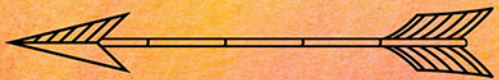
BRAVE MOMS, *brave kids*



A BATTLE PLAN FOR RAISING HEROES

LEE NIENHUIS

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Praise for *Brave Moms, Brave Kids*

Raising brave kids is a key to shaping generations to come. Lee has done the hard work of courage in her own life and in the life of her family to be the exact right person to walk us down this path. I'm grateful she is using her voice to call us all to be braver—for ourselves and for each other.

—Annie F. Downs, bestselling author of *Looking For Lovely* and *Let's All Be Brave*

Lee beautifully weaves together spiritual insights and real-life stories that will give you hope! She provides sound practical advice and supplies biblical tools that will help you gain confidence to be a brave mom in raising your children to be Jesus lovers and followers. Get ready to laugh, cry, be challenged and receive giant doses of encouragement. A timely word for today moms—*don't miss it*!

—Fern Nichols, founder, Moms in Prayer International

Lee gives an honest look at a young moms fears, worries and imperfections. Real life situations that bombard us. Yet she powerfully shares how we all can become the hero our children need so they can become the heroes this world needs. Her teaching is rich and deep in God's truth. Take your time and let your heart be transformed. Become the brave mom you want to be and leave fear behind. This is a book you will want to read again! A book every young mom needs!

—Sally Burke, president, Moms in Prayer International

Brave Moms, Brave Kids will be my new go-to book to encourage moms about raising faith-filled kids. Lee combines passionate, personal experience with practical application, approachability, and scriptural truth! It will change the way you parent and give you hope that you can still raise modern-day heroes of the faith.

—Marlae Gritter, director of global advancement, Moms in Prayer International

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Brave Moms, Brave Kids

LEE NIENHUIS

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BRAVE MOMS, BRAVE KIDS

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To Brendan, Gabriella, Lexie Beth, and Ryan

The wonder of it all is that I get to be your mama. There are no words to describe this honor. With all my heart I pray:

"That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

—Ephesians 3:16-19

I love you.

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A Word from the Author

What you hold in your hands is a gamble, truly—an act of faith on my part. I am in the throes of motherhood, so deeply buried in the trenches of the everyday that I don't dare take my eyes off my own mission. Four little people rely on me for everything from rides to practice and new shoes to bath time and a competitive Candy Land opponent. I am not done with my journey. I am not looking back with fondness over each step. I am right in the middle of my walk of faith in *this generation*, through the grit of the day with the trials of this fast-paced society and dark world.

There is still ample time for my kids to fall apart. Although they are making age-appropriate decisions to follow Christ today, tomorrow they could hit some rough patch and skid out of control. We never, ever know what a day will bring, do we? But as one of the wisest women I know once told me, "If you think you have motherhood figured out, one of two things could happen. You could become *paranoid* when it isn't going as planned. Or you could become *proud*. Both of those bring displeasure to God, Lee." Not having ultimate control could drive me crazy or it could drive me to my knees in prayer. I am choosing the latter.

Let's just address the risk right from the start. First, I could still mess up my kids. I am totally aware that I have an everyday fight against my own sin, and that surely in our close proximity the kids will take shrapnel from my own battle. If you were looking for a book

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written by a perfect parent, it's best for you to disengage now. I assure you, rarely do a couple of days go by that I don't wish I could redo a conversation or an interaction. You can't talk as much as I do and not dig yourself into a hole occasionally.

Yet I've produced children just like me, sinners desperately in need of the grace of Jesus. So the broken mother is part of this equation, but the broken kid is part of it as well.

Although all signs are good right now, my kids could still choose to walk away from the God their dad and I love so much. They might not choose dynamic faith, or faith at all. Experience tells us when children leave home, all bets are off. They make the choices about what they will believe and who they will become. We've all seen it happen—godly families with prodigals. The idea could slay me.

