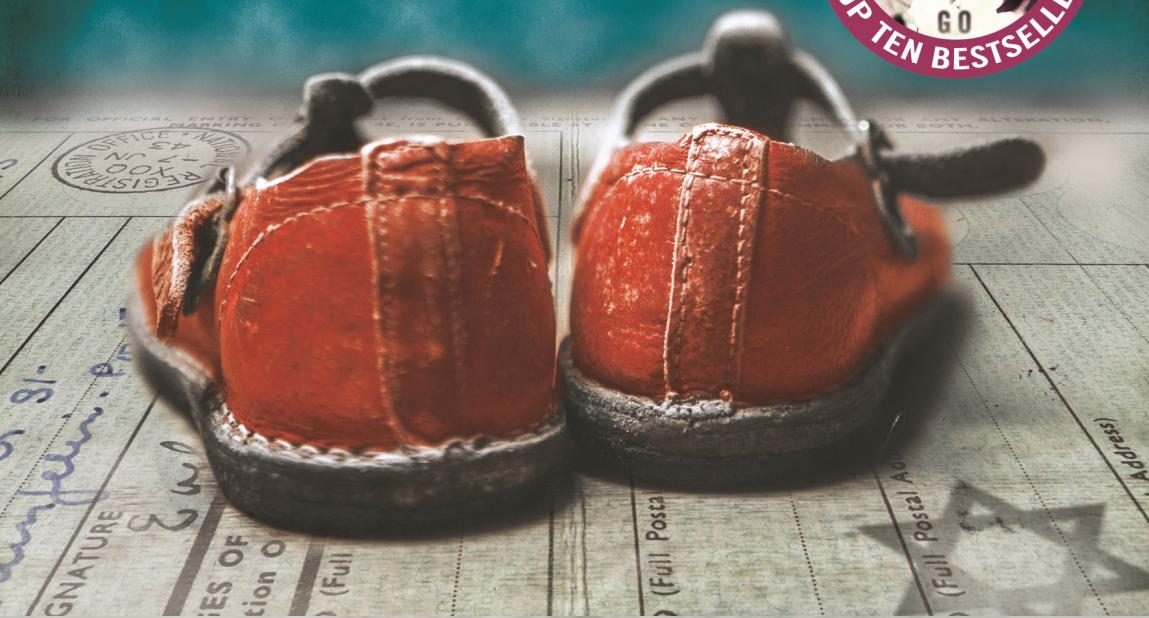
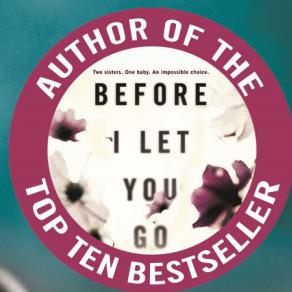


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELLY RIMMER

the
things we
cannot
say



Prologue

Soviet Union—1942

The priest presiding over my wedding was half-starved, half-frozen and wearing rags but he was resourceful; he'd blessed a chunk of moldy bread from breakfast to serve as a communion wafer.

"Repeat the vows after me," he smiled. My vision blurred, but I spoke the traditional vows through lips numb from cold.

"I take you, Tomasz Slaski, to be my husband, and I promise to love, honor, and respect, to be faithful to you, and not to forsake you until we are parted by death, in fear of God, One in the Holy Trinity and all the Saints."

I'd looked to my wedding to Tomasz as a beacon, the same way a sailor on rough seas might fix his gaze upon a lighthouse at the distant shore. Our love had been my reason to live and to carry on and to *fight* for so many years, but our wedding day was supposed to be a brief reprieve from all of the hardship and suffering. The reality of that day was so very different, and my disappointment in those moments seemed bigger than the world itself.

We were supposed to marry in the regal church in our home-town—not there, standing just beyond the tent city of the Bu-zuluk refugee and military camp, just far enough from the tents that the squalid stench of eighty thousand desperate souls was slightly less thick in the air. That reprieve from the crowds and the smell came at cost; we were outside, sheltered only by the branches of a sparse fir tree. It was an unseasonably cold day for fall, and every now and again, fat snowflakes would fall from the heavy gray skies to melt into our hair or our clothing or to make still more mud in the ground around our feet.

I'd known my “friends” in the assembled crowd of well-wishers for only a few weeks. Every other person who'd once been important to me was in a concentration camp or dead or just plain lost. My groom awkwardly declined to take communion—a gesture which bewildered that poor, kindly priest, but didn't surprise me one bit. Even as the bride, I wore the only set of clothes I owned, and by then once-simple routines like bathing had become luxuries long forgotten. The lice infestation that had overrun the entire camp had not spared me, nor my groom, nor the priest—nor even a single individual in the small crowd of well-wishers. Our entire assembly shifted and twitched constantly, desperate to soothe that endless itch.

I was dull with shock, which was almost a blessing, because it was probably all that saved me from weeping my way through the ceremony.

Mrs. Konczal was yet another new friend to me, but she was fast becoming a dear one. She was in charge of the orphans, and I'd been working alongside her on compulsory work duties since my arrival at the camp. When the ceremony was done, she ushered a group of children out from the small crowd of onlookers and she flashed me a radiant smile. Then she raised her arms to conduct, and together, she and the makeshift choir began to sing *Serdecnza Matko*—a hymn to the Beloved Mother.

Those orphans were filthy and skinny and alone, just as I was, but they weren't sad at all in that moment. Instead, their hopeful gazes were focused on me, and they were eager to see me pleased. I wanted nothing more than to wallow in the awfulness of my situation—but the hope in those innocent eyes took priority over my self-pity. I forced myself to share with them all a bright, proud smile, and then I made myself a promise.

There would be no more tears from me that day. If those orphans could be generous and brave in the face of their situation, then so could I.

After that I focused only on the music, and the sound of Mrs. Konczal's magnificent voice as it rose high above and around us in a soaring solo. Her tone was sweet and true, and she scaled the melody like it was a game—bringing me something close to joy in a moment that should have been joyful, offering me peace in a moment that should have been peaceful and dragging me back once more to a faith I kept wishing I could lose.

