



**IN THE
SHADOW
OF STONE**

ROB KAUFMAN

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A Novel

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When Jack Fontaine's sister asked him to fulfill her dying wish, he agreed without a moment's hesitation. It was a simple mission; one he thought would cost him nothing.

"I know we haven't been close, Jack," she said, looking so deeply into his eyes he felt she was grabbing his thoughts. "But I also know that you're the one person who can do this for me."

Except for the dim light above her head, the hospital room was cast in silhouette, a pervading darkness swallowing the numerous get well cards taped to the wall. Jack studied her face, trying to remember how she'd looked before. Over the past year her eyes had fallen deep into their sockets, creating a skeleton-like shadow above her cheeks. The skin of her face was stretched thin, the outline of her cheekbones deforming her face. Her mouth, where there'd once been voluptuous lips, was now a thin slit; when trying to smile, she looked more like a corpse than a living being.

Jack touched the back of his hand to her forehead, wiping away the mist of perspiration. "Of course, Dana," he said, his voice tight with emotion, "anything."

She turned her head away from him and looked to the door. A tear slid down the side of her face into the deep wrinkles lining her neck. She turned back to her brother. "You're very successful." She licked her dehydrated lips and tried to swallow. "And so organized. That's why I'm asking you to do this for me."

"Organized?" Jack forced a smile. "I think you mean obsessive compulsive, don't you?"

Her lips tightened into a faint smirk. “You’re not compulsive,” she whispered, turning away slightly.

Just obsessive, Jack thought, fighting himself not to read too deeply into her omission of words.

As though she sensed his struggle, Dana lifted her hand from the soaked bed sheet and let it fall on his arm. “You’re great at everything you do, Jack. You know how to take control over any situation. That’s why I know you’ll be able to do what I need you to.”

This was the first time in recent memory he’d received a compliment from her. For as long as he could remember she’d been so judgmental, so high and mighty, that he didn’t realize she noticed his positive traits, let alone his success. He wanted to take hold of her thinning hair and pull it hard. “Why couldn’t you tell me this before?” he wanted to scream, “while there was still time to rebuild our relationship?” Instead he continued wiping her forehead.

Her tongue slowly edged through her teeth to try to moisten her lips. “I made a DVD for Jenna,” she whispered, “and I want you to keep it safe until her eighteenth birthday. I’d give the DVD to her father, but I know he’d either lose it or forget about it.” She held his eyes with hers. “You know I love Glen, but there are some things I can’t trust him with. He’ll be a good father to Jenna, I’m sure of that. But I can’t expect him to hold onto a DVD for ten years ... it just won’t happen. And I don’t know if Mom and Dad will even be around in ten years.” She stopped talking and looked at the ceiling. The realization that she was going to die before their parents struck them both at the same time. Her eyelids swelled with tears. “I know you’ll be able to do this for me.”

She blinked away her tears and cleared her throat. “I hid the DVD in the piano bench a few days before I came to the hospital. No one looks in there. I don’t even think anyone realizes the bench opens. No one except you.” She struggled with her tongue to keep it from sticking to the roof of her mouth.

“I got it,” Jack said, taking the small cup of water from the nightstand and bringing it to her mouth. Unable to swallow the tepid liquid, she swirled it around her mouth and spit into the cup with a look of embarrassment. “It’s okay,” he whispered, the emotion holding back his full voice. “And I’ll take care of the DVD for you.”

She let her head drop back onto the pillow and closed her eyes. “One last thing,” she said, her eyes still closed. “The DVD is for Jenna’s eyes only. No matter what, she should be the only one to see it – and preferably alone on her eighteenth birthday, okay?”

She took a long, heavy breath and within seconds was in a deep sleep – without warning or effort. Jack placed the cup of water back on the nightstand and glanced at the clock. It was 3:30 AM and he was starting to feel the hour. He strolled over to the window, opened the blinds, and pressed his forehead against the cool glass. Stars glittered in the black sky, reminding him of the nights he and Dana had camped out in their backyard as children. “Star light, star bright,” they’d say in unison, “first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” Staring at the brightest star in the sky they’d make their wish. Back then, Jack would always wish for friends. Dana, he figured, probably wished for a new baseball bat or catcher’s mitt.

As she lay in the cold hospital bed on the edge of death, Jack wondered what Dana had wished for as an adult. He was certain it wasn’t this.

