

THE COURAGE TO COLLAPSE

Sometimes you have to break everything you knew
to build the life you deserve.

by Avi Virabean

For the fighters.

For the dreamers who refuse to give up.

For the ones who dare to believe that love can still win.

"Sometimes happiness isn't found. It's built.

Piece by piece. Kiss by kiss."

A Note from the Author

Thank you for opening these first chapters of *The Courage to Collapse*.

The story ahead is about healing, second chances, and the quiet bravery it takes to rebuild a life after everything falls apart. Whether you are reading this with your morning coffee or late at night with a glass of wine, I hope Ella and John's journey finds a small place in your heart.

Warmly, Avi

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

01 - THE TREE - BRASOV

Braşov, August 2017

Even now I can feel that fresh and cold mountain air.

The little tent stood outside the cabin, beneath a tree in a valley between the mountains. The sun slipped through the leaves and left bright patches on the canvas. They still had not decided whether they were brave enough to sleep in it. For now, it was simply waiting for them.

John carried their blanket outside. Ella followed with a bottle of white wine and two glasses.

"You know we have chairs inside," he said.

"I know."

"And a perfectly good table."

"I know that too."

"Then why are we sitting on the ground?"

"Because chairs do not have mountains around them."

He looked at her, then at the chairs visible through the open cabin door.

"That is a strong argument."

"I am a French teacher. Arguments are part of the job."

She spread the blanket beneath the tree. John sat down beside her, close enough that their shoulders touched. The mountain air moved around them, clean and cold, and Ella pulled her jacket tighter around herself.

"You are cold," he said.

"A little."

He reached for her hand and held it between both of his. Every few minutes, he looked at her instead of the mountains.

"You know you can look at the scenery," she said.

"I am looking at the scenery."

"No, you are looking at me."

"You are more interesting."

She smiled and turned her face toward the valley, pretending to be offended. It was not a very convincing performance. She had been smiling since they met at the station in Cluj-Napoca.

Neither of them was young enough to believe love alone could solve everything. They had already lived long enough to know about bills, lawyers, bad decisions, sleepless nights, and the quiet damage people could do to one another while still sharing the same bed.

Now they were sitting on a blanket beneath the tree, their shoes abandoned beside them, talking about movies, music, and how happy they were that in the end they had managed to be in each other's hands.

"If we had met earlier," Ella said, "I would not have liked you."

John put a hand over his heart. "That is a terrible thing to say on our vacation."

"You were probably unbearable at twenty."

"I am still unbearable. You simply have better taste now."

She reached for the bottle of wine and poured them both another glass. The bottle was already more than half empty. Their lunch had been simple: bread, cheese, tomatoes, and whatever else they had remembered to buy at the last village. They had forgotten salt. John had blamed the mountains. Ella had blamed John.

They laughed about the times when they had thought it was impossible for them to be together. Now it was happening. They were finally free: free to live, free to love, and free to laugh without checking the time or lowering their voices.

There had been a time when every phone call had to end quickly. A time when every message carried fear inside it. A time when John stared at his phone and tried to guess what silence meant, while Ella sat in another apartment and wondered how much of herself she could hide before she disappeared completely.

They did not need to talk about all of that today.

Today, John was lying with his head in her lap. Ella was running her fingers through his hair, occasionally tugging just hard enough to make him complain.

"You have too much hair," she said.

"It is one of my best qualities."

"Your beard is uneven."

"Another best quality."

"Your shirt is inside out."

John opened one eye. "That is fashion."

"That is laziness."

"Fashion is laziness with confidence."

She shook her head, but she was smiling again.

They entertained themselves with a bottle of white wine, cold as their exes' hearts.

The wine was warming them, enhancing their feelings. Or perhaps the feelings had been there long before the wine and were simply enjoying the excuse.

Ella shifted closer and asked him to sit up. John obeyed, suspiciously.

"What are you planning?"

"I am going to help you relax."

"I am already relaxed. I am drinking wine under a tree."

"You are carrying tension in your shoulders."

"I carry many important things in my shoulders."

"You carry everything in your shoulders."

That quieted him. She knew him too well now. She knew when he was joking to avoid an answer. She knew when he was tired, even when he insisted he was fine. She knew that sometimes he woke in the night and checked whether she was still there.

She jumped into showing off her massage skills. That massage workshop definitely paid off—now she felt his body more intensely, like they were dancing together with emotions and touches. Her hands, so warm, were doing a great job relaxing the strained muscles of his back.

John closed his eyes. The leaves moved above them. Somewhere nearby, water ran over stones. Ella's fingers pressed slowly into his shoulders, and for a few minutes he did not think about Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Charlotte, Victor, money, or the future.

