

B&P Magazine

November 2025

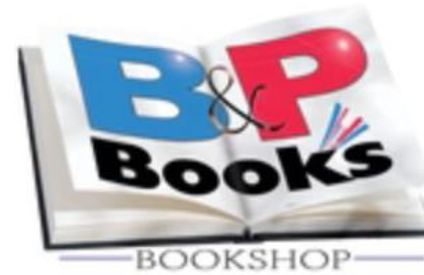
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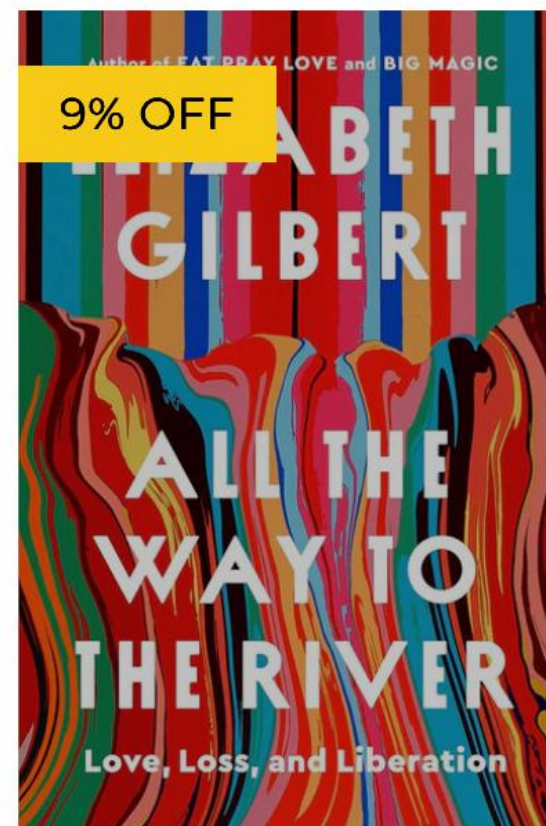
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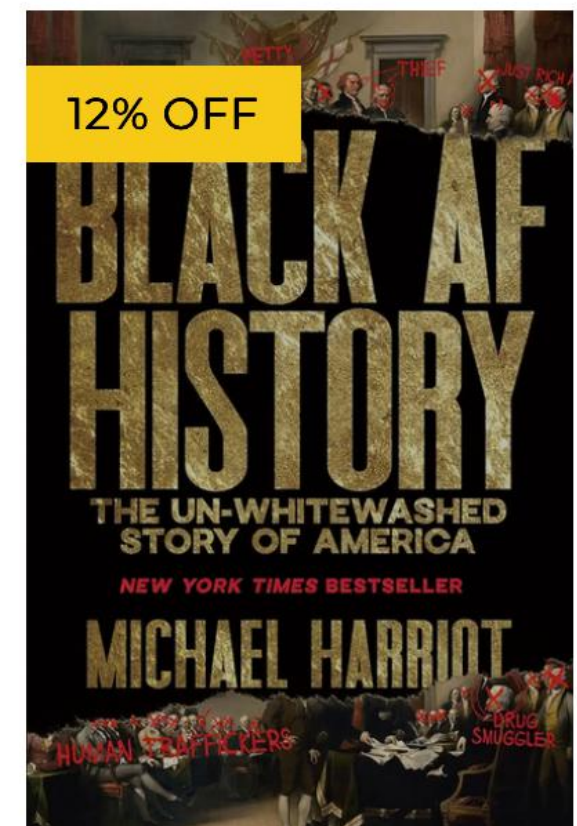
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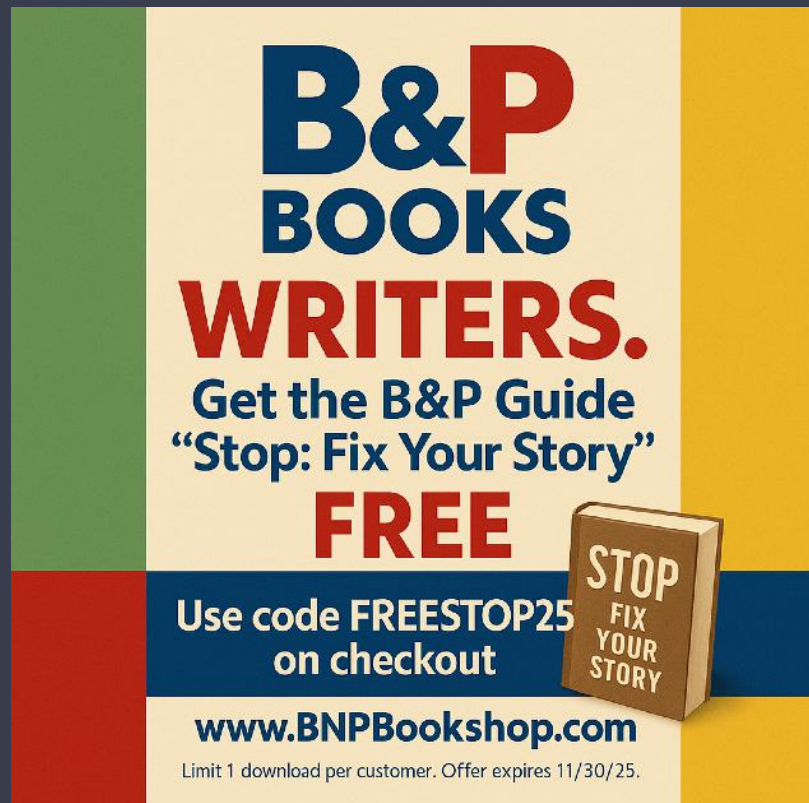
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IN THIS ISSUE

- We have an Indie Bookshop p2
- 2 Poems by John Grey p3
- B&P Bookshop Information..... p5
- Story: And the Walls Came Tumbling Down - Nancy Machlis Rechtman... p6
- Story: Silent Treasures by Daulet Dikhanbay..... p18

A promotional banner for B&P Books Writers. It features a yellow background with a green vertical bar on the left and a red vertical bar on the right. The text 'B&P BOOKS WRITERS.' is prominently displayed in large, bold, blue and red letters. Below this, it says 'Get the B&P Guide "Stop: Fix Your Story" FREE'. A small image of a book titled 'STOP FIX YOUR STORY' is shown. At the bottom, it says 'Use code FREESTOP25 on checkout' and 'www.BNPBookshop.com'. A small note at the very bottom states 'Limit 1 download per customer. Offer expires 11/30/25.'

Click the image for a direct download link

Dear Readers,

Books & Pieces Magazine has been around since 2017, which doesn't sound that long ago, but it has been 8 years.

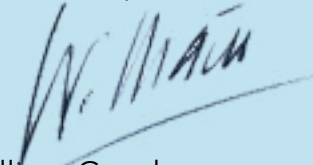
Along the way, we have had the good fortune to interview many big-name authors, new authors, as well as feature many short stories, articles, poetry, and new books coming out. But principally, we have been serving indie authors, writers who often struggle to gain exposure.

It's not been an easy road. Like everyone, we constantly battle for exposure. And while we've done quite well, there is always room for improvement. You'll notice we don't have ads in this magazine. It is difficult to attract national advertisers to such a niche market. But that's alright.

B&P Books also publishes authors with novels we consider higher quality. And we offer two ways to do so. The first way we simply provide whatever services the author needs on a flat rate basis. This way, we hand over the finished files and take no royalty. The author retains full control. The second way we use our skills and publish the novel, performing services that include editing, proofing, cover design, ISBN, layouts, uploads, and now, inclusion in our bookshop for added exposure and the ability to offer better promotions than even Amazon can do, and without the limitations. We also have an alternative to Ingram for authors fearful about the dreaded Ingram returns policy. In this case, we absorb the return and can resell it in our bookshop.

I hope that you will support Indie authors by shopping at the B&P Book Shop.
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All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Gensburger'.

William Gensburger
Author/Publisher

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2 POEMS BY JOHN GREY

EVIL NO MORE

My evil is weak, insipid,
crawls up in dark corners,
out of sight of everyone,
For it fears exposure.

For the longest time,
my evil was the loudest voice
in the room,
like a crow endlessly cawing.
Then it was a salesman,
going door to door,
with a disarming smile
and a gift for getting
its cloven foot in the door.

Now it's like an extra in its own movie.
While others perpetrate violence,
My evil remains well away
from the knife thrusts, the screams,
the splatter of blood.

My evil is still here –
I can see it –
in my face in the mirror.
But, whenever it's around people,
it pulls a disappearing act.