These are the concerns I have wrestled with extensively. When it came to finally writing this book, I felt all the *what ifs* and fear whispered, "*Unqualified.*" But down at the core of me, I believe that anything God has called me to do He will equip me to do. I am a student of God's Word, and in the Bible He laid out principles that must be followed for us to raise up another generation of Christ followers. His Word contains everything I need for life, godliness, and courageous motherhood and everything my kids need for life, godliness, and dynamic faith (2 Peter 1:3-4). My hope is not in my own strength, but in His. And I am going to do this afraid because I'm still feeling the butterflies along with the thought, *Surely there is someone else*. A quick trip through Scripture and history assures me most heroes are afraid at the beginning and maybe all the way to the end. They just choose to do it anyway.

> This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11 NIV).

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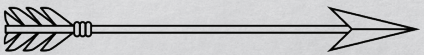
Part One

Tired of Being Afraid



In every great story is a defining moment, a time when a decision changes everything. This is our moment.

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1

Where Are All the Heroes?

Since it is so likely [children] will meet cruel enemies,
let them at least have heard of brave
knights and heroic courage.
—C.S. Lewis

The scene is dark and creepy. If there were background music it would be filled with dissonance, that eerie sound exactly the opposite of harmony. Unresolved tension leads us to feel in our very marrow how far we've traveled from where we are supposed to be. Danger lurks around every corner with enemies lying in wait to spring out in surprise. And just when it feels as though the danger has been avoided, a new, even scarier enemy or trap pops up.

What lurks around the next corner? Whom should I fear?

I change the channel on movies like this. I've never been the girl who wanted to be afraid on purpose. I'd take a good underdog story *any* day of the week over a creepy movie that leaves me feeling restless and unresolved. That's what dissonance is, after all. The problem is this isn't a movie. This is today.

Everyone is wondering when the hero will show up to do something about all this darkness and evil, but there's no symbol we can shoot into the sky to bring someone to the rescue. If only it were that simple.

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Dissonance: "lack of harmony among musical notes"; "a tension or clash resulting from the combination of two disharmonious or unsuitable elements"[1]

The dark scene greets us every morning. It's my town and it's yours. The world spins and warps as one natural disaster after another hits and weather forecasters remind us we are breaking every historical record. It's almost as though we are operating only in the areas of extremes. Not just in the weather, but in the volatility of the stock market, the place many of us trust with our financial investments, plans, and provision for the future. We've watched an entire hard-working generation lose their footing and sense of security in a couple of lousy days on Wall Street. Rising costs at the grocery store make us shake our heads and wonder how we will continue to feed our children well. And then there is the matter of evil—pornography, drug abuse, embezzlement, misuse of power and office.

We are in a time of redefinition of marriage and when the moral compass seems to have lost its needle altogether. Personal integrity, modesty, and purity seem archaic, as though those are words from a different century. While we may believe conceptually that such traits are best for our children, such attributes considered old-fashioned will undoubtedly open them up to shaming and mockery.

Perhaps it has always been this way, and now our eyes have been opened to the darkness. Or maybe the dark's rage is getting stronger. Jesus warned us that "in the world [we] will have tribulation" (John 16:33), but the reality of these trials seems so strong now. Is it just me or do Christians say now more than ever, "It's only going to get worse, you know"?

I woke up this morning to news of another mass shooting. It troubles me that I'm no longer shocked by the daily reports; they all seem common now. I pour myself another cup of coffee and prepare for another day of raising children in a violent world. Some days I want to scream, "Stop the madness!" and quit watching the news, or grab

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every one of our elected officials and say, "Do something!" I want to shout at the church and issue a rally cry to everyone I know. "Pray! We must pray!" On the ugliest days, when everything inside me quakes, I want to dig a hole in the backyard to hide in, gather my babies, rock them, and cry, "Come, Lord Jesus. Please, come."

