

THE
COURAGE
of KINGS

DANA HALLIN

ILLUMIFY MEDIA GLOBAL
Littleton, Colorado

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To my grandparents, Harold and Velma Hallin,
who not only poured their wisdom and love into my life
but taught me that all stories find their way to us from that
first, sacred story.

PROLOGUE

SOMEWHERE IN THE TRANSYLVANIA AREA OF ROMANIA

There were no warnings. Not a sound.

One moment, children were playing outside in the cool, feeble sunlight of an early spring morning, happy to be released from the stale air and cooking smells of a long winter spent indoors.

The next, they were falling to the ground. The playground was soon littered with crumpled little heaps scattered in the grass.

Two women, schoolyard attendants, stood chatting about neighborhood gossip and the challenges of getting their husbands to fix things around their houses.

As the children began to fall to the ground, the women's conversation slowed, sputtered, and finally stopped. They looked around, frozen in terror and disbelief.

Dear God, what was happening?

A shooter? A gas leak?

They slowly turned in unison to scan the fences of the property line, back to the little heaps and then up into the sky, their questioning thoughts hanging in the silent air, like frozen laundry left out on an abandoned clothesline.

Chapter 1

LOS ANGELES

Bree stared at the envelope propped up against the lamp at the corner of her desk. Yes, that was her friend Cynthia's impeccable handwriting. No need to open the envelope. Bree already knew what was inside.

The elegant handwriting on the expensive white parchment blurred in and out of focus as she struggled to keep control of her emotions. What had her grief counselor said? *When you have strong emotions, address the thoughts fueling them.*

That was it. She was supposed to address her thoughts. Thoughts that apparently only needed the arrival of a graduation announcement in the mail to come snaking out of the darkness, coiling next to her, hissing seductively, "*It's just an apple . . . Just one bite. One . . .*"

She shook her head, sending the bottom of her silky blonde bob sliding across the top of her collar. When she couldn't shake the dark thoughts away, she stood up and walked around the room, blindly skirting shelves and tables filled with exquisite urns, beads, pottery, and icons. The red soles of her shoes tapped out a muffled SOS as she paced across the corner of the Persian rug.

"Not now. Not now. Please, not now!" she pleaded softly with herself.

Suddenly she felt haunted by the mementos around the room, mementos collected during her—their—extensive travels. Each piece

represented a memory or shared experience, and today, it was impossible to keep her mind from drifting toward those dangerous cliffs.

Another turn around the room. Bree could feel her pounding heart begin to slow as she fought to ground herself in the present. She took a deep breath and allowed herself to look around the room, taking in each personally chosen piece of furniture as if for the first time. Hers was an office envied for its distinctive style and design, something she had once valued so much.

She glanced at the envelope as she made yet another pass by her desk.

Two years. Had it been two years? She stopped in front of the bookshelf where his framed photos had once been. She had put them away because they had been painful to see every day, but now their absence seemed even more unbearable. Her knees weakened, and she blindly felt for the nearest chair.

There was no stopping it now. The floodgates had opened, and the waves she had so valiantly held back were now crashing up against her fierce resolve.

Another look at the white envelope and she felt herself slipping into memories of that night—and the white light in his hospital room.



It is the light that is so unnerving. Bright and unrelenting. That and the noise. She hears the machines pumping their rhythmic clanks and beeps, heralding another precious second of life for Jayden. She is standing at the end of the bed, watching two members of the ICU post-op team hover over the unconscious form of her son.

Ben is standing at her side, and they are both dressed in expensive and now disheveled evening attire. The police had finally tracked them down at one of the many fund-raising social events that crowded their calendars. By the time they arrived, Jayden was already in surgery.

Now she studies his face. Is it a blessing that he is not conscious? She has no way of knowing. His head is swathed in dense white gauze, his eyes

closed and barely visible as his lungs are pushed up and then down with each compression of the machines.

The authorities are calling it a “random gang shooting.” Apparently, Jayden had been driving home on the 10 from a Lakers game. There was no evidence of any road rage. The lone eyewitness indicated that a dark-windowed sedan had sped up next to Jayden’s SUV and shot him through the glass at close range. He was unconscious and in cardiac arrest en route to the hospital. Surgery was immediate. No time for her or Ben to weigh in on top surgeons or to access their concierge health-care facilities. They ended up in the Cedar Sinai trauma unit along with every other gunshot victim in LA tonight . . . and they are at the mercy of the Fates.

The initial trauma team has been replaced by an ICU team schooled in critical post-op care. They seem to be working on every part of Jayden. Bree wants desperately to touch him, but there is no space for her. She reaches for his one exposed foot. It’s cold. Oddly manlike. When did her boy change into this man? An alarm goes off. More frenetic activity. More consultations. Still the bright light. Internal cranial bleeding. More surgery. She must let go. A nurse is pulling her away from the now-rolling bed. She hears a sobbing woman scream, “Ben! Ben! They are taking him! Do something! We can’t let him go . . .” And of course, it’s her own voice . . .