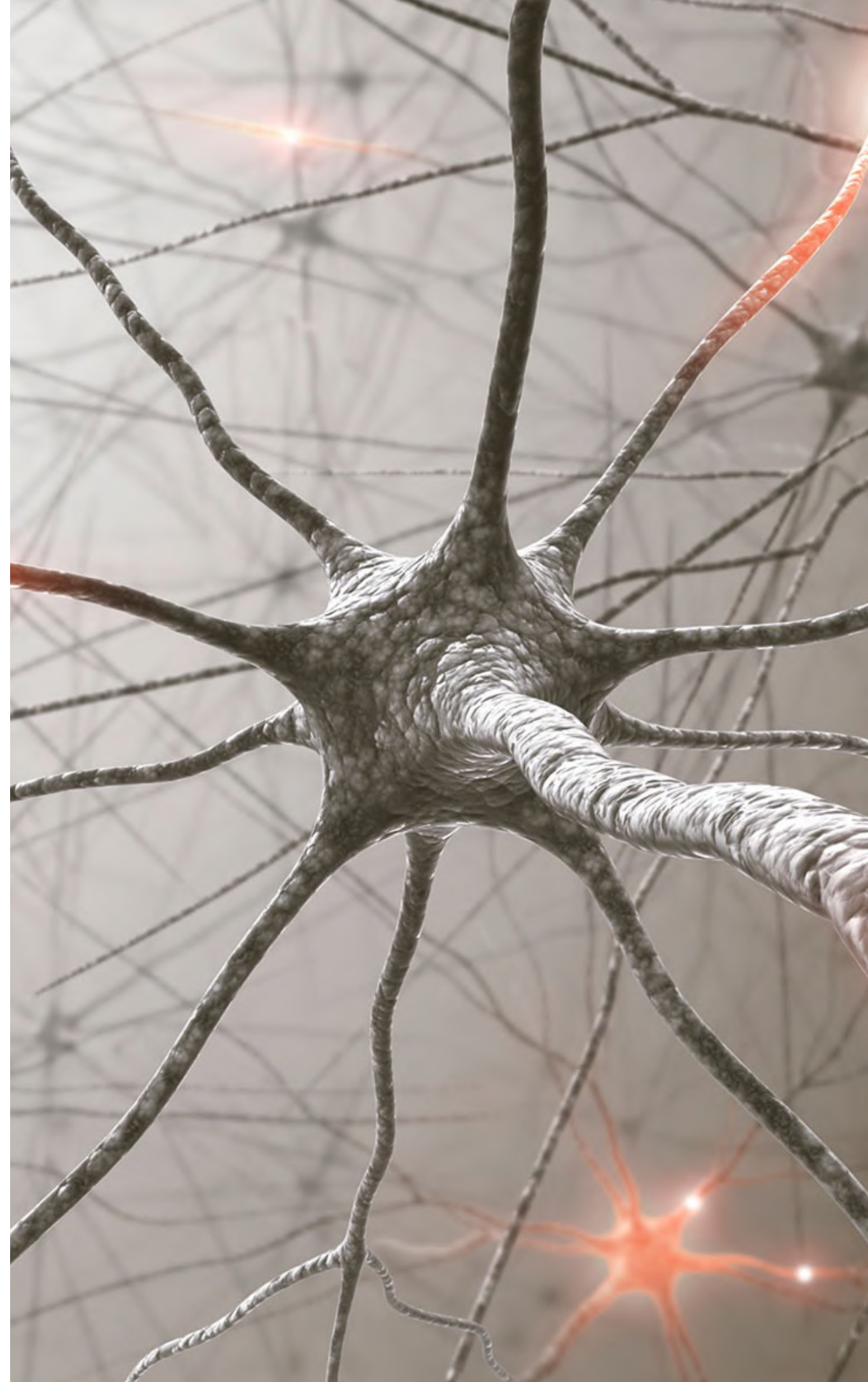
My evil is tenacious,
I'll give it that.
It can cling to a wall like a stain.

It could live down in floorboard dust
for a thousand years.
It just doesn't like company.
So what good is to me?

Every now and then,
I find myself accidentally alone with
someone.
They so act the prey
and my predator instincts
tremble for a moment
in my hands.
But my evil snaps back into shyness,
a shameful fate
for the demon I once was.

My evil no longer stalks.
Or pounces like a big cat.
Or eviscerates.
Or drenches its face
in bloody entrails.

My evil is all washed up.
That has nothing to do
with washing up after.



WHAT THE DOG KNOWS

by John Grey

The dog is restless.
He sniffs the darkness.
Ears turn up.
His hair rises slowly but pointedly.

I try to soothe him,
rub his crown
and below the chin.
But he's too on edge to notice.
He stares into the nothingness
and growls.

He can sense things I cannot.
Beyond his acute sense of smell
are the receptors that sniff out evil.

It's there in the corner.
It's in the closet.
It's under the bed.
He peers anxiously
through the window.
It's outside as well.

But he doesn't snort
at my familiar presence.
Nor does his own self
raise any alarms.

He's content that he and I
are the good left in the world.
It's reassuring. It's comforting.
But then there's everything else.

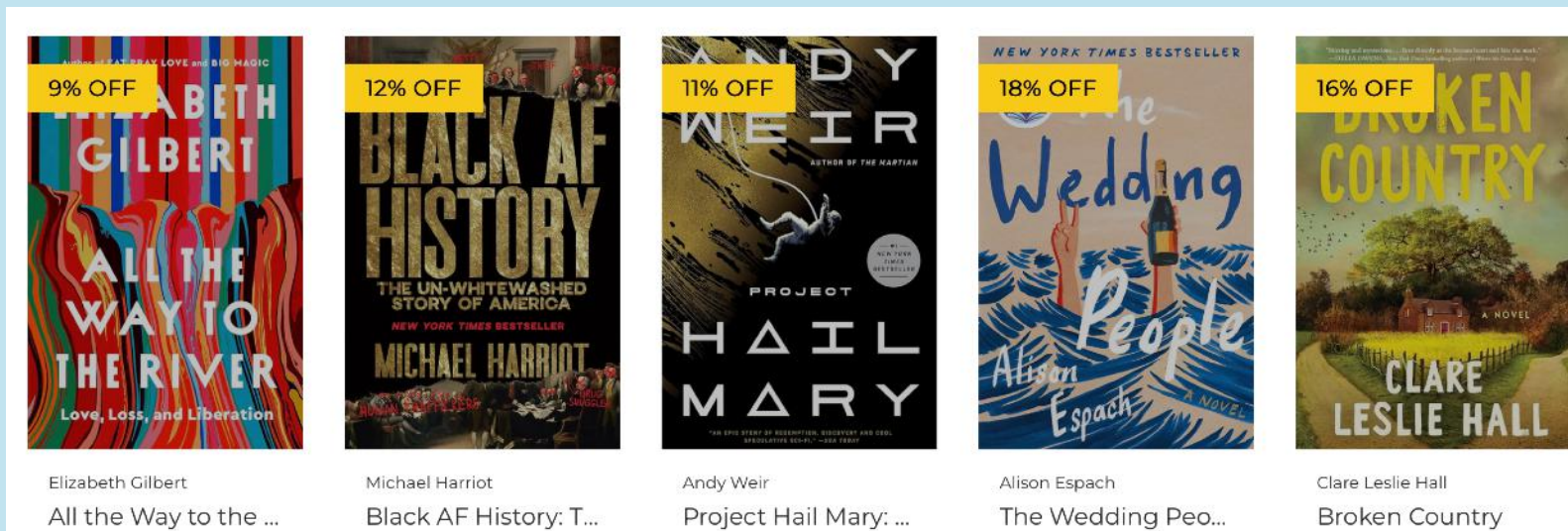


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, River And South and The Alembic. Latest books, "Subject Matters", "Between Two Fires" and "Covert" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Paterson Literary Review, White Wall Review and Cantos.

B&P BOOKSHOP

INFORMATION YOU NEED



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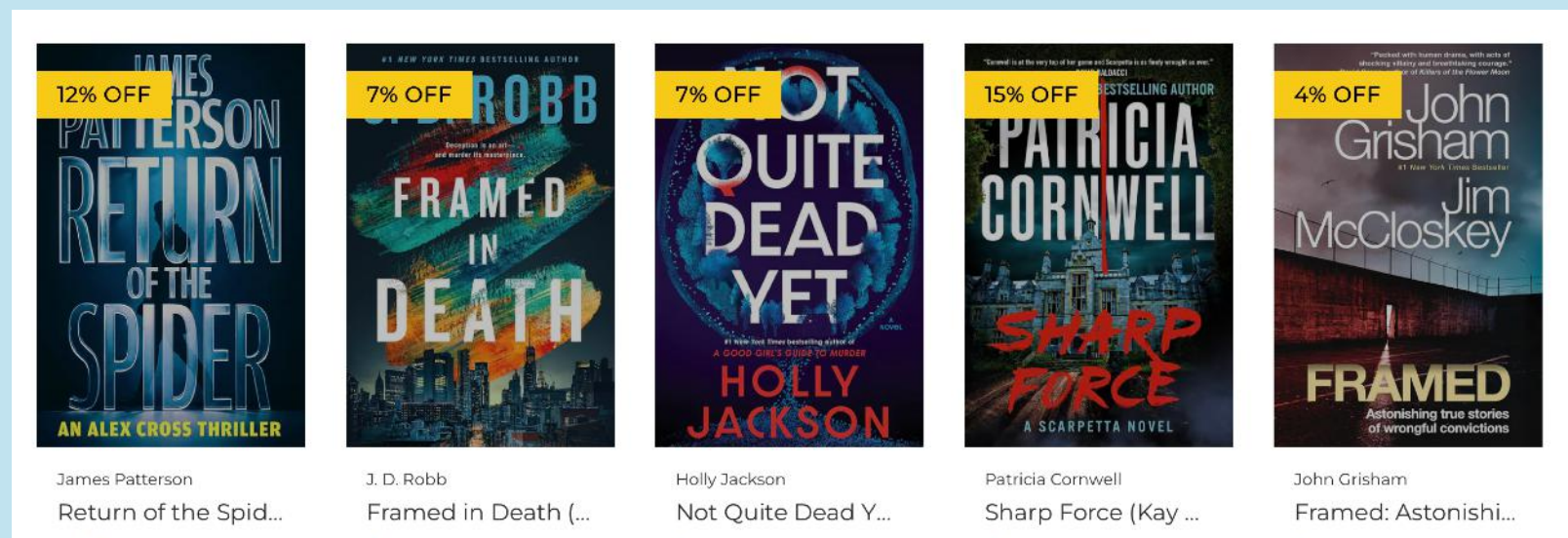
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AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN

A STORY BY NANCY MACHLIS RECHTMAN



~~~~~

**Jasmine turned** when she noticed the man waving to her. She wondered if she was supposed to know him, but he seemed like a vision wafting across her memory like a genie escaping a bottle. But the more she struggled to remember him the farther away the memory receded like the early-morning tide.

Jasmine's past was no longer filled with clear lines and vivid colors. It wasn't always like that. But a few years ago, she had

sustained a severe head injury that had caused a brain bleed when she fell from a ladder when she was trying to help retrieve the neighbor's cat from her roof. Even now, vague flashes of faces and voices that were often familiar but had no owner, and snippets of scenarios that evoked emotions, flitted through her consciousness, but the stories surrounding them had disappeared into the distant fog.

The man waved again. Jasmine wanted to turn away and run. She was tired of pretending she knew people these days. It was so much easier not to engage. But it was too late. He was walking across the park, heading directly towards her.

“Jasmine!” he called heartily, reaching his arms out for a hug.

A huge panic overtook her. She folded her arms protectively across her chest, clutching her jacket tightly. She turned her shoulder towards him and tried to smile. “Hey there, how are you?” she asked, trying to mimic his hearty tone.

He noticed her protective stance but stopped just before reaching her. “Jaz, are you OK?”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, turning away. “I have somewhere I need to be.” Then she turned and disappeared into the crowd. She didn’t turn around to make sure the man wasn’t following her until she reached the library and raced inside. When she checked behind her, there was no sign of him, and she was once again able to take some deep breaths to calm herself down.

She looked up and saw the librarian behind the front desk was waving to her and she smiled and waved back. Sandy Alvarez had been the main librarian for

years and today Jasmine remembered her. She waved back and headed upstairs to the historical fiction section, her favorite part of the building. The library had always been her sanctuary from the chaos of the rest of the world and later, after the head injury, it protected her from the chaos of her mind. She found a kind of peace there that she couldn’t find anywhere else. Everything was always where it was supposed to be and it was reassuring that there was still some kind of order in her world. She reached the top of the stairs and turned to her right. She was surprised to see a group of children sitting on benches in the center of the floor. They were listening to Sandy read a story to them. She had never seen Sandy away from the front desk before and wondered where the regular children’s librarian was. She edged closer to the group and listened to Sandy read a story about a mouse during the French Revolution. The children seemed transfixed and soon, Jasmine was listening as raptly as the children. After all, she did love history, although her readings had rarely included mice.

The children clapped when the story was over and urged Sandy to read one more book to them. Jasmine turned and headed to the familiar shelves of the history section. Except the familiar shelves weren’t there. How could that be? Instead, the shelves were filled with

picture books and chapter books, easy readers and middle-grade books, and so much more that had nothing to do with historical fiction for adults. Had the historical fiction section been moved? If yes, where to? And why? And how?

Sandy stood up to stretch before reading the next book to the children. She smiled as Jasmine approached tentatively. “Can I help you, dear?”

Jasmine didn’t know what to say. How could she explain that an entire section of the library seemed to be missing? “Um, I’m sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering where the historical fiction section has been moved to?”

Sandy examined Jasmine’s face with concern. “My dear, the historical fiction section is downstairs, where it’s always been. If you wait until I’m done with our next book, I can take you there.”

Jasmine stared at her in surprise. The historical fiction section had been upstairs for as long as she had been coming to this library, which was pretty much forever. Or at least, it felt that way. What was Sandy talking about? And why was she addressing her as if she were a stranger? “Um, no, that’s OK. I’ll find it, thank you.” And she fled towards the stairs and headed to the first floor.

Halfway down, the stairs suddenly



morphed into a mound of orange Jell-O and she felt like she was transforming into a puddle of liquid with no center. A jolt rocketed through her body as she reached the bottom step and she grabbed the banister to keep from falling. She staggered towards the shelves behind the stairs and finally found the historical fiction section. There sat some of her favorite books and she started to find her footing. Still dizzy, she held onto the shelves as she made her way down the rows of familiar books. Her favorites took place during World War II and there were plenty of those to be had. But she had always found that any well-written book dealing with historical subjects could get her attention and she read the backs of several books before adding them to her stack.

Instead of leaving once she had found five books that piqued her interest (two of which she had read before but looked forward to reading again), she sat at a small table by the window and decided to rest there for a while before heading out. She picked up the book on top of the stack, which was about two friends in the early 1900s who rebelled against the norms of the day,

fighting for the right for women to vote. They each found love with two very different men and that strained their friendship as their lifestyles changed – as did their priorities. Jasmine sank deeper into the chair as she began to read.

“Hi, Jasmine,” came a voice from behind her. She looked up, startled, and there was the man who had approached her in the park. She wanted to jump up and flee, but also didn’t want to cause a scene.

“Hello,” Jasmine said, trying to stifle her panic.

“Do you remember me?” he asked.

Jasmine shook her head, searching her memory for him. There was something familiar about his voice, but not familiar enough for full recognition. “I’m sorry?” she said questioningly.

“I’m Scott,” he said soothingly. “We lived next door to each other when we were kids, don’t you remember? We hung out almost every day. We were best friends. You loved to come over and play with our dog, Duchess. Do you remember Duchess?”

“Duchess,” Jasmine said softly. In her mind, she saw a sweet yellow lab bounding towards her, tail wagging,

knocking her over and covering her face with kisses. “Duchess,” Jasmine said again, smiling.

Scott nodded his head vigorously. “I used to think you wanted to visit with the Duchess more than me. And that was OK, she was the best dog.”

“Where is Duchess?” Jasmine asked, looking around as if Duchess might suddenly appear.

“She died when we were in high school,” Scott replied, staring at her intensely.

Jasmine started to cry. “I loved her,” she said softly.

“She got old, Jasmine.”

“Do you still live in your house?” she asked.

“Well, I left after college. Do you remember that I used to visit you when I came back to see my parents? But then they moved away, and they asked me if I wanted to move back into their house so they wouldn’t have to sell it to strangers.”

Jasmine processed his words. She remembered Duchess, but had no real memory of Scott. Should she tell him?

Should she explain what had happened to her? She was trying to decide when suddenly, the ground convulsed. She was thrown from her chair and flung against the window. There was nothing for her to hold onto as books and shelves went crashing onto the floor. She screamed. When it finally stopped, she opened her eyes.

She was standing by the entrance to the library, five books in her arms. Everything looked as it had when she had first arrived. Sandy Alvarez was sitting at the main desk as always. She looked up when she saw Jasmine. “Did you want to check those out, Jasmine?” she asked.

“What?” Jasmine said in confusion. “What just happened?”

“What just happened where?” Sandy wondered.

“Here. The earthquake. Everything was...” Jasmine motioned around the library. But everything was back to normal. Nothing was out of place. And, there was no sign of Scott.

“Would you like to sit down, dear?” Sandy asked with concern.

Jasmine continued to look around and shook her head. “No... well, maybe,” she answered.

Sandy stepped out from behind the desk and led Jasmine to the table where she had just been sitting. But everything was fine. "Can I get you some water?" Sandy inquired.