And as that song wound on, I closed my eyes and I forced down my fear and my doubt, until I could once again trust that the broken pieces of my life would fall into place again one day.

War had taken almost everything from me; but I *refused* to let it shake my confidence in the man I loved.

1

Alice

I'm having a very bad day, but however bad I feel right now, I know my son is feeling worse. We're at the grocery store a few blocks away from our house in Winter Park, Florida. Eddie is on the floor, his legs flailing as he screams at the top of his lungs. He's pinching his upper arms compulsively; ugly purple and red bruises are already starting to form. Eddie is also covered in yogurt, because when all of this started twenty minutes ago, he emptied the refrigerator shelves onto the floor and there are now packages of various shapes and sizes on the tiles around him—an increasingly messy landing pad for his limbs as they thrash. The skin on his face has mottled from the exertion, and there are beads of sweat on his forehead.

Eddie's medication has made him gain a lot of weight in the last few years, and now he weighs sixty-eight pounds—that's more than half my body weight. I can't pick him up and carry him out to the car as I would have done in his early years. It

didn't feel easy at the time, but back then, this kind of public breakdown was much simpler because we could just evacuate.

Today's disaster happened twenty minutes ago when Eddie reached the yogurt aisle. He has a relatively broad palate for yogurt compared to his peers at the special school he attends—Eddie will at least eat strawberry *and* vanilla Go-Gurt. There can be no substitutions on brand or container—and no point trying to refill old tubes, either, because Eddie sees right through it.

It has to be Go-Gurt. It has to be strawberry or vanilla. It has to be *in* the tube.

At some point recently, someone at Go-Gurt decided to improve the design of the graphics on the tubes—the logo has shifted and the colors are more vibrant. I'm sure no one at Go-Gurt realized that such a tiny change would one day lead to a seven-year-old boy smashing up a supermarket aisle in a bewildered rage.

To Eddie, Go-Gurt has the old-style label, and this new label only means that Eddie no longer recognizes Go-Gurt as food he can tolerate. He knew we were going to the store to get yogurt, then we came to the store, and Eddie looked at the long yogurt aisle, and he saw a lot of things, all of which he now identifies as “not-yogurt.”

I try to avoid this kind of incident, so we always have a whole shelfful of Go-Gurt in the fridge at home. If not for my grandmother's recent hospitalization, I'd have done this trip alone yesterday when Eddie was at school, before he ate the last two tubes and “we are running a little low on yogurt and soup” became “holy crap, the only thing we have left in the house that Eddie can eat is a single tin of soup and he won't eat soup for breakfast.”

I don't actually know what I'm going to do about that now. All I know is that if Campbell's ever changes the label of their

pumpkin soup tins, I'm going to curl up into a little ball and give up on life.

Maybe I'm more like Eddie than I know, because this one small thing today has me feeling like I might melt down too. Besides Eddie and his sister, Pascale, my grandmother Hanna is the most important person in my world. My husband, Wade, and mother, Julita, would probably take exception to that statement, but I'm frustrated with them both, so right now that's just how I feel. My grandmother, or *Babcia* as I've always called her, is currently in the hospital, because two days ago she was sitting at the dining table at her retirement home when she had what we now know was a minor stroke. And today, I spent the entire morning rushing—rushing around the house, rushing in the car, rushing to the yogurt aisle—all so Eddie and I could get to Babcia to spend time with her. I don't even want to acknowledge to myself that maybe I'm rushing even more than usual because I'm trying to make the most of the time we have left with her. In the background to all of this hurriedness, I'm increasingly aware that her time is running out.

Eddie has virtually no expressive language—basically he can't speak. He can *hear* just fine, but his receptive language skills are weak too, so to warn him that today instead of going to the train station to watch trains as we usually do on a Thursday, I had to come up with a visual symbol he'd understand. I got up at 5 a.m. I printed out some photos I took yesterday at the hospital, then trimmed them and I stuck them onto his timetable, right after the symbol for *eat* and the symbol for *Publix* and *yogurt*. I wrote a social script that explained that today we had to go to the hospital and we would see Babcia, but that she would be in bed and she would not be able to talk with us, and that Babcia was okay and Eddie is okay and everything is going to be okay.

I'm aware that much of the reassurance in that script is a lie. I'm not naive—Babcia is ninety-five years old, the chances of

her walking out of the hospital this time are slim—she's probably *not* okay at all. But that's what Eddie needed to hear, so that's what I told him. I sat him down with the schedule and the script and I ran through both until Eddie opened his iPad and the communications program he uses—an Augmentative and Alternative Communication app, AAC for short. It's a simple but life-changing concept—each screen displays a series of images that represent the words Eddie can't say. By pressing on those images, Eddie is able to find a voice. This morning, he looked down at the screen for a moment, then he pressed on the Yes button, so I knew he understood what he'd read, at least to some degree.

Everything was fine until we arrived here, and the packaging had changed. In the time that's passed since, concerned staff and shoppers have come and gone.

“Can we help, ma’am?” they asked at first, and I shook my head, explained his autism diagnosis and let them go on their merry way. Then the offers of help became more insistent. “*Can we carry him out to your car for you, ma’am?*” So then I explained that he doesn’t really like to be touched at the best of times, but if a bunch of strangers touched him, the situation would get worse. I could see from the expression on their faces that they doubted things *could* get any worse, but not so much that they dared risk it.

Then a woman came past with an identically dressed set of perfectly behaved, no doubt neurotypical children sitting up high in her cart. As she navigated her cart around my out-of-control son, I heard one of the children ask her what was wrong with him, and she muttered, “he just needs a good spankin’, darlin’.”

Sure, I thought. He just needs a spankin’. That’ll teach him how to deal with sensory overload and learn to speak. Maybe if I spank him, he’ll use the toilet spontaneously and I can ditch the obsessively regimented routine I use to prevent his inconti-

nence. Such an easy solution... Why didn't I think of spanking him seven years ago? But just as my temper started to simmer she glanced at me, and I met her gaze before she looked away. I caught a hint of pity in her eyes, and there was no mistaking the fear. The woman blushed, averted her gaze, and that leisurely journey with her children in the cart became a veritable sprint to the next aisle.

