crowd passed as I stooped to get it. It had my name written on the front in red ink.

Strange.

I opened it carefully and found an expensive card with a picture of a single rose on the front. My heart skipped a beat.

“What’s up?” someone said behind me.

I shoved the card under some books and turned. It was Marion.

“Nothing,” I said. “You going to lunch?”

“Thought I’d eat outside. It’s a little windy, but I sit behind the climbing wall.”

“I’ll join you,” I said, grabbing the bag I had packed this morning.

Once Bryce and I graduated from elementary school, Mom made us pack our own lunches. She supplied ham or turkey or peanut butter and jelly, along with chips and snacks. She said if we were old enough to drive ATVs, we were old enough to make our own lunches.

The sunshine was almost blinding as we walked outside, and it made me think of Bryce. He loves watching the Cubs or the Rockies—just the sight of grass growing and sunshine makes him pine for baseball.

Marion didn’t say anything as she opened her organic-yogurt container and a bag of whole-wheat crackers. Her family doesn’t have much money, but somehow she always comes to school with the healthiest food.

“Guess you’re wondering where I’m at with the God thing,” Marion said, licking her plastic spoon.

I was really thinking about the card in my locker, but I nodded. We’d had a good talk in Tres Peaks, and she seemed interested in spiritual stuff.

She crunched a few crackers. “Remember what you said after I gave my speech?”

I shook my head.

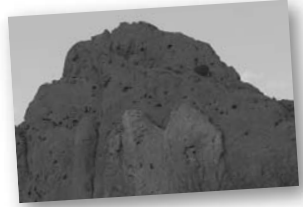
“I asked, what if God hadn’t answered my prayer about going to the tournament? What if someone hadn’t paid the money?”

It was coming back. Marion had made a bargain with God—that

if he let her go to the tournament, she would read the Bible. “You’ve got a new problem?” I said.

“A long time ago I prayed about my dad’s health. Why would God answer a prayer about a dumb old speech tournament and keep my dad sick?”

I opened my peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and tried to think of an answer.



CHAPTER 6

☺ Bryce ☺

At lunch I looked for Ashley but couldn't find her. I ate fast and walked into the courtyard. It was a gorgeous day, perfect baseball weather, and the wind was blowing toward the fences. The Cubs were playing in St. Louis tonight.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed the Chapmans' number. Pastor Andy had talked with Mom and told her the Chapmans didn't know anything about the wallets. I wanted to ask some questions myself and had looked up their number before we left the house. Mrs. Chapman answered and gave me her husband's work number.

I called him and told him about the wallets.

“Yeah, Andy told me about your find,” Mr. Chapman said. “Any money inside?”

“Mostly licenses and stuff. I’m wondering if you know about the building’s history.”

“The previous owners were young. They had it only a year and gave up on turning it into a restaurant. Sorry.”

“Anybody else who might know?”

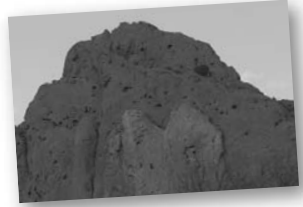
He paused. “I know a collector who keeps up with the history of the town.”

“What’s his name?”

“Bob Gerrill.”

The name rang a bell, but I couldn’t place it. It wasn’t until I found a local phone directory that I put it together. I had talked with him after some of his Civil War artifacts were stolen. I dialed his number and asked if I could stop by after school.

“Sure, Bryce. I’d love to see you again.”



CHAPTER 7

✧ Ashley ✧

I wished Pastor Andy were here or that I could give Marion a book or a tape, but she was looking at me with hungry eyes. It's funny that you can pray for someone, and then when they get interested in God and ask questions, you panic.

“When you mentioned your bargain, it kind of made me nervous because some people treat God like a genie. You ask for stuff and rub the lamp, and he gives it. The problem comes when he doesn't give what you want.”

“You think I think God is a genie?”

“No, I didn't mean it that way—”

“Because you act like you know everything, Ashley.”

I couldn't speak. Her words were like daggers. Someone once said that telling a person about Jesus is like a beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. The beggar beside me wasn't happy with the directions.

“You asked me a question,” I said. “I *don't* know all the answers. But I do know that God loves you and wants the best for you.”

“Then why did he let my dad get sick? If Jesus can raise the dead and stop a big storm, why wouldn't he do this for me?”

“Let's back up. Do you believe there's a God?”

“I don't know anymore.”

My heart dropped. I'd pictured Marion going to church with us. Mom had talked about starting a Bible study at our house for girls my age, and I hoped Marion would be there. Now I wasn't even sure she wanted to be my friend, let alone follow God. “Why don't we go see Pastor Andy? He's a really neat—”

“I don't want anything to do with churches,” Marion said, standing and brushing sand from her pants.

“He'd answer your questions.”

The wind whipped up and blew Marion's hair. She crumpled her brown bag. “I don't need to talk. I know the answers to my questions. My dad's seeing a doctor in Denver tomorrow. They say it might be his last chance.”