The lights of Boston's skyscrapers blurred through his tears. Jack closed his eyes to squeeze out the teardrops so he could feel them on his face. He needed to know he was crying, to recognize the emotions he'd hidden for so long. He wanted to let everything out, cry until his eyes swelled, wiping the tears on his sleeve until the white cotton fabric was soaked. But only a single tear fell, the room so deathly quiet, he heard it hit the floor.

He picked the brightest star in the sky and made his wish, painfully aware he was already too late.

The sharp smell of hospital antiseptic pushed Jack's thoughts back twenty years to the nurse's office at Whitmore Junior High.

"Hop up on the table," Nurse Ann instructed, rubbing her hands together as if she were about to pluck a chicken. "Let's take a look."

Jack studied the gray hair piled on her head, the wrinkles around her eyes that made her look both happy and sad at the same time. She was Jack's picture of the perfect grandmother: a face filled with kindness and caring, misshapen fingers always fiddling with something and a rail thin body, slightly hunched over from years of catering to others. Jack wondered why she wasn't at home, rocking in a chair, knitting socks for the hoards of grandchildren he imagined visited her every Sunday.

"Up! Up!" she said again, patting the table behind him.

Trying not to crinkle the tissue paper covering the soft cushions, Jack jumped onto the table, his feet dangling more than three feet from the floor. He watched the nurse

carefully, noticing the precision with which she poured the clear liquid from the large brown bottle onto a cotton ball, squeezing the excess into the sink. By the way she slowed her pace as she walked toward him, he knew it was going to sting. Frantically, he tried flattening the tissue paper that crumpled on each side of him.

“Don’t concern yourself with that ,Jack,” she said, using her index finger to gently lift his head. “I need to make sure this doesn’t get in your eye.”

Before the cotton ball touched his broken skin, Jack flinched.

“Please, Jack. I need you to sit still.” Her voice was stern, but still held the same warmth Jack had come to know all too well. “This cut is very close to your eye and we need to be very careful.”

Jack clasped his hands and closed his eyes. Visions of the brawl he’d just escaped swarmed his thoughts as Nurse Ann softly dabbed the cotton ball on the cut. It didn’t hurt as much as he thought it would.

“How did this happen?” she asked, grabbing a fresh cotton ball from the square glass container.

Jack opened his eyes and turned toward Dana who stood in the corner of the room, covering her left eye, then her right eye, trying to read the eye chart on the wall behind him. She gave him her typical *I’ll take care of this* expression.

“He ran into a door again just as someone was opening it. He’s such a nerd sometimes,” Dana said, making faces behind the nurse’s back.

Jack nodded his head. “A door,” he mimicked.

But the lie didn't make him feel any better. He'd been humiliated again, the same way he'd been humiliated since school had started four months ago. The two most well-known bullies of the ninth grade had labeled him a nerd from the first day of school. It didn't matter that he was two years their junior; they'd pegged him the perfect target and let him know it: constantly surprising him from behind and pulling the pens and pencils from his shirt pocket or dumping his books as he walked home from school, making sure to leave a trail of crumpled notebook paper for him to pick up. The torment had become so routine Jack was astounded if a day went by without incident. He'd built his hurt into an invisible wall, resolving himself to the fact that he'd been chosen to bear the brunt of other people's anger.

But today's events had been different. There was pushing and shoving, cursing and pulling hair. When it started, Jack remembered thinking they must've had a bad morning and wondered if there was any way to soothe their souls before things got out of hand. He quickly found out there wasn't.

As he walked through the school cafeteria from recess, clipping his favorite pen to his shirt pocket, he suddenly heard snickering behind him. Before he could turn around, Jack and his books were sprawled out on the floor.

"Look," said Albert, the chubbier of the two, "his shirt's all dirty! Mr. Clean is dirty!"

His laughter cut through Jack like a sheet of ice. He darted his eyes around the room, searching desperately for a teacher, but it was just the three of them. Somehow he'd been left alone without adult supervision. At that moment he vowed never to forgive them, or himself, for allowing this to happen.

“Oh my,” Frank said, using his tall, lanky form to pretend to dance, “and his pen fell out of his shirt. What’s he gonna do? How’s he gonna write?”

As Jack tried to grab the pen from the floor, a giant sneaker landed on his hand. He studied the sneaker, noticing ripped pieces of rubber swinging down its sides, deformed pendulums wiping against years of caked mud hiding in the crevasses. That’s when he felt the tug on his hair, shocked into the realization that obsessing over a dirty sneaker shouldn’t be his top priority.

