

ESCAPING DARKNESS 10



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RED ROCK MYSTERIES

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JERRY B. JENKINS · CHRIS FABRY

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Escaping Darkness

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**“ DO or DO NOT.
There is no try.”**

Yoda

**“As long as ALGEBRA is taught
in school, there will be PRAYER in school.”**

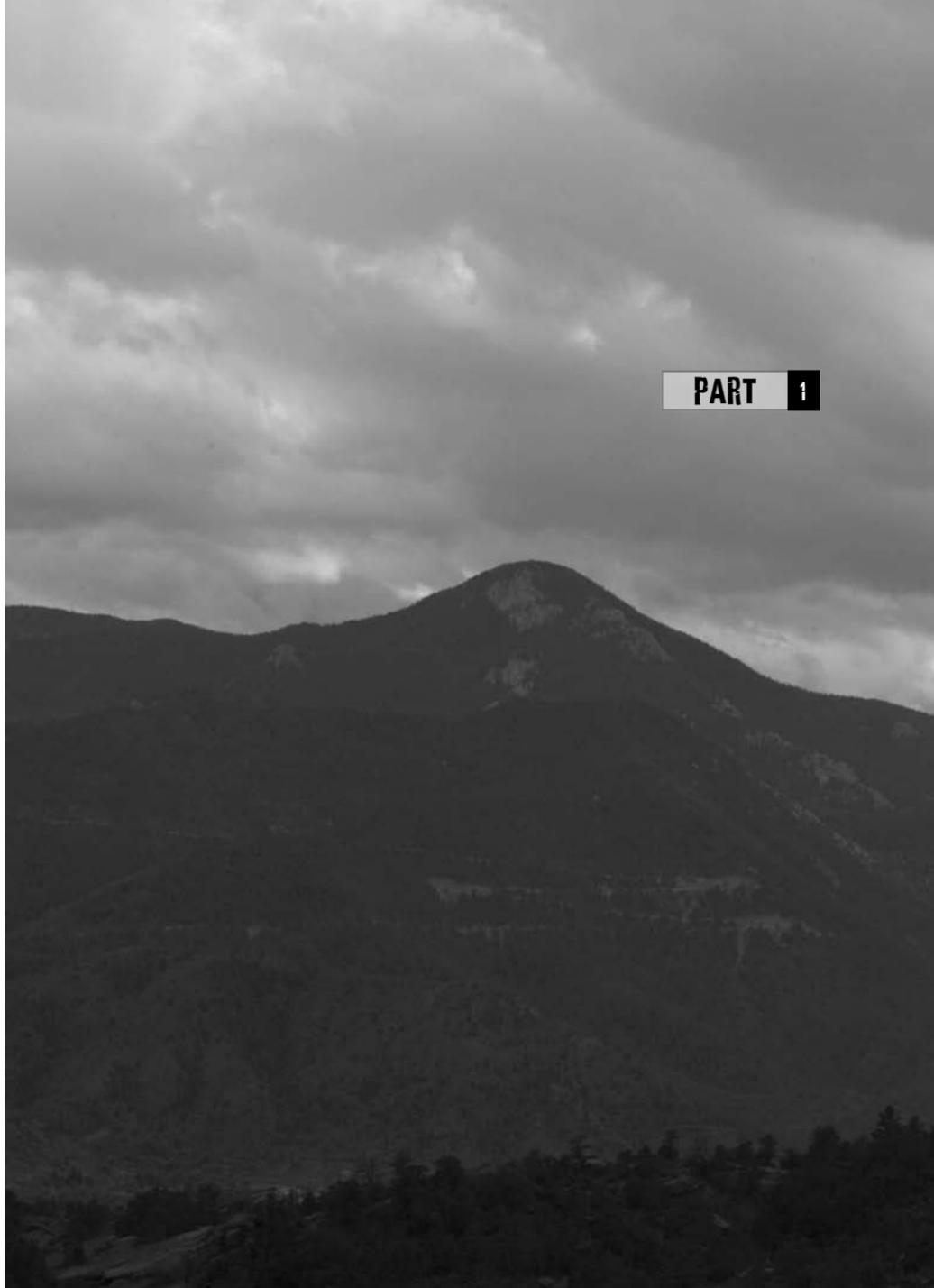
Cokie Roberts

**“Calling ATHEISM a religion
is like calling BALD a hair color.”**

Don Hirschberg

**“I once wanted to become an
atheist, but I GAVE UP—
they have no holidays.”**

Henny Youngman



PART

1

BEFORE



Darkness was her constant friend. An inky, black nothing. She had stopped counting the days, stopped trying to remember when she hadn't felt hungry. Trapped. Alone.

