

For Mark Collins, best husband and father in the world.



ZONDERVAN

Last Breath

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Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Last breath / Brandilyn and Amberly Collins.

p. cm. — (Rayne Tour series ; bk. 2)

Summary: For sixteen-year-old Shayley, a dying man's last words about her long-lost father are almost worse than the violence and murders occurring during her famous mother's rock concert tour, and she is driven to find out if they are true.

ISBN 978-0-310-71540-5 (softcover)

[1. Murder—Fiction. 2. Fathers and daughters—Fiction. 3. Paparazzi—Fiction. 4. Single-parent families—Fiction. 5. Rock groups—Fiction. 6. Fame—Fiction. 7. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Collins, Amberly. II. Title.

PZ7.C692Las 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2009015212

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920. www.alivecommunications.com

Interior design by Christine Orejuela-Winkelman

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 • 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Y*our father sent me.*

The last words of a dying man, whispered in my ear.

Were they true? What did they mean?

Guitars blasted the last chord of Rayne's hit song, "Ever Alone," as Mom's voice echoed through the Pepsi Center in Denver. The heavy drum beat thumped in my chest. With a final smash of cymbals, the rock song ended. Multicolored laser lights swept the stadium. Time for intermission.

Wild shrieks from thousands of fans rang in my ears.

I rose from my chair backstage. Tiredly, I smiled at the famous Rayne O'Connor as she strode toward me on high, red heels. In the lights her sequined top shimmered and her blonde hair shone. She walked like a rock star — until she stepped from her fans' sight. Then her posture slumped. Mom's intense blue eyes usually gleamed with the excitement of performing, but now I saw only sadness and exhaustion. How she'd managed to perform tonight, I'd never know. Except that she's strong. A real fighter.

Me? I had to keep fighting too, even though my legs still trembled and I'd probably have nightmares for weeks.

Your father sent me.

I had to find out what those words meant.

"You're a very brave young lady," a Denver detective had told me just a few hours ago. I didn't feel brave then or now.

"You okay, Shaley?" Mom had to shout over the crowd's screams as she hugged me.

I nodded against her shoulder, hanging on tightly until she pulled back.

The applause died down. Voices and footsteps filled the stadium as thousands of people headed for concessions and bathrooms during the break.

Kim, the band's alto singer, laid a tanned hand on my head. A white-blond strand of hair stuck to the pink gloss on her lips. She brushed it away. "How you doin'?"

"Fine."

Our bodyguards Mick and Wendell walked over to escort Mom. Wendell's eyes were clouded, and his short black hair stuck out all over. He hadn't even bothered to fix it since the life-and-death chase in our hotel a few hours ago. He was usually so picky about his hair. Mick looked sad too. They both had been good friends with Bruce.

Bruce had been killed hours ago. Shot.

And he'd been trying to guard me.

My vision blurred. I blinked hard and looked at the floor.

"Come on." Mom nudged my arm. "We're all meeting in my dressing room."

Mick and Wendell flanked her as she walked away.

Usually we don't have to be so careful backstage. It's a heavily guarded area anyway. But tonight nothing was the same.

Kim and I followed Mom down a long hall to her dressing room. Morrey, Kim's boyfriend and Rayne's drummer, caught up with us. He put a tattoo-covered arm around Kim, her head only reaching his shoulders. Morrey looked at me and winked, but I saw no happiness in it.

Ross Blanke, the band's tour production manager, hustled up to us, along with Stan, the lead guitarist, and Rich, Rayne's bass player. "Hey," Ross put a pudgy hand on Mom's shoulder. "You're doing great." He waved an arm. "All of you, you're just doing great."

"You do what you have to," Stan said grimly. His black face shone with sweat.

We all trudged into the dressing room. Mick and Wendell took up places on each side of the door.

Marshall, the makeup artist and hairstylist, started handing out water bottles. Marshall's in his thirties, with buggy eyes and curly dark hair. His fingers are long and narrow, and he's great with his makeup tools. But until two days ago, he'd been second to Mom's main stylist, Tom.

"Thanks." I took a bottle from Marshall and tried to smile. Didn't work. Just looking at him made me sad, because his presence reminded me of Tom's absence.

Tom, my closest friend on tour, had been murdered two days ago.

Mom, Ross, Rich, and I sank down on the blue couch — one of the furniture pieces Mom requested in every dressing room. This one was extra large, with a high back and thick arms. To our left stood a table with lots of catered food, but no one was hungry. I'd hardly eaten in the last day and a half and knew I should have something. But no way, not now.

Stan, Morrey, and Kim drew up chairs to form a circle.

"All right." Ross sat with his short, fat legs apart, hands on his thighs. The huge diamond ring on his right hand was turned to one side. He straightened it with his pinky finger. "I've checked outside past the guarded area. The zoo's double what it usually is. The news has already hit and every reporter and his brother are waiting for us. Some paparazzi are already there, and others have probably hopped planes and will show up by the time we leave."