He only felt her hands.

"See?" she whispered. "You can be quiet."

"I am concentrating."

"On what?"

"Not ruining this moment."

Her hands stopped.

"You are not going to ruin it."

He opened his eyes and turned his head toward her. "How do you know?"

"Because you are here."

It was not a grand answer. That was why he believed it.

They deserved this vacation. They both worked hard; it was quite inevitable these days. They had spent too many months loving each other through screens, bad connections, locked doors, and stolen minutes. They had earned a few days in which the only difficult decision was whether to make coffee or open another bottle of wine.

They knew that being in love under a bridge was not romantic; it was poverty. But money had never been the most important thing for them.

They had learned that love did not need an expensive restaurant or a perfect apartment. Sometimes it needed a train ticket. Sometimes it needed a phone call

made from a stairwell. Sometimes it needed a person who stayed, even after hearing the truth.

And sometimes it needed a crooked tent, warm bread, and a bottle of wine under a tree.

They were grown-ups, but they were happy and childish together. They often said, "Sad people are clowns with broken hearts."

John had no idea who had said it. Ella had no idea either. It did not matter. They had repeated it often enough for it to become theirs.

She leaned against him. He wrapped an arm around her waist. For a while, neither of them spoke. The silence between them was not the old silence, the one that had swallowed whole evenings and left two people sitting beside each other like strangers.

This silence was full.

Somewhere above them, a raven circled slowly, gliding between the treetops like a silent witness. Its dark wings caught the sunlight and disappeared again. John followed it with his eyes until Ella touched his cheek.

"What are you looking at?"

"A raven."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It depends on the story."

"This is our story. You decide."

He looked at her, at the loose strands of blonde hair moving in the wind, at the eyes that had once been afraid to want anything for herself.

"Then it is good," he said. "It is watching over us."

The wind rustled the leaves in a rhythm that almost matched their laughter.

The afternoon grew quieter around them. The cabin door stood open behind them, the little tent waited beneath the tree, and the mountains held the last warmth of the sun.

They were together after a long battle full of events, anger, jealousy, and love.

The wine bottle tipped slightly, the last drops falling into her glass. She raised it to toast—not to the past, not to the future—but to the now.

John lifted his glass to meet hers.

"To us?" he asked.

Ella looked at him for a long moment.

"To us," she said. "And to not make everything more complicated than it already is."

"I cannot promise that."

"I know."

Their glasses touched.

To them.

02 - HE - 1990-2002

But let's go back in time a bit, shall we?

John was born in Moldova, an Eastern European country and a former Soviet republic. A little boy with black hair and green eyes, raised on strict values and open air.

That boy had a beautiful childhood — the blessed pre-Facebook kind. He liked to tell stories about stealing apples from the old neighbor, playing with wooden sticks, thinking of them as swords, and countless adventures with his yellow bike, most of them ending with: "My mom had to bandage my hand and I was grounded for a week."

He was a smart kid, first in his class. His father — a special forces officer — raised him with love, respect, and everything that came with "being a real man." His mother, a nurse, taught him self-respect and good habits. They were strict. They were also devoted. And for a while, the world made sense.

When John was eight, his father insisted that he join a Sambo class. A retired officer he knew taught it in the village, in a plain room behind the community hall. The fee was small. The instructor mostly treated the classes as a way of giving something back to the place he had grown up in and staying connected to the people there.

John did not want to go at first. He wanted to play outside and come home dirty, not stand barefoot on a worn mat while older boys pushed him around. His father took him to the first class anyway.

"You will learn how to fall," he said. "And how not to make someone else fall unless you have no other choice."

Sambo taught John balance, patience, and the difference between being frightened and being helpless. His father watched from the doorway whenever he could, saying little and correcting John's posture with a brief touch to the shoulder.

Between school, Sambo, and the endless invitations of the street, most of his childhood could be summarized simply:

"I went to school, I came home, did my homework, then went out and did crazy kid stuff — just so one day, I'd have stories for my grandchildren."

One winter, after a night of heavy snow, his father woke him before breakfast.

"Get dressed, soldier."

John sat up immediately. "Are we going somewhere?"

"We are going to build a castle."

That was all John needed to hear. He pulled on two sweaters, thick trousers, and the wool hat his mother had knitted for him. By the time he reached the yard, his father had already cleared a wide patch of snow with a shovel.

"A castle needs walls," his father said. "And walls need a plan."

He drew a shape in the snow with the end of the shovel: four walls, a narrow entrance, and two towers at the front.

"This is the gate," John said.

