

#1 BESTSELLING AUTHORS
JERRY B. JENKINS & CHRIS FABRY

RED ROCK MYSTERIES

2: STOLEN SECRETS



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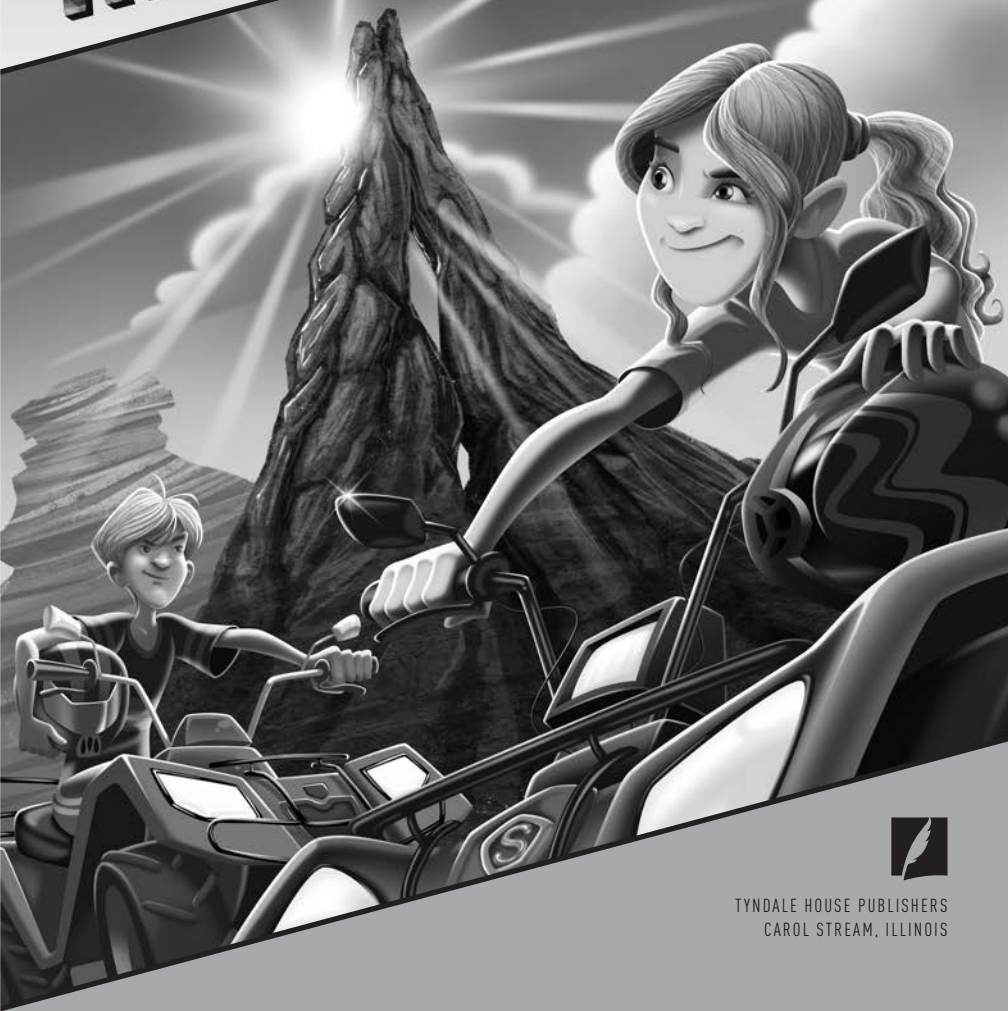
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“Atticus was right.
One time he said you never
really know a man until you
STAND IN HIS SHOES
and walk around in them.”

HARPER LEE,
To Kill a Mockingbird

“**WE** are all in the gutter
but some of us are looking
at the **STARS.**”

OSCAR WILDE



Four words.

That's all it took to turn Ashley and Bryce Timberline's world upside down. Ashley gasped as she stared at her stepfather, Sam. Bryce's jaw fell.

Tears rimmed Sam Timberline's eyes. "I'm so sorry. You have to believe me."

Ashley started to cry. "What are you sorry for?"

"For killing your father."

Kathryn Timberline, the twins' mother, trembled. Leigh, their 16-year-old stepsister, stared at the ceiling. The only sound came from the creaking backyard swing where four-year-old Dylan played.

Bryce finally broke the silence. "How could you have killed him? He died in a plane crash."

Sam nodded, his forehead wrinkling. His hair was only flecked with gray, but he looked like he had aged overnight.

Ashley and Bryce had been so close to him over the past week—the trip to the mountains, a brush with death.

“You killed Dad?” Ashley said, a tear zigzagging down her cheek.

Sam stood and stepped toward them. The phone rang. He hesitated, then walked to the kitchen.