People say things like that because it makes them feel better in what is undoubtedly a very awkward situation. I don't blame her—I kind of envy her. I wish I could be that self-righteous, but seven years of parenting Edison Michaels has taught me nothing if not humility. I'm doing the best I can, it's usually not good enough and that's just the way it is.

The manager came by a few minutes ago.

"Ma'am, we have to do something. He's done hundreds of dollars' worth of damage to my stock and now the other shoppers are getting upset."

"I'm all ears," I said, and I shrugged. "What do you propose?"

"Can we call the paramedics? It's a medical crisis, right?"

"What do you think they're going to do? Sedate him?"

His eyes brightened.

"Can they do that?"

I scowled at him, and his face fell again. We sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment, then I sighed as if he'd convinced me.

"You call the paramedics, then," I said, but the knowing smile I gave him must have scared him just a bit, because he stepped away from me. "Let's just see how Eddie copes with a paramedic visit. I'm sure the blaring sirens and the uniforms and *more* strangers can't make things much worse." I paused, then I looked at him innocently. "*Right?*"

The manager walked away muttering to himself, but he must have thought twice about the paramedics because I've yet to hear sirens. Instead, there are visibly uncomfortable store assistants

standing at either end of the aisle quietly explaining the situation to shoppers and offering to pick out any products they require to save them walking near my noisy, awkward son.

As for me, I'm sitting on the floor beside him now. I want to be stoic and I want to be calm, but I'm sobbing intermittently, because no matter how many times this happens, it's utterly humiliating. I've tried everything I can to defuse this situation and my every attempt has failed. This will only end when Eddie tires himself out.

Really, I should have known better than to risk bringing him into a grocery store today. I don't think he fully understands what this hospital visit means, but he knows *something* is off. Not for the first time, I wish he could handle a full-time school placement, instead of the two-day-a-week schedule we've had to settle for. If only I could have dropped him off at school today and come here alone, or even if I could have convinced my husband, Wade, to stay home from work with Eddie.

Wade had meetings. He always has meetings, especially when *not* having meetings would mean he would have to be alone with Edison.

“Excuse me.”

I look up wearily, expecting to find another staff member has come to offer “assistance.” Instead, it is an elderly woman—a frail woman, with kind gray eyes and a startling blue hue to her hair. Blue rinse aside, she looks a lot like my Babcia—short and skinny, but purposefully styled. This woman is carrying a flashy handbag and she’s dressed from head to toe in explosive floral prints, all the way down to her fabric Mary Janes, which are patterned with gerberas. Babcia would wear those shoes too. Even now, well into her nineties, Babcia is still generally dressed in clothes featuring crazy flowers or outlandish lace. I have a feeling if the two women met, they’d be instant friends.

I feel a pinch in my chest at the recognition, and impatience sweeps over me.

Hurry up, Eddie. We have to hurry. Babcia is sick and we need to get to the hospital.

The woman offers me a gentle smile and opens her handbag conspiratorially.

“Do you think something in here could help?” She withdraws from her bag a collection of little trinkets—a red balloon, a blue lollipop, a tiny wooden doll and a small wooden dreidel. The woman crouches beside me, then drops them all onto the floor.

I’ve already tried distraction so I *know* this isn’t going to work, but the kindness in the woman’s gaze almost brings me to tears anyway. When I look into her eyes, I see empathy and understanding—but not a hint of pity. It’s a beautiful and unfortunately rare thing to have someone understand my situation instead of judging it.

I murmur false appreciation and I glance between the woman and Edison while I try to figure out if this is going to make the situation worse. He *has* at least turned the volume down a little, and out of his puffy, tear-filled eyes, he’s watching the woman warily. He does so love Babcia. Perhaps he sees the likeness too.

I nod toward the woman, and she lifts the balloon. Eddie doesn’t react. She lifts the doll, and again, his expression remains pinched. Then the lollipop, with the same result. I’ve completely lost hope when she picks up the dreidel, so I’m surprised when Eddie’s wailing falters just a little.

Colorful Hebrew characters are etched into each side, and the woman runs her finger over one of them, then sets the dreidel onto the floor and gives an elegant flick of her wrist. As the dreidel spins, the colors hypnotically blend into a brilliant blur. “My grandson is on the spectrum too,” she tells me quietly. “I have at least an inkling of how difficult your situation is. The dreidels are Braden’s favorite too...”

Eddie is staring intently at the dreidel as it spins. His wailing has stopped. All that's left behind now are soft, shuddering sobs.

"Do you know what the Hebrew means?" the woman asks me quietly. I shake my head, and she reads softly, "It's an acronym—it stands for *a great miracle happened there*."

I want to tell the woman that I don't believe in miracles anymore, but I'm not sure that's true, because one seems to be unfolding right before me. Eddie is now almost silent but for the occasional sniffle or echoed sob. The dreidel's spin fades until it wobbles, then it topples onto its side. I hear the sharp intake of his breath.

"Darling boy, do you know what this is?" the woman asks quietly.

"He doesn't speak," I try to explain, but Eddie chooses that exact moment to dig deep into his bag of embarrassing autism tricks as he turns his gaze to me and says hoarsely, "I love you Eddie."

The woman glances at me, and I try to explain,

"That's just...it's called echolalia...he can *say* words, but there's no meaning behind them. He's just parroting what he hears me say to him—he doesn't know what it means. It's kind his way of saying *Mommy*."

The woman offers me another gentle smile now and she sets the dreidel down right near Eddie, starts it spinning again and waits. He stares in silent wonder, and by the time the dreidel falls onto its side for a second time, he's completely calm. I fumble for his iPad, load the AAC, then hit the *finish* and the *car* buttons before I turn the screen toward Eddie. He sits up, drags himself to his feet and looks at me expectantly.