"The gate is too wide. An enemy could walk straight in."

"Then we need a drawbridge."

His father looked at him seriously for a moment. "Excellent thinking."

They worked until their gloves were wet and their cheeks burned from the cold. His father packed the snow into hard blocks while John carried them, one at a time, and placed them along the walls. Sometimes the blocks collapsed. Sometimes John stepped on the wrong place and sank up to his knees. Each time, his father helped him out without laughing until John was safely standing again.

"A good commander does not abandon his men," his father said.

"Are you the commander?"

"I am the king."

"Then I am the general."

"You are too small to be a general."

"I am a very dangerous general."

"I can see that."

By midday, the castle stood in the yard, crooked and magnificent. It had thick walls, two uneven towers, and a little opening through which John could spy on the imaginary enemy.

The neighborhood children noticed it from the street. First came two brothers from the house next door, then a girl in a red scarf, and finally Andrei, who had followed them while carrying a broken wooden sled.

"Can we come in?" one of the brothers asked.

John stood behind the wall. "Who are you?"

"The king's army."

"You look dangerous."

"We are very dangerous."

John looked at his father, who was still holding the shovel.

"What do we do?"

His father lowered his voice. "We defend the castle."

He packed snow into hard balls and lined them up behind the wall.

"These are not ordinary snowballs," John explained. "They are snow grenades."

"Handmade?" his father asked.

"The best kind."

His father nodded as if John had just presented a serious military invention.

"You two can be the defenders," Andrei said. "We will attack from the garden."

"You cannot attack the castle," John protested. "It is ours."

"That is why it is fun."

His father pointed the shovel toward the other children. "No throwing at faces. No climbing on the walls. The castle must still be standing when the battle is over." The children agreed, although Andrei's agreement sounded suspiciously short.

They ran behind the fence and began their attack. Snow grenades struck the walls, breaking apart in white clouds. John crouched behind a tower and threw one through the opening. It landed beside Andrei's boot.

"You missed!"

"That was a warning."

"A terrible warning."

John's father leaned over the wall and sent a snowball flying toward the garden. It hit one of the brothers in the shoulder. The boy shouted that he had been wounded and fell dramatically into the snow.

"One enemy down!" John yelled.

His father laughed.

It was not a quiet laugh. It echoed off the neighboring buildings, deep and booming, and filled the whole winter yard. John had heard his father laugh before, but never like that—not while wearing an old army coat, crouched behind a crooked snow wall, defending a castle from three children and a broken sled.

The battle lasted until everyone was wet and exhausted. The attackers reached the gate twice. The defenders drove them back twice. On the third attempt, Andrei climbed over the lowest wall and raised both hands.

"I have captured the castle!"

John grabbed a handful of snow and threw it at Andrei's chest.

"Hey!"

Andrei scooped up snow of his own and fired back. Within seconds, the battle had dissolved into a chaotic snow fight. The children shouted and ducked behind the walls, pelting one another until nobody could remember who was defending what.

"No fair! You started it!" Andrei yelled.

"You invaded!"

John lunged for him, but Andrei slipped away. They rolled through the snow, laughing, until John's father caught them both by the backs of their coats and pulled them apart.

"Enough, soldiers. Before someone loses an ear."

John struggled in his father's grip, snow covering his hair, his coat, and half his face.

"But he captured the castle!"

"Then you will have to build another one."

His father set them down and pointed toward the crooked walls.

"The castle is still standing. That means nobody has won yet."

John looked at Andrei, who was already reaching for another snowball.

"We can defend it together," John said.

Andrei considered this, then nodded. "Until the next attack."

From the kitchen window, his mother had been watching the battle. She opened the back door and called into the yard:

"John! Bring your friends inside before you all freeze! Hot chocolate is ready, and I made biscuits."

The children stopped at once. Hot chocolate was too important to ignore.

"Are there enough for everyone?" John shouted.

"There are enough if nobody takes three before the others get inside."

Andrei looked at the other children. "Run!"

They dropped their snow grenades and raced toward the house. John followed, but stopped at the gate and looked back at the castle.

"Do you think it will still be here tomorrow?" he asked.

His father rested the shovel against the wall and looked at the crooked towers.

"Maybe. Snow castles do not last forever."

"Then we will build it again."

John nodded, satisfied, and ran after the others. His mother caught him by the shoulders at the door, brushed the snow from his hat, and kissed his cold cheek.

"Look at you. You are frozen."

"Only my fingers."

"Then hot chocolate will warm them."

"And biscuits?"

"Especially biscuits."

Behind them, the castle stood crooked and proud in the white yard, waiting for the next battle.