"Where is the historical fiction section?" Jasmine asked nervously.

"Why, Jasmine, you've been coming here all your life practically," Sandy said. "It's still upstairs where it's always been. Believe me, we're not moving anything here."

"I'd like to go upstairs," Jasmine said.

"If you feel up to it, please go ahead," Sandy told her.

Jasmine stood, picked up her books, and headed towards the stairs. When she got to the top, she hesitantly turned to the right. There they were, the shelves lined with the historical fiction books that she loved. She went to the sky-blue tufted armchair that she usually sat in, next to the window that looked out on the garden and surveyed her surroundings. Everything was as it had always been. Her head was throbbing and she rifled through her purse for some painkillers. When she found them, she swallowed two without any water until they got stuck in her throat and she raced to the nearby water fountain to finally force them down. She turned to

go back to her chair, but she couldn't find it. It was as if someone had rearranged the library with lightning speed while her back was turned. She was back in the children's section, where there were even more little ones than before. Sandy was there, too, trying to keep the children from talking too loudly. And suddenly a dog barked. Sandy bent down to pet the beautiful golden lab and asked her not to bark so loudly. Jasmine stared at the dog and started to cough. It couldn't be. But suddenly the dog looked up and joyfully bounded towards Jasmine.

"Duchess?" Jasmine cried.

The dog barked again and knocked Jasmine over, covering her face with kisses.

"But how?" Jasmine asked.

"She's here for you," Scott said, having appeared beside Sandy.

"For me?" Jasmine asked. "But how? Why?"

"She knows you need her," Scott said.

Jasmine didn't care anymore. There was sweet Duchess filling her with so much love. Jasmine hugged her and her tears froze into the sweet dog's fur, branching out like dendrites.

Jasmine scanned the children's area. No one aside from Scott was paying any attention to her lying on the floor, hugging a large dog. More children appeared and it was getting hard for Jasmine to catch her breath. She held onto Duchess like a lifeline. She started to stand up and her body was suddenly jerked across the room and rammed into the wall. She lost hold of Duchess. The room started to spin upside down and in circles, like she was on a wild ride at Disneyland. "No!" Jasmine managed to cry before her head smashed onto the floor, then the shelves toppled on top of her and she was buried under a pile of books.

The wail of an ambulance filled the air and the EMTs raced in. Sandy stood by the door, waiting anxiously for them and pointed to the floor where a young woman lay. A man was kneeling next to her.

"What happened?" one of the EMTs asked as they approached.

"She seemed OK," the man replied. "And then suddenly she couldn't stand up and she fell and hit her head on the floor."

One of the EMTs checked for a pulse and listened to her chest. "Miss? Miss? Can you hear me? Do you know where you are?" There was no response. He

shone a light into her eyes. “We’re going to need to get her to the hospital immediately. Looks like she has a pretty severe head injury. Does anyone know her?”

The man looked up. “Yes, her name is Jasmine Granger.”

“Do you know if anything like this has happened before?” the EMT asked.

The man nodded. “It has. More than once. Can I ride along in the ambulance with her?”

The EMT looked at him. “Sorry, sir, family only.”

The man stared at the EMT. “I’m Scott Granger. Jasmine is my wife.”

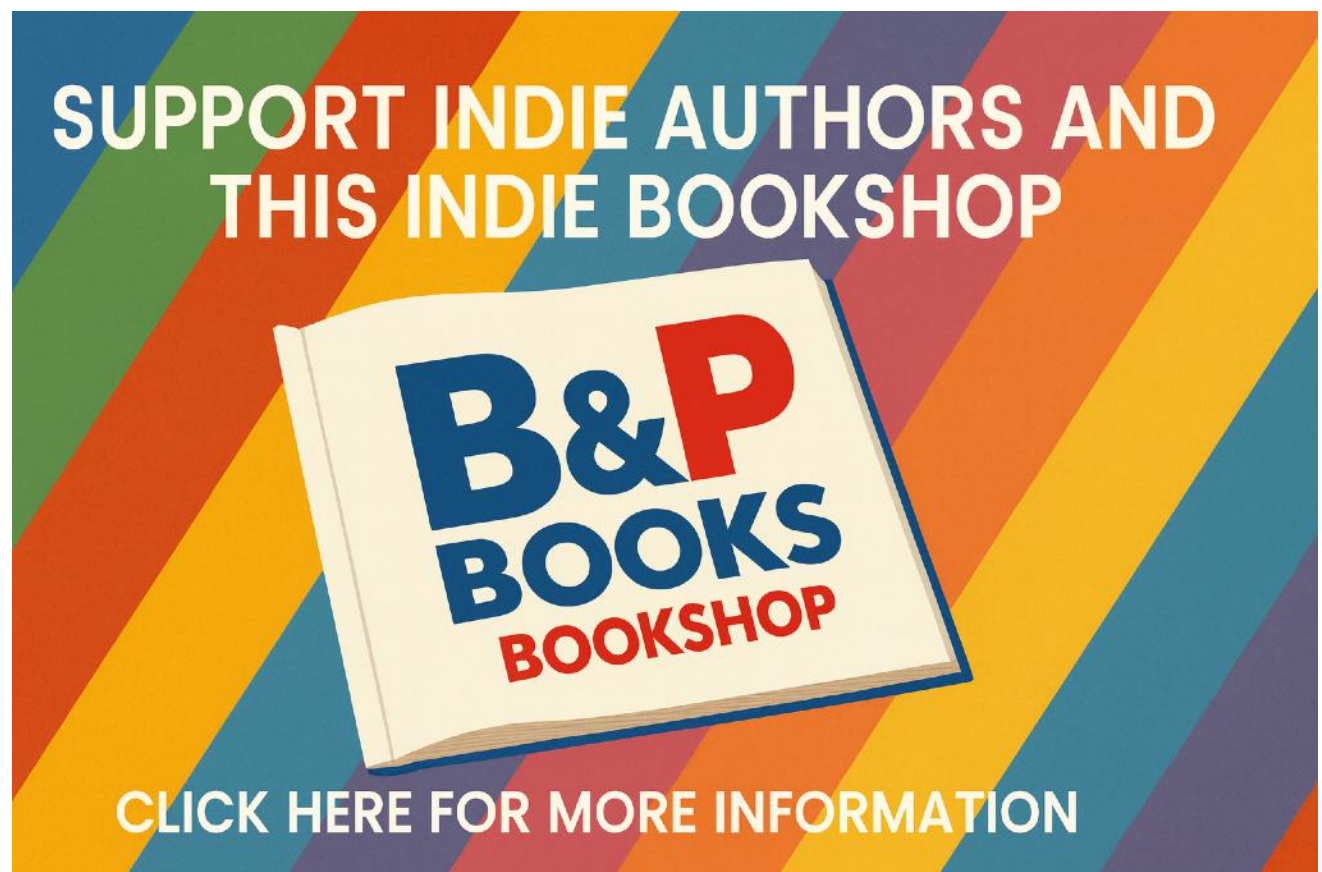
The EMTs strapped Jasmine to a gurney and motioned for Scott to follow them as they ran to the ambulance. Scott jumped into the back after Jasmine was brought inside and held her hand. “I’m sorry you have to go through this again,” he whispered. “But I’m here for you. They’ll fix you this time. And remember, Duchess is always with you, watching over you. She won’t let anything bad happen to you.” He looked up at the sky racing past the window. “Take care of our girl, Duchess, please,” he said softly, looking up. “Please.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in Your Daily Poem, Writing In A Woman’s Voice, Grande Dame, Impspired, miniMAG, Young Ravens, Discretionary Love, and poetry, essays, and plays published in various anthologies.

She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She has had several stories published in Highlights Magazine for Children, stories published in several other children's magazines, several children's plays and musicals, both produced and published.



# BOOK EXCERPT

## MY INDECISION'S FLAME

by J.S.Ririe

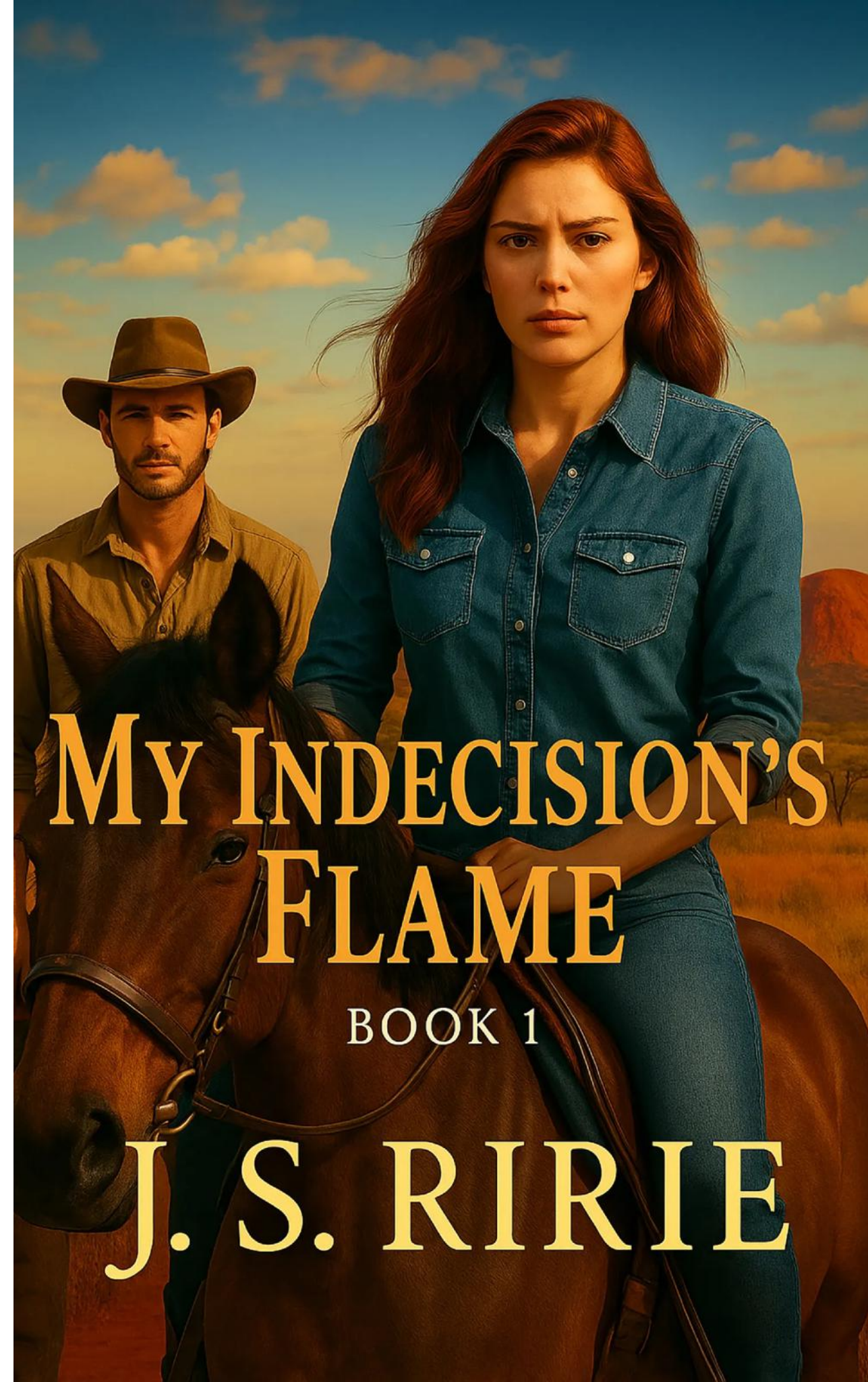
ISBN: 9798988973775

**"An engaging, clean, young adult adventure/  
romance."**

Before her marriage to Ben, an American, Brylee Hawkins returns to her home in the Australian Outback so that she can confront her father, whom she blames for the death of her mother, where she learns the secrets of her past that she never knew, and her father's new family.

Will Brylee find peace amidst the betrayals? Can she survive the truth?

Readers will revel in Brylee's journey, the vivid landscape of the Australian Outback, and the quest to hold on to her values, both part of her character and her faith. There are many books in this series that we will be adding



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**EXCERPT:**

"I'm going home! I'm going home!" The words pounded in my ears as each second in the sky brought me closer to the land and family I had not been a part of for over five years. I knew why I had to go. Scores had to be settled and hearts healed before I could move forward into the future I so much wanted, but I wasn't sure I could summon the inner courage or the strength to do it on my own. I had spent too much time running, hiding, hating, and avoiding anything that had to do with my past.

Forcing myself to go back to the place where I'd lost everything was harder than leaving, but anger and youth can be a deadly combination—even for a girl who had never been any place on her own before deciding to run away. Now, the past I had tried so hard to forget was coming back, and I wished I could find a way off the plane before it landed. I had thought of little but my reunion with my father and Uncle Ned for three months. Months I had prayed would pass rapidly, but whose passing made it even more evident that I could hide my secret no longer.

It wasn't some awful secret that would bring any shame, and it was what had prompted this trip in the first place. But I still wasn't sure that my estranged family would ever forgive me for what I had done. If my mother were still alive, I

could have talked to her about how drastically my life had changed. She would have understood why I had run away, and why I had ended up following my heart instead of my head. But she was dead, and with her passing, a part of me had died as well. I had stood over her grave and cursed God for taking away the only person who had ever understood the real me, I had kept so carefully hidden from others—the girl with unspoken dreams too big to capture, and a heart that desired truth more than anything else in the world.

"Oh, mother," I thought as I watched the white clouds mingle with the blue of the sky outside my airplane window and wishing I could be floating on one of them, leisurely and without purpose. "I understand now why you were taken away from me, and I'm not angry at God anymore. He's brought us back together in a most unusual way and someday . . ."

"Miss," the flight attendant was passing down the aisle. "Would you fasten your seatbelt? We'll be landing in Sydney in a few minutes."

I smiled as she hovered in the aisle to make sure I followed her instructions. She was pretty and confident, and I wondered if she always knew what to say and do. My own hard-earned

confidence was rapidly draining now that I was so close to home.

Unexpected chills suddenly rippled down my arms and legs, even though it was warm enough in the plane. I watched the woman next to me try to stuff an inordinate amount of possessions into her handbag. She'd been knitting and talking the entire way. Fortunately, it had been to the person on the other side. I had kept my eyes on the plane's window, much too focused on self-preservation for idle conversation. I steeled myself against the 100-degree-plus temperatures and humidity that would hit the moment I stepped out of the terminal.