"That's it, sweetheart," the woman says softly. She bends and picks up the dreidel, and she passes it to Eddie as she murmurs, "What a clever boy, calming yourself down like that. Your mommy must be so proud of you."

“Thank you,” I say to the woman.

She nods, and she touches my forearm briefly as she murmurs, “You’re doing a good job, Momma. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Her words feel like platitudes at first. I lead Edison from the store, empty-handed but for the unexpected treasure from the stranger. I clip him into his special-order car seat, a necessity despite his size because he won’t sit still enough for a regular seat belt. I slide into my own seat, and I glance at him in the rearview mirror. He’s staring at the dreidel, calm and still, but he’s a million miles away like he always is, and I’m tired. I’m always tired.

You’re doing a good job, Momma. Don’t you ever forget that.

I don’t cry much over Eddie. I love him. I care for him. I don’t ever let myself feel self-pity. I’m like an alcoholic who won’t take even a drop of drink. I know once I open the flood-gates to feeling sorry for myself, I’ll get a taste for it, and it will destroy me.

But today my grandmother is in hospital, and the kind woman with the gerbera shoes felt like an angel visiting me in my hour of need, and what if Babcia sent her, and what if this is my grandmother’s last gift to me because she’s about to slip away?

It’s my turn for a meltdown. Eddie plays with his dreidel, holding it right in front of his face and rotating it very slowly in the air as if he’s trying to figure out how it works. I sob. I give myself eight luxurious minutes of weeping, because that brings us to 10 a.m., and we’re now exactly an hour later than I hoped to be.

When the car clock ticks over the hour, I decide to stop wallowing—and then I do: just like that I turn the pity off. I wipe my nose with a Kleenex, clear my throat and start the car. As soon as I press the ignition, my phone connects to the car and on the touch screen by the steering wheel, the missed messages from my mom appear.

Where are you?

You said you'd be here by 9.00. Are you still coming?

Alice. Call me please, what's going on?

Babcia is awake, but come quickly because I don't know how long it will be until she needs another nap.

And then finally, one from Wade.

Sorry I couldn't take today off, honey. Are you mad?

We haven't even made it to the hospital yet. It's going to be a long day.

2

Alina

Tomasz Slaski was determined to be a doctor like his father, but I always thought he was born to tell stories. I decided I'd marry him one day as he told me an elaborate tale about rescuing a mermaid princess from the lake while the rest of our town was asleep. I was nine and Tomasz was twelve years old, but we were already good friends, and that day I decided that he was mine. Somewhere in the years that followed, he came to see me as *his* too, and by the time I finished grade seven and my family could no longer afford to send me to school, Tomasz had a well-established habit of calling on me at home.

Like most of the children I knew, I left school and went to work in the fields with my parents—although *unlike* most of the children I knew, I never really worked all that hard. I was the youngest child, and even once puberty had come and gone, I was still fine-boned and only just five feet tall. Everyone else in my family was tall and strong, and despite my twin brothers being only fourteen months older than me, my family had

never really stopped treating me like a child. I didn't mind that too much at all as long as it meant the twins did the heavy lifting with the farm work.

Tomasz was from a wealthier family and long destined for university, so he stayed on at high school far longer than most in our district in southern Poland. Even once our paths diverged, he would regularly climb the hill between our homes to spend time with me, and every time he visited, he'd charm my whole family with outrageous tales from his week.

Even as a child and a teenager, Tomasz had a way of speaking that made you think that anything was possible. That's what I loved about him first—he opened up my world to endless possibilities, and in doing so, filled it with magic. But for Tomasz, I'd never even have wondered about the world beyond my village, but once we fell in love, exploring it with him was pretty much all I could think about.

I wished so much that we could be married before he left for medical school so that I could go with him to the city. Mostly I couldn't bear the thought of us parting, but a part of that desperation was rooted in my impatience to leave the family farm. My home was just past the outskirts of the rural township of Trzebinia, where Tomasz's father Aleksy was the doctor, and his mother Julita had been a schoolteacher until she died in childbirth with his little sister. I was certain my life lay beyond the small world we inhabited, but there was no way to escape without marriage, and I was still a little too young for that—only fifteen at the time. The best I could hope for was that one day, Tomasz would come back for me.

The weekend arrived before Tomasz was due to leave, late in the spring of 1938. Time has a way of diluting how we remember things, but there are some memories too pure for even the ravages of the years, and that Sunday is as fresh in my mind as it was when I woke the next morning. Perhaps it's just a side

effect of holding the memory so close to myself over the years, replaying it in my mind over and over again as if it was my favorite film. Even now when I struggle to remember where I am sometimes or what day it is, I'm certain I still remember everything from *that* day—every moment, every touch, every scent and every sound. All day, heavy gray clouds had lingered low in the sky. We'd had so much rain in the days before that my boots were coated, and I wasn't sure how much was from the animals and how much was from the mud. For days, the weather had been dreary, but by that Sunday evening, a cruel wind had blown in that made it bitter.

My brothers Filipe and Stanislaw had both worked all day in the cold while I was chatting with Tomasz, so my parents insisted I do one last task to tend to the animals before supper. I resisted fiercely until Tomasz took my hand and led the way.

“You are so spoiled,” he laughed softly.

“You sound like my parents,” I muttered.

“Well, maybe it's true,” he glanced back at me, still pulling me along by my hand, but the adoration in his gaze was undeniable. “Don't worry, Spoiled Alina. I love you anyway.”

At that, I felt a flush of pride and pleasure so strong that everything else became irrelevant.

“I love you too,” I said, and he dragged me a little farther and a little faster so that I almost crashed into him, and then at the very last second, executed a sneaky kiss.

“You are brave to do that with my father so close.” I grinned.

“Perhaps I am brave,” he said. “Or perhaps love has made me stupid.” At that, he cast a slightly anxious glance toward the house just to make sure my father hadn't seen us, and when I burst out laughing, he kissed me again.

“Enough fun and games,” he said. “Let's get this over and done with.”

Soon enough we were finished, and it was *finally* time to go

inside to escape the awful weather. I moved to make a beeline for the house, but Tomasz caught my elbow and he said lightly, “Let’s go up to the hill.”