Years later, John would remember the castle only in pieces: the cold inside his boots, the sting in his fingers, the crooked towers, and his father's old army coat dusted white. But he remembers it most for the laughter.

That sound stayed with him for years.

03 - DAD - 2002

John always remembered his father as the ultimate example of what a real man should be. Not because his father had explained it to him in grand speeches, but because he saw it in the way the man lived: calm, respectful, disciplined, and never too proud to kneel in the snow and build a castle with his son.

His father also had a gentleman's side. He opened doors for John's mother, carried her bags, and noticed when she was tired before she said anything. Their house always had fresh flowers in it. John especially remembered the tulips—their bright colors in a glass vase and the clean aroma of freshly cut stems filling the room.

Sometimes, when the radio played a slow song, his father would take his mother's hand and dance with her in the living room. There was no special occasion. The furniture had not been moved. John might be sitting on the floor with his toys or doing his homework at the table, watching them pass slowly between the sofa and the window.

"You are stepping on my foot," his mother would say.

"I am leading you."

"You are leading me into the furniture."

"The furniture is in the wrong place."

She would laugh, and he would pull her closer.

"I love you," he would tell her.

"I love you too."

They said it easily, without embarrassment, even when John was in the room. His father believed a man should know how to carry heavy things, protect the people he loved, and say what he felt.

"A real man does not hide his feelings, John," he told him once. "If you love someone, you tell them."

"Even if they already know?"

"Especially then. People should not have to guess."

John remembered that lesson long after he forgot many of the others.

On some weekends, when his father worked at the military base, he took John with him. John loved everything about the army—the uniforms, the polished boots, the serious voices, the smell of oil and cold metal. He dreamed of becoming just like his father: a special forces officer, serving his country proudly.

Once, they went by train to the shooting range. John sat beside the window with his nose almost touching the glass. Villages slipped past in pieces: a church tower, a row of wooden fences, smoke rising from chimneys, a dog running along the tracks until the train carried it out of sight.

"Where are we now, Dad?"

"We are on the train, John."

A few villages later, John asked again.

"And now where are we?"

"Still on the train, John. Still on the train."

His father smiled and ruffled his hair.

"You could use a haircut. Soon people will start to think you are a girl. Remind me to cut your hair when we get home."

"I am not a girl! Girls are evil!"

"Why is that?"

"Yesterday a girl at school called me names and wanted to fight me."

"Why did she call you names?"

"Because I did not let her copy my homework. It is not my fault she is dumb, Dad."

"Language, John. You do not use bad language to talk to or about girls."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Next time, offer to help her with the homework instead. Maybe you can become friends."

"Friends? With a girl? Never!"

"You will see when you grow up. Girls are your best friends."

John looked at him suspiciously. "How do you know?"

"Because I have met your mother."

That answer made John laugh. His father laughed too, a deep, rolling sound that filled the train compartment and made the other passengers look over and smile.

At the shooting range, his father showed him how to stand, how to hold the rifle properly, and how to breathe before pulling the trigger. He did not let John shoot until he had repeated the rules three times.

"A weapon is not a toy," he said.

"I know."

"Knowing means listening every time, especially when you are excited."

"I am listening."

"Good. Then tell me what you must do before you touch the trigger."

John looked at the rifle, then at the paper target hanging far downrange.

"Check that it is loaded?"

"First, you check where the barrel is pointing."

"At the target."

"Only when you are ready to shoot. Until then, it stays pointed in a safe direction."

John adjusted his grip.

"And if I am not sure?"

"You stop. You put it down. You ask. There is no shame in not knowing. There is shame in pretending."

His father stood behind him while John raised the rifle. He corrected the position of John's elbows and showed him how to keep his finger away from the trigger until he was ready.

"Do not fight the rifle," he said. "Breathe. Let your body become still."

John tried to hold his breath.

"Not like that. You are not hiding from the world. Breathe normally, then let the shot go when you are calm."

The first shot missed the center of the target and struck the outer ring.

John lowered the rifle. "I missed."

"You hit the target."

"I wanted the center."

"Wanting something is not the same as being ready for it. Try again."

John looked at the target, then at his father.

"What if I never get it right?"

"Then you keep learning. Responsibility is not being perfect. It is knowing that your choices have consequences and taking care with them."

John raised the rifle again. This time, he took his time. The second shot landed closer to the center.

His father nodded once.

"Better."

"Not perfect."

"I did not ask for perfect. I asked you to pay attention."

Their time together felt like training then. Later, John would understand that it was also love.

The last ordinary evening began with John's mother complaining about his hair.