During the day a sliver of light pierced the door, and she strained to see more of it. Beautiful daylight.

Before she had been locked away, before her cries for help, she remembered daylight, soft and pure and warm. Now it felt a world away.

What parents could do this to their own flesh and blood? Were they really her parents? How could people be so mean? so uncaring?

The one bright spot was her brother. He brought her food late at night or when their parents weren't around. Broken pieces of sandwich. Crackers. Once, some peanut butter in a little plastic case. She ate it with her fingers.

He promised he would get her out. Promised he would help. But how?

It was hard to remember life outside the darkness. How can you imagine happiness?

She had seen a few movies—once at the theater in the big red seats with the smell of popcorn so overwhelming it made her stomach hurt just to think about it. She played these movies over and over in her mind. Dog movies. Horse movies. Kids-on-the-run movies. She tried to remember what the people in them said, but she couldn't, so she'd make up words. Moms and dads saying, "I love you." She had to make that up.

She listened closely. The creaking floor. Wind against the roof. A scratching, skittering in the walls.

She slept when she could and tried not to dream. Dreams were the worst. Even worse than the darkness.

In the morning, when the light tried to invade, she thought of God. There had to be a God. She had seen people on TV talk about him. Say that he loved her. Knew her name.

She prayed the only way she knew how—in whispers and cries and in a song someone, somewhere, had taught her.

*Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong,
They are weak but He is strong. . . .*

She clung to the last line like a drowning man to a piece of driftwood. She was weak. Alone. She needed help. Jesus was strong. He would help her because he loved her. He would rescue her.

She had seen pictures of Jesus, with a long, white robe and flowing hair and beard. In the moments before she fell asleep, she imagined him opening the door, a silhouette blocking the light. He

would reach down and take her hand, then pick her up and carry her away.

Please, God. Please help me. Please, Jesus. Don't let them hurt me anymore. I won't be bad. I won't try to run away. I won't eat much. Please send someone to help me.

At times she thought she could almost hear him say, "I hear you." But those words were always drowned out by their voices, the yelling and cursing.

It was hard to breathe. She had gotten sick on her first day inside. A headache. Upset stomach.

She leaned back and swallowed. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Before she fell asleep again, she looked at the sliver of light at the bottom of the door and said a final prayer. "Please, God, if you're there, I need your help."



CHAPTER 1

☺ Bryce ☺

The crack of the bat split the air—one of the best sounds in the world—and the crowd at Coors Field *oohed* and *aahed*. The Chicago Cubs were in the middle of a four-run first inning, and I couldn't believe I was seeing them in person again.

My name's Bryce Timberline. My twin sister, Ashley, doesn't like baseball much—she just comes for the food. My stepdad, Sam, had promised to take us to a game when the Cubs came to town in September, and the place was packed. We had to park a few blocks from the stadium, and Dylan, my little brother, complained about the walk from the minute we got out of the car.

Our stepsister's boyfriend, Randy, finally put Dylan on his shoulders and carried him. Leigh—she's 17 and a senior now—put her arm in Randy's just like Mom did with Sam. I rolled my eyes and hurried ahead, hoping they wouldn't ask to leave the game before the last out.

Sam hadn't said anything about our seats, but I could tell when we went up the thin escalator that we weren't sitting in the cheap ones.

Before we'd sat in the Rockpile in center field, way up in the discount seats you get at the grocery store if you buy \$100 worth of food. But I'd never been in this part of the stadium. There were pictures and framed jerseys signed by past players on the walls, plaques celebrating special moments, and even a statue.

But the best part came when Sam ushered us inside a luxury box.

"Wow!" I said. "Sweet."

"Exactly," Ashley said. "A sweet suite."

There was a little kitchen, flat-screen TVs mounted in two corners, a leather couch near the window, and tall barstools along the wall.

"Guy I flew last week offered us this," Sam said. He has a growly voice, like there's gravel in his throat. "I told him how much you were looking forward to the Cubs game, and he said he'd be out of town tonight."

I looked out the big window at the field. A perfect view. We were on the same level with the guys who do play-by-play on TV and radio.

Someone knocked, and three people rolled in steel trays filled with hot dogs, bratwurst, pizza, hamburgers, vegetables, and dip. A cooler taller than Sam held Coca-Cola, Sprite, Dr Pepper, and root beer. Dylan looked inside like he was at a soda museum.

“Do we have to pay for this?” Leigh said.

“I think it’s included,” Sam said.

Randy grabbed a plate and piled the pizza high.

Outside the window a balcony hung over the field. The 10 seats out there sat in two private rows. I snatched a soda, stacked a bunch of veggies next to a burger, and headed for the front row.



CHAPTER 2

✿ Ashley ✿

I could tell Bryce thought he had died and gone to baseball heaven. His field of dreams. He likes baseball as much as breathing, and if he had to choose, I think he'd rather play or watch baseball.

He remembers our real dad taking him to Cubs games in Chicago. Our real dad died in a plane crash, and in a strange way, that's how Mom and Sam came together. Sam's wife and little daughter were on the same plane. Mom met him at one of the memorial services.

Our real dad had gotten kind of religious on Mom before he died, but she didn't want anything to do with church and the Bible. But after she was married to Sam, who's not a Christian—and neither is

Leigh, his older daughter—something clicked and she started going to church. Bryce and I tagged along, and it wasn't long before we understood about God and what he'd done for us. Now we spend a lot of time trying to convince the people we love the most that God cares for them.

Anyway, when the game started, Bryce was in the front row talking with Randy about batting averages, ERAs, and the play-offs. (Randy plays on the Red Rock High School baseball team, so he knows a lot about that stuff.) Sam sat behind them, his arm around Mom. Dylan had parked himself in front of the cooler.

"You doing that pole thing Tuesday?" Leigh said, crunching cauliflower with ranch dressing. She flipped through the TV channels to a reality show.

"See You at the Pole?" I said.

"Yeah, whatever. You doing that?"

The crowd cheered. Someone had hit a home run. Or struck out. Or maybe a dog had run onto the field and the security guys were chasing it.

See You at the Pole is a nationwide thing where Christian kids gather at the flagpole at their schools to pray and sing.

"Bryce and I probably will."

"Why do you bother?" Leigh said.

At first I thought she was trying to be mean. But the way she said it, the ranch dressing running down her hand, her eyes fixed on the TV, made me think she really didn't understand why anybody would be so . . . radical.

"I think it makes people feel better," she said before I could answer. "If they stand out there in front of everyone, they think God likes them more."

"That's not the way I feel," I said.

She switched to a show where people ate horse-intestine-flavored Popsicles (or something like that). “Then why?”

“Solidarity.”

She looked at me like *I* had just eaten a horse intestine.

“It means unity—”

“I know what it means, Ashley. I didn’t know you did.”

Now she was sounding mean, like an eighth grader shouldn’t be using such big words, but she motioned with her cauliflower for me to continue, her eyes glued to the TV again.

“When we stand around that pole and sing and pray, it feels like we’re not alone. Even some of the teachers—”

“So it is about a feeling,” she said.

“It’s more than that. We ask God to forgive us, we pray for the teachers and the administrators, and we pray for our friends who don’t know God. . . .”

Leigh turned from the television and stared. “People like me.” There were green specks on her tongue from a piece of broccoli.

I shrugged. “I’m just saying. . . .”

She flicked the channel again, and a preacher with perfect hair came on. He held his hands over a big pile of letters and said he was going to pray.

“I’d like to tie this guy to a pole,” Leigh said.