“What!” I gasped as my teeth chattered. He smiled anyway, and I laughed at him. “Tomasz! Maybe I’m a little spoiled, but *you* are definitely crazy.”

“Alina, *moje wszystko*,” he said—and that got me—it *always* got me, because his pet name for me meant “my everything,” and every time he said it I’d go weak at the knees. His gaze grew very serious and he said, “This is our last evening together for a while, and I want a moment with you before we sit with your parents. Please?”

The hill was a wooded peak, the very end of a long, thin thatch of thick forest left untouched simply because the ground was so rocky and the pinnacle so steep it served no useful farming purpose. That hill sheltered my house and the lands of our farm, and provided a barrier between our quiet existence and town life in Trzebinia. From the top of our hill to the building that housed both Tomasz’s family and his father’s medical practice was a brisk fifteen-minute walk, or at times when he wasn’t supposed to be there with me in the first place, an eight-minute sprint.

For as long as I could remember, the hill had always been *our* spot—somewhere we could enjoy both the view and in more recent years, each other. It was a place where we had privacy if we hid in the pockets of clearing between the trees. If we sat near the long, flat boulder at the very top, we had the visibility to catch any family members who might come for us, particularly Tomasz’s younger sister, Emilia, who seemed to have an instinct to come looking for us whenever our passion for each other might burn out of control.

We climbed the incline that evening until we reached the peak, and by then, what scant daylight we’d had was gone and

the dull lights of the houses in Trzebinia were twinkling below us. As we took our positions on the boulder, Tomasz wrapped his arms around me and pulled me hard against his chest. He was shaking too, and at first, I thought that was because of the cold.

“This is ridiculous,” I laughed softly, turning my head toward him. “We’re going to catch our death, Tomasz!”

His arms tightened around me, just a little, and then he drew in a deep breath.

“Alina,” he said, “your father has given us permission and his blessing for a wedding, but we need to wait a few years...and by then I’ll be earning some money to provide for you anyway. We will have time to think of the details later...just know that whatever places you can dream of, I’ll find a way to take you to there, Alina Dziak. We can have a good life.” His voice became rough, and he cleared his throat before he whispered, “I will *give* you a good life.”

I was surprised and delighted by the proposal, but also momentarily insecure, so I pulled away from him a little and asked carefully, “But how do you know you’ll still want to be with me once you see what life is like in the big city?”

He shifted then, adjusting my position so that we could face each other, and he cupped my face in his hands.

“All I know and all I need to know is that whenever we are apart, I always miss you, and I know you feel the same. *That* is never going to change—it doesn’t matter what college brings. You and I were made for each other—so whether you come to be with me or I come home to be with you—we will always find our way back to one another. This is just a little pause now, but you’ll see. Time apart will change nothing.”

This was just another amazing story Tomasz was telling—only this time, it was the story of our future, and a promise that we would share one after all. I could see it in my mind as if it had already happened—I knew in that moment that we *would*

marry, and we would have babies, and then we would grow old together. I was astounded by the love I felt for Tomasz, and that I could see that same desperate love mirrored in his eyes felt like a miracle.

I was the luckiest girl in Poland—the luckiest girl on Earth, to find such a wonderful man and to have him love me back just as deeply as I loved him. He was clever, and so kind and so handsome—and Tomasz Slaski had the most amazing eyes. They were a startling shade of green, and they always sparkled just a little, as if he was quietly enjoying a mischievous secret. I pulled him close then and I pressed my face into his neck.

“Tomasz,” I whispered, through the happiest of tears. “I was always going to wait for you. Even before you asked me to.”

Father took me into the town the next morning to say good-bye to Tomasz before he left for Warsaw. We were engaged now and that was a milestone the adults in our life respected, so for the first time ever, we embraced in front of our fathers. Aleksy carried Tomasz’s suitcase, and Tomasz held tightly to his train ticket. Despite the noisy sobs Emilia was making, she looked a picture in one of her pretty floral dresses. I fussed over him on the platform, fiddling with the lapel of his coat and straightening the fall of his thick sandy hair.

“I’ll write you,” Tomasz promised me. “And I’ll come home as much as I can.”

“I know,” I said. His expression was somber but his eyes were dry, and I was determined to be brave too that day until he was out of sight. He kissed me on the cheek, and then he shook my father’s hand. After saying goodbye to his father and sister, Tomasz took his suitcase, and walked onto the carriage. When he hung out the window to wave to us, his gaze was fixed on mine. I forced myself to smile until the train dragged him all the

way from my sight. Aleksy gave me a brief hug and said gruffly, “You’ll make a fine daughter one day, Alina.”

“She’ll make a fine *sister*, Father,” Emilia protested. She gave one last shuddering sob and sniffed dramatically, then she took my hand and pulled me away from Aleksy’s embrace. I didn’t have much experience with children—but the soft spot I held for Emilia grew exponentially in that moment as she beamed up at me with those shiny green eyes. I kissed the side of her head, then hugged her tightly.

“Don’t worry, little one. I’ll be your sister even while we wait.”

“I know he didn’t want to leave you, Alina, and I know this is hard on you too,” Aleksy murmured. “But Tomasz has wanted to be a doctor since before he learned to read, and we had to let him go.” He fell silent for a moment, then he cleared his throat and asked, “You’ll visit with us while Tomasz is away, won’t you?”

“Of course I will,” I promised him. There was a lingering sadness in Aleksy’s gaze, and he and Tomasz looked so alike—the same green eyes, the same sandy hair, even the same build. Seeing Aleksy sad was like seeing Tomasz sad in the distant future, and I hated the very thought of it—so I gave him another gentle hug.

“You are already my family, Aleksy,” I said. He smiled down at me, just as Emilia cleared her throat pointedly. “And you too, little Emilia. I promise I’ll visit you both as often as I can until Tomasz comes back to us.”

My father was solemn on the walk back to the farm, and in her usual stoic style, my mother was impatient with my moping that evening. When I climbed into bed for an early night, she appeared in the doorway between my room and the living space.