Bree heard a persistent buzzing. The traumatic images continued to swirl around her. The intercom on her phone still buzzed. Gradually she managed to pull out of the memories and regain a sense of where she was. Now. Today.

She and Ben *had* let their son go that night. He’d never survived the second surgery.

She couldn’t move to respond to the intercom, and it eventually stopped. It was probably her assistant saying she was leaving for the night.

Bree sat rooted to her chair, emotions still ricocheting between memories from that awful night and the sight of Jayden’s best friend’s graduation announcement propped against the lamp on her desk.

It was so unfair. Why couldn’t she be thrilled for Zach without being devastated by her own loss? Zach’s story was a glorious one. His

future so bright. Just like Jayden's had been. Why had this happened to her only child? What spinning cosmic needle of fate had landed on *her* son's life? She couldn't begin to answer this or any of the other questions that ultimately followed.

Bree felt ill-equipped for metaphysical quandary. She hadn't been raised that way. Her world and that of her parents had been created by calculated effort, not by introspective thought. Her father had drilled the concepts of focused objectives and self-determination into her psyche before she was old enough to make a conscious choice. She'd ridden those ideals from her first grammar school awards ceremony all the way to a Harvard MBA and beyond.

From her mother, Bree had inherited an equal drive for perfection and style. Her appearance, her home, her lifestyle, and even her family reflected Bree's carefully curated taste. There's no doubt that her choices had enhanced her position as CEO of the travel conglomerate she had eventually built. It was an accomplishment that had withstood the advent of the World Wide Web, the resulting thrust of e-commerce and, the crash of '08.

It had not survived the death of her son. She'd sold it the year after he died. "Taking the cash off the table" was how she had presented it to the world, but the truth was that it was her crushed spirit that was "off the table." She'd negotiated a two-year employment contract so she could keep working six days a week. It was the only way to keep what was left of her life buried under the weight of routine and order.

Not that it had done any good. Once again, she had been overwhelmed by relentless dark thoughts and emotions. No wonder she had stopped seeing that quack of a therapist. No one should have been better equipped to isolate and control negative thoughts and emotions than she, Breelyn Stanton. And yet, all it had taken was one envelope, and here she was, unraveling all over again.

Bree stood and picked up her Prada bag. Her last view of the office from the doorway was the desk lamp shining down on a symbol of the life she'd once had but would never have again.

Chapter 2

LOS ANGELES

Furious, Ben crushed the pages of the newspaper in his hands and slammed the wadded ball into the wastebasket by his desk.

This was always how it started. He'd be deep into a day of meetings and projects, and then some random thing, like coming across an article about three soldiers dying in Afghanistan, would trigger his grief and rage.

These were young men like Jayden. Jayden at the age he would have been today. So much promise. So much waste. Was Ben the only one who wanted accountability? Did anyone even have a clue at this point why the US was fighting in that godforsaken place? He felt like calling up his senator and asking her for a justifiable synopsis of the US position and military objectives for that interminable war. The only reason he didn't was that he knew he'd just get some politician-speak, filled with bullshit rhetoric that would send his blood pressure into orbit.

Ben looked down. Despite his best efforts, the names of the dead soldiers were still partially visible on the crumpled newspaper in the wastebasket. He took off his glasses and laid them on his desk, exposing his lean, angular face and intense blue eyes, now dark with the frustration and anger he couldn't seem to shake.

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing the back of his neck.

He thought about the parents of the young men and what they had gone through when they were notified of their sons' deaths. He'd once watched a documentary on the military protocol for getting dead US soldiers home. Even with decades of practice, there was just no good way to tell any parent their child was gone.

He knew that from experience.



He feels the air leave his lungs, doubling over as if he has been punched in the stomach. He grasps for the doorframe in order to stay standing. Bree is wailing, her body half on the bed as she pleads with Jayden to stay alive . . .

The police officer that night had crashed some “save the whales” (or dinosaurs) thing Bree had talked him into attending. How surreal to be dressed in a tux, holding a champagne flute, when you find out your kid is in critical condition in some hospital. The officer had launched into the details of Jayden’s condition. He was still talking as Ben scanned the room for Bree. He spotted her across the room, deep in conversation, blissfully unaware of what she was about to learn.

He’d made his way through the crowd, then gently taken her arm and led her nearly to the exit door before uttering the words he never imagined he’d have to say: “Sweetheart . . . there’s been an accident. Jayden is . . .” He couldn’t say the words. “Jayden needs us.”

The police had escorted them to the hospital under the protection of lights and sirens. Ben was grateful for the powerful engine of their Maserati sedan as they trailed the flashing lights through the LA traffic toward the hospital. Whenever he could, Ben had glanced at Bree. He’d silently willed her strength. *Bree, hold on, love; we will get there.*

Once they’d arrived at the hospital, Ben and Bree had rushed through the double doors, intent on finding their son. When they entered the trauma unit, they were not prepared for the sights and sounds of so many people caught up in a battle for life. Some people were grouped in clusters, arms around each other, seeking solace in hope and prayers.

Others were not so stoic, and their wails broke through the cacophony of conversation as doctors shared harrowing updates. Still others sat alone and silent, staring off with no one present to comfort them or share their sorrows.