"Your father promised he would cut it this weekend," she said, standing behind him with a comb in her hand.

"He said he would."

"And you believe everything your father says?"

"Yes."

She tried to smooth his hair down. It rose again immediately.

"Then you are both impossible."

His father sat at the table, taking apart a small pocketknife and cleaning it with a piece of cloth. He looked up.

"I will cut it tomorrow."

"You said that last weekend," his mother replied.

"Tomorrow I will be a better man."

"That would be a miracle."

John watched them, waiting for his father to defend himself. Instead, his father smiled and reached across the table for his wife's hand.

"I will also fix John's bicycle."

"The bicycle is fine."

"The front brake is making a terrible sound."

"It is warning people that I am coming."

"It is warning the whole street."

His mother placed a bowl of soup in front of John. The three of them ate together while rain tapped against the window. His father told a story from the base, changing his voice for each person until John nearly choked laughing. After dinner, they stood in the hallway while his father inspected the bicycle.

"Tomorrow," his father said, tapping the brake cable, "we fix this, cut your hair, and then you can ride to the end of the street."

"Can I go farther?"

"If your mother agrees."

John turned to her.

"We will discuss it," she said.

"That means no."

"That means you should sleep."

His father bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"Good night, son."

"Good night, Dad."

John went to bed believing tomorrow was waiting for him.

He was twelve when the knock came at the door one autumn evening.

His mother opened it. John was in the hallway, trying to hear who had come. His uncle stood outside, pale and wet from the rain. He did not take off his coat. He did not step inside.

His mother looked at his face and understood before he said anything.
"What happened?"

His uncle looked past her, toward John.
"There was an accident."

John moved closer. "What accident?"
His uncle swallowed. "Your father was driving home. A drunk driver lost control of his car."

The words did not make sense. John knew what an accident was. He knew what drunk meant. He knew his father was supposed to come home. Those facts refused to stand together.
"Where is he?"

His uncle closed his eyes for a moment.
"John..."
"Where is he?"

His mother crossed the hallway and pulled him against her. She was shaking, but her arms were strong around him.
"Your father is gone, sweetheart."

John pushed away from her.
"Gone where?"
"He died."

The house became strangely quiet. The clock in the living room kept ticking. Somewhere in the kitchen, water dripped from a tap. John stared at the coat hanging over his uncle's arm and thought about the wet footprints it had left on the floor.

His father, thirty-seven years old, was dead.

John sat on the stairs that night, wrapped in his mother's oversized sweater. He stared at the closed front door for hours, as if his father might still walk through it, complain about the rain, and ask whether John had finished his homework.

His mother sat beside him without saying much. She placed one hand on his back and kept it there. Her hand was warm. John could feel it through the sweater, steady and careful, but he did not know how to lean into it.

"He said he would fix my bicycle tomorrow," John whispered.

His mother closed her eyes.

"I know."

"He said he would cut my hair."

"I know."

"He did not say goodbye."

She pulled him against her. This time, he did not push away.

His uncle arrived later that night and pulled John into a wordless hug. He cried hard enough that John could feel it in his own chest. John stood stiffly in his arms, unable to cry, listening to the rain strike the windows.

In the morning, his father's boots were still beside the door. His army jacket still hung from its hook. The pocketknife still lay on the kitchen table, cleaned and folded shut.

John touched it, then pulled his hand away.

After his father's death, his mother raised him alone. John became quieter, more serious, and careful not to add to her burdens. He stopped asking for new things. He stopped complaining when something broke. He tried to become the man of the house, although nobody had asked him to and he was still only twelve.

He kept going to Sambo. The retired officer never asked whether he wanted to stop. He opened the village room twice a week, swept the mat himself, and corrected John's stance in the same patient voice his father had used. Some days John trained until his shirt clung to his back. Other days he sat on the edge of the mat and watched the older boys, too tired or too angry to join them.

The class became one of the few places where nobody treated him like a boy who might break. The instructor expected him to listen, fall, stand up, and try again. John continued until he left for college in the city, carrying the discipline with him even after the village and the room behind the community hall were far away.

He did not have language for what had changed in him yet. He only knew that tomorrow had arrived without his father, and that nothing would ever be ordinary again.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

You've just reached the end of the preview for "The Courage to Collapse." Ella's choice and John's path to healing are only just beginning.

If these opening pages resonated with you, I would love for you to stay connected and be part of this story as it comes to life.

LET'S STAY IN TOUCH



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Did this excerpt make you laugh or cry? Send me your thoughts directly. I read and reply to every single note from readers.

Thank you for being here at the very beginning of this journey.

— Avi Virabean