“I am being brave, Mama,” I lied, wiping at my eyes to avoid her scolding for my tears. She hesitated, then she stepped into my room and extended her hand toward me. Nestled safe within

her calloused palm was her wedding ring, a plain but thick gold band that she'd worn for as long as I remembered.

"When the time is right, we will have a wedding at the church in the township, and Tomasz can put this ring on your finger. We don't have much to offer you for your marriage, but this ring was my mother's, and it has seen Father and I through twenty-nine years of marriage. Good times, bad times—the ring has held us steadfast. I give it to you to bring you fortune for your future—but I want you to hold on to it even now so that while you wait, you will remember the life that's ahead of you."

As soon she finished her speech, she spun on her heel and pulled my door closed behind her, as if she knew I'd cry some more and she couldn't even bear to see it. After that, I kept the ring buried in my clothes drawer, beneath a pile of woolen socks. Every night before I went to sleep, I'd take that little ring in my hand, and I'd go to my window.

I'd stare out toward the hill that had borne witness to so many quiet moments with Tomasz, and I'd clutch that ring tightly against my chest while I prayed to Mother Mary to keep Tomasz safe until he came home to me.

3

Alice

As we step into the geriatric ward, Eddie spots Babcia, and he immediately breaks out of my grasp and runs into her room.

“Eddie,” he calls as he runs. “Eddie darling, do you want something to eat?”

Echolalia is the bane of my existence sometimes. Babcia is constantly offering Edison—and everyone else—food, and so now, when he sees Babcia, he mimics her. It’s harmless when we’re alone. When we’re in public and he piles on that faux Polish accent, it sounds a lot like he’s mocking her. The nurse reviewing Babcia’s IV setup frowns at him, and I want to explain to her what’s going on, but I’m too stricken by the sight of Babcia herself. She’s propped up and her eyes are open. This should feel like an improvement on the semiconscious state she was in last night, except that she’s clearly still very weak—she’s sunk heavily into the pillows.

“Hello, Edison.” I hear my mother sigh as I catch up to Eddie

and join him in the room. Eddie looks at Mom, then mutters under his breath,

“Stop doing that, Eddie.”

Mom remains silent but her disapproval is palpable, as it always is when Eddie’s echolalia reminds us all that the phrase he most associates with her is a scolding. Now she turns her gaze to me, and she says, “Alice, you are incredibly late.”

I feel justified in ignoring my mother’s greeting given it is equal parts social nicety and criticism, which is the exact ratio that comprises almost every communication she undertakes. Jultita Slaski-Davis is a lot of things; a lifelong marathon runner, a venerated district court judge, a militant civil libertarian, an avid environmentalist; a seventy-six-year old who has *no* intention of retiring from her work anytime soon. People are forever telling me she’s an inspiration, and I can see their point, because she’s an impressive woman. The one thing she’s *not* is a cuddly, maternal grandma—which is exactly why Eddie and I have a much easier relationship with Babcia.

I take the space next to Eddie at my grandmother’s bedside and wrap my hand through hers. The weathered skin of her fingers is cold, so I clasp my other hand around it and try to warm her up a little.

“Babcia,” I murmur. “How are you feeling?”

Babcia makes a sound that’s closer to a grunt than a word and distress registers in her eyes as she searches my gaze. Mom sighs impatiently.

“If you’d been here earlier, you’d already know that she may be awake now, but I don’t think she can hear. These *nurses* don’t know anything. I’m waiting for the doctor to tell me what the Hell is going on.”

The nurse beside Mom raises her eyebrows, but she doesn’t look at Mom or even at me. If she did look at me, I’d offer her an apologetic wince, but the nurse is clearly determined to get

her job done and get out of the room as quickly as she can. She presses one last button on the IV regulator, then touches my grandmother's arm to get her attention. Babcia turns to face her.

"Okay, Hanna," she nurse says gently. "I'll leave you with your family now. Just buzz if you need me, okay?"

Eddie pushes me out of the way as soon as the nurse goes, and fumbles to take Babcia's hand. When I let him have it, he immediately settles. I glance back to Babcia, and I see the smile she turns on for him. I always thought my relationship with my grandmother was unique. She all but raised me through different phases of my childhood; my mother's career has *always* come first. But as special as it is, our relationship isn't a patch on the bond she has with Eddie. In a world that doesn't understand my son, he's always had Babcia, who doesn't care if she understands him or not—she simply adores him the way he is.

I survey her carefully now, assessing her, as if I can scan her with my gaze and realize the extent of the damage within her mind.

"Can you hear me, Babcia?" I say, and she turns toward me, but frowns fiercely as she concentrates. Her only response is the swell of tears that rise to her eyes. I glance at Mom, who is standing stiffly, her jaw set hard.

"I think she can hear," I say to Mom, who hesitates, then offers, "Well, then...maybe she doesn't recognize us?"

"Eddie," Eddie says. "Eddie darling, do you want something to eat?"

Babcia turns to him and she smiles a tired but brilliant smile that immediately earns a matching smile from my son. He releases Babcia's hand, throws his iPad up onto the bed beside her legs and starts trying to climb the railings.

"Eddie," Mom says impatiently. "Don't do that. Babcia is not well. Alice, you need to stop him. This is *not* a playground."

But Babcia tries to pull herself into a sitting position and opens

her arms wide toward Eddie, and even Mom falls silent at that. I pull the bedrail down, and help shift the various cords out of the way as my very solid son climbs all the way onto the bed beside his very fragile great-grandmother. Babcia shifts over, slowly and carefully, purposefully making room for him *right* beside her. He nestles into her side and closes his eyes, and as she sinks back into the pillow, she rests her cheek against Eddie's blond hair. Then Babcia closes her eyes too, and she breathes him in as if he's a newborn baby.

"She certainly seems to recognize Eddie," I say softly.

Mom sighs impatiently and runs her hand through the stiff tufts of her no-nonsense gray hair. I settle onto the chair beside the bed and reach into my bag for my phone. There's another message from Wade on the screen.