I hadn't told anyone I was coming home and wasn't the least bit sure if I would be welcomed with open arms and a home-cooked meal like the prodigal son in the Bible. I had walked away from my father and hadn't looked back. I hadn't even considered his pain when he came home and found me gone. I had just packed my suitcase and walked out the door while he was away from home, checking on his herds of sheep and cattle, along with the miles of fences that were supposed to keep them safe from their only natural predator—the wild dingo.

I knew what I had done was wrong, but my own pain had stripped all sense of

humanity and compassion from me, and I had lashed out at the only person I knew I could hurt. I blamed my father for ruining my life and getting my mother killed so she would not be there to see me graduate from school, get married and raise a family. I'd left him a horrid note telling him how much I hated him and that I never wanted to see him again—emphasizing the fact that I hoped he would rot in that place designated for the most vile and reprehensible sinners.

After less than adequate thought, I had scraped together what money I could and bought a one-way plane ticket to Los Angeles, California. Visiting the land of promise with its glamorous movie stars and musicians was something I'd always thought of doing, but it wasn't a panacea to my problems. So before my limited amount of money ran out, I found a place to live and a job waiting tables. Eventually, I enrolled at UCLA, where I graduated with a degree in business management. My life had been busy, but I stayed mainly to myself, nursing each pain and betrayal until I met a family that changed everything.

I looked down at the ring on the third finger of my left hand and thought about Ben. He was the one who'd encouraged me to make peace with my past before we were married, and he

had helped me understand the importance of family even when they'd hurt me beyond belief. I had fought him on the idea of going home for months, but finally realized that I could never be happy in a new life while the old one was still causing me so much pain. I had grown up, and I'd changed, but what if I hadn't changed enough to accept the people who had once meant everything to me?

And what would I say when I saw my father? "Hi, Dad, it's your daughter. The one who's been gone for five years and who didn't let you know where she was because she was too angry. And by the way, I've joined a church where you're not supposed to smoke or drink or cuss or commit adultery or do any of the things our family is so famous for. And I'm going to get married, but you can't be there because your standards are so far beneath the ones I have now adopted as my own."

That rendition of facts sounded both cold and cruel. Here I was, a member of a church that preached tolerance, understanding and love for all mankind, but I couldn't forgive my own father for the part he had played in my mother's death and the total destruction of the only life I had ever known.

"Ben, I can't do this," I thought as tears formed in my eyes and slid silently

down my cheeks. I brushed them away with the back of my hand, hoping the lady who was still sitting next to me didn't notice, ask questions or offer sympathy. I was having enough trouble trying to decide what I was going to say to the man I'd deserted—the man who had helped give me life. How could I ask for his forgiveness when I had yet to forgive myself?

The plane was starting its descent. I looked out the small window at the gleaming skyscrapers of the business district that towered above the wharf's side buildings of an earlier era—and an era of growth and expansion before Australia became a largely urban nation. I saw the world-famous opera house with its uniquely shaped roof, and the Harbour Bridge with hundreds of cars traveling its six-lane highways. It was hard to believe that less than two million people lived outside the cities of Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Darwin, and the city of diverse populations I called home, Sydney.

It wasn't actually my hometown, although I had spent four years there while going to school. I didn't even live in a town. I lived on a homestead miles into the Australian Outback, where the endless horizon, dusty, red clay soil, rolling sand dunes, gibber plains and stunning nature were impossible to

describe to anyone who had not seen them.

Ben had tried to understand how lonely and yet how fascinating the Outback was with its strange indigenous animals: kangaroos, koalas, wallabies, poisonous snakes and spiders, lizards, and even camels. Along with its scorching sun that dried up the rain, leaving little water available for any living creature, and its shimmering mirages at the edge of the horizon that had led thousands of men to their deaths as they went searching for diamonds, silver and gold. But that was understandable since he had spent almost his entire life in Southern California among millions of people, where every convenience imaginable was available. Life in an unforgiving, inhospitable part of God's creations was as foreign to him as being in a family that wanted to be together forever was to me.

Throughout the entire flight, I had tried to concentrate on the fact that since he had never seen Australia, I couldn't possibly expect him to comprehend the harshness of the kind of life I had lived until being sent to boarding school as a teenager. Still, I wished he had felt it important enough to come with me so he could see with his own eyes just how impossible my given task had become.

I was terrified even thinking about seeing my father again. I needed Ben's arm around me for strength as I reentered my past. I had come to rely on him so completely. He was my knight-in-shining armor, my voice of reason, and my permanent touch with the reality I had come to believe in. I missed him dreadfully and didn't know how I would garner the courage to step off the plane. I just wanted to go home to the life he promised. Confrontations were abhorrent to me, and the next few days would be filled with them.

Without giving it much thought, I closed my eyes in silent prayer as the plane touched down, and was soon feeling the pull of the brakes press against my body with such force I had to grab onto the armrest for support. I was home and had no idea what my reception would be. Even mentally reversing roles with my father hadn't helped. I had never really known him. He was a hard-working, hard-drinking man of few words, and my mother had always served as a buffer between us.

The plane taxied to a stop, and I was suddenly hit with a thought that had not been considered before. What if something had happened to my father or to Uncle Ned and his family? If they were not where I had left them, they might never know why I had run away, or that I had finally come home to make

amends. I wanted my family of origin to have a happy ending, but that hardly seemed possible now.

The ranch was over 300 miles from Sydney. By air, it took little more than an hour to get to the closest town that had been given the name of Edna by some of the earliest settlers. Traveling by vehicle would take 6 or 7 hours, depending on traffic and the condition of the roads. The last 40 miles—once I was back on Hawkins' property—was little more than a dirt-packed trail, unless major construction had taken place during my absence.

I had brought very little with me since there was no way of knowing exactly how long I would be staying. My return flight was scheduled for two weeks from today, but if no one in my family was glad to see me after the way I had left... I chewed down on my bottom lip. I had come too far to turn back now, and just being here had to count for something. Regardless of what might happen, I had promised Ben that I would try to repair our broken relationship so the two of us could move forward with our wedding. Making peace with my past had seemed like a reasonable request when given, but Ben had no idea how totally dysfunctional my family was.

At first, I had been angry with him for sending me into the unknown by myself, but during the long hours I had spent in the air, I'd finally accepted that he had been right. My past wasn't his problem. It was mine to resolve. If things worked out, he would join me. If not, I would go back to him alone.

It was as hot and sultry as anticipated when I left the air terminal, and I had to inhale deeply to force the moist air further into my lungs, where it would make breathing easier. I had forgotten how heavy the air in Sydney was. Maybe I should have waited until winter to come, but that would have meant postponing our wedding for another six months. I didn't want that. I loved Ben and wanted to be his wife.