He was facing the tile floor as the fingers gathered his hair and pulled his head so far back he could see the fluorescent lights flickering in the ceiling. About to scream, he heard a door slam. Albert released his hair so quickly Jack’s head shot forward and hit the floor right below his right eye.

“You fat hunk of crap!” Jack heard Dana’s voice coming from a place somewhere miles and miles away. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” There was no response. “If you can *find* someone your own size!”

The silence spilled through the room. Jack rolled onto his back to see Albert and Frank backing up into the exit doors with each deliberate step Dana took toward them.

“We were just kidding around,” Albert said, sounding like an injured kitten.

They all knew who was in charge of the situation. Dana was the most popular girl in school, and the strongest. She’d taken karate for almost three years and was nimble and smart enough to make these boys suffer. And they knew it.

“If I ever see you doing this again, you’ll regret it more than your parents regret having you as kids.”

Seconds later, they were gone. Dana ran to Jack and examined the cut below his eye. She sighed as Jack tried desperately to smack the dirt from his pants.

“Will you not worry about that now, please! C’mon, I’ll bring you to Nurse Ann. She’s probably wondering why you haven’t shown up for your daily visit.”

Jack stamped his foot. “I don’t go there every day! Take it back, Dana!” he screamed.

Placing her arm around Jack’s shoulder, she helped him pick up his books and all his pens and his pencils.

“I take it back,” Dana said, gently pulling him toward the nurse’s office. “You’re so much younger than they are. That’s why they pick on you, you know.” Jack nodded, the embarrassment too thick on his tongue to utter a sound. Dana squeezed his shoulder. “C’mon. Nurse Ann’s probably worried by now.”

Jack jumped off the table and ran his finger lightly against the band-aid. He turned around and smoothed the tissue paper that still held his indentation.

“Why are you doing that?” Nurse Ann asked, rubbing the top of his head.

Dana ran across the room and grabbed Jack’s hand.

“He worries about those things,” Dana sighed, “always does. I heard my parents say he has control issues.”

Nurse Ann tilted her head and grimaced. “What do you mean?”

“Yeah,” Jack questioned, “what do you mean?” It never occurred to him that he had an *issue*, not to mention his family had been talking about him behind his back.

“I’m not sure,” Dana said to Nurse Ann, using her hands to iron out the air in front of her. “I do know that when everything’s clean and neat and in its place, Jack’s a lot happier. You should see how mad he gets when he comes into my messy room.” She giggled, looked down at Jack and tousled his hair. “But I did hear my parents say that he’ll grow out of it. I’m hoping it’s sooner than later!”

Jack felt the last of his energy drain from his body and was unsure if he could make it through the rest of the day. He’d not only been beaten up by bullies and saved by his sister, of all people, but now he discovered he had an *issue*. His head started to hurt and all he wanted to do was go home. But he had no choice in the matter. Dana had already grabbed his hand and was pulling him out the door.

“Wait!” Nurse Ann yelled, grabbing the pen from behind her ear. “I’ll write you a late pass so your teachers will know where you’ve been.”

Jack and Dana were half way down the hall when Dana turned her head around and yelled, “I got it covered!”

And she did – Jack knew that better than anyone else. He tightened his grip on her hand and tried with all his might to hold back his tears. She rubbed her thumb against his sweaty palm, making Jack painfully aware of her special gift, something he’d searched for within himself but could never find. Dana had a way of knowing what a person was thinking and the ability to soothe their soul with a simple look or tender touch. It was a gift she’d share with all the people who came into her life. A gift she had so often shared

with Jack, until the day she took it back and left him with empty hands and an aching heart.

Bars of light from the hospital parking lot crept through the vertical blinds along the ceiling above Dana's head. Jack watched the thin, white cotton sheet on her chest rise and fall with each shallow breath. Although she was only thirty-one years old, her illness made her look fifty; an appearance caused by the rampant white blood cells that had turned against her and run amok, killing her with every breath she took.

He'd tried to reconnect with her over the past year, asking for private meetings, opening dialogs to clear the air and cushion the blow of this very day. They'd met a few times and tried talking through their issues, but the meetings never worked out as planned. The hugs he'd imagined didn't come; the kisses and cries of forgiveness never materialized. Her belief that he betrayed her ran too deep, and she couldn't let it go.