Ally, I really am sorry. Please write back and let me know you're okay.

I know I'm not being fair, but I'm still so disappointed that he wouldn't help me today. I scowl and think about turning the phone off, but at the last second, I relent and reply.

Having a very bad day, but I am okay.

It's a long while later that we're approached by a middle-aged woman in a lab coat, who motions toward us to join her at the nurses' desk. Eddie is holding the dreidel up again in front of his face and doesn't react to me at all as I turn from the bed, so I leave him be.

"I'm Doctor Chang, Hanna's physician. I wanted to update you on her condition."

Babcia is stable today, but given the location of the stroke, her doctors think there's damage to the language centers in her

brain. She can certainly hear, but she's not reactive to requests or instructions and further testing needs to be done. Behind us, I hear Eddie's iPad as the robotic voice of the AAC app announces, *Dreidel*.

I'm not paying much attention to Eddie, only enough that I'm vaguely surprised he managed to figure out what his new treasure is called. His visual language app lists thousands of images he can use to identify concepts he might need to communicate, but *dreidel* is hardly going to be in the "most commonly used" section of the menu. I enjoy a moment or two of Mommy-pride in among the panic of the seemingly endless bad news from Doctor Chang. *Could be permanent, more testing required, scans, this situation is not entirely unheard of, unfortunately high chance of further events. End of life plans?*

I like dreidel, Eddie's iPad says. *Your turn.*

I wince and turn back to glance at the bed, where Eddie has turned the iPad toward my grandmother. He's sitting up now, his back against the bedrail. I don't know what I expect to see, but I'm surprised when Babcia lifts her hand slowly and hits the screen.

I...like...

I interrupt the doctor by grabbing her forearm, and she startles and steps away from me.

"Sorry," I blurt. "Just...look."

The doctor and Mom turn just in time to see Babcia hit the next button. Mom draws in a sharp breath.

...dreidel...too. Babcia hits each button slowly and with obvious difficulty, but eventually, she expresses herself just fine.

Babcia hurt? Eddie asks now.

Babcia scared, Babcia types.

Eddie scared, Eddie types.

Eddie...is...okay, Babcia slowly pecks out. *Babcia...is...okay*.

Eddie nods, and sinks back onto the bed to rest his head in Babcia's shoulder again.

"Is he autistic?" the doctor asks.

"He's on the autism spectrum, yes," I correct her. The terminology doesn't matter, not really, but it matters to me because my son is more than a label. To say he *is* autistic is not accurate—autism is not who he is, it is a part of who he is. This is semantics to someone who doesn't live with the disorder every day and the doctor looks at me blankly, as if she can't even hear the distinction. I feel heat on my cheeks. "He's nonverbal. He uses the Augmentative and Alternative Communication app to speak. Babcia is already used to communicating that way, although she's normally much faster—"

"That's the problem with her hand," Mom interrupts me, and she's glaring at the doctor again. "I told you, she's having trouble moving her right side."

"I remember, and we're looking into it," the doctor says, then she pauses a moment and admits, "We don't tend to use technology with elderly patients in this situation—most of them don't have a clue where to start. So as difficult as this is, at least she has the advantage of her familiarity with the concept. I'll talk to a speech pathologist. This is good."

"This isn't *good*," Mom says impatiently. "*Good* isn't my mother having to speak through a damned iPad app, it's frustrating enough that we have to use the rotten thing for Eddie. How long will this last for? How are you going to fix it?"

"Julita, in these—"

"It's *Judge* Slaski-Davis." My mother corrects her, and I sigh a little as I turn back toward the bed. Babcia catches my eye and nods toward the iPad, so I quietly leave the doctor to deal with my nightmare of a mother. Babcia hits the *your turn* button, and I take the iPad from her hands.

Are you hurt? I ask her. She takes the iPad and flicks through

the screens until she can find the right images. Then slowly and carefully, she speaks.

Babcia okay. Want help.

She hands me the iPad immediately, obviously keen to see my reply, but I have no idea what to say to her or even how to ask her for more information about what she needs. I look from the iPad screen then back to her face and her blue eyes quickly shift from pleading to impatient. She motions for me to pass her the iPad again and so I do, and then she scrolls through screens and screens. She finds the magnifying glass icon and hits it, and the iPad says *find*, but then she goes back to scrolling. Her gaze narrows. Her lips tighten. Beads of sweat break out on her lined forehead, and more time passes as a flush gradually rises in her cheeks. She hits the *find* button again and again, and then she growls and pushes the iPad toward me.

Her frustration is palpable, but I don't know what to do. Mom and the doctor are still squabbling, and Eddie is still curled up beside Babcia, rolling the dreidel along the sheet now as if it is a toy train. I look at Babcia helplessly, and she raises her hands as if to say *I don't know either*. For a moment, I swipe through the screens of Eddie's most commonly used icons, pausing each time so she can check to see if what she needs is there. After a minute or so of this, a new thought strikes me. I open the app to the *new icon* page, and as soon as I do, Babcia snatches the device back eagerly. She finds a picture of a young man, then starts to type, slowly and carefully. She's not using her forefinger—she's using the side of her pinkie and her ring finger. It's awkward, and it takes her a few goes to form the word correctly, but then she does, and she clicks the save button and shows me proudly.

Tomasz.

"How is she? Mom asks me from the doorway. I look up to her and find the doctor has gone, possibly to find a stiff drink.

"It's slow, but she's using the device. She's just asked me for—"

It occurs to me what Babcia *is* actually asking, and my heart sinks.

“Oh no, Babcia,” I whisper, but the words are pointless—if the stroke has damaged her receptive language, then she’s in much the same boat as Eddie; spoken words have no meaning for her right now. I meet her gaze again, and tears glimmer in her eyes. I look from her to the iPad, but I have absolutely no idea how to tell her that her husband died just over twelve months ago. Pa was a brilliant pediatric surgeon until his seventies, then he taught at the University of Florida until his eighties—but as soon as he retired, dementia took hold and after a long, miserable decline, he died last year. “Babcia...he’s...he...um...”