As they stood frozen in the middle of all the human drama—Ben in his Armani tux and Bree in a floor-length, sequined gown—they'd felt like they had walked into a scene from an apocalyptic movie.

Eventually, they were escorted to a surgery waiting area on another floor, and finally, into a private ICU room. Jayden had lain motionless, barely recognizable under all the bandages. Ben had tried not to wince as his eyes followed the swollen shape of his son's head down to the ventilator that forced air into his lungs at regular intervals. His boy.

Oh my God . . . oh my God . . . oh my God . . .

The neuro and cardiac surgeons had funneled in and out, looking for positive responses or worsening conditions. Each took the time to inform Ben and Bree that they were dealing with a “worst-case scenario” and that the odds against Jayden's survival were minimal.

“I'm afraid it is only the heroic efforts of the first responders, and your son's incredibly strong heart, that have kept him alive this long,” the cardiac surgeon had explained. “The next few hours will be critical in determining the outcome.”

Ben and Bree could only nod, silent with the shock of what they were hearing.

“One more thing,” the surgeon added, “and again, I'm sorry to have to discuss this right now—I need to let you know that according to his driver license, he has elected to be an organ donor. At some point, we may need to make decisions that . . .”

Ben hadn't heard another word the surgeon was saying. He could see his mouth moving, but not discern the words themselves.

Organs? Jayden's organs?

He and Bree had stood at the foot of Jayden's bed that night, watching as the medical warriors continued to fight. As the surgeon had predicted, that night had proved to be an epic battle for Jayden's

life. Despite the Herculean efforts of every doctor and every possible medical response, they had lost him.

Much later, Ben had gone over every option, every possible scenario, looking for anything that might have changed the outcome for his son. He'd examined everything from Jayden selecting USC as a school, to transferring him to another hospital for different care and different surgeons. But in the end, it had been clear that there was nothing Ben could have done to prevent Jayden's death, short of keeping his son in a bubble. One thing he'd been sure of—neither he nor Bree would ever be the same again.



Ben looked away from the wastebasket and up to the skyline beyond the window of his office. Not just any office, but a corner office, in a building he had designed and built himself. Bree had nicknamed it the Taj Mahal because of how puffed up he'd been over the international awards and recognition it had received. Having his name on this building had always meant so much to him. It still did. After all, he had bucked a privileged childhood filled with expectations and opportunities as the son of a renowned surgeon to become the senior partner of one of the top architectural firms in the world. His father had wanted him to follow in his footsteps, and as Benjamin Stanton III, he had in many ways. But, while both of them had felt called to work with their hands, Ben's patients had been steel and concrete instead of the human body.

There was something about creating a structure from nothing but raw materials that made him feel almost godlike.

But now, of course, he knew he wasn't anything close to that. He couldn't be. Mainly because he couldn't stomach the idea of standing around, twiddling his thumbs, while innocent people suffered and died, refusing to get involved. Oh, the explanation for the lack of any divine intervention was always cloaked under the guise of "free will" or some other kind of carefully crafted religious dogma, but

he knew the truth. It was just another version of “pass the buck” rhetoric.

In the early days after Jayden had died, Ben had confronted God. “Either you’re God or you’re not!” he had yelled, pounding the steering wheel with clenched fists. “If you are, get in the game and quit letting this shit happen!”

Ironically, or maybe not, God had been too busy with the “twiddling” to answer him.

Irony. The word kept dogging him. Things just didn’t seem to turn out the way they should. Not just God’s absence or Jayden’s death. Even before Jayden died, in fact. For example, there was the time Jayden had come home from some “do-gooder” summer trip and announced that he wanted to become a doctor. A *doctor*. He’d made the announcement over breakfast, prompting Ben to glance up from his coffee and paper. He’d given his son a scathing look, while mentally shaking his fist at his dead father. It had only taken one generation and Ben Sr. had managed to reach out from the grave to repay Ben for choosing architectural engineering instead of medicine.

Eventually Ben had resigned himself to the idea. After all, Jayden was a good kid. If he wanted to be a doctor, then let him. But it had been a moot point. A couple of joyriding gang thugs had made the final decision about his son’s future. Poof. Done. No intervention and no explanation from the universe—or from Whoever claimed to be in charge.

In the two years since, Ben had been forced to reexamine his views about life and the nature of things. What he’d concluded was that he didn’t like what he saw in the world. Just like the names in the journal today. Who would have thought that simply driving on a city street would have been as dangerous as fighting in Afghanistan? At least in war you could carry a weapon and defend yourself.

No matter how hard Ben tried to find an explanation that made sense, it didn’t matter. In the end, nothing changed the outcome. Dead kids.

He was suddenly aware that his office was taking on the rich hues of the deepening purple sunset. He glanced at his watch, stood up, and

grabbed the keys to the Maserati. Bree would be waiting, and he didn't want her to be home alone.

As he closed his office door behind him, he decided that all the untamed chaos and injustice meant one thing: a God with no balls *and* no logic.

And that wasn't good enough for Benjamin Stanton III.