This is not the world we wanted for our children. For pity's sake, in 2012 a man walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut and shot first graders. The next day I had friends researching bulletproof vests for their children and backpacks that doubled as body armor. We watched the news of parents frantic to find their children, and our hearts became like lumps in our throats. For days, I held my kids, prayed for the parents whose children would never come home, and wondered to myself, *What kind of evil shoots children?*

When I was growing up, wars happened on the other side of the world. Iraq was a land far, far away, and my dad, who was a retired lieutenant colonel in the army, made me feel safe. He assured me that our country's military far surpassed them all and that we were protected. That's what dads do. But one Tuesday morning the rules of security changed forever. September 11, 2001, changed America's vocabulary. Men living inside our country, who were neighbors, had jobs, and went to the grocery store like the rest of us, orchestrated an attack that killed thousands of people before the bleary eyes of a nation. Some of us hadn't even had our morning cup of coffee. I sat with my husband and close friends and watched replay after replay of the Twin Towers collapsing, wondering who could possibly have done this and why. Why kill innocent people?

We all changed that day, whether we were in our twenties and heading to work (like me), or trying to feed breakfast to a house full of kids, or quieting a child. That was the day the word *terrorism* found its way into the vocabulary of our everyday and the façade of safety shattered around us.

Today my children practice "active shooter drills" in school. They pile up like puppies, hidden in closets and corners away from doors

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and windows, just in case. When my daughter came home and told me about it, my heart ripped wide open. We don't watch the news around here much, and I try not to focus our attention on the darkness, but it creeps into corners.

Then we have the matter of persecution. Twenty years ago, if we read these words, we may have nodded our heads, agreeing that hypothetically we could sometimes be insulted as Christians: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12 NIV).

You could get whiplash over how quickly times have changed, and today nothing is hypothetical about being insulted and misunderstood because you follow Christ. Self-identifying as a Christian is a surefire way to become a target for mockery, suspicion, and accusation. Snide remarks and disgusted glances, however, feel welcome when we look at businessmen and businesswomen who are now forced to choose between obeying the law of the land and violating their God-given consciences. Allowing faith to become a private matter to protect our families' futures is a real temptation.

And then we have "YouTube" martyrdom. We have no words for watching men dressed in orange jumpsuits, kneeling on a sandy beach, hooded men with long blades standing behind them. Our breath gathers into knots in our throats and tears sting our eyes because we know what comes next—heads are severed for the sake of the kingdom of God. This is the ultimate sacrifice in following the Lord Jesus. Men dressed in black, faceless, asking men if they will deny Christ. It feels unholy to look away and too much to process all at the same time.

This morning my five-year-old son stood at the other end of our church pew and sang the words to "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" from the soles of his feet. His exuberance and conviction made the surrounding crowd turn and grin, and I'm certain also warmed them to the soles of their feet. I was proud of Ryan. My son *has* made the

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decision to follow Jesus, and as much as that sweet and spicy boy knows how, he *is* following Jesus. It's no small thing when your child declares his love for the Lord, publicly no less. But that pride and the tears of happiness that stung the corners of my eyes were soon replaced. The next line of that song says, "No turning back, no turning back." It could cost Ryan everything to follow Jesus, and that knowledge churns my stomach. I go back and forth between wanting to fist bump his dad in pride and excitement and wishing the following verse did not say, "The cross before me, the world behind me."

It will take a heroic effort to follow Christ in this generation and the next. Not too long ago I saw a sign in a rest area that said, "Looking for everyday heroes." I can't seem to let go of that phrase. Heroes don't wear capes and swoop in to save the day, and *hero* isn't a job description, no matter what the movies tell us. Heroism happens in a moment that you've trained for all your life. It's a revealing of the character stored up in you that meets the moment ordained for it to be revealed to the world. Years and years of practicing faithfulness has been stored up for the time it takes a stand.

> A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles. —Christopher Reeve[2]

What's a Hero, Anyway?

A hero is a faith-filled child of God who so believes in the goodness, worthiness, and faithfulness of God that she is obedient to His call on her life in public and private. Heroes are marked by integrity and a willingness to do the right thing when no one is watching. They are courageous—not foolish, but courageous—when fear could swallow them whole. They help when it hurts and stand when their knees shake. Heroes have strength and fortitude that hold firm when storms blow around them, knowing God's way is best despite opposition. They are willing to be used by God and allow Him to direct

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them into all that will entail. Heroes roll up their sleeves and get to work no matter how daunting the task in front of them. They are faithful and can be counted on to do the right thing, to cling tight to the Lord over and over. This is heroism, and if it has ever been needed, surely it is needed now.