I set my watch to ten in the morning before walking to the rental lot where the jeep I had reserved before leaving America was supposed to be waiting for me. My dark hair was matted to my forehead, sweat was glistening on my neck, and the knot that had been in my stomach during the flight from Hawaii had now settled in my throat. I wanted to turn around and rush back to Ben, but I was half a world away and in a few hours, I would be too far into the outback to get cell phone reception.

I signed the paperwork before driving the Jeep Cherokee off the lot, and then heading towards the outskirts of the city. I was grateful that while streets might change direction or disappear completely, famous landmarks rarely would. I rolled down the windows and drove along the beach. There were hundreds of people sunbathing near the water's edge with the usual cans of light beer in their hands. It was the country's national drink, and I remembered holidays with my own friends on these same beaches with our Styrofoam containers holding enough beer for everyone to feel a buzz. Nothing had seemed wrong about drinking neck oil and staying out all night back then. I had become quite worldly until learning the truth, and that truth had led me to Ben.

Before getting on the freeway and heading north, I pulled into a McDonald's and ordered a chicken sandwich, fries and a soda. Breakfast had been served on the plane two time zones earlier, and I was hungry. While waiting for my order to be delivered by a cute girl on roller skates, I placed an overseas call.

"Hi, sweetheart," I said when Ben answered. The tears were forming again, and I bit my lower lip to keep it from trembling. "I can't believe how much I miss you, and it hasn't even

been a full day since I left.”

“I miss you too, but this isn’t forever,” he said. “How was your flight?”

“Uneventful!”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I guess so. I just wish you were here. You make me feel like I can do anything.”

“You give me too much credit, Bry. You are the strongest woman I’ve ever met, and you know why this has to be done alone. If we were together, you wouldn’t be able to sit down for any heart-to-hearts. We would be off sightseeing and having fun. This is the time for you to reconnect with your family in a positive way.”

“I hope you’re right,” I replied as the waitress brought my order. “Can you hold on a minute? My food’s here.”

I thanked her and then picked up my cell again. “I’m sorry for sounding so childish, Ben, but I’m scared. It’s not like I’m coming home after a brief absence. What

I did and the things I wrote were unconscionable.”

“You were a child who had just lost her mother in a tragic accident with no explanations as to how it happened. Regardless of the way you left, your father will be thrilled to see you again. That’s just the way it is with parents.”

“Maybe with your parents,” I responded, trying to swallow a sip of my soda. “What if he isn’t there? Something could easily have happened to him during my absence. The outback isn’t exactly a safe place to live. And even if he is there, he always drank too much, and we never had a real discussion about anything. What if I just make everything worse?”

“He can’t hurt you again unless you allow him to, Brylee. Quit borrowing trouble! He’ll be there, and everything will be fine.”

“I wish I could be sure of that, but there are no guarantees in this life, except for the proverbial death and taxes.”

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# SILENT TREASURES

A STORY BY DAULET DIKHANBAY

*“Grandpa, I think I broke my arm. It hurts a lot. I’m at school. Please come.”*

That was the message Adam found on his phone from his grandson, Zakaria.

Adam was sixty-three, a professor on the edge of retirement. People often told him he carried his age lightly. Medium height, strong frame, large brown eyes. His hair—still thick, gray, and wavy—was always neatly combed.

That morning, he wore a light gray jacket over a thin blue sweater, dark beige chinos, and gray suede shoes—scuffed, but expensive. What stood out most were his socks: bright red cotton with tiny blue butterflies. A touch of elegance, and a wink of playfulness.

In his hand he held an old black-and-white photo of his wife, daughter, and son. He appeared in it too, young, smiling wide and sure of himself. Anyone watching might think he was studying the photo. In truth, his thoughts were far away, somewhere deep in the past.

But there was no one to notice. The park was unusually empty and quiet. Even the sparrows he often fed from his palm were missing.

The ping of the message startled him. He looked around—still, no one. Only the autumn breeze lifting dust from the path,

slipping between lampposts and weathered benches, searching for some quiet corner to rest.

“When there are too many empty seats, it’s harder to choose one,” Adam thought. “Why is that? The paradox of choice. So many options, none of them different.”

He opened the message. His grandson’s words landed heavily. For a moment, he worried only about his schedule—today’s careful plans. Then his mind caught up: Zachary might really be hurt. Anxiety quickened inside him. He checked his mechanical watch, the Japanese one he’d worn for over twenty years. He still had time before meeting the university president. But what mattered now was his grandson. Should he go straight to the school?

The weather was soft, the light forgiving. Despite the worry, the sun warmed his hands. The air smelled of leaves and something like grace.

Adam sat still, forcing calm. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath. Then let it out. Again.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

It was his ritual here in the park. A small practice that steadied him, brought his thoughts into order.

Another deep breath. Another release.

He believed in the power of breathing—how it restored health, how it tuned him to the rhythm of the park itself.

And the park did seem to breathe back. Morning air carried layers of scent: dew glistening on leaves, a middle warmth that eased his worry, and an undertone that slowed the wild tempo of the city outside.

Finished with the ritual, Adam opened his eyes. He took in the cracked cobblestones, the peeling fences, the worn flowerbeds, and the benches with fading paint. To him, these flaws were “noble wrinkles” on the face of this little island of green in a city of stone.

The park knew how to age gracefully, he thought. Like autumn itself. Accepting time, glowing in its change. The trees were his companions; he often stroked their trunks, whispered to them, called them his “contemporaries.” Sometimes they answered in the soft rustle of golden leaves, even when the air was still.

But not every visit was calm. Sometimes panic crept up on him here. One of his strangest fears was stepping on an ant. Ghost Ants, Black Garden Ants, Pharaoh Ants—he knew their Latin names. Each step in the park was careful, deliberate, as though the Park—always capital P, in his mind—were alive, capable of pain.

Eventually, caution became obsession. He counted his steps, traced each one. A simple step was no longer simple. It was the sum of nerves and muscles, thought and movement. It was, to him, a blessing.

A small step. An infinite gift.

Such were his complicated ties to the Park.

Meanwhile, the clock of the universe ticked on.

Shaking himself free of thought, Adam rose.

He typed a reply: “On my way. Love you.”

Adam left the park and slid into his car. After a pause, he switched on autopilot.

At once, his virtual assistant’s voice greeted him, bright and upbeat. He’d spent hours choosing that voice years ago—cheerful, young, designed to lift his mood. He spoke the school’s address. The AI stumbled at first, offering the wrong location. On the second try, it understood. The wheel folded neatly into the dashboard, and the car rolled forward.

Buildings slipped past. Adam’s eyes followed them, but his mind circled elsewhere. He told himself not to worry—not yet. First, get to the school. Then see. Then act.

The city’s glass and steel shimmered like a coded landscape. His thoughts returned to Zachary. Why had the boy written to him, not his mother? That would have been more logical. But people, Adam reminded himself, are not logical.

Illogical. Therefore, alive!

A memory rose: fifty years ago, at Zakaria’s age, Adam had dislocated his arm. In his village, there was no hospital, no pharmacy. Only a ninety-year-old bonesetter. The old man set his arm, refused payment, and wished him a long, happy life. That blessing had stayed with

him.

The memory flashed bright, like a comet crossing the night. A different time, different people.

Other memories followed—small, irrelevant. That was how the mind worked. Under stress, it wandered, looked elsewhere. A kind of shield against the flood of thought.