Is Cat here? I shuddered. The slinky-looking photographer had pulled a fire alarm in our San Jose hotel the night before just to force us out of our rooms. The police told him not to get within five hundred feet of us. Like he'd care.

My eyes burned, and I was so tired. I slumped down in the couch and laid my head back.

Ross ran a hand through his scraggly brown hair. "Fans out

there are gonna be talking about what they heard on the news before the concert. Rayne, you should say something about it.”

“Yeah.” Mom sighed.

Rich frowned. He was moving his shaved head from side to side, stretching his neck. His piercing gray eyes looked my way, and his face softened. I looked away.

Everyone was being so nice. Still, it was hard to know three people had died because of me.

Ross scratched his chin. “We got extra coverage from the Denver police at the hotel tonight. Tomorrow we head for Albuquerque. It’s close enough for Vance to drive the main bus without a switch-off driver, and the next two venues are close too. But we’ve all been through a lot. Can you guys keep performing?” He looked around, eyebrows raised.

“Man.” Morrey raked back his shoulder-length black hair. “If three deaths in two days aren’t enough to make us quit . . .” His full lips pressed together.

I glanced hopefully at Mom. *Yeah, let’s go home!* I could sleep in my own bed, hide from the paparazzi and reporters, and hang out with my best friend, Brittany.

But canceling concerts would mean losing *a lot* of money. The Rayne tour was supposed to continue another four weeks.

Mom leaned forward, elbows on her knees and one hand to her cheek. Her long red fingernails matched the color of her lips. “I almost lost my daughter tonight.” Her voice was tight. “I don’t care if I *never* tour again — Shaley’s got to be protected, that’s the number one thing.”

I want you protected too, Mom.

“Absolutely,” Morrey said, “but at least the threat to Shaley is gone now that Jerry’s dead.”

Kim spread her hands. “I don’t know what to say. I’m still reeling. We barely had time to talk about any of this before getting on stage tonight. I feel like my mind’s gonna explode. And *Tom* . . .”

She teared up, and that made me cry. Kim had been like a

mother to Tom. Crazy, funny Tom. It was just so hard to believe he was gone.

I wiped my eyes and looked at my lap.

“Anyway.” Kim steadied her voice. “It’s so much to deal with. I don’t know how we’re going to keep up this pace for another month.”

Mom looked at Ross. “We can’t keep going very long with only Vance to drive the main bus.”

Ross nodded. “Until Thursday. I’d have to replace him by then.”

“With who?” Mom’s voice had an edge.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to jump on it.”

“You can’t just ‘jump on it.’ We need time to thoroughly check the new driver out.”

“Rayne.” Ross threw her a look. “I *did* check Jerry out. Completely. He had a false ID, remember? That’s what the police said. I couldn’t have known that.”

“You might have known if you’d checked harder.”

Ross’s face flushed. “I *did*—”

“No you didn’t! Or if you did it wasn’t good enough!” Mom pushed to her feet and paced a few steps. “Something’s mighty wrong if we can’t even find out a guy’s a convicted felon!”

What? I stiffened. “How do you know that?”

Mom waved a hand in the air. “The police told me just before we left the hotel.”

I stared at Mom. “When was he in prison?”

Mom threw a hard look at Ross. “He’d barely gotten out when we hired him.”

Heat flushed through my veins. I snapped my gaze toward the floor, Jerry’s last words ringing in my head. *Your father sent me.*

My father had purposely sent someone who’d been in prison?

“Rayne,” Ross snapped, “I’ve told you I’m sorry a dozen times—”

“Sorry isn’t enough!” Mom whirled toward him. “My daughter was taken hostage. She could have been killed!”

Rich jumped up and put his arms around her. “Come on, Rayne, it’s okay now.”

Maybe Jerry had lied. Maybe he’d never even met my father.

Mom leaned against Rich, eyes closed. The anger on her face melted into exhaustion. “It’s not okay.” Mom shook her head. “Tom’s dead, Bruce is dead. And Shaley —”

Her words broke off. Mom pulled away from Rich and took a deep breath. “We can’t decide this now. It’s only fifteen minutes before we have to be back on stage. I still need to change.”

Stan stood. “I say we figure on doing Albuquerque, and then we can decide about the rest.”

“Yeah, me too.” Rich got up, along with everyone else. I could see the business-like attitude settle on all their faces. Soon they had to perform again. Every other concern had to be pushed aside. In the entertainment world the saying was true: *the show must go on*.

Within a minute everyone had left except Mom, Marshall, and me. Mom threw herself into a chair by the bright mirrors so Marshall could adjust her makeup. When he left, she changed into a steel-blue top and skinny-legged black pants.

I sat numbly on the couch, four words running through my mind. *Your father sent me*.

Mom didn’t know what Jerry had whispered to me as he died. I needed to tell her. But how? Like me, she was running on empty. It would be one more shock, another scare. I wasn’t sure she could take any more and still perform.

Had Jerry told me the truth? Had the father I’d never known — the man my mother refused to talk about — purposely sent a killer to join our tour?

I needed to know. I needed to find out. Because if it *was* true — the danger was far from over.