The world pushes forward athletes and musicians who have been given big platforms and fame. But spotlights can be a distraction, and those who seek them can be easily knocked off-kilter. True heroes are people who do the right thing, whether or not anyone is watching.

Is it wishful thinking to hope Christian parents today can raise children who follow hard after their God? Do these kinds of people even exist anymore? It is so easy to be disenchanted and skeptical of all leaders. Our skepticism may have merit, but heroes of the faith are everywhere. We just need to know what we're looking for—and greater still, our children need to be trained to look for heroes and emulate them. Heroes won't always be the presidents of organizations, the ones giving speeches, or people with any accolades at all. They will be the faithful. The parents who hold coats over their kids' heads while it rains at the bus stop or the mom or dad kneeling in prayer when no one is watching. She may sit knee to knee with someone broken over loss, whispering the truth of Christ's power over that hurting heart. Or our hero may be a young man who says no to a temptation that nags again and again and again.

Heroes finish the race. They know it will be messy, bloody, and hard, but they refuse to give up on their God just because the journey is difficult.

Two Kinds of Mothers

I met a hero in the making at a family Christmas party this year. It isn't unusual for new people to be at our gatherings because the cousins are of marrying age and the grandkids sometimes bring friends. Sam, however, had no intention of marrying one of us—he is a foreign exchange student staying with my aunt and uncle. He

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introduced himself and told me he was from Mexico. He had planned on an exchange opportunity in Canada, but he was rerouted to Michigan. Canada's loss.

I could tell my aunt Jean was totally taken with this 17-year-old boy. Sam played games with the younger kids and made appropriate small talk with the adults. I remember thinking to myself what a cool guy he was. I had no idea what lay behind that engaging smile.

Jean and I found a spot to talk, and I asked her to tell me how the experience with Sam was going. She gushed about what a cool kid he was and explained how sad she was going to be when he left. He had rededicated his life to Christ at a youth event a few weeks before and had been loving his youth group. Sam had come out of a religious background and known the Lord, but he had not made the connection between heritage and personal, daily faith. I think that's why God sent him to Michigan.

Jean seemed eager to tell me his story. "Sam loves his country, Lee. He told me people think the Mexican people are lazy, but that they aren't." She assured him she knew that full well. She grew up on a fruit farm with migrant workers from Mexico coming to help bring in the crop. Jean worked side by side with many hardworking Mexicans. This must have bolstered his pride, because he explained, "Our television has shows that glorify the life of the drug lords. They have nice homes, fancy cars, and women. It's so wrong. What our people need instead of this way of life is confidence."

Sam is still developing where that confidence will find its grounding, but he wants to be a man who leads out of integrity and self-sacrifice. Jean leaned in. "Sam wants to be the president of Mexico." When he told each of his mamas—his own in Mexico and Jean in America—as much, the difference between their responses was like night and day. One spoke death to his dream and the other gave life to it. His mama in Mexico told Sam not to talk like that. "No, Sam. They kill the good men. You can't do that." Jean smiled over him and his plans and courageously whispered, "I believe you can."

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> If I want to raise a hero, I'm going to have to *become* a hero, because brave kids need brave moms.

This is what we live for as mothers—the moment when our child turns to us and says, "I want to do something great with my life in the service of others." Or "I want to follow Christ wherever He leads." This is the heart cry of a hero, and what we learn at the very bottom of it all is this: If I want to raise a hero, I'm going to have to *become* a hero, because brave kids need brave moms. Heaven help me if my fear keeps my child from serving the Lord and becoming a change agent in our dark culture.

The sacrifice is real. The danger is real. Let's do it anyway.

Lord,

This world is frightening and changing quickly. At every turn the Enemy seems to be winning ground, and at times the task You've given me to raise wholehearted Christ followers seems out of reach. I'm so grateful we don't face the road ahead alone. Start in me, Lord. Mold me into the brave, faithful woman of God You have created me to be. Then use me to develop children who make an impact for the kingdom of God for Your name and glory. In Jesus's powerful name I pray, amen.

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