She shakes her head fiercely and she hits the buttons again.

Find Tomasz.

More scrolling, then:

Need help.

Emergency.

Find Tomasz.

Then, while I’m still struggling to figure out how to deal with this, she selects another series of icons and the device reads a nonsensical message to me:

Babcia fire Tomasz.

Her hands are shaking. Her face is set in a fierce frown, but there’s determination in her gaze. I put my hand gently on her forearm and when she looks up at me, I shake my head slowly, but her eyes register only confusion and frustration.

I’m confused and frustrated too—and I’m suddenly angry, because it is brutally unfair to see this proud woman so confused.

“Babcia...” I whisper, and she sighs impatiently and shakes my hand off her arm. My grandmother has an unlimited depth of empathy and she loves relentlessly—but she’s the toughest woman I know, and she seems completely undeterred by my inability to communicate with her. She goes back to scrolling

through the pages of icons on the screen of the iPad, until I see her expression brighten. Again and again, she repeats this process, painstakingly forming a sentence. Over the next few minutes, Mom goes to find a coffee, and I watch as Babcia tries to wrangle this clumsy communication method into submission. It's easier for her now that all of the icons are on the "recently used" page, and soon she's just hitting the same buttons over and over again now.

Need help. Find...box...go home. Want home.

I swallow my sigh, take the iPad and tell her *Babcia in hospital now. Then go home later.*

This is the language pattern I have to use with my son, and it's one that's automatic for me—*now this, then something else*—explaining sequences of events and time to him because he has *no* concept of it without the guidelines of instructions and schedules. Communicating via the AAC is so damned restrictive. With Eddie, I'm used to the limitations because it's all we've ever had—and it is *vastly* better than nothing. Until he learned to read and use the AAC, our whole life was a series of melt-downs inspired by his overwhelming frustration at being locked inside himself, unable to communicate.

The problem now is that with Babcia, I'm used to the endless freedom of spoken communication, and having to revert to this AAC app suddenly does seem an impossibly poor substitute.

Babcia snatches the iPad back and resumes her demands.

Need help.

Find Tomasz.

Home.

Box.

Now.

Help.

Box.

Camera.

Paper.

Babcia fire Tomasz.

Mom steps all the way into the room. She hands me a coffee, then returns to stand at the foot of the bed.

“What’s this about?” she asks me.

“I don’t know,” I admit. Babcia gives us both an impatient glare now and repeats the commands, and when we still don’t react, she turns the sound *all the way up* and hits the repeat button again. This is a trick she’s learned from my son, who does the exact same thing when he’s not getting his own way.

Help.

Find Tomasz.

Box.

Camera. Paper. Box.

Now. Now. Emergency. Now.

Find Tomasz. Now.

Babcia fire Tomasz.

“Christ. She’s really forgotten Pa passed,” Mom whispers, and I glance at her. Mom is not known for vulnerability, but right now her expression is pinched and I think I see tears in her eyes. I shake my head slowly. Babcia seems quite determined that she doesn’t need me to remind her that Pa has passed, so I just don’t think that’s it.

Find Tomasz.

Find box.

Box. Find. Now. Need help.

“Oh!” Mom gasps suddenly. “She has that box of mementos. I haven’t seen it in years—not since we moved them into the retirement home after Pa got sick. It’s either in storage or at her unit there. Maybe that’s what she wants, maybe she wants a *photo* of Pa? That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, yes,” I say. A wave of relief relaxes muscles I didn’t even know I’d tensed. “Good thinking, Mom.”

“I can go try to find it if you’ll stay with her?”

“Please, yes,” I say, and I take the iPad. I hit the photograph of Mom, and the iPad reads *Nanna*, so I wince and start to edit the label on the photo—but Babcia waves my hand away impatiently. Our gazes lock, and she gives me a wry smile, as if she’s telling me *I’m broken, kiddo, but not stupid*. I’m so relieved by that smile that I bend to kiss her forehead, and then I hit some more buttons.

Nanna find box now.

Babcia sighs with happiness and hits the *yes* button, then rests her hand on my forearm and squeezes. She can’t speak at the moment, but she’s been a guiding light for my entire life, so I hear her voice in my head anyway.

Good girl, Alice. Thank you.

the things
we cannot say

KELLY
RIMMER

Paperback

eBook

Bookworld

iBooks

Booktopia

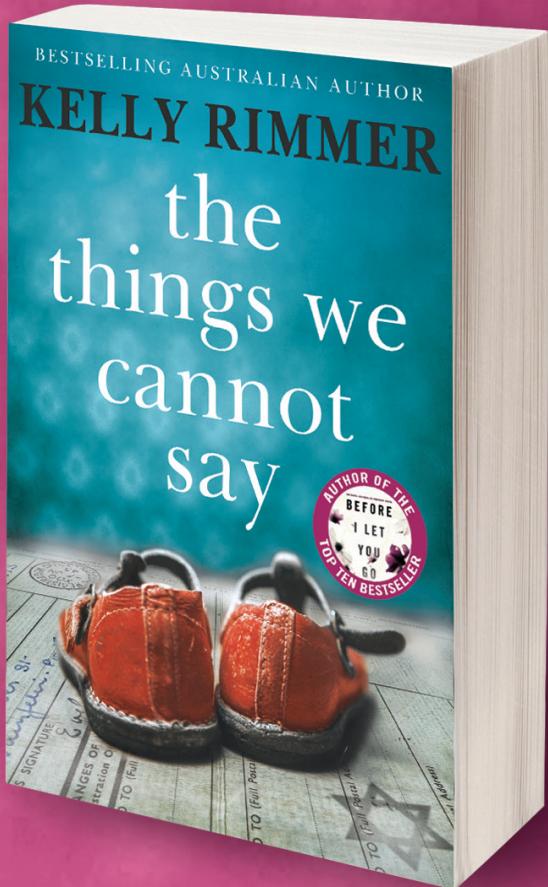
Kindle

Dymocks

QBD

Amazon

Did you love this
sample? Order the
whole book now!



Passion. Shared.