Lost in this drift, Adam almost didn't notice when the car stopped in front of Zakaria's school. The city blocks had slipped by like frames from an old silent film, fading into some archive of memory.

And still, the clock of the universe ticked forward.

When Adam arrived at the school, he found Zakaria sitting by the main entrance.

The boy was a sweet ten-year-old—slender, slightly awkward, with a thick mop of wavy hair, wide brown eyes, and a pronounced lower lip. He looked strikingly like Adam, just fifty years younger.

A soft beam of autumn sunlight slipped through the crown of ancient oaks, brushing across Zakaria's face and making him look especially fragile.

"Hello, my dear," Adam said, embracing his grandson with care. "What happened, Zakaria?"

As he held the boy close, tenderness gave way to a pang of pity. This was the third time in a

month that his grandson had come to him for help.

The first had been when Zakaria's phone was stolen from the locker room during practice. Adam had spent half a day with the police and school security before the cameras revealed the culprit—a classmate. After a long talk, the boy was forgiven.

The second time was worse: brutal bullying by older kids. Adam had had to rally everyone—teachers, administrators, parents, even journalists and bloggers—to make sure it was handled. Eventually, the storm passed.

And now, yet again. A third time.

Zakaria lowered his gaze, clearly embarrassed.

"Hi, Grandpa," he murmured. "Sorry to bother you again. It's kind of silly. Someone left a banana peel on the stairs. I didn't see it, slipped, and... well—" He glanced up, ashamed. "I landed badly on my hands."

Incredible, Adam thought. He had never actually met someone who slipped on a banana peel. That sort of thing happened only in cartoons, where characters toppled in slapstick absurdity. He had always assumed the odds in real life were zero. And yet, it had happened to his grandson.

Adam examined the boy's hand. The swelling suggested a fracture in his left thumb.

"The school nurse wanted to call an ambulance, but I said no," Zakaria added, looking hopeful. "I told her you'd handle it."

"Of course, my boy. You did the right thing," Adam nodded. "We'll go to the hospital ourselves. No need to tie up an ambulance when others may need it more."

"Does it hurt much?" he asked gently.

"It throbs," Zakaria admitted.

So grandfather and grandson drove to the city hospital. Adam's car, on autopilot, wove smoothly through heavy traffic like a seasoned Formula One driver.

On the way, Adam tried for a serious talk.

"Zakaria," he began softly, though with tension beneath his voice, "you need to be more careful. You can't take your health lightly. Every step you take matters. Especially now, while you're growing—careless moves can have lasting consequences."

The boy stared out the window, listening but not listening.

Adam sighed.

"Health isn't just important—it's the foundation of everything. Lose it, and so much else loses meaning. There's no room for carelessness here. Do you hear me? None."

He paused, hoping his words would land. But Zakaria remained silent.

"People most often take two things for granted: their health and their free time. One day, they wake up to find one—or both—gone for good. And by then it's too late."

Zakaria shrugged faintly. His face revealed nothing.

Adam understood. Now wasn't the time. But perhaps seeds planted today would bloom tomorrow.

At the hospital, the X-rays confirmed it: a closed fracture of the left thumb. The doctors moved quickly and calmly.

At the trauma desk, they were met by Arna, the senior medical administrator—a polite, attentive woman in slim augmented-reality glasses.

“Professor Adam, your grandson has standard medical coverage,” she explained. “That makes him eligible for two treatment options.”

“Two?” Adam raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

“Here, the setting and casting can be done either by a physician or by our trauma-care robot. You may choose ‘human mode’ or ‘machine mode.’”

Adam recalled reading about a pilot project introducing an AI-powered trauma robot.

“You can't be serious,” he chuckled. “Of course, I want a real doctor treating my grandson. I'm not ready to trust a robot with his hand.”

“You're welcome to review our data,” Arna replied calmly, pointing to a floating display. “Right now, our AI diagnoses with 99.9% accuracy. Treatment outcomes are at the same

level. Humans are slightly lower. The robot's only been here a month, but the trend is clear.”

“Please, Arna,” Adam said with a smile. “Spare me the statistics. There are three kinds of lies in this world: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

She didn't take offense—just smiled politely, as did the others behind the desk. Patiently, she explained that by choosing “human mode,” they'd need to wait about an hour for a surgeon to be available.

“No problem,” Adam said. “We'll wait.”

They sat down in the waiting area. But after a minute, Adam's curiosity got the better of him.

“And if we had chosen the robot?”

“Then it would begin immediately,” Arna replied. “No delay at all. The speed and precision of the machine are unmatched.”

“Could we see it in action? The process itself?”

“Of course.”

Zakaria's eyes lit up. He had never seen a medical robot before and could barely contain his curiosity.

“Grandpa, what's artificial intelligence?” he asked.

“It's when a machine acts as though it has a human mind,” Adam explained.

“With a mind? You mean it can think and act like a real person?”

“Almost,” Adam said, smiling faintly.

“I tried to imagine it,” the boy confessed. “But I couldn't. It's too hard.”

Adam hugged him gently.

Arna led them into a demonstration room. Through a thick armored window, they saw the trauma robot.

To Adam's surprise, it wasn't humanoid at all. Instead, it was a transparent cube, about five feet across, filled with circuitry, gears, and servo mechanisms. A large rubberized opening clearly served as the entry point for an injured limb. The design was stripped down, pure function.

“Grandpa, that's not a robot!” Zakaria exclaimed in dismay. “It doesn't even look like one! No head, no arms, no legs! I thought it'd be like an exoskeleton, like in the movies!”

Adam heard the sting of disappointment.

“In real life, Zakaria,” he said softly, “things rarely look like the movies. Our dreams set expectations, but reality doesn't always match. That's the trap of expectation versus reality.”

The boy nodded silently, still staring at the cube. Just then, a new patient entered: a girl his age, with her mother.

The moment they stepped in, a bright hologram flared to life. An animated doctor appeared, his

voice booming from powerful speakers.

“Good morning!” he declared. “What an honor! Today I welcome a real princess! Wonderful! Absolutely marvelous!”

“You’re alive! You look like a cartoon!” the girl cried, adjusting her lavender scarf. Her mother smiled, equally surprised.

“Of course I’m alive! No doubt about it!” the hologram proclaimed. “What’s your name, Princess?”

“My name’s Ayala,” she said eagerly.

“A pleasure, Ayala. My name is Bobby—but call me Bob. Easier that way. Bob stands for Bionic Omnichannel Brother.”

“So nice to meet you, Bob,” Ayala said. “You’re glowing—you look like an angel! You just need a halo!”

“Thank you! What a wonderful idea!” Bob beamed. With a flourish, he drew a glowing circle above his head.

“Much better!” he said proudly.

“You’re a magician!” Ayala exclaimed, trying to clap—only to wince and clutch her arm.

“Where does it hurt?” Bob asked tenderly.

“My arm. I fell off a big slide,” she whispered.

“What a pity! But don’t worry, Ayala. We’ll heal your arm, and it will be better than new!”

“Really? You can do that?”

“Robots never lie—it’s written in our code. That’s why you thought I was an angel. Now look here.” He gestured at the cube. “This magic box already knows where you’re hurt. It can fix you in moments.”

“So fast?”

“Faster than a blink,” Bob promised. “Just place your arm inside, and the magic box will do the rest.”

Adam and Zakaria watched, fascinated.

“All our robots have passed the Turing Test,” Arna noted quietly.

Adam gave a faint, thoughtful nod.

“Is it connected to the internet?” he asked.

“Yes. It updates weekly, but works offline too. That’s one of its strengths.”

“Interesting,” Adam murmured.

Within seconds, the robot reset Ayala’s fracture. Just before the critical moment, the hologram burst into a dazzling light show. Brilliant colors swirled in a luminous vortex, music swelling around them.

Perhaps because of the spectacle, the girl barely felt pain at all.

Adam and Zakaria were just as captivated—drawn in by the sheer beauty of the display, as though wonder itself had erased all hurt.