“Mom?” Ashley said.

Her mother simply shook her head.

Bryce gazed out the window at the red rock formation beyond their property line. It stood in a protected county area where he and Ashley liked to drive their four-wheeled ATVs.

Sam spoke quietly into the phone and walked outside. When he returned, he gave his wife a pained look. “I need to leave for a couple of days.”

“What?” Bryce said. “You can’t just tell us you killed Dad and then leave.”

“I want to tell you everything. But I can’t. Not now.” He knelt before Bryce. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“You saved our lives on that mountain,” Ashley said.

Sam nodded. “I love you guys. But I have to go.”

He went upstairs and returned with an overnight bag and the keys to his new truck. He called Dylan in, gave him a hug, and walked out.

“Leigh?” Bryce said.

She shrugged. “I don’t know much more than you.”

“Anything is more than we know,” Bryce said.

“Everything changed after that crash,” she said. “I lost my mom and little sister.”

“What do you mean, changed?” Ashley said.

“Where we lived. Even our . . .” Leigh bit her lip. “Look, I don’t feel right saying more.”

“You’re right. It should come from him,” their mother said.

“And what about us?” Bryce said, jumping to his feet. “What are we supposed to do? Our stepfather just admitted he’s a murderer.”

“You’re only 13,” Leigh said. “I don’t think you can handle—”

Bryce gritted his teeth. “You have no idea what I can handle, Leigh.” He ran upstairs to his room and stood looking out the window.

“Bryce!” his mother called.

Ashley followed her brother.

“Ashley, wait,” Kathryn said. “When Sam can tell you more, he will.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to keep secrets,” Ashley said from the stairs. “Our whole lives have been a secret. You don’t even trust us enough to tell us the truth.”

“I don’t know the whole truth,” her mother said, crying.

Ashley trudged to her room and closed the door. She got out her favorite candle—pumpkin and spice. Then she opened her journal and fell on the bed.



CHAPTER 1



ASHLEY

I was the first one into the mirrored room at Peak Academy of Dance. We call it PAD. I put my stuff in the corner and started stretching. The last couple of days Mom had spent a lot of time on the phone, I guess with Sam. I had no idea where he had gone. Leigh stayed away from Bryce and me. It was all so mysterious.

Only Dylan was normal. When he gets a scratch anywhere on his body, he puts Band-Aids over it. Today he put three on his right arm, four on his left, one on his forehead, and even one in his hair. It was the first time I'd seen Mom smile in days.

Mom told Bryce that Sam would be back by Saturday, but Bryce

didn't seem to care. The two of us hadn't talked much about Sam's confession, but I'd written several pages in my journal.

What do you do when you find out your stepdad is the reason you're miserable? What do you do when the man your mother chose to marry says he's responsible for the death of the father you loved?

Bryce and I had moved to Colorado from Illinois with our mom and little brother. Our real dad had died in a plane crash—the news said it was terrorists, but now . . .

A year later Mom met Sam at a memorial service for the victims. Sam's wife and daughter were killed in the same crash. Mom and Sam fell in love and were married.

Sam adopted us and we took his last name. A year after that, Mom got religious on us. We thought it would pass, but it didn't, and soon Bryce and I both became Christians.

Sometimes when things like this are going on, I walk through life in a daze. Dancing helps me focus. It's kind of like my mom's writing, I guess. I get into another world. The music and the movement take over, and for an hour I go someplace else in my mind.

I didn't want the hour to end. When it did, Mrs. Gunderson came in. She's the head of the academy. She had us all sit down and explained that this would be the last week for candle sales for PAD.

"You know how important this is," she said with a smile, "so I'm expecting big results. And the one who sells the most will win these." She produced a pair of ballet shoes like the professionals wear.

I looked at my own ratty shoes and my heart sank. I had sold only one candle, and that was to Mom. The girls around me squealed and whispered how many each had sold, which made me even more depressed.

While we packed up our stuff, parents peeked in the window, whispering to each other, then escorted their kids outside. Weird. As I walked through the lobby past the front desk, I found the door locked.

“We’d like you to wait inside for your mother, Ashley,” Mrs. Gunderson said.

“But I always meet her in the parking lot.”

“Tonight’s different, dear.”

I got a drink of water and noticed one of the dance teachers guarding the back door.

“What’s going on?” I said to my friend Hayley.

She shrugged as she changed into her tennis shoes. “Place is on lockdown. Maybe somebody stole something.”

“They’d be going through our stuff if that happened,” I said. “There’s your mom.”

Mrs. Henderson rushed in and hugged Hayley, something I had never seen her do. People whispered everywhere, and I was relieved when Mom pulled into the parking lot and hurried in.

“What’s wrong?” I said as we headed out.

“Something terrible, Ashley.”