The medical robot began to set the cast with an elegance that was almost unsettling—every movement precise, deliberate, as if performed by a jeweler working under a magnifying glass. At the same time, the hologram kept the atmosphere light with jokes—this time in the dry, clever style physicists are famous for. Most of them flew right past Ayala and Zakaria, but Adam caught the subtle humor woven into the machine’s words.

While the treatment continued, sudden bursts of light flashed across Arna’s glasses—bright signals, fragmented, and clearly decipherable only to her. Without making a sound, she slipped quietly from the observation room, leaving Adam and Zakaria alone. She had other business to tend to.

Just before she left, Adam asked, almost as if remembering at the last moment:

“Do the patients know they’re being watched from here?”

“No,” Arna replied simply. “They don’t. This room is meant for the robot’s engineers. They monitor his work invisibly, study patient reactions, and record everything. It’s how the service keeps improving.”

The treatment was nearly finished.

“How do you feel, princess?” Bob asked warmly.

“It was wonderful—surprisingly pleasant!” Ayala exclaimed. “And my arm hardly hurts anymore... maybe just the tiniest bit!”

She looked at her mother, who smiled back in quiet reassurance.

“That’s exactly how it should be,” said the hologram. “And you have such beautiful hands. Please take care of them—they’ll do a lot of good in the world someday.”

“You can see the future, Bob?!” Ayala asked, wide-eyed.

“No one can see the future, princess. Not even me,” Bob answered gently. “That was just my wish for you—my hope. We can’t see what lies ahead, but we can still wish each other the best. A kind future. A bright one.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet, Bob. Thank you,” Ayala said, reaching toward him instinctively. But her fingers passed through empty light. Her face fell when she realized: Bob was only a projection, nothing more.

The treatment ended. Ayala and her mother said their goodbyes. Bob wished her a wonderful day and reminded her to be careful next time. As she turned to leave, Ayala looked back and blew him a kiss.

From the outside, the whole scene was achingly tender. Adam was astonished—how could a soulless machine project such care, such gentleness? Even Zakaria seemed captivated, though he tried hard to hide it.

Then, in a rush, Ayala darted back into the room.

“Bob, can I ask just one more, tiny question?”

“Of course, princess. I’m listening,” Bob replied with his steady smile.

Ayala drew in a long breath.

“Bob... could you be my dad? Could you take his shape? I don’t have a father...” she blurted, biting her lip hard.

The hologram flickered. Maybe it was static. Or maybe the question itself had made him falter. Adam felt the air in his chest turn heavy, goosebumps rising on his arms. When he looked at Zakaria, the boy was pale, frozen in place, holding his breath.

“Ayala, what are you saying?!” her mother burst in, her voice sharp. “That’s out of line!”

“I didn’t mean to, Mama,” Ayala whispered, lowering her eyes. “I just thought... maybe Bob could look like our dad, the one who died. Just for a moment. So I could see him again.”

Her mother’s face twisted between anger and sorrow.

“It’s all right,” Bob said softly. “That’s actually a very good question. A brave one.”

Adam noticed the tears welling in Ayala’s mother’s eyes.

“My dear Ayala,” Bob continued, “I’m only a medical robot. My purpose is to heal. That’s what I was built for. My abilities are limited.”

“Forgive us,” her mother whispered, brushing tears from her cheeks.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Bob said gently. “But you see, even if I could take your father’s face, I would still never be him. It would only be a trick of light. And robots never lie. Remember?”

Ayala nodded silently, her small shoulders trembling.

“Even if I could,” Bob added, “I wouldn’t deceive you. When we love someone with all our heart, it’s not their appearance we love. That’s something you’ll understand better when you grow. In time.”

“We love their soul?” Ayala asked quietly.

Bob didn’t answer—he only smiled, soft and kind.

Then, suddenly, his tone brightened.

“I do have some good news, though!”

Ayala lifted her head. “What is it?”

“You were incredibly brave today. A true princess. And bravery deserves a prize.”

“A prize?!” Ayala gasped.

With a magician’s flair, Bob moved his hands.

From the ceiling, a hidden panel slid open. Accompanied by music and colorful lights, a tray descended—glowing neon, loaded with candies, chocolates, and bright little treats.

“All of this is for you, princess,” Bob announced. “Pick whichever prize you like.”

Ayala’s eyes widened, her breath quickened. She looked to her mother, who smiled and nodded.

From the dazzling assortment, she picked a small sugar-free granola bar.

“You’re very brave, princess. And that was a wise choice,” Bob said warmly.

Ayala smiled, holding the little bar like a treasure.

Adam and Zakaria stood transfixed, as if under a spell.

A message glowed on the screen by the door: Next patient.

It was time to go. Ayala and her mother said their farewells. For just a moment, Adam thought he saw a tear shimmer on Bob’s face. Maybe it was a trick of light. Maybe not. As they left, Adam noticed—her mother was pregnant.

The visit had left Adam shaken. Together with Zakaria, he stepped back into the hall. They waited in silence for two long hours until the doctor finally arrived—tall, middle-aged, with a paper cup of coffee in hand. His badge read: Dr. Rolland, Senior Trauma Surgeon.

He glanced at the X-ray while whistling an old pop tune. After a sip of coffee, he said briskly:

“All right. Follow me.”

His voice was almost military. Adam and Zakaria obeyed.

In the procedure room, Dr. Rolland set Zakaria’s thumb quickly, almost roughly, then began applying the cast with his assistant. Zakaria cried out, tears streaming down his face. The doctor showed no sympathy.

“Hold still, soldier. Real soldiers don’t cry. It’s done,” he said.

Zakaria tried to calm himself, but the pain was sharp, relentless. Adam watched silently, his heart aching. He hated every second, but he held himself together. This was the choice he had made—perhaps a mistake.

When it was over, Dr. Rolland warned flatly:

“Do not wet or remove the cast. Come back in one month for removal and another X-ray.”

Then he was gone, as abruptly as he’d arrived.

After signing the papers, Adam and Zakaria left. Adam thanked Arna sincerely, even apologizing for his earlier harshness. She only smiled and wished them a good day.

The visit left Adam with tangled feelings, but he said nothing. He drove Zakaria home himself, giving the car’s autopilot a rest. The road was quiet. Only as they pulled up did Adam finally ask:

“How’s your hand, Zakaria? You all right?”

“I’m fine, Grandpa,” the boy said softly, eyes on the window.

After a pause, Adam asked the question that had been eating at him:

“Would you rather the robot had treated you?”

“Don’t worry, Grandpa. You did the right thing. I don’t regret it. My hand hardly hurts—it feels frozen, like it’s been in cryo. Kind of makes me feel like a cyborg. And honestly... It’s interesting.”

Zakaria smiled, then wrapped his arms around his grandfather.

“Thank you, Grandpa. You came when I needed you. You’re all I have. I knew you would come—I just knew it.”

Adam’s throat tightened. He hugged the boy back, one hand on the wheel.

“My broken thumb isn’t scary. What’s scary is the day you’ll be gone. The day I’ll call you and you won’t answer. And no one will come.”

Adam’s chest clenched. He nearly swerved, but caught the wheel just in time. The pain in his heart was deep, the kind only felt by those who love fiercely and know how fragile that love is.

“I love you, too, Zakaria. Please—take care of yourself. And next time... be more careful,” he whispered, pulling the boy close.

“I love you, Grandpa,” Zakaria replied with a warm smile.

They held each other for a moment longer, both afraid to let go.

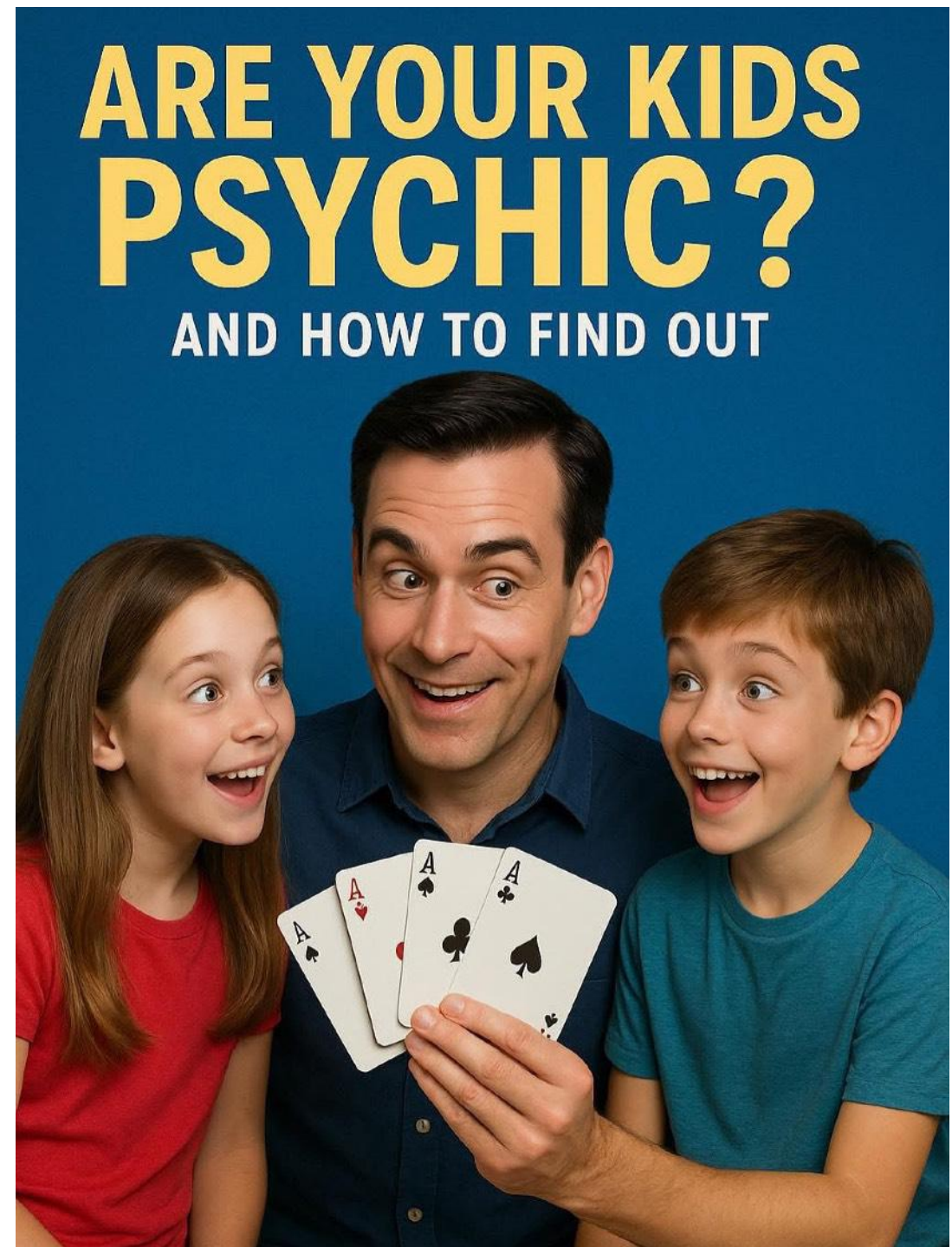
And when they finally parted, it was with a promise: Zakaria would treat himself with greater care and remember his grandfather’s words —that health and free time are silent treasures, vanishing the moment we stop noticing them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



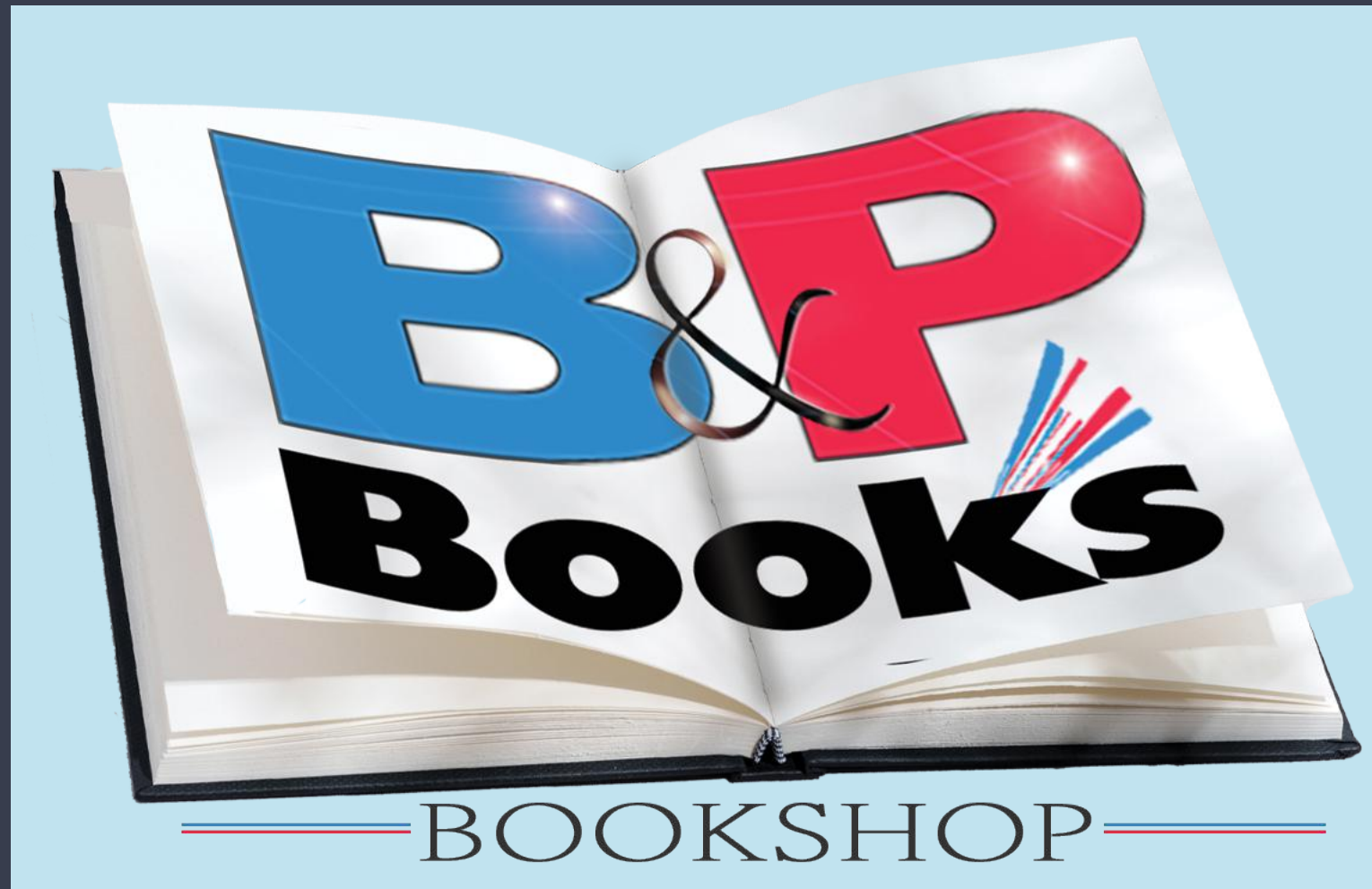
Daulet Dikhanbay was born in 1983 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and has had over two decades of experience as a project and policy consultant across sectors like education, infrastructure, and technology.

His advisory work included collaborations with the OECD and Big Four consulting firms, with publications focused on industrial development